

Truly Deeply Healthy

It's not often that we get a batch of recommendations for one outlet, so our interest was aroused when Pure California, a new healthy food, smoothie and juice bar in Soho, kept being name dropped. Its stated aim is to provide fresh, natural, healthy and delicious food and drink for people on the move. Nellie Nichols went along to find out if it really does what it says on the tin

WITHOUT fail I always steer clear of those born again healthy people whose daily diet is made up of bowls of Aduki and Mung Beans. I don't want to be preached at or know the behaviour of anyone's insides bits. Some are so serious they apparently make mash out of Millet and concoct an uncanny amount of recipes with Tofu. Don't get me wrong, but I'd rather drink a cup of Builders than Nettle Tea any day, and I don't go into a cold sweat if I haven't got bananas in my handbag for that fix before going to the gym.

Of course, healthy eating is of paramount importance and now more than ever consumers are becoming hugely self-aware of what they eat. Obesity, intolerances and allergies have spread like bindweed across our western world, probably all of it diet related. Stupidly we all seem to carry on filling ourselves up with things we shouldn't and I certainly lack the discipline to give up caffeine. On a positive note though there are more pairs of reading glasses in evidence in my local Waitrose than ever before - label reading is now very much in vogue. (Why do I always leave mine at home though, constantly having to plead with total strangers to read me lists of ingredients).

As far as our industry goes, there is a definite struggle with health criteria, because at the end of the day, fat does taste delicious and the meagre amounts we are advised to eat by the government,

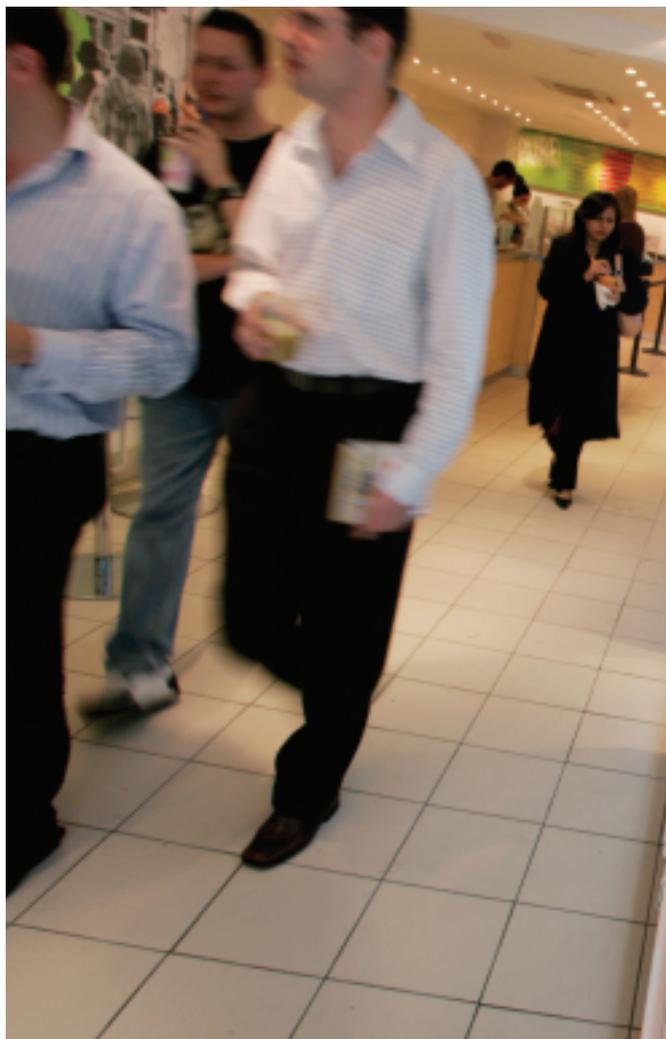
along with those of sugar and salt do little to create taste.

I've believed for quite a while it was only a matter of time before an authentic and trustworthy healthy concept appeared on the high street. Rather than dictating health to consumers, one that informs, educates and offers a huge choice of genuine good healthy food on the move. I'm not talking about humorous marketing bolstered by sandwiches and salads, but honest salubrious food. Healthy eating made easy for everyone.

Pure California opened a little over a year ago as the brainchild of two city boys Greg and Spencer, who came from a background of Financial News and Research and are both massively driven by health. Finding it impossible to find healthy food on the move that appealed to them, they took it on themselves.

The image is bright, clean and white with just a splash of lime green and jaffa orange, conjuring images of vibrant fruit and veg. I do feel better just being there, but this may be because it seems to attract healthy types (I stand at the till next to a very charming man just on his way to training and buying some dried mangoes, so I start a conversation up about the merits of dried versus fresh - I know, lame).

One of those difficult long and thin sites, the layout is functional. Natural wood bar stools in





the window, fridges down one wall well filled with sandwiches and wraps, giant and little side salads. There's a very innovative muesli bar that's stocked all day, offering wheat free, deluxe and bran and granola with a choice of fruit and nut toppings and milk, yoghurt or Soya. Then on to the yoghurt pots, fruits and masses of different low fat muffins. I love the little pots of pomegranate seeds and small pots of fresh chopped veg that have a humous dipping pot to go with them. There is an abundant choice. Keep walking in and you come to the build-your-own salad, juice and smoothie bar.

There is a range of Organic functional soups, up to three served every day including a Good Carb Soup, a Protein Provider, and even an Antioxidiser. These all tick lots of boxes if that's what you're after, being free from a selection of Dairy, Wheat, Gluten, Yeast, and so on. Some are even suitable for Vegans – this for me could be a step too far until you realise none of these things are in the attractive sounding Organic Mediterranean Tomato.

What else gives them the edge? Their wraps for a start, which are made freshly for them everyday by their local baker. The difference, when they haven't been frozen and are made so well by hand, is immense. Some of their breads are the same, fresh with a true home made small batch taste. This bread has no issues: no coring, not

misshapen, not dry – it's bread, in fact, as sandwiches really should be made from and eating it makes you realise just what sandwich bread can be like.

Their range of eleven smoothies, (and ten functional ones), together with their twelve juices are all freshly made to order. The range covers every type of fruit and supplement. Go NUTS is made with peanut butter, bananas, skimmed milk and honey, Pom Pleaser is made with Watermelon, Cantaloupe, Pineapple, Honeydew and Pomegranate Juice. Then there is the Acai Pot made with the Brazilian super berry blended with bananas and apple juice then topped with muesli. Something for everyone from the simple and delicious to the more obscure: a hangover cure, pre-training, brain fuel, detox, anti-oxidiser, the list goes on.

Each supplement (please put them out of sight, massive containers of white powder aren't attractive on a counter) is a careful blend of vitamins, minerals, and supplements. Extensive information is available as to what each contains, as well as the most impressive glossary I have ever seen on one huge wall - a veritable dictionary of foods and ingredients to advise you on what to eat and drink or when possible recipes are Low GI, low fat, organic or free range, sometimes wheat free. Overall you don't even notice as the combinations are so bold and interesting.

And what of the products. The Tuna Salad sandwich was bland for me but full of goodies; carrot, celery, red onion, nothing some decent seasoning wouldn't fix. The fact that the products they sell are based on nutritional balance must be recognised.

There is a bit of repetition of fillings in the range of sandwiches and wraps I found unnecessary, but on the whole there is good choice. The Low GI Chicken Pesto sandwich was good, with juicy big pieces of excellent chicken and tasty pesto. The Chicken Caesar Wrap has crunchy croutons in it, a nice touch and a risk they can take given the products are freshly made.

I found the Turkey and Avocado on Wheat Free quite hard going and dry but this is fixable with a little more mayo and perhaps a slice or two of tomato. The Healthy Ham and Cheese was streets ahead, and easily one of the best Ham and Cheddar's I've ever had. Dry delicious free range ham and low fat cheddar - I didn't even realise it was low fat it tasted so good - wonderful wholegrain mustard mixed with honey. I am overwhelmed by the calibre of these ingredients. Delicious.

SANDWICH & JUICE BARS

On the whole, these products are well priced, considering you are paying for premium key ingredients; in most cases free range and organic. All the wraps are under the £3.00 mark and so are most of the sandwiches, bar two.

The salads are well thought out. The choice is either from the list of House Salads including the Tuna Chef's Salad which puts a new twist on a Tuna Salad with the additions of broccoli, raisins and pumpkins seeds, and the Oriental Chicken made with free range chicken, bean sprouts, grated carrots, broccoli, baby corn and cashews with a sesame ginger dressing.

There's a Low GI Salad and even a High Protein one. These are not cheap though, ranging from £4.25 - £5.25 but they are very large and generously filled. The smaller, very cute, Side Salad pots are all a steal at £1.25.

The Salad Bar itself works on a simple three steps. Choose your base from either Cos Lettuce, the Exclusive Lettuce Mix (Lola Rosso, Spinach, Red Chard and Curly Endive), Fusilli Pasta, A Baked Potato or Sweet Potato, or Brown Rice. Add one ingredient from a big choice of free range meats and fish and then three more from the extensive list of dairy and veg. There are nut and seed toppings too. Stick to the three steps and this will cost you £4.25 but of course it's designed to get you to pile the ingredients on once you set eyes on them and this can really mount up.

I am staring at my Anti Oxidiser juice: Apple, Orange, Pomegranate and fresh mint. It is the colour of pond water and I don't want to drink it. I ordered it as I was informed it was one of their best sellers and most popular. I stir it with my straw. Time is marching on and it is separating in



a very unpleasant fashion. I am again amazed. This is truly the most awesome of juices (and I then spend hours at home replicating it over the weekend but irritatingly never got it quite the same).

There are plans afoot for a rollout and rumour has it the second store is opening soon not far from this first one in Soho. I certainly get the feeling this is an original formula. Original in that it's far from being a 'me too', original in its quest for providing the sort of food all of us should be encouraged to eat on a very regular basis.



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background

PURE California is the creation of London-born Spencer Craig and New Yorker Greg Castle.

Following their first meeting as teenagers, in the summer of 1995, the pair struck up a strong friendship and undertook several transatlantic visits in order to stay in touch. It was on such a trip, in May 2004, that the friends found themselves discussing London life and how hard it was to find healthy convenience food at a reasonable price.

Despite finding success within their respective companies, Spencer and Greg sought a new challenge and shared the dream of offering Londoners healthy food on the move. Pure California was born, as one would expect, over lunch.

The 3,500 miles between the two did little to halt their pursuit of 'purity'. Spencer made several visits to Greg in New York where the pair went undercover, viewing dozens of healthy food establishments and noting what they felt would and would not work in London. The friends agreed that a well-rounded healthy concept that included smoothies, juices, wraps, sandwiches, salads and soups was what was needed.

In August 2004 Greg moved to the UK and the development of the concept moved to the next level. Funding was sourced from several high-profile investors, 'Pure California' was chosen as a name and its central London premises were found.

Spencer and Greg spent hours adding one more raspberry, another quarter of a banana or a further dash of coconut milk in order to get the just right flavour for all of their smoothies. Self confessed "smoothie-holics"; the friends continue to experiment with new flavours and combinations on a daily basis.

I know I would go there regularly if it was closer to my patch. Good ideas are borne out of necessity. Perhaps the days of the All Day Breakfast are numbered? I believe so and I make a mental note to come here as often as I may be passing. Perhaps I will even go out of my way.

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The above is based on her independent views**



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