

NELLIE NICHOLS

# Marvellously Your Own

MYO, a make your own sandwich concept using quality ingredients, originated in Australia and is now starting to take off in the UK. It's a unique concept that turns the counter round and puts the customer in charge, says Nellie Nichols



Apparently the definition of hindsight is the inclination to see events that have occurred as more predictable than they in fact were before they took place.

When someone says 'with hindsight' I personally find it very annoying. But, when I look back to a trip I made to Australia in 2000 it's impossible not to use it so I apologise to anyone reading this who feels the same way.

Arriving on the enormous west coast (I have never been able to get my head around the fact that Western Australia is big enough to hold the whole of the UK, Japan and Germany) I started my journey in Perth, and, as always, had a look at the local sandwich market. What I found was a clever and impressive idea that {with hindsight} I should have done something about and brought back to the UK. But I didn't and now someone else has.

MYO (Make Your Own) was started in Perth by one Mr Bird in 1994, who with twenty years' experience in food saw an opportunity for an upmarket fast food outlet for office workers in

the central business district, with the objective of creating a franchise operation in Australia and then to export it across the world. Currently there are branches in Canada, Scotland and England, with plans to expand to New Zealand, the U.S., Asia and the Middle East).

The concept of the business was fantastically simple, sensible and sound. To start a sandwich and salad bar operation where customers can create their own products using the finest ingredients, taking whatever time they like, with a consequential minimal cost effective labour requirement.

The business model had the capability of suiting every customer – those in a hurry, as well as those who had the time to create a sandwich slowly and imaginatively. The shop fit requirement was to be a modern clean design that was not only relatively easy to install, hard wearing and had a global fit, but also gave emphasis to the fresh and healthy values of the brand.

MYO is a unique concept in that its main competitive advantage is that unlike its competitors it turns the counter around and puts the customer in charge. The saving on labour this achieves is then passed back to the customer in better value for money and higher quality ingredients.

Neil Rankin and Robert Gherghetta both independently had the same idea as I did but, unlike me, actually did something about it and contacted the infamous Mr Bird which led to the migration into the UK of the now soon to be global MYO brand.

There are three franchises in Glasgow but the



rest of the UK stores are company owned. Two in London and a third opening in February will be followed by Manchester and a steady expansion programme over the next few years.

When I met Neil Rankin in their Berkeley Street store, a stone's throw from a very large Pret and in the middle of the West End sandwich heartland, he was setting up the baked potato roasting machine.

He makes me very happy when I realise he sells my favourite Illy coffee. He is hands on, open, friendly, and clearly very astute. He talks me through how it works: for breakfast there is an extensive help yourself cereal bar and a toaster to toast a choice of breads with spreads and jams.

Mid-morning this converts to salad and sandwich choices; grab a lined tray, choose a bread (a large choice that changes every week of fresh focaccia, ciabatta, wraps, rolls and thick sliced bloomers) add your fillings and make your sandwich.

The baked potatoes work in much the same way with a big variety of hot additions: vegetarian or meat chilli, baked beans and curries or any of the sandwich ingredients to use as toppings.

There are two sizes of salad box to fill as you like and the more they change variety the more they sell. And everywhere you look there is choice and more choice.

It begs the question why on earth would anyone darken the doors of a sandwich shop that didn't allow you to make your own lunch? And therein lies the huge attraction of MYO. This place is fun, there is true freedom of choice and this is as personal or weird as you want it to be.

A modern day Woodstock of the sandwich world but slick and obviously considerably cleaner. In some stores the serve yourself counters are islands to easily circumnavigate, in others they line the walls. The proteins are grouped together, as are salads. Dressings come in easy to use squirty bottles. Everything is designed for the convenience of the customer.

I am nevertheless intrigued as to how you are charged for this. What system could possibly not involve waiting at the tills while some poor person scrutinises the innards of your sandwich and works out what on earth you have or haven't put in it?

How on earth would you recognise it all without poking about and taking it all to bits? But clever Mr Bird has bypassed all this detail with a simple formula. 250g overall weight sandwiches are £2.95, 250g wraps are £3.30, and 350g large wraps are £4.10. There is a selection of 300g medium rolls at £3.35 and 350g continental ones at £3.90.

Salads are £3.60 or £4.60 for medium or large – just fill the box. If you go overweight on the sandwiches you are charged at 1p per gram but very few customers do (they apparently self

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I will definitely be popping in next time I'm passing and I'll let you know exactly how weird a sandwich I put together another day

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regulate) and it's easy to see by the trained eye if it's worth putting a sandwich on the scales for the moment of truth.

This is the Easy Jet version of sandwich luggage (or any other airline come to think of it) but the lion's share of MYO customers are dedicated followers and repeat business made up of those on diets, big eaters who want big sandwiches and some who are just plain fussy.

Many have their foibles – one regular comes in for a rice wrap, another recently e mailed their allegiance as they have finally found a way of having just the right amount of mustard (a great



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deal) in their beef sandwich and then there's the customer who comes in specially to make their Jalapeno sandwich with just a touch of cheese.

Now I am going to assume that the average transaction time is going to be painfully long here and that nothing can stop legions of customers gravitating to the tills all at once resulting in that upsetting sight of a queue snaking out of the front door. That this will be MYO's Achilles heel and the one area perhaps less slick than the others. But how wrong can I be. With every greaseproof paper lined tray arriving at the till the sandwiches are hand wrapped and cut in half in an average of thirty seconds. Every customer is totally in control of just how long their lunch will take to choose and put together, having it packed and paying for it is the easy bit.

So now's the time I normally chuck in a few words of advice for what they're worth. I would like to see a much wider selection of fish in the available ingredients and perhaps some changing specials that add some difference to the range. There's a real need as well for a more

professional labelling system for not only the ingredients but also the squeeze sauce bottles and the huge variety of breads. Apart from that there is little I can see to warrant change.

MYO is a novel concept and clearly one with a great deal of appeal. I know I have often craved a certain sandwich, only to resign myself to one that is more accessible and the easier option. I am a firm believer that freedom of choice is a very powerful thing in our lunchtime market when a sandwich or a salad is the typical 24/7 fare, and that even though the high street is almost at saturation point there is and always will be room for operators with innovative new concepts.

Interestingly MYO is not a high street player in that their interest is in slightly off pitch sites. These will invariably be easier to secure, being less appealing to the big name sandwich giants who scrap over prime sites on the main drag and will always tend to generate their needed repeat customers. High street locations would mean too many single visit customers resulting in weighing far too many sandwiches.

So I hope their planned expansion continues to follow the road to success because this is a refreshing, novel and fun concept and therefore in my book truly deserves to succeed. I will definitely be popping in next time I'm passing and I'll let you know exactly how weird a sandwich I put together another day.

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The above is based on her independent views

