

NELLIE NICHOLS

A Green Goddess and a panini, please

It's that time of year when a detox juice and healthy food looms large in shoppers' minds. Where better for **Nellie Nichols** to visit than Crussh, the fast-expanding juice and sandwich bar

I'm staring at two of the most hideously green coloured drinks I've ever seen and they both look like something out of *The Munsters*, if you remember the television series.

I always loved it, but for some reason it was considered inappropriate in my house when I was younger. No idea why, but it was probably something to do with the bolt coming out of Herman's neck.

One juice is darker than the other and, as I deliberate as to which I'm going to make myself try first, I'm not sure if this is a plus point or not.

It's January, it's snowing and I'm sitting in Crussh with two of their apparent best sellers: a Green Goddess, described as the 'Ultimate Detox' (Organic Apple, Kiwi, Pear, Lime, Cucumber, Spinach and Celery) and a Detox Cactus (Organic Cactus, Pineapple, Lime, Banana, Pineapple Juice and Yoghurt). Apparently, amongst other exciting promises, this is going to clean my liver; good luck to it is all I can say.

Now I'm drinking it (and I have to say it's very delicious, despite its green glow). I'm also trying to work out the probability of some Mexican suddenly thinking 'hmmm, cactuses must be edible' and then taking the risk of eating one, assuming it would not only be safe and, in addition to tasting OK, also miraculously have beneficial health properties to start this craze off.

By the law of averages this can only bode well for other common spiky plants, not usually part of the culinary experience, such as perhaps Christmas trees or holly if any one wants to have a go (but on your head be it).

Over the years, fruit juices have had many guises, from the 'must have' starter of the 1970's to a sludgy concentrate served with a full English. But a new era has dawned for juice as Britain's increasing demand for high quality, natural and healthy products

revolutionises the market. Added vitamins, minerals, and functional ingredients now promise to get rid of your hangover, flush your toxins, fight your cold, get you digesting more efficiently, improve your brain performance, your concentration and your stamina, lift depression and stop your hair falling out. Smoothies and juices, it seems, can do no wrong.

The health benefits are mirrored by impressive sales results in the 'noughties'. Sales of packaged crushed fruit drinks doubled year on year between 2001 and 2006 to create a UK market worth £134m. British consumers drank a staggering 34 million litres in 2006 - up from just 6.3 million in 2001 - and if market analyst Mintel's figures prove correct, that figure will treble to about 100 million litres by 2011.

Crussh was started in 1998; now with 24 branches, it has steadily grown, in contrast to other juice bars that have failed. Many of those failures assumed wrongly that their success could be achieved with juice as the sole product, even with our unpredictable climate.

Only at the eleventh hour, and sadly too late for many, were sandwiches and coffee thought of as a vital addition. Whilst a menu with too wide a spread across different categories is just as precarious, a one-trick pony is doomed to fail. Take soup bars that are another high risk strategy with ridiculously long odds - they have never really worked as a stand-alone product.

Crussh have consequently covered the food bases, but then perhaps added more than is necessary on top, with a menu that, in its entirety, offers a dizzy choice of breakfast porridge and yoghurt pots, hot eating ciabattas, sandwiches, wraps, salads, soups, cakes, pastries, as well as sushi and several health pots.

I was a little overwhelmed to say the least,



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for me; a triumph or a disaster.

The one thing I truly hate about toasted sandwiches, especially Paninis, is that they come out of the grill with a crust as brittle and hard as Harrogate toffee. This always results in a total dental challenge that leaves my front teeth zinging with the shock and heat of trying to crack through the coal face rock hard surface.

Now, I love nothing better than being surprised by food, and here I am totally amazed by the wafer-thin crisp shell and goose feather, pillow soft interior of this toasted bread; this is like nothing I have ever eaten before. Inside this magic bread lies 'Skinny Free Range Ham and Edam'. Far from being greasy and oily like the majority of toasted ham and cheese marriages, this is wholesome, satisfying, tasty and delicious.

Moving on to sandwiches, I want to say their Tuna and Cucumber is delicious because it's very hard, I think, to get this one wrong, but here is an example of mixing flavours in a jumble of awfulness that is far too complex.

Tabasco, lemon juice, capers, salt, pepper, tomato puree, and onion, all fighting in the ring together and not enough of them down and out for the count. The Simply Caesar Wrap, however, is lovely and I'd happily eat it again another day, especially as the wrap is one of the most interesting I've come across in a long while, with little shards of nuts and seeds, rather than the ubiquitous black pepper.

There is a fascinating range of 'Health Pots' that run from Vine Tomato, Mint and Edamame Beans, then Beetroot, Chickpea and Coriander, as well as Butterbean, Cherry Tomato and Parsley through to Puy Lentil, and Goats Cheese and Sweet Potato - all smaller eats, but a good option to go with a soup, instead of a sandwich if you are in that mood.

Last is a Crayfish, Mint and Buckwheat Noodle Salad. The presentation of this is stunning; bean sprouts, a lime wedge, chunks of cucumber. The box is then generously filled with a big heap of crayfish and the fresh mint shows great thought and attention to detail.



and surely this has an expensive waste implication on bad weather days such as today? All this in addition to their massive core range of juices, smoothies, boosters, and hot and cold drinks.

It is, after all, a fantastically extensive portfolio to get right in the quality stakes, never mind creating the planogram from hell. In my mind there is a fine balance between offering a good choice, and keeping it interesting at the same time, as well as simple enough to manage for maximum commercial benefit.

So I'm starting at the beginning of the day with Organic Porridge and complementary toppings; it's kind of porridgy and what I expected. There are some nice options of raisins and syrup, all very warming.

Moving swiftly on to soup, there is quite a choice here of daily changing recipes as is the norm now. Today it's Chilli Chicken with kidney beans and juicy bits of tomato; Indian Chicken Rajah - thick with lots of rice and spices; Spinach and Lentil, and Vegetable Garden (the least exciting, which is a shame as the name sounds very promising).

I'm very intrigued to try their low fat Ciabatta-style bread they use for all their toasted sandwiches. The words 'low fat' and 'style' equate in my estimation to some removal of taste and authenticity which doesn't bode well, and considering they have put their whole range of five on it this has to go one way or the other



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A very delicious Yuzu dressing makes it close to unthinkable good.

Am I surprised by some of this? Of course I am. There are parts of this brand I love: the detailed easy to use nutritional information on the website; the chiselled look they give their cucumber that is so beautifully Asian, yet less practical than machine cutting; their use of fresh mint; their Yuzu dressing; their nothing short of miraculous Ciabatta bread.

Then there are the things that annoy me intensely; their appalling paper carrier bags that aren't big enough to lay a salad flat so the wet stuff leaks out and the bag breaks very irritatingly on the platform of High Street Kensington tube station; the very cheesy product names I wish companies wouldn't keep doing, because they think they are amusing and clever when they are far from it. Then there's the fact that they claim to be preservative and additive free wherever possible, yet sell a chocolate cake full of nasties and e numbers and even go as far as listing them all on the website.

Surely this doesn't make a jot of sense, especially as this terrible cake sits in the range alongside a 'clean dec' organic one. Why both? And whilst on the subject of naturalness, I've never believed that gums and thickeners, used to make low fat mayo a clone of the real thing, are particularly natural.

I would cull their lower sellers in many areas of their range: the endless cakes, bars, muffins and pastries and snacks simply can't all be front runners in a less indulgent health-led brand.

But when all is said and done, I think CrussH is here to expand on many a high street in this new decade, despite what remains of our recession. And do I like it? Yes, you know, I think I do.

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The above is based on her independent views