NELLIE NICHOLS

Fast-expanding TOSSED aims to be fully-rounded

Salad and sandwich bars have multiplied in recent years, buoyed up by the surge in healthy and light eating. Tossed is up there with the most successful. Nellie Nichols went to visit the founder Vincent McKeritt, BS (Batchelor of Salad), with his seventh unit about to open

My first salad memory is of Butter lettuce, accompanied by a slice of home-baked cloved ham and, depending on my mother's mood, the occasional blob of Salad Cream, the sweet acidic taste of which I still love today.

I remember her showing me how to scratch the lettuce stalk and smell it to reveal its sweet or bitter smell and its matching flavour.

Those were the days before the invention of lettuce spinners, and she used to wash the lettuce in the big kitchen sink before wrapping it in a clean T towel, the corners of which she then gathered up before stepping out into the garden in all weathers to ferociously flick it in all directions until the T towel was sodden but the lettuce miraculously dry.

Salad in all its guises has moved on in leaps and bounds since then but it still seems only yesterday that M & S broke new ground by launching plastic tubs of salads in fantastic, layered combinations. Suddenly there was a viably healthy, convenient lunch opportunity with as much potential as its main competition, the sandwich.

But in the early days of the high street sandwich bar, salads didn't really make much of an appearance on the menu. Low in popularity compared to its bready competition, salad production proved to be peppered with issues, from their composition and make up, to how they could be nicely dressed. And grated carrot, hard boiled egg and coleslaw were about as innovative as they got.

The weight of the ingredients crushed any leaves less robust than iceberg. Dressing the salad undermined any kind of potential shelf life, but the industry was still waiting for the advent of

individual dressing pots and the current extensive choice in salad packaging we have today.

Fast forward to the overwhelming choice of salads in this new decade. Walking into M & S, if I fancy a salad for my lunch, I am torn between leaf, pulse and pasta bases, from the miniature individual size to the up to the brim filled large bowls with their fascinating and interesting ingredients, and all at the most remarkably reasonable prices. Here for me the commercial scene is set: a delicious well composed salad, available for a just few pounds.

Then, going into EAT or Pret, again there is a wealth of choice in small and large salads, innovative recipes and a peek inside to see all card box packaging. The stakes have now risen and become more sophisticated in the salad arena.

Pret's No Bread range was, I think, a catalyst in this evolution: a small box of bread-free ingredients - call it a salad if you want. Speaking as one of the original concept team, I believe this maverick idea proved the acceptance of a version of the salad as part of a combination lunch in the UK, rather than it just being a sole component, achieved through dynamic marketing.

In New York the consumer always wants a salad and soup combination. It's what they love. But it goes without saying that a salad, unless well-constructed and generous, is unlikely to keep you going until tea-time on its own. Marry it up with another partner though and you have a satisfying lunch to sustain you through your day.

So this leads me to Salad Bar concepts started in London in the Noughties. With the British weather as mad and unpredictable as it is, a sole salad concept wasn't really a viable proposition as a stand-alone success story.

The multiple option menu is always a high risk strategy but probably the best route to a successful salad business model, provided the multiples are mainstream enough to drive sales and minimise waste.

Coming up the escalators in Westfield Shopping Centre, I am fighting my way without breathing through their poor extraction system in the food court, on my way to visit Tossed.

It was set up in 2005 by Vincent McKeritt who, straight out of Bristol Business School, decided to start his own business. Five years on and he is about to open his seventh unit, and is buoyant when I meet him about what he describes as his 'fully rounded' healthy eating option. Fully rounded in my book implies a more than decent smattering of perfection. Let's see, because my expectation is rising with every word he enthusiastically utters, and perfect is a very tall order.

Vincent speaks about putting the fun back into healthy eating. I'm not sure what this really means. Should we all be chuckling away at little cracker jokes while we eat? (I did, though I have to say, have some endless fun playing with his nutritional calculator on the website www.tosseduk.com, which calculates your salad as you put it together). His marketing speaks of nothing ground-breakingly new: assuring words and phrases, sustainability, responsibility, free range, fresh, and so on. He says healthy food doesn't need to be boring …well we all agree with that. But is it sufficiently different to put up there above the rest?

The menu may be a little over-complicated. There are soups, stews, sandwiches, wraps, baps, bloomers, and until recently jacket potatoes. There are different sizes in each category:

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medium and large salads, and wraps which range from £3.35 to £4.05, depending on what is in them and if they are hot or cold; and I’m a bit confused about the configuration of the many options.

But the wraps are generously overfilled and wrapped in the simplest of ways in greaseproof and easy to open, no nonsense packs. To open one can only be compared to the excitement of opening a beautifully wrapped birthday present. The Chicken Caesar Wrap, £3.25, which is made on one of the softest nicest wraps I’ve had in a long time, is fluffy and pillow like, not stiff and dry to chew, as I am often resigned to expect in a longer-life manufactured version. Made with low fat mayo and vine tomatoes, this is guilt-free at only 333 calories.

The Ham and Brie Bloomer, £2.95, is again far from being mean or on the small side, and definitely not for the faint hearted. The ham is delicious but the low GI bloomer, a little thickly cut and door-stop like for girls, and at 493 calories (no doubt because of the cheese), I’m not sure there is too much point using low fat yoghurt - certainly not the Greek version, which is even higher in numbers than the regular stuff.

The Deli Chicken on granary is only 287 calories and made with low fat mayo and yoghurt and roasted tomatoes, cucumber and rocket - again on low GI bread. This is a decent low fat sandwich but the chicken is without doubt dry, tough, bitty and disappointing and needs to be replaced quickly with a more succulent sliced version. There can’t be anything I hate more in this industry than the below average industrial chicken meat that I come across all too often.

The salad bar is a long runway of multi-coloured different ingredients to tempt and combine into different mixes. You can select your base from a choice of leaves and hot and cold bases including cous cous, noodles, and brown basmati rice. In Westfield you can also add a hot grilled to order ingredient to have on top. Clever.

There is a list of salads that can be made and tossed to order and their signature salad I try is made up of chicken, mozzarella, red grapes, apple, toasted cashews, dried cranberries with cos and mixed leaves, and its champagne raspberry dressing is wondrous.

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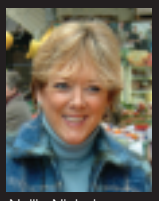
There are lots of fabulous ones to choose from including soy and sesame and honey and lemon. You could get quite carried away with it all, but to design one yourself should be approached with caution, and here’s the rub. If you take a classic salad recipe from Pret and mirror it here it might sting you for at least £2.00 more – not dissimilar to choosing your own pizza toppings, the additions all rack up quickly.

So I would stick to their house salads and be done. There is a Moroccan, a Greek and a Mexican, and I would suggest in the quest for full roundedness perhaps there are a few more to add from the more healthy countries of the globe: Vietnam, Japan and Thailand. So all in all, yes, Vincent and his team can toss a very good salad, make no mistake.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