

NELLIE NICHOLS

On another PLANET

Planet Organic has launched a range of organic sandwiches – Filling Station – in its London stores. Nellie Nichols went along to sample the new offerings

Although I care passionately about what I eat and where it comes from, I'm afraid I do sit very comfortably on the organic fence.

I buy organic milk because I like it coming naturally from a cow, and organic eggs because I'd like to have my own, and am delusional enough to think I will (and I care enormously about animal welfare), but that's the end of it.

I, like most of the population, simply can't justify the price hike for organic (or have the disposable income for it anyway) and so I join the school of thought that the organic weekly shop is for those with more money than sense. There is just a little too much hysterical hype about organic being better, more nutritious and making you live longer than regular vegetables, supposedly soaked and pickled in dangerous chemicals.

After very lengthy trials, the Berlin-based consumer watchdog Stiftung Warentest, (which I follow on a regular basis; such fascinating stuff) concluded that organic food has no health, taste or nutritional advantages over conventional, manufactured or harvested food.

Before some of you get up in arms and beat an angry path to my door, think

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about it. The powerful weedkillers of old have long since been banned and modern versions are strictly regulated to be harmless to the soil and leave undetectable residues. If you could taste pesticides, what loopy farmer would be stupid enough to actually use them? But people should be allowed to believe what they want to believe in, and, I don't care what anyone says, I will always believe in Father Christmas and fairies.

So one of the burning questions is: where does that leave the true taste of organic sandwiches? Here comes another hot potato. So I'm off to Planet Organic in London to find out what their new



'Filling Station' range has to offer.

Apparently each of their organic ingredients is carefully scrutinised for flavour and nutrition and their new range has been developed in response to what the Head Chef describes as the Planet Organic customers' call for 'a fresh alternative to the usual soggy cheese and pickle sandwich'. Fighting talk to us all indeed.

I'm informed by the cashier (a Hungarian Christopher Biggins lookalike in very fetching turquoise rimmed glasses) that the Westbourne Grove store is the original, having opened in 1995.

I still have no idea if this is true, but bearing in mind when I asked the same man for directions to Whiteleys shopping centre and he suggested I would need to take a bus, I did have concerns, knowing it was probably just a couple of minutes walk away.

It could well have been true though, because on entering the store it appears to be a little cavernous and tired, but then the bar has undoubtedly been raised since the opening of the slickly merchandised Wholefoods in High Street, Kensington and this is what I have now



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The above is based on her independent views



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come to expect from the health food sector.

When I do find the fixture for sandwiches and snacks I have to say it is a country mile away from what I am expecting and, to be honest, a bit of a let down.

To launch a new brand under the umbrella of a large organic store and shout about it surely promises a stunningly thought through display of products, placed in neat rows on the shelf and bursting with pride. The reality is a mish-mash of different

unheard of brands and niche products, jumbled together in the semi-darkness, running from the poorly packaged and unpleasantly clingfilmed wedges of tortilla omelettes and (ditto wrapped) tofu and falafel wraps to pots of odd salads.

In amongst this melange sit, almost like an afterthought, the Filling Station range of four sandwiches and two artisan rolls. If ever there was a case for a planogram believe me this is it.

So off I go with the Egg Salad on Wheat Free Rye, £2.99. The sliced egg does not have the canary yellow organic yolk I am anticipating and I do not expect the tomatoes to be as ripe as they are, or to be misplaced on top of the mayonnaise and therefore sliding about as if on a skating rink. There are sprouts in there too which is another surprise and a lack of seasoning, which is undoubtedly a shame. Tomatoes and egg always ask for black pepper.

The next I try is Smoked Salmon and Cream Cheese again on Wheat Free Rye, £3.69. I can't even begin to understand how this one is so wrong. The salmon appears to have been cut with a butter knife; the slices are nearly as thick as the bread and I have to give up when I encounter a larger than life pin bone.

The cucumber is thin and, as a consequence of nestling up close and personal to the salmon, is limp and lifeless. The cream cheese, which I can only hope will be the saving grace, is so thin a scraping that it has cracked and is very reminiscent of the surface of the moon.

The BBQ Chicken and Slaw with Roasted Cherry Tomatoes and Rocket on Spelt Bread, £3.99 is the best so far. The chicken tastes freshly roasted and is nice and moist, the slaw crunchy, albeit cabbage shouldn't

come in wedges, and the cherry tomatoes are juicy and full of flavour. There is too much grated carrot though and the sauce seems to have been squirted into just one central blob, rendering the rest of the sandwich arid.

I'm afraid the Pumpkin Seed and Humous, again on Spelt, £3.49 is simply too worthy and not my type of sandwich and when I pick this up I just shower myself in grated carrot. The sandwich is so dry there is nothing to hold it in and it is soon followed onto my lap by a flurry of seeds and sprouts.

The Roast Chicken & Tomato (artisan) Roll, £3.99 again has nice chicken but the wholegrain mustard appears to have only made a slight appearance and the rocket leaves are very tired. The Mozzarella & Tomato Roll, £3.79 is simply oozing with oily pesto and the tomatoes again have seen off their younger days.

To be completely honest, (and I know you wouldn't expect anything else of me) this is all wrong. It's as if this range of sandwiches has been developed by someone who has never done this sort of thing before. The sensitivity of placement and how ingredients should be sliced and prepared, not to mention their acceptable quality, seems to have been completely bypassed and ignored.

With such a well managed hot food counter staffed by such an attentive team it seems nothing short of a major oversight not to have created a fabulous made-to-order sandwich counter utilising the many delicious ingredients so compatible with sandwiches that are on sale in the store. This Filling Station isn't for me.

