



THE MEXICAN WAY



Nellie Nichols

Chipotle has been a 'must' stop off for sandwich designers on 'new retail trends' tours, since it opened in London recently. Is all the fuss justified? Nellie Nichols joined the queue to find out

I don't ever want to go to Mexico, I think it's a texture thing. I can only visit a country if I have a fascination for its food, and the food from Mexico is often soft, squidgy, baby food textures which have never appealed to me.

Neither have chillies, some of which have the potential to damage anyone's taste buds, and as mine represent my livelihood, I consider them worth taking extreme care of. I am sure this is quite short-sighted but, to be honest, I've happily let myself be led by my instincts for

years, and as this has proved reasonably successful I figure I should just keep doing it.

But perhaps now is the time to dip my burrito in the salsa because the UK is being slowly infiltrated by what are being described finally as truly decent Mexican eateries: Wahaca, Mexican street food started by Thomasina Miers of Masterchef fame which I am trying out later this week, Chilango and Tortilla. All are growing into respectable chains fed by the growing popularity for international cuisine in the ever

diversifying food to go arena.

But to me, the most intriguing of them all has to be the first UK opening of Chipotle in May. A complete unknown this side of the pond, in the States it is nothing short of a national institution with a 2009 revenue in excess of \$1.5 billion. More than 1,000 restaurants in 37 states employ 25,000. It serves more than 750,000 customers every day. Welcome to the sleeping giant, and I'm sure I won't be the only one watching its European awakening with great interest.





I soon feel its corporate enormity when I make some enquires about an interview. Before I know it my In Box is filling up with a peppering of emails from the PR machine back in Dallas, Texas. What is Sandwich Magazine? (I mean, honestly!) Who makes up the readership? Do I realise Chipotle don't make what they consider a sandwich? They then email that they'll think about it for a while and let me know. I'm going ahead anyway - you know me - and in any case, I've decided that this new kid on the UK block is too significant

not to write about.

Finally after going round in one long frustrating and convoluted circle I'm back where I started, talking to Jacob Sumner, the 'Restaurateur of European Operations', clearly the army's advance party. He has been responsible for the first store opening in May in Charing Cross Road, off Shaftesbury Avenue in London, opposite the famous Foyle's bookstore.

To be honest, I started off thinking what was all the fuss about: wasn't this just another McDonald's clone with a different product offering? Painting by numbers in the kitchen, roll it out in every city and start printing the cash. I'm still not entirely sure and that's after spending quite some time with Jacob.

What I do know is this is very much a proactive and positive food business template. If you're going to create a fast food model that has the capability of becoming this gargantuan, giving it a heartbeat and a conscience was a very wise move by its founder, Steve Els when he opened his first store in Denver Colorado in 1993.

His ethos was to create a Mexican fast food concept by using what has become one of Chipotle's mantras: "food with integrity," with ingredients that have been raised not only with respect to animals but also the environment and farmers.

I would imagine initially this was a pretty simple task to pull off - after all, small quantities of farm-assured chicken are not insurmountable to find and all through the 90's that is exactly what he did. Naturally raised pigs, chicken and cattle were all sourced and used in his expanding

number of restaurants. It's only recently he has hit the issue of his demand having outgrown his supply.

In 2010 he faced the conundrum of his chicken supply shrinking back from 100% to 80% against his sales. Before opening in London they identified suppliers all over England of farm-assured meats, and their impressive back-up in a time of crisis entails Jason getting on his bike and cycling to Borough Market to buy guaranteed pork quality from the famous Ginger Pig.

Chipotle's growth may now well be getting in the way of its beliefs but they are fighting hard to source the best and eliminate the worst as they grow year on year. 2004, only a couple of years before Chipotle went public on the New York Stock Exchange, marked the year that their oil no longer contained trans fats. In 2009 Steve testified before Congress to try and eliminate antibiotics in ranching.

I'm invited to the kitchen and to meet some of the team. They call it 'kitchen transparency'. The kitchen forms part of the counter and there is virtually no preparation that doesn't take place in full view of the customer. Everything is done from scratch, from the washing and shredding of the Romaine lettuce to the seven hours a day spent de-seeding and dicing tomatoes.

Today's lettuce is washed eleven times until the icy water that is constantly changed is 'fit to drink'. Cumin seeds are toasted on the grill twice a day and form part of one of the two house salsas, along with juniper berries. Shards of pepper are roasted along their sides, flanks of beef hand butchered and marinated,

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pork is slow cooked for ten hours. Plum tomatoes are jumbled up with jalapeños and then roasted; their charred skins then blitzed into tiny fragments and added to the salsa. Jacob takes me to show me the evidence in the glistening shiny salsa on the counter. He stirs it with pride to show me, then excitedly points out a slice of gloriously scorched yellow pepper he has spotted and tells me he knows it will taste incredible.

I don't think for a single minute there is any question at all that Jacob doesn't truly love his job, but then everyone here looks like they do; there is a calm organised symmetry in this kitchen I don't often witness.

This is because there is a very impressive and honest people culture here that attracts high performing employees, which results in 90% of the managers coming up through the ranks from the restaurant crews. Countless team members keep a watchful and independent eye on the 'front line' of ingredients and make their own judgement on when to grill more chicken or flip some more chargrilled peppers, all standing by readily prepared in the state of the art built in fridge below the grill.

Either everyone who works here is on happy pills or, far more likely it's just a great place to work. Training is done 'shoulder to shoulder' and when I ask Jason if they have a training academy he is visibly amused.

There are just five choices to make at Chipotle: a burrito, a bowl (a burrito without the flour tortilla),



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The above is based on her independent views

soft or crispy tacos and salads, yet there are 65,000 possible combinations you can create. The quality of the ingredients is absolutely without question; I loved the cilantro lime rice and the pinto beans and the slow cooked pork just melts away. The salsas and guacamole put most others you will have tasted to shame and then there is the very delicious chipotle honey vinaigrette. There's nothing here not to love.

There is a strict no freezer policy but a huge walk-in fridge and I feel very privileged to be invited to take a look inside. A walk-in is at the heart of any kitchen, it is here we all know you will see immediately just how well the kitchen runs, and gauge the

freshness of the product. It is the soul and the heartbeat of the operation where nothing can hide. I can only marvel at the wonderment of such fresh, neat trays and containers of such spanking quality.

Steve Els has a philosophy that I am a passionate believer in, which is based on the 'keep it simple' school of thought. He says if you only do a few things, you can do them better than anyone else. Despite their product being far from cheap at an average spend of around £6.50 with no add-ons, Chipotle want you to experience a well-sourced delicious product that is hard to beat on taste and quality and changes the way consumers think and feel about fast food. That makes perfect sense to me.