



Accounting for tastes

From melting toasties to frothy cappuccinos, customers at BP's service stations around the world are enjoying Real Food, Real Coffee, Real Quick. IAN VALENTINE finds out why fresh food on the move is proving to be the retail recipe for success. Photography by Stephen Barnett





Mugshot: BP's Aral service stations in Germany have built a reputation for quality food and coffee.



En route: BP's service stations are sited on prime locations to attract motorists.

The year is 1990 and you turn into a service station to fill up. After all, why else would you enter a service station? You go to pay and a pale neon strip light crackles as you push through the heavy door, the smell of grease and anti-freeze invading your nostrils. You are hungry and late, and with no time to visit a town, you decide to make do with a sandwich and coffee.

The choice is plastic cheese, vulcanised ham or something that claims to be egg. All three fillings are trapped between limp white slices of bread and an inch of margarine. You take a bar of chocolate instead. The only coffee on offer is tepid, transparent and tastes of engine oil. The tea is made of powdered milk. You grab a can of Coke. You write a note in your FiloFax to pack a picnic next time.

Fast forward to the present day and your dress sense, vehicle and fuel will have changed for the better. Your BP service station has also improved beyond recognition, following a global policy to provide customers with a convenient, quality product that has redefined the service station experience.

The Wild Bean Café in the UK, for example, now available to customers in nearly 170 BP Connect stations up and down the land, has quickly developed a reputation for excellence on the move. Over 3.5 million cups of coffee were sold last year, the equivalent of 400 road tankers; while if you linked the two million filled baguettes sold in 2004, they would form a chain from London to Rome, and back.

Graham Sims, business unit leader for UK Retail, has overseen the creation, launch and establishment of the Wild Bean Cafe chain. "Five years ago we identified the huge opportunity through our extensive real estate in the UK to compete in the convenience retail market," he said. "BP's service stations enjoy prime locations to attract motorists to or on the way home from work, the shops or the school run, for example. It would also help us combat the growing threat from supermarkets."

They say that the smell of freshly brewed coffee and freshly baked bread will help sell your house, and as you approach the counter of a BP Connect, the warm aroma of espresso, cappuccino and macchiato tempts you into the café. Wickedly sticky pastries, croissants, doughnuts, melting toasties and well-filled baguettes await, all baked on site by friendly staff.

"We realised that people nowadays want quality food quickly and expect fresh produce, so we introduced our new range of coffee and sandwiches," explains Sims. "We have also seized on the need to stay ahead of competitors, so our range of products is always evolving. The greatest compliment is to hear people say they are surprised to learn Wild Bean Cafés are not independent franchises, but part of BP, the oil company".

"We also take pride in the training we give our staff in the cafés and were delighted to receive recognition from the government for our policy to help staff achieve Non-Vocational Qualifications. Indeed, we were given the best score ever awarded by the judges."

The sandwiches have also received plaudits, lifting the coveted 'En-Route Sandwich Retailer of the Year 2004 at the British Sandwich Association Industry Awards, known as 'The Sammies'. Director of the BSA Jim Winship confirmed that BP's policy had worked. "In the past the forecourt sector has not always had the best of reputations for sandwiches. The award recognises the work done by Wild Bean Café to change this perception and brings forecourt sandwiches in line with the products now available on the high street."

Nick Smith, who is in charge of researching and developing the food and drinks behind this recent success, was delighted with the award. "It is testament to the hard work of our food technologist partners and a forward-thinking policy that we have come this far," he says.

"The key has been to offer a seasonal selection such as a turkey and stuffing sandwich or mince pies at Christmas or lighter salads in the summer. But we recognise that our customers appreciate the more traditional sandwich fillings. Indeed 55% of our sales are from just six fillings – BLT, egg & cress, chicken & bacon, chicken salad, egg & bacon and the lower calorie tuna & cucumber. You ignore those at your peril."

Smith is also excited about the new range of Wild Chill smoothies and shakes made from fresh ingredients such as mixed berries, mango, chocolate, vanilla and iced coffee. ☺



Keeping in touch: Internet kiosks give BP Connect customers up-to-the-minute information and access to online shopping.

Innovative approach: Left, far right and below, fresh food served by friendly staff has helped BP lead the way in forecourt retailing; centre, all the energy requirements at the BP Connect service station in Hornchurch, UK, are met by renewable sources, including wind power.



“We have already seen great results, as well as our coffee syrups that are free across the network. If you haven’t tried one, you should – it will blow you away! Our ambition was to provide Real Food, Real Coffee, Real Quick and we feel we have achieved it.”

When the 4th Earl of Sandwich placed a slice of ham between two hunks of bread in 1762, he could have had little idea of the phenomenon he had started. Recent research estimates that an average individual in Europe will eat over 230 sandwiches every year. And the same need for handy, quick food that inspired the Earl over two centuries ago (he didn’t want to interrupt a card game) is even more relevant in our own time-starved society.

The simple sandwich has formed the spearhead of a marketing initiative across BP’s Aral service stations in Germany with the introduction of its nationwide special sandwich offer. Attracting customers by building a reputation for fresh, quality food and coffee on the go at its 1,200 Petit Bistro cafes, BP has established a significant lead over its competitors.

At the heart of this offer is a new range called SuperSnacks, five fillings that aim to corner the convenience sector. Following detailed customer research, the marketing team in Bochum learnt that the German motorist’s favourite sandwiches contained salami, hot and cold cured ham, meatballs or gouda cheese. They then set about creating special sauces with a secret recipe, such as gherkin pickles, wild garlic and tsatsiki, that would give each snack a unique taste. If they liked what they ate, they had to come back to Aral to find it.



All the sandwiches are baked and handmade on site by trained staff, to exact recipes, and no product is allowed to remain on the shelf for longer than four hours. Happily, they have usually been bought well before then and, only six months after the launch in June 2004, more than 4.2 million SuperSnacks had been sold.

“The key is that all our customers know that they will get exactly the product they like, and they know it will be fresh and available immediately,” explains Walter Clements, business unit leader for Germany, Luxemburg and Switzerland.

“We have also involved the service station managers in the project and allowed them to take ownership of the product, and the results have been very encouraging.” Indeed, Aral is now the fourth biggest player in the fast food sector in Germany. “Personally I prefer the salami sandwich the most,” adds Clements.

Sitting in a Petit Bistro over lunchtime proved a valuable experience. Time and again, as customers approached the cash registers to pay for gas, they noticed the colourful signs for SuperSnacks and deviated towards the Petit Bistro section of the store. Gerhard Ballack, a 42 year-old software salesman from Dusseldorf, said that he would vary his choice of sandwich, depending on the time of day. “I often eat the gouda for breakfast, the ham for lunch and the meatball for supper,” he says. “But not all three in a day! My wife, on the other hand, only eats the cheese sandwich.”

While national tastes and trends will always differ, BP’s global policy to provide quality food and drinks for people on the move has borne fruit the world over. New Zealander Richard Barker, BP’s offer and format manager, is delighted with the progress made in such a short time.

“Six years ago the food and drinks sector was identified as one of the major planks on which to build for the future, and we strove to provide a distinctive offer that is faster and better quality that will bring the customer back,” he says.

“I know I am biased, but much of the impetus for this initiative came from Australasia, where consumers reacted quickly to the introduction of fresh, top quality products. ‘Down under’, it is

the humble meat pie that is favoured above sandwiches and BP has developed a reputation for selling unique, high-grade pies, with a taste that customers crave.”

When it comes to food on the run, few nations have mastered it like the US. If BP was to make inroads into this enormous market, it needed to develop a strategy that would cater for the everyday needs of this choosy clientele, whilst identifying a niche that would make BP Connect on the East Coast or ampm on the West Coast the first port of call.

The solution lay in a policy of self-expression, whereby customers have the facilities to make their coffee, soft drink or sandwich exactly the way they want it. The days when buyers simply asked for a cup of coffee are long gone. BP now offers four individual flavours at different strengths, with five kinds of creamer. A 24-fountain soft drinks bar allows the thirsty traveller to choose how much of whatever he likes.

“We give the consumer the opportunity to make his own personalised drink, be it hot or cold. If he likes a diet coke with a dash of cherry, for example, he makes it how he likes,” says Polly Flinn, senior vice president for BP’s US retail operations. “We are also the only vendor who allows a customer to choose between cubed or crushed ice, and it is very popular.”

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Unlike the UK market, where a ready-made sandwich is the standard fare, US visitors to Wild Bean Café expect custom made sandwiches from the deli. Likewise, a large self-serve condiment selection allows the public to put whatever they like the most on their burger or hot-dog.

“The new futuristic ATM terminals at the pumps give the opportunity to create your own favourite at the touch of a screen, so that you can visit the rest of the store and pick up your product a few minutes later. It is all about speed, convenience, quality and self-expression,” says Flinn.

Next year, the customer can look forward to an expanded range of toasted paninis, energy drinks, ice coffees, as well as a new European-style baguette. But at a full 12 inches (30 centimetres), it will be customised for the US appetite.

Sandwiches or smoothies, the successful introduction of any new product depends on finding out what customers want, and meeting that demand. “In 2004 we undertook a comprehensive meal and beverage study across a number of markets in the US and UK,” says Andrew Baird, customer insight director for BP’s global retail business. “We wanted to find out what it would take for customers to switch to BP.”

Baird explains that the key feature of this research was to explicitly link attitudes (what customers say) to behaviours (what customers do) by way of in-depth interviews and one-month diary panels.

“For example,” he recalls, “we asked one focus group where they’d like to go for a fast-food lunch, and everyone chose McDonalds, citing the fact they’d introduced a new salad range. However, once they got there, everyone came out with a burger.”

Baird adds that the results of the research have proved invaluable. “The findings will have a significant impact on the future direction and success of our retail food business.” **BPM**

● *Ian Valentine is a feature writer based in London with a background in nature and conservation.*