

Changes in the court of the cuisine king

FURTHER TO HIS FASCINATING PIECE ON CUSTOMER-CENTRIC SHOPPING CENTRE DESIGN BACK IN OCTOBER, **IAN ELLIOTT**, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INVESTMENT DIRECTOR OF HAMBURG-BASED MAKE IT REAL GMBH, TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO THE FUTURE OF FOOD COURTS

The first food court I saw was in the Ridings Centre in Wakefield, England, shortly after it opened in 19... something. It was a good use of some difficult to lease space and was based on the US concept of kiosks surrounding a communal seating area. It offered a choice of food in a different surrounding and was a great success. The US-style concept of kiosk and communal seating spread throughout Europe with some regional and country differences that branding would allow.

In the 1990s more restaurants and cafes started to be located in the malls, and became a part of the retail mix rather than be totally segregated. These themed 'food streets' and 'restaurant courts' responded to operators that wanted their own seating and individuality. Different nationalities and their eating habits influenced the design. This was particularly the case in Portugal and Spain, while the UK tended to follow the US fashion of more and more entertainment, although not to the extent of Mall of America, West Edmonton Mall and Woodbine Centre in Toronto.

Local and national preferences are essential in determining the design of the food court in a shopping centre. In Turkey for example, the food court in a shopping centre is proportionally larger than anywhere else in Europe. While local food preferences are important, the key criterion is the social importance of a place to meet family, friends and even business contacts. In Spain and Portugal, people's love of eating out and entertainment well into the night can be seen in food court design, but its popular success was a result of mixing local individual as well as international brands.

Notwithstanding cultural preferences, there are a number of trends which are moving food courts away from the segregated kiosk and communal seating format. As usual these are driven by customers as well as new operators. In a market where shops double as tourist attractions, hotels double as meeting points with lifestyle and museums double as shopping malls, there is also a trend in restaurants and bars towards this multi-functional 'compaction'.

Cafes, bars and restaurants are becoming more multi-use, and seek to offer culture,



entertainment and shopping as well as something to eat and drink. A food market, multi-media store, restaurants, cafes and bars related to the market with quality produce is a great place to go as can be seen in the basement of L'illa Diagonal in Barcelona. But then, in Barcelona as in many cities in Spain food markets have always offered a mix of 'take away' and 'try it' on the premises. Other service providers are seeing the opportunity as well.

In France, perhaps not the first stop for retail innovation, Chez Jean, a food 'n' news concept was launched earlier this year by Casino (supermarkets) and Relay (news kiosks). Chez Jean is a cafe, news-stand and superette all rolled into one. Even the Financial Times (5 May 2009) set out a case for Starbucks offering ATM and Internet banking in its units and, as it pointed out, it does sound more like a bank than a coffee shop.

Food Markets themselves are adding to their offer. In Palermo's La Vucciria market there are artistic, cultural and gastronomic events in and around the market throughout the year.

A food court really has to earn its keep by doing more than just feeding people at specific times of the day. In the morning it looks particularly dreary even unappetising. It has to be a lot more interesting, entertaining and especially more 'chillaxing' (a derivative of 'to chill out'). It should have discrete as well as public meeting places, be a social Internet location and a place for reflection as well as for contemplation; an integral part of a 'third place', a home-away-from-home for people living, working and visiting. Its design should not only arouse the public's curiosity but have a magnetic attraction, an experience, a feature you simply have to see. This core attraction becomes a genuine landmark only when it relates to the customers' experiences and incorporates them into the 'emotional context' of the premises.

I like the possibility of mixing food and gastronomy, media, leisure, entertainment, and services and linking them by a golden thread to draw you through a memorable experience. But then I have always liked the energy and experiences of fresh food markets and what they sell and cook. 