

Christie + Co Market Analysis

Operators taking healthy view on value

Healthy and sustainable food choices remain two of the major talking points currently occupying the minds of operators. Despite the challenging environment, it is clear that the demand from consumers for operators to pay more than lip service to these two issues remains strong.

A recent survey by Toptable, the bookings website, discovered that 93% of users questioned believed that restaurants and chefs should set an example in promoting healthy and sustainable food choices. Furthermore 70% agreed that they would be more likely to eat at a restaurant that was accredited by a reputable sustainability body.

It is clear, in these cash-strapped times, that consumers want greater value from their eating out trips but not, it seems, at the expense of either healthy options or sustainability.

With this in mind, the Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA) was recently launched with 80 members already signed up and a further 200 willing to join. The not-for-profit, nationwide organisation is committed to promoting sustainability across the UK's restaurant industry, from high street chains to fine dining operators. A wide range of operators has already joined the Association including the Mexican restaurant group Wahaca, and healthy fast-food chain Leon.

To become a member of the SRA restaurants have to pledge to be more sustainable, embrace the organisation's values and commit to at least three new sustainable activities included its charter of actions - which could include offering tap water, supporting a charity, or having a vegetarian option. Each year that an operator is a member of the SRA, it has to pledge to a further three sustainable activities.

Other companies are exploring ways to make their properties more sustainable. Whitbread's "Good Together" programme was launched at the end of 2009, with a pledge by the company to reduce its carbon emissions by 26% by 2020. The budget hotel, pub/restaurant and coffee shop operator is set to open its first low-carbon restaurant — a 220-cover Beefeater — this autumn in West Sussex.

The FSA's current consultation process regarding calorie labelling on menus is also highlighting the healthy eating issue. The consultation process followed a successful trial undertaken by 21 companies, including those from the casual dining and quick service restaurant sectors such as Pret a Manger and Mitchells & Butlers, which saw the introduction of calorie labelling on menus.

The outcome of the consultation, which was due to end in March, with the details of a final scheme to be published this spring, will decide on how calorie information will appear in eating and drinking out outlets. The study found that the labelling would help with issues of visibility, understanding and consumer engagement.

The downturn has been "a wake up call", for many operators, who have had to have a hard look at their businesses. They have had to ensure that their businesses remain robust by delivering good quality products and value for money.

By adapting their offers to the current market many have been able to stay afloat and, in some cases, grow. This adaption has included, and looks set to increasingly include, the factoring in of a more sustainable offer and healthy options.

We have found that those operators who adapted early to these growing consumers trends have found themselves in the best place to ride out the recession and are now in the perfect position to build their estates, whilst other play catch up.

People are always going to eat out, but as a restaurateur you have to give extra value, and this now goes beyond pricing your food competitively and providing customer care. The recession has left a long-term legacy among diners, who will continue to demand good food and a better dining experience but also healthier and more sustainable menu choices.

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