

F&M is tightening up on costs and refreshing its consumer offer

Fortnum's goes back to basics with focus on 'iconic' products

By MICK WHITWORTH

With corporate sales in the doldrums, Fortnum & Mason is to refresh its £30-a-head afternoon tea offer and reintroduce a personalised tea-blending service as part of a wider move to focus on its most "iconic" consumer products and services.

Food chief Simon Burdess said F&M, owned by the Weston family, was reviewing all aspects of the afternoon tea served in its classic fourth-floor St James's Restaurant.

"We can do 300 covers for afternoon tea on a Saturday, and it's a huge part of our revenue in the St James, so it has to be excellent," he said.

F&M has been through a tough year after the completion of a massive £24m refit in 2007. Although Burdess said the London store was "trading extremely well at the moment" its corporate hampers business has nosedived in the recession and in January the company said it was cutting up to 10% of its 530-strong workforce. Burdess said that after the upheaval of the store redevelopment it was now vital to ensure each part of the business was working effectively.



Burdess: F&M stacks up very well against any other shop in the UK

"It's in the public domain that Fortnum & Mason is not a profit-making business, We had a pretty tough Christmas with the decline in corporate sales, and you have to make changes sometimes. We have to control costs without affecting the customer experience at front of shop."

He continued: "A big part of the business plan was reinvigorating 181 Piccadilly. The next stage is looking at the day-to-day business of running a luxury store and a luxury food brand, and the continual need to delivery excellence."

He stressed that no customer-facing staff had been lost in January's restructure. The buying team – which he described as "the engine room" of F&M – was also unaffected, and new staff have just been recruited to the tea section.

Burdess said while there were a few aspects of the 2007 revamp he would now do differently, there was plenty of room to grow sales within the current fabric. "I think we stack up very well against any other shop in the UK," he told FFD.

Slow Food threatened with division in UK

By PATRICK McGUIGAN

The troubled Slow Food movement in the UK was still mired in disagreements as FFD went to press, with a breakaway faction proposing to form its own company that would rival the recently created Slow Food UK Trust.

At an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) in Birmingham at the end of April, three board members of the original Slow Food UK company, which was wound up at the beginning of the year because of funding problems, outlined proposals for a new company (Newco) to lead the movement and rival the Trust. The proposal was passed by a majority of 199 to 34, with 18 abstentions.

Slow Food has around 2,500 members in the UK, which are linked to local groups called 'convivia'.

The Slow Food Trust was formed from the ashes of the original Slow Food UK company, which was forced to close after main backer Peter Kindersley of the Sheepdrove Trust withdrew funding.

A majority of the old board voted in favour of transferring the assets of

the original company to the Trust, which has since appointed a new board and CEO, and opened an office in London. The Trust has also re-secured funding by Kindersley and has the backing of Slow Food International.

However, three members of the original board – Geoffrey Carr, Sue Miller and John Fleming – are unhappy with the way the Trust has been set up, prompting the Newco proposal.

Carol Trewin of the Slow Food Devon convivium, who attended the EGM, described the situation as "a complete fiasco".

"The meeting revealed widespread bitterness and acrimony between the original directors and a lot of anger among convivia leaders and members," she said.

Paolo Di Croce, Slow Food's international secretary, wrote a letter to all members after the EGM, stating: "The only body with the right to represent Slow Food in the UK is the Slow Food UK Trust. The resolution presented in order to implement the Newco proposal has no legal value."

Virtually as good as going to market?



Shoppers can wander among market stalls and hear food producers talk passionately about their products without leaving their own homes, thanks to the launch of a virtual farmers' market.

Set up by Marcus Carter, who previously worked at his family's Patchwork paté business, the interactive online market features stalls from 32 speciality producers, including Anglesey Sea Salt, Teapigs and Sillfield Farm.

Part of the virtual world Second Life, visitors to the market use an 'avatar' or computer model of themselves to browse the market, interacting with stallholders and watching videos of producers talking about their businesses. Products can be purchased via the producers' own websites.

So far around 180 people have created avatars to browse the market.

www.virtualfarmersmarketuk.com

● The provisional line-up for the World Cheese Congress, taking place this September in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria alongside the World Cheese Awards, has been announced. The wide-ranging event will focus on the global implications of trademarking and Protected Food Names.

Key presenters include: Keijo Hyvonen, EC Directorate-General for Agriculture & Rural Development; Cathy Strange, global dairy buyer, Whole Foods USA; Kobus Mulder, Agri-Expo SA and chair of the South African Cheese Awards; Louis Aird, import/export director, Saputo Dairy Company, Canada; Regi Hise of Roth Kasa, USA Culinary Education Centre; Roland Barthelemy, Maitre Fromager, Guilde des Fromagers, France; and Murayama Shigenobu: lecturer, Tokyo Cheese Academy. For full details go to: www.finefoodworld.co.uk

Deli-restaurant chain Carluccio's announced last month that half-year profits had fallen 12% because of a 20% increase in imported product costs, higher utility costs and an increase in statutory paid staff holidays.

● Raymond Blanc has returned to help relaunch the Maison Blanc patisserie chain. The chef, who founded the company in 1981 before selling his stake, has rejoined as consultant chef and will help with product development.

East Sussex deli and café business Bill's Produce Store plans to open branches in Chichester, Bath and London. The retailer, which runs shops in Lewes and Brighton, sold a chunk of its business to restaurant group Caprice Holdings last year.

● Gonalston Farm Shop's fish counter was highly commended in the Seafood Awards, organised by trade body Seafish. The Notts-based business was short-listed in the Seafood Independent Retailer of the Year award along with The Fish Deli in Devon.

Former Loxton Foods owner Paul Durbin says he is still looking for investment targets among artisan producers after taking a stake in Lynne Mallinson's Country Puddings last year (see p47). Durbin said he was looking for people like Mallinson who had "wonderful ideas" but could benefit from his experience and investment.