

## Cooking up new products

Chefs, it almost goes without saying, have an important role to play in the world of food. In our January issue we looked at the rise of the celebrity chef and the increasing use of a famous chef's face and name to market new food products. In this issue Andrew Don examines the behind-the-scenes roll of professional chefs and restaurateurs in the new product development process.

**A**ldo Zilli, television chef and patron of Signor Zilli and Zilli Fish in London's trendy Soho district, has just netted himself some extra-curricular work skipping Safeway's fish offering.

Zilli has been briefed to improve the £8bn turnover supermarket chain's one hundred fish counters and develop fish sauces. He has created 10 sauces from which the retailer will choose four.

Next there are talks about graduating to the delicatessens where he hopes to improve the Italian merchandise. "My ambition has always been to have delis. Now I will have 500," he says.

He believes all the chains need expert help from the finer purveyors of gastronomy. "They have so much room in supermarkets but they do not use it right. You go to the cheese counter and they don't have gorgonzola!"

Celebrity chefs have become big business in Britain as supermarkets increasingly dig into their new product expenditure pot to cook up something different for their public.

Some thirty top names dominate a market that earns them an estimated extra £500,000 a year in total, helping the retail market inject what is hoped is a bit of class to their portfolio.

The outcome is not always successful: Marks & Spencer still gets bashful when asked to analyse its failed dalliance with top-earning Ainsley Harriott who devised and endorsed its Food in a Flash range.

And Tony Tobin of TV program Ready Steady Cook once came up with ideas that Safeway felt "were so lavish that the average shopper would not have bought them".

It is a market shrouded in secrecy. Some observers claim Sainsbury uses big-name chefs purely for new product development purposes (NPD) rather than endorsement but keeps it quiet.

But the chain insists it does not use celebrity chefs and, in common with most of the food manufacturers, likes to use its own

in-house personnel - Stephen Parkins, former sous chef at the award-winning Sugar Club in West London.

A far smaller number of celebrity chefs work for food businesses exclusively on NPD. Some do NPD work coupled with product endorsement, such as Gary Rhodes for Hazlewood Foods. Others produce recipes for in-store magazines, help with PR, give opinions and advice when asked, and appear at exhibitions and demonstrations.

Some of those who are hired to work on NPD keep in the background, unless the food company want product endorsement, and often the public will not hear about this extra string to their culinary bow.



Paul Gayler

For example, few will know that Cyrus Todiwala, co-owner and executive chef of Café Spice, with branches in London's financial district and Battersea, south London, advises The Recipe Company, supplier of Indian Food to Marks & Spencer.

Safeway, up until recently, used Tony Tobin, among others, on its George's food

tasting panel, named after former managing director George Charters, to comment on proposed new launches. Once Tobin said a new fish ready meal was lacking in lemon, but it was too late to pull the launch so Safeway decided to show its consultants the products at an earlier stage of development in future.

Marks & Spencer (M&S), is currently talking to Giorgio Locatelli, who owns Zafferano in Knightsbridge, with a view to using him as a consultant.

M&S has worked with Albert Roux for 10-15 years and 18 months ago developed the chain's Connoisseur range, described as restaurant quality food consisting of starters, main course and desserts.

A lot of conflicting information exists about how much supermarkets are prepared to pay the crème de la crème. Much of the budget could be easily eaten up in a month by the likes of Ainsley Harriott, reckoned by some to command up to £17,000 a day and Anton Mossiman, Albert Roux and Anthony Worrall-Thompson who can apparently earn £15,000, a day.

The claim draws a chuckle from Tesco strategic development manager Richard Stride for whom Anthony Worrall-Thompson did some training 18 months ago, "but it did not cost £15,000," insists Stride. "It probably did not cost 10% of that."

Far more frequently celebrity chef remuneration for NPD work, will be £1,000-£5,000 a day for an average five days a year.

Aldo Zilli says he is looking at £1,000 a day "if I'm lucky." He also expects to get a royalty on the fish sauces for Safeway which he says only took him a day to concoct.

Some, like Paul Gayler, who is a member of Tesco's four-strong Chef's Club, advising on cheeses and vegetarian lines, are on monthly retainers.

Fiona Lindsay, of London-based chef agency Limelight Management, says: "It is too expensive for most people to do on a regular basis."

But if the product works well, the



Aldo Zilli

supermarket could have it on their shelves for years and make their initial investment on a celebrity chef dwindle into insignificance.

None of the top chefs say they do it purely for the money - they see themselves on a mission to spread the word about good food. Most believe what the supermarkets produce is "crap", according to one source and they want the public to have something better.

## They have a lot more to offer than ordinary chefs

Lindsay says it is a trend that has been building up for at least 10 years and it is increasing. Her agency's business has grown 10-fold during that time and she believes it will continue in this way.

The movement is more marked in the UK than in other European countries, says Michael Gottlieb, president of The Restaurant Association and former owner of Smolensky's On The Strand. "Other than in France, there are few star chefs. The ready meals market has not really developed in Europe nearly as much as it has here."

The use of gastronomic geniuses got

going in the US about 15 years ago with some of the best North American chefs, including Paul Pruhomme, Rick Bayless and Wolfgang Puck, who have expanded their culinary prowess on to supermarket shelves.

Lindsay says the use of outside chefs creates an air of excitement among development staff about what they are doing.

"They have a lot more to offer than ordinary chefs because they are more at the sharp end and get more PR. If you are a chef working in a small pub you might be god but if you are a celebrity you are wanted by the press, politicians..."

But they also use them because they have the reputation of being the best in their field.

"A lot of chefs are good at copying other people's dishes. The top chefs create new dishes."

She admits it is difficult to replicate what is served in restaurants but she reckons Paul Gayler, executive chef at The Lanesborough Hotel, at Hyde Park, south-west London, has achieved that with his work on the 110-strong Tesco Finest range.

"They have to give the public what they want. Price is important. People know they will have to pay a bit more for ready-meal ranges and Tesco has been very successful."

Most of the chefs do not find it a problem fitting in with the regimented supermarket chains - indeed their own kitchens tend to be highly disciplined.

However, they can find the decision-making process frustrating. Lindsay says: "I don't think they can believe supermarkets take such a long time about things. Chefs make instant decisions."

Initial links with the chefs tend to be direct or through an intermediary such as an agent.

Aldo Zilli's work resulted from a recommendation from a friend who was having a meeting with a Safeway director.

Tesco freely publicises the chefs it uses for NPD with products such as Twice Baked Mushroom Risotto created by Paul Gayler - "I worked on that, and others, with Paul at The Lanesborough," says Stride.

Anton Edelmann created one of the chain's fastest selling lines Tarte Tatin. Brian Turner and Rick Stein have trained its fish managers and butchers.

Stride thinks Tesco could use celebrity chefs a lot more in future. "It improves our credibility with our customers," he says.

Sometimes chefs will work on products at their own place of work, in-store or at a supermarket's own-label supplier and sometimes at all three.

"On Finest the chefs and I worked very closely together. It is very time consuming for everyone to do it that way but you end up with a good result. Sometimes we make the product and get them to comment and we react to their comments."

He says there are no problems with inflated egos. "They go out of their way to come in and help out and we go out and eat together. They really enjoy getting their heads down and cooking with us. They like to see the results of their labours on the shelves."

### NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT - WHO HAS WORKED WHERE

#### Marks & Spencer

Lesley Waters, Rosemary Connolly, Albert Roux, Ainsley Harriott, Cyrus Todiwala

#### Tesco

Paul Gayler, Rick Stein, Anton Edelmann, Brian Turner,

#### Waitrose

Raymond Blanc

#### Somerfield

James Martin

(advisory but open to using him for NPD)

#### Safeway

Aldo Zilli (just starting), Tony Tobin

#### Sainsbury's

none

#### Asda

none