
FEATURES

Change is brewing...

After years where the emphasis has been on bland uniformity, farsighted companies are recognising a consumer hunger for personality, adventure and excitement. Here we examine this new spirit of individuality, and how one food lover is tapping into it to launch a tea range with a difference.

Seán Farrell is a man with a mission: to turn tea drinking into an adventure. The driving force behind Chateau Rouge, a tea range being launched this September, believes people want to get excited by food again. He explains, "People are caring more about what they eat and drink. They want products that have character and reflect where they're grown and produced. Even in this difficult economic climate, I think we're witnessing a sea change. There's a certain type of consumer who is moving away from mass produced, consistently uniform and ultimately boring offerings – back to interesting, quality products from small producers, where every mouthful tells a story of how, when and where they were grown."

What's happening on the High Street may seem to contradict Seán's assertions.

For example, despite the thousands of different varieties of fruit and vegetables,

supermarkets' focus on profitability, flawless uniform appearance, yields and shelf life, above quality and taste, limits choice to the same few varieties. Similarly, many of our traditional breeds of cattle, pigs and sheep, each with their own distinctive flavour, have been brought close to extinction as the meat industry turns to leaner, bigger, faster-growing animals that meet supermarkets' demand for cheap, bland meat.

The backlash against blandness

However, there are signs the tide is turning.

Running counter to the idea that shoppers want perfection and consistency, there has been a surge in the popularity of vegetable box schemes (over 400,000 boxes of sometimes misshapen and muddy produce are delivered in the UK each week) and farmers' markets (there are now over 550 in the UK). Likewise there are a growing number of online companies selling traditional breeds



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of meat, and it's also being snapped up by key food trendsetters – chefs. You may have noticed menus specifying Gloucester Old Spot', 'Middle White', 'Aberdeen Angus' or 'Longhorn' rather than just 'pork' and 'beef'.

Even supermarkets are starting to realise the importance of provenance and variety: witness packs of pork chops bearing photographs of the farm from which they originate, the launch of 'finer' ranges extolling the pedigree of the ingredients involved, or cheese sections offering an impressive choice of farmhouse cheeses from around the country.

This could be said to be an extension of a trend that first started with wine. While 1970s British wines drinkers were mostly content to choose between Blue Nun, Bull's Blood and Mateus Rosé, by the 1980s forward-thinking companies such as Oddbins had opened our eyes to New World Wines and got us talking about grape varieties, regions, Grand Cru and terroir. Similarly a generation brought up on Nescafé and Dairy Milk, is now being invited to appreciate the subtle nuances between bean variety and country of origin. While the

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Noughties' fixation with cupcakes has seen a spate of small companies producing delightfully quirky, handmade cakes using the same ingredients you'd use at home.

From fixed-wheel bikes to investing in start-ups

This shift in the national consciousness extends beyond comestibles. In an age when cars are largely identical, personality-free boxes, by harking back to a time when cars had personality the revamped BMW Mini Cooper and Fiat 500 have become cult objects of desire. Equally, fixed-wheel bikes – basic, stripped-back cycles popular with couriers – are proving a hit with cyclists who love feeling more linked to the bike and being more aware of the road.

Even the financial arena is seeing a growing interest in investing directly in smaller businesses and start-ups over more generic

investment vehicles such as blue chips or funds. This may be partly due to investors' desire to be closer to businesses and the people behind them rather than insulated from where the action is by the buffer of a fund manager.



"Cupcakes embody our love of the small-scale and quirky"



"The original Fiat 500"

Turning over a new (tea) leaf

So how does this desire for adventure and individuality translate to tea?

Seán says, "We're all familiar with supermarket tea bags made from 'fannings' – the tiny flavour-free bits left over from processing. But consumers are waking up to different tea varieties and whole leaf teas which retain all the essential oils and flavours. In response to this there's a lot of activity at the luxury end of the market; Selfridges now stocks tea ranges by a perfumer (Miller Harris) and a fashion designer (Lolita Lempicka)!"

“With Chateau Rouge, I want to celebrate teas as a direct expression of their individual geography, soil”s, weather and history. I also want to recapture an age when explorers and traders returned from their travels with exotic, unknown discoveries. Even high end tea brands tend to stick to the same tried and trusted varieties, like Assam, Ceylon or English Breakfast. I’m aiming to break away from this ‘same old, same old’ and introduce people to teas that are a bit left of field. For example, we have a wonderfully complex black tea from Nepal, where the tea industry has been slow to develop. Nepal enjoys the same climate as its better known neighbour Darjeeling but has younger bushes and

eco-friendlier methods – all of which comes through in the tea.”

As to the future Seán believes the Chateau Rouge ethos could apply across a range of produce, from coffee and preserves to olive oils. “Too many foods have been wrenched from where they come from, resulting in a mediocre product that can be reproduced in any region or country. It’s time to reclaim the things we eat and drink as something pleasurable, individual and extraordinary.”

For more information about Chateau Rouge contact Seán Farrell on 0777 166 2207 or email info@chateaurouge.co.uk



“Consumers can now access wines from around the world”