

At the Lunch! Show in London this September, the importance of smoothies to the café sector will be highlighted by the final of the British Smoothie Championships. The event will, rather like barista championships, attract a certain fun and novelty interest from the general media, but for the coffee-house trade, there is a very good practical reason for taking an interest.

Smoothies are back in growth - after great sales performance five or six years back, the sector dipped very sharply indeed, but recovered by a good eleven per cent last year.

And yet, coffee houses are simply not as creative with the concept as they should be, and so do not get as much profit from the sector as they should. Indeed, the coffee-house trade has never won the smoothie title, because all the winners have been from specialist juice bars, and so it is reckoned that virtually every café in the land might pick up commercial ideas by watching what the finalists do.

Fortunately, the top two winners from last year are very practical business people who are able to talk in realistic terms about the commercial value of an award-winning smoothie, and why they do things the way they do.

The reigning champ is Sylvie Parcot from Crussh, the chain with a couple of dozen stores around London, and the runner-up is Oliver Wilson-Fish, the helpfully opinionated operator of Juicafe in Lancaster, who also took second place the year before. It is from people like these that the average high street café operator can pick up no end of information on building a profitable smoothie trade, and that is why contests are useful for the everyday high-street operator.

Not surprisingly, the smoothie championship concentrates on made-from-scratch drinks - certain fruit ingredients, juices and yogurts are provided, but permission has to be requested on the entry form for the use of any other kind of juice or ingredient. Pre-made smoothie bases are not permitted at all (the organisers say, quite reasonably, that they see the value of these products out in the big commercial world, just not in a skill-based competition).



The British Smoothie Championships will be held at the Lunch! exhibition at the Business Design Centre, London (20-21st September). The event is sponsored by Magrini, who provide the prize of a Vitamix Quiet One Blender worth over £1,000. Enter at www.lunchshow.co.uk

Making smoothies for profit and prestige

The annual smoothie-making contests have all been won by specialist juice bars. What can we learn from them about making the smoothie a practical and profitable part of the coffee-bar sector... and can a coffee-house take that smoothie-making title away from the juice specialists this year?



Members of an enthusiastic smoothie-contest audience show their approval by waving bananas. Right: champion Sylvie Parcot



Last year, Sylvie's winning smoothie was her Pomegranate Passion Pleasure smoothie, which combined pomegranate, banana, mango, pineapple, pineapple juice, passion fruit and yogurt. Oli Wilson-Fish's runner-up smoothie, the Passionista, was remarkably similar - passionfruit, mango, banana and pineapple juice also figured.

Sylvie knew the economics of her recipe before she entered - it was already on the Crussh menu. Why the choice of ingredients?

His 12oz Passionista sells in Juicafe for £3, the 16oz is £3.60 and the 20oz is £4.10. All very good pricings - so how do you actively sell a smoothie?

Think about the name of it, says Oli. This really means something.

"Customers look at ingredients and decide in their heads if they will like the combination before ordering. So the ingredient combination on your menu has to sound tasty, and the name of the smoothie is as important as the fruits you put in. The tasting notes for

"Some competition entries are complicated. I'm trying to sell things, so mine was a 'commercial smoothie'." - Oli Wilson-Fish

"Pomegranate was 'the fruit to have' at that time, for its benefits and vitamins. We just decided to add mint to give it an extra twist. The point of banana is for fibre and thickness, and the key with banana is not to use too much.

"We used our own pineapple juice, which we had asked permission for."

Runner-up Oli's entry also came more from practical commercial experience rather than any desire to dazzle the judges.

"We bring in a new menu in time for the schools half-term after Christmas, and the Passionista was already on that menu.

"We have seen that some competition entries are trying to be too complicated - there were definitely two smoothies last year that I wouldn't dream of trying commercially, for cost or time reasons. I'm trying to sell things, so mine was a 'commercial smoothie'. We don't -complicate things - my own favourite smoothie at the moment is just two fruits and a juice."

the Passionista are 'a smooth creamy Caribbean flavour with a passionfruit twist, to make you feel like sex in the city!'

What fruits work well in a sellable smoothie? It has been said that banana and strawberry, found in so many recipes, are 'the lazy smoothie-maker's ingredients', but Oli sees a reason for them.

"Just as with a coffee blend, you make sure that strong flavours don't overpower the rest, so you would take particular care with ginger.

"Bananas and strawberries are well used for two reasons - they are relatively cheap compared to other fruits, and consumers buy within their comfort zones, and because the banana holds the smoothie together, especially if you are using things like melon. Without it the smoothie may separate out, which obviously doesn't look good."

It is widely said that there is no definition of a smoothie - banana, as a fibrous fruit, comes into Oli's definition.

"When we first started out we thought the defining line on smoothies was whether or not there were seeds or it was a 'smooth smoothie' - we have now divided our menu into smoothies and banana-free smoothies."

A very big aspect of smoothie sales is visual appeal. So it was noticeable that a few years ago, a food writer dismissively wrote of the smoothie finals that 'I'd like to say that the tension was unbearable, but actually it doesn't take long to make a smoothie, and after a minute or so, two competing glasses of pale sludge are ready on the table.'

So much for the belief that a smoothie has to be visually and colourfully attractive, so that the customer feels they're getting something special in return for their money!

"Yes, I saw that!" comes a ready response from Oli. "It is all about perception. The name of the smoothie and the ingredients create a perception of what the smoothie will look like, so you must show your fruit off, to let people see that you are 'making' it, not just 'pouring' it.

"You allow no bubbles when you pour the smoothie into the glass, and you make the right amount to fill the glass for two reasons - one, no wastage, and two, it looks like you know what you are doing, and so gives the customer confidence that the taste will match their expectation.

"In take-aways, you use a clear cup, clear domed lid and two standard straws. If you are using a 'stroon', which is a cross between a straw and a spoon used by people who make cheap and nasty smoothies and milkshakes, that says you are obviously not blending your fruit well enough, so you either don't care or have bought cheap equipment.

"Two straws also mean people can share a smoothie without sharing saliva. The perception about smoothies may be mainly health associated, but also it is fun and social, hence the swapping and sharing of drinks."

(Always make sure your ingredients are in full view of your customers, confirms Sylvie at Crussh. It's the same 'perception' theory as having an open kitchen in a restaurant.)

A matter of debate among smoothie-makers is of additives. Several brands produce 'supplements', designed to go into smoothies - there are energy ones, the 'nourish your mind' ones, and

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there are even 'anti-ageing', anti-hangover, and aphrodisiac ones.

Joyfully, there is no restriction against these in the smoothie championships - there have been several 'healthy' entries, with names like The Immune Booster, and although nobody has yet entered a blatantly-named Hangover smoothie, many entries have featured aloe vera juice, wheat-grass or acai.



"Would I use them in competition? Hell, no!" laughs Oli Wilson-Fish. "This is the industry equivalent of adding a syrup to your coffee - your purists hate them, but the general public love them.

"Some have their benefits, so in the business, yes, we do use them and the local student population swear by the hangover cure one. In general, for me, it's better to have a tasty smoothie rather than one which tastes foul but will give you glowing skin!"

Smoothie-contest winners to date, being always from juice cafes, have had access to the right equipment. By contrast, a high-street cafe may have just one blender, or none at all.

Both Sylvie and Oli are sympathetic to the view that coffee-houses and tea-rooms may not have room or budget for an army of blenders, or storage space for a vast amount of fruit. Nevertheless, they argue, for profitability and credibility, it is best to be seen to be making 'made to order' smoothies, so far as is possible.

"To make a decent business of it, you might invest in frozen pre-portioned fruit, but you might find the profit margin not so good," offers Sylvie. "But you must invest in a powerful blender."

From Oli his argument in favour of the 'from scratch' smoothie begins with passion and ends with a good logical business reason.

"When we opened Juicafe, the main reason was because we were sick and tired of only being able to get 'either' a good smoothie or a good coffee in some establishments. You could not get both in the same place - but there really is no logical reason why you can't make them both properly.

"Five years on, I still cringe every time I see a plastic cup of chemical muck being sold as a 'real fruit smoothie'. Some smoothie bases look like chemical and taste like chemical.

"Smoothies are a premium product, and if you cringe at instant coffee, you must hate instant smoothies!"

"Remember that a big advantage of doing it properly and making every smoothie from scratch means that you can tweak your ingredients and your recipe - this means you can accommodate different requests, and also that you can handle allergies and similar requirements."

Smoothies for the non-expert operator



Sweetbird's new 'no added sugar' smoothies - this is the smoothie sector's big news of the summer, says Jonathan Money of Cream Supplies

You can make smoothies from scratch, or you can buy in pre-made smoothies... or you can create your own by working from the right base

Is the coffee-house trade really doing as well as it can with smoothies? In the recent survey undertaken by the Coffee Boys, working with the Caffe Culture show, one of the items investigated was the pricing of smoothies. For a 'medium' size, the average selling price was found to be around £2.50, although ten per cent of respondents reported achieving between £3-£4. Other than a handful of respondents, most cafes charged £1.80 or more. And astonishingly, 36 per cent of coffee house respondents said they do not sell smoothies at all.

In an interview with us recently, Coffee Boy Johnny Richardson remarked that 'there is consumer demand for smoothies, but it is remarkably difficult to make money from them'. What did he mean by that?

"The problem is that they are relatively time-consuming to produce and, in many cases, a relatively high cost to the operator. People have a tendency to look at the smoothie and juice market and think - that's the next big thing, the 'new coffee'. That couldn't be further from the truth - they are much more expensive than coffee to produce.

"For a retailer, Innocent smoothies are incredibly expensive to buy, and have quite a restricted shelf life. They're an incredible example of a brand getting so powerful that the customer drives supply, and the retailer just has to take the margin hit on the chin."

There was a sideswipe in one regional daily paper last month which said that consumers drink lots of smoothies because they're 'healthy', when they are 'stuffed with calories'. This has not gone down well with the smoothie trade, who see it as a cheap shot, and an inaccurate one.

"A sugar-free smoothie made with real fruit is about as healthy a drink as you could wish for from a café," retorted wholesaler Jon Money of Cream Supplies, who makes a point of investigating and marketing the 'healthy' aspects of products.

"For me, the big news of the summer

is the Sweetbird sugar-free smoothies that Beyond the Bean have launched. As a result of the lack of sugar (sucrose) the flavours have a natural 'bite' to them - a natural slight bitterness. This makes them taste much more like 'real' smoothies made from fresh fruit."

(The Sweetbird smoothie is sweetened with apple, and is an 'add ice and blend' product).

"I personally think cafes should move in the direction of using blenders to make entire smoothies rather than using tetra-packed puree," remarks Jon Money, "but the Sweetbird purees are the next best thing and obviously means less investment in equipment and training for small operators.

"They are blazing a trail here which

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