

Can Whole Foods live

Europe's biggest 'organic supermarket' opens in London tomorrow. But is Whole Foods good value? Will it source locally? And will we swallow bravura US 'eco-retailing'? asks Lucy Mayhew

WELL, it comes to something when the opening of a food shop is celebrated with the pizzazz of Harry Potter film premiere. But Whole Foods Market (WFM), which celebrated its introduction to London last night, is no bog-standard grocer. The US health food behemoth — which owns Fresh and Wild — opens its first European shop to the public tomorrow in the former home of Barkers in Kensington High Street.

About 2,000 people were invited to its party. That doesn't happen when a new Tesco or Waitrose appears. But WFM wants to do more than just fill your fridge. It hopes to revolutionise our attitudes to buying food and drink.

It's not simply the scale of the enterprise — 80,000sq ft, 10,000 products and 500 staff — but also the idea that if you give yourself to the WFM philosophy, you will be far happier, far healthier and far more knowledgeable about your body. The shop is even pioneering "personal nutritionists" to advise on what to put in your trolley. "Feeling stressed, sir? Incan berries. Run down? It's frozen bee pollen for you."

WFM represents the American Dream of nutritional retailing. Founded in 1980 it touts itself as an organic, eco-friendly, morally superior supermarket. Its detractors, and there are quite a few, say this is impossible because operating on such a vast scale, you cannot be environmentally friendly. Selling itself as an independent local store that happens to be massive is, say some, just a cynical ploy; WFM is as greedy as Tesco, just better at marketing.

Whatever your opinion, London has never seen a food shop like this. "It's an overwhelming sensory experience," it claims. And it's right.

There are almost 100 different olive oils (with a "tasting station"), a temperature-controlled cheese room, 1,000 wines, "mix your own bars" for granola, lentils, nuts and pulses, 40 breads, 50 freshly squeezed juices, 24 freshly brewed coffees, a 30m-long "dairy case" and 40 different types of sausages made on the premises. A huge "food mall" has an oyster bar, pizzeria, ice-cream parlour, sushi bar and organic pub.

There's even a florist, organic fashion, a Whole Body nutritional area and a supplements section. One row, not far from a "1950-style American candy store" is devoted to weight-loss pills. The "artists" who create the handwritten signage are housed in a glass cube so you can see them at work. Oh, and you can make your own ground brazil-nut butter. At last.

If you want to try any of the impossibly shiny fresh fruit, a "team member" slices you off a chunk. "We feel the British must learn to embrace food like we do at home," said a spokesman, with an irony almost more delicious than any of £5 bars of chocolate on sale.

This may well be Charlie's Chocolate Factory for ethical gourmands but just how deep-set are its values? The slogans



talk of the "traceability" of food, the "compassionate treatment of animals", the "relationships with farmers", there are "no trans fats, no artificial flavours and no preservatives". It has cleverly got into bed with the respected Soil Association which fosters relations between producers and consumers. This is all worthy but London's £1 billion organic food market is the most competitive in Europe, and Waitrose and M&S are increasing their eco-ethical-organic fare. Emma Latham, marketing manager for the new store, squirmed when pressed for answers on the competitiveness of its pricing. Explaining the idea of themed personal shopping trips on "nutrition for

'Whole Foods Market represents the American Dream of nutritional retailing'

more energy", "diabetic-cuisine" and the "cost-conscious family shop", she refused to be drawn on how much the "budget-shop" trip would cost but reluctantly conceded that "where relevant, prices would not exceed Waitrose" (see the panel, top right, for some price comparisons).

For a company whose philosophy is to communicate often, openly and compassionately, it is very reticent. While "immensely proud" of its support for UK farmers and suppliers, it couldn't reveal how many it worked with — nor what percentage of its produce is organic.

London shoppers are likely to be more inquisitive, and cynical, than most. So WFM has created a "Q station" where they can find out the origins of any item.

When I ask about "locally sourced" food, there is confusion. The company is committed to it, they say, but whether it's from producers 20 miles away, or as its US website says, from suppliers seven hours away, no one will answer. A fruit and veg buyer tells me WFM has about 30 UK suppliers and, depending on season, between 30 and 50 per cent of the fruit and veg will be from the UK.

"This caginess is typical," says a former team member at Bristol's WFM Fresh & Wild store. "It's embarrassed by how much produce comes from abroad and you're trained what to tell customers to preserve Whole Foods' reputation."

The confusion doesn't end there. During tastings in the run-up to opening one local resident reported: "I was given a glass of a Sauvignon Blanc but the American assistant could only say it was a blend of wines." The oyster bar assistant had no idea where the oysters came from.

But there's nowhere in London with a more extensive supplement and natural beauty section. WFM supports a different charity each month, all packaging generated is recycled, all electricity sourced from green supplier Ecotricity and fresh produce waste kept to a minimum by using unsold items for soups and meals.

What about getting your shopping home? A green-fuelled home-delivery service is meant to start in six months. In the meantime, if you don't have a chauffeur-driven Prius, WFM will hold your shopping so you can return with your car after the congestion charge finishes.

On leaving, last night's partygoers were given organic chamomile tea, rice cakes, and something called Larabar — a chocolate and coconut chew. All in a fashionable re-useable, cloth grocery bag. Will it become the bag to be seen around town and will we take the Whole Foods ethos to their hearts? We shall see.

SO WHAT IS TASTY AND HEALTHY?

Raymond Blanc and nutritionist Dr John Briffa review some of the more unusual Whole Foods offerings

EQUITABLE GOURMET, LOUBIEH (GREEN BEANS IN TOMATO) & MOUSSAKA

£4.49 for 380g

Equitable Gourmet links small producers of authentic Lebanese foods to food buyers. Producers enjoy shares in company profits.

● **RB** The ethical-trading foundations sound marvellous. The Loubieh had good flavour; the moussaka was let down by the excess oil.

★★★★☆

● **Dr B** Despite hefty price and air-mile consideration, from a socio-political perspective this is a great concept — they're essentially good vegetables cooked in olive oil and packaged in glass, so no extraneous chemicals can leach into the food.

★★★★☆

INCAN BERRIES

£2.50 for 60g

Golden-dried fruits from a herb indigenous to parts of the Amazon, and rich in cholesterol-lowering pectin and B vitamins.

● **RB** Quite acidic with a sweetness towards the end. I've ordered some to use for our buffet breakfasts.

★★★★☆

● **Dr B** These are nuggets of nutritional gold but no single food will replace a varied healthy diet.

★★★★☆

LIZI'S GRANOLA CRUNCH SNACK PACKS

Belgian chocolate, treacle and lime & ginger, £1.20 for 50g

Bite-size toasted cereal clusters less disruptive to blood-sugar levels than popular cereal.

● **RB** It's crunchy with large oats and the treacle was stunning with no stickiness. The Belgian chocolate version tastes flat.

★★★★☆

● **Dr B** Giving food a glycemic-load ranking, which measures the effects on blood-sugar levels, is nutritionally relevant but just being low-carb doesn't make it healthy. Still, these have so few carbs compared with popular cereal bars, they make a natural and convenient alternative to most snacks.

★★★★☆

PERCIE DU SERT WILLOW FLOWER AND ROCK ROSE NOURISH KEFIR MILK

£1.89 for 500ml

Kefir ("good feeling" in Turkish) is



up to its own hype?



Fresh and nutritional approach: Whole Foods Market aims to revolutionise our way of shopping, starting with its huge shop in Kensington High Street, opening tomorrow

THE WHOLE FOODS PRICE COMPARISON

	WHOLE FOODS	WAITROSE	TESCO
Organic mango	99p	£1.69	£1.29
Organic cantaloupe	£1.49	£1.99	£1.29
Organic carrots	£1.79/kg	£1.19/750g	89p/750g
English asparagus	£1.49/250g	£2.69/250g	£2.49/250g
Organic avocados	89p each	99p	99p
English strawberries	£3 for 2 punnets	£1.99/225g	£1.89 a punnet
Roasted almonds	£5.99/kg	£1.99/150g	£1.89/175g
Yorkshire tea bags	99p/40	£1.74/80	£1.74/80
Tin of tuna	99p	£1.15	88p/400g
Organic chicken	£6.59/kg	£5.69/kg	£4.23/kg
Bottle chablis	£5.99	£6.66	£5.98
Swiss-style muesli	£1.59/500mg	£1.25/750g	74p/750g
Kettle crisps	£1.69/150g	£1.29/150g	98p/150g
Organic bread flour	£1.49/2kg	£1.15/1.5kg	79p/1kg
Organic baked beans	69p	55p	54p
Green & Blacks chocolate	£2.99/150g	£1.55/200g	£1.98/150g
Ben & Jerry's ice cream	£3.99	£3.79	£3.98/tub
Tin of tomatoes	99p/400g	79p/400g	45p/400g
Heinz tomato soup	99p	81p	89p
Organic virgin olive oil	£3.99/500ml	£4.39/500ml	£2.68/500ml
Balsamic vinegar	£2.99/500ml	£5.45/250ml	£2.09/250ml
Organic penne	79p/500g	£1.09/500g	99p/500g
Soya milk	99p/1 litre	95p/litre	94p/litre
Organic jam	£1.59/340g	£1.59/340g	£1.14/340g
Marmite	£3.29/250g	£2.18/250g	£2.18/250g
Italian organic coffee	£3.39/250g	£2.29/227g	£1.69/227g

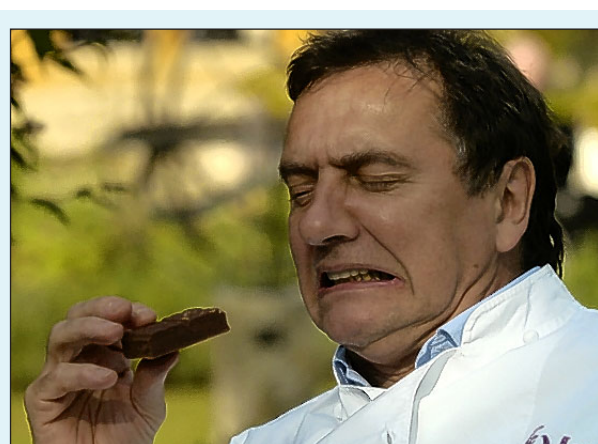
EATING IN STORE

BELLA BLISSET visits the food hall that seats 350 serving everything from oysters to ice-cream.

- 'Little Plates' — Salt cod fritters (£5.95) to crispy pork belly (£6.95)
- Oyster and champagne bar — Rocks (£1.50 each or £8.95 for six) and natives (£2.25 each and £12.95 for six). Fruits de Mer £27.95.
- Sushi — mackerel, tuna or sweet prawn sashimi (£3) and steamed dim sum (£2.95). Choice of saké.
- Crepes and waffles — from caramelised apples and almonds (£4.99).
- Gelato and sorbet — 24 flavours from rich hazelnut to refreshing mango from about £3.
- Pizza — traditional Italian pizza with dozens of toppings. From about £10.
- The Bramley — Organic pub. Sierra Nevada (£4 a pint) and Grolsch Weizen wheat ale (£4.50 a pint).
- Mezze — hummus, tabbouleh and traditional kibbeh.
- Juice and Smoothies — detox (pear, spinach, cucumber, lime, kiwi and apple for £1.99) and smoothies (Berry Blitz and Honey Vanilla, £2.89)
- Coffee — Cappuccinos, lattes and hot chocolate (£1.85 for a small cup).
- On the greens — Superfood salads such as 'green energy' with edame, broccoli and omega 3 dressing (£7.99)

WFM BY NUMBERS

- 10,000 food lines
- 12,000 bottles of wine – 1,000 lines
- 150 of which are organic
- 400 varieties of cheese – 30 per cent from the UK
- 80 olive oils
- 550 team members, 55 chefs and 12 bakers in store daily
- 48 types of freshly baked bread (using both organic and non-organic flour from Gloucestershire millers which also supply Prince Charles's Duchy Originals brand)
- 100 chocolate brands
- 60 lines of ice cream
- 10,000 Whole Body beauty and supplement lines
- £230 the most expensive item in store — Dom Perignon Vintage Rosé, 1996
- 31 tills
- 2.7 tonnes of ice per day in the fresh fish department



Choc discovery: chef Raymond Blanc doesn't find the flavours he expects in "naked chocolate"

SHAZZIE'S NAKED CHOCOLATE
£4.45 for a 65g bar
Sweetened with lucama, a low-GI fruit, and mesquite, which is reportedly high in protein, calcium and magnesium. The Empress bar contains flakes of 23-carat gold. Siren bars contain spirulina and blue-green algae from Oregon lakes.

- RB This is not remotely like chocolate. The spirulina bar should be sold as an energy bar. ★☆☆☆☆
- Dr B Cocoa is rich in magnesium and plant chemicals that are good for the circulation. But this tasted soapy. ★★☆☆☆

moist. It had a clean tang but lacked punch. Sprinkle on muesli.
★★★☆☆
● Dr B It's sweet and tastes flowery and is high in vitamin E and powerful antioxidant nutrients called carotenoids. The price is prohibitive. ★★☆☆☆

VITA COCONUT JUICE

£1.29 for 330ml
Green coconut water is an outstanding natural energy and rehydration drink — it's naturally sterile and has the same mineral and electrolyte make-up as human blood plasma.



- RB It's so hard to get fresh coconuts — I love the clean, fresh taste. It would be great to marinate mangos in this coconut juice with a bit of lime juice. ★★★★★
- Dr B This has a third of the sugar of Lucozade and gives a good dose of potassium and magnesium needed for energy. I can't think of anything else which is unprocessed, unadulterated and with the same health properties. ★★★★★

organisms and bad bacteria. Kefir smells horrible but it's worth putting on your muesli. ★★★★★

FRESHLY FROZEN BEE POLLEN

£19.90
French beekeeper Percie du Sert believes high-nutrients are destroyed in dried pollen so he invented a freezing process to lock in all the vitamins. He claims the hormonal, digestive and immune system benefits are staggering.
● RB Lovely to look at and very

fermented by shepherds from the Caucasus and believed to bring longevity. Studies have found Kefir improves the immune system and inhibits tumour growth in animals.
● RB It's a good, clean old-fashioned milk — tart, slightly lemony and delicious and I like to think I'm nurturing my gut. ★★★★★
● Dr B Fermented milk breaks down certain components making it more digestible. This will do more good than popular probiotic drinks, which can have so much sugar added that they encourage yeast

● For information on Raymond Blanc's cookery programmes and restaurant, including a course in La Nutrition et la Cuisine Moderne, call 01844 278 881 (www.manoir.com).
● For nutrition and natural health advice visit www.drbriffa.com.
● Prices are based on RRP values and may vary in store.

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