

SE Magazine  
HD **THE SUPER GOURMET SANDWICH**  
BY MILANDA ROUT  
WC 1,974 words  
PD 3 October 2014  
SN Wish Magazine  
SC NLWISH  
ED 1  
PG 64  
LA English  
CY © 2014 News Limited. All rights reserved.  
LP

LONDON HAS THE HARRODS FOOD HALL AND FORTNUM & MASON. NEW YORK HAS DEAN & DELUCA AND WHOLE FOODS MARKET. PARIS HAS LE BON MARCHE. BUT COULD AUSTRALIA'S ANSWER TO GOURMET SHOPPING BE WOOLIES?

It is 7 o'clock on a Monday night and the **cheese** room is pretty cold. But that does not bother the people gathered to taste the latest brie from France because the \$30,000 bottle of whisky they are sipping from is keeping them warm. On their way out, they may grab some fresh prawns or dry-aged beef or ... toilet paper. That's right, they are in their local supermarket.

TD

For a long time, this country had a serious lack of gourmet food options. You would not dream of picking up a ready-made dinner at your local supermarket let alone go in to eat your lunch there. You would not risk venturing near the seafood counter or spend a single minute more than you had to getting your groceries. But that is all changing. Australian supermarkets are finally going upmarket.

You can see this first-hand at Woolworths' new flagship store in Double Bay, in Sydney's eastern suburbs. It has a walk-in **cheese** room and an in-store Parisian chef or "foodie" to advise on what truffles to **buy** or how to cook the dry-aged beef hanging in the butchery.

Coles's "next-generation" store in the northwest of the city has in-house baristas, pastry chefs and sushi chefs. Then there is the expansion of the US food and kitchen equipment store Williams-Sonoma and new organic food sellers such as About Life. Add in whispers of Marks & Spencer looking for a site in central Sydney to sell their famous meals to homeward-bound commuters and talk that the new owner of David Jones will try to restore its food halls to their glory days, and we may be seeing the beginnings of a food revolution - for your trolley anyway.

Retail researcher Michael Bate from Colliers International says luxury is finally filtering down to the grocery aisles. "It is changing," he explains of Australia's much-maligned supermarket scene. "In the new Double Bay Woolworths and the Macquarie Centre Coles [northwest Sydney], you are seeing beautiful products and high-quality own brands. You can even sit on a stool by a mirror in a supermarket and have your makeup done." He adds that Double Bay Woolworths is the closest thing Australia has to Whole Foods Market in New York.

So what has sparked this slow-burning revolution? As in the rest of the country's retail sector, the internet is a major factor pushing food retailers to lift their game. According to Kevin Moore, from retail consultancy Crossmark Asia Pacific, 53 per cent of Australian retailers are online and that means a bricks and mortar store has to provide an experience consumers can't get via a computer. "I want an experience that will make me get in the car, fight the traffic and pay for parking," he says.

To compete with online and provide a special experience for shoppers, retailers have invested substantially in beautiful refurbishments, changes in format, more specialised staff and better technology. "There is a whole upgrading of retail going on," Moore says. "And there is investment in quality, not quantity." He says this started at the top end with luxury fashion providers but is finally filtering down into

supermarkets. Suddenly, food stores are not simply stocking their shelves but "curating" their goods, finding the best cuts of beef, the choicest free-range chicken or the freshest local produce. "They are doing all the hard work for you," he says.

Jess Gill, who has taken on the new role of Woolworths director of customer experience, agrees that online has forced all retailers, including supermarkets, to lift their game. Over a decent coffee at the Double Bay store (again not something usually associated with a supermarket), she says customers will become much more inclined to **buy** non-perishable groceries online. "That means there has to be much more of a reason for you to come in, so we want to up our fresh food offerings so that fresh every day will become much more necessary."

This has translated into 19 new initiatives at the store (developed in a \$110 **million** joint venture between Woolworths and Woollahra Council), including the **cheese** room, a specialised butcher offering dry-aged beef, an on-site bakery and new gourmet product ranges such as wild boar, crocodile and venison, along with sampling of these unfamiliar products. "Here people are very keen to have a try," she says. "We have put in a tasting station; we have a foodie here permanently who cooks up something different every day and anything that is seasonal, fresh or special. What is great about having a foodie here is that you are not really going to say, 'Ooh, I will have wild boar tonight', but you will if you taste it."

The current foodie (a Parisian chef called Frederick) is also responsible for training staff and providing advice to customers on food matching. This recently extended to an event with the neighbouring Dan Murphy's store, which opened a \$30,000 bottle of whisky (in conjunction with a whisky appreciation society) and matched it with the best products from the **cheese** room. "That's what the foodie does - bring a love of food into the store," says Gill. "And we get incredible comments about it. And what I love about that is it's not the layout of the store, it's not the signage, not the groceries - it's real, it's the people, and I think that is a big change."

There has also been a dramatic change in the layout, however. Woolworths has tried to make the store look more like a food market hall and less like a supermarket you want to get out of as fast as possible. There is less harsh white lighting, less signage and more produce on display. "This space, you feel like you can hang around a bit," Gill says of the fresh food section. "Nobody comes to a supermarket to have a look. People come to do their shopping and we want to make that a really nice experience and also get them to look up from their shopping list every now and then to try something new. This sort of layout helps to do that."

Meanwhile, food and homewares import Williams-Sonoma is taking the customer experience a step further by offering cooking classes. And they are a huge hit. The US chain, which sells cookware and gourmet food (there is a wait-list in Australia for its **brand** of balsamic vinegar), has classes in its store in Bondi Junction in Sydney. They offer everything from pizza-making for kids to a Christmas-themed cocktail evening to a "dinner in Paris". After only a year in Australia, the retailer (which also owns Pottery Barn, Pottery Barn Kids and West Elm furniture stores) has expanded to a second store in the northern suburbs of Sydney and a third is slated for Chadstone in Melbourne later this year.

Ironically, it was the strength of Williams-Sonoma's internet sales that led to the creation of new bricks-and-mortar stores. "We were amazed that Australia became our biggest market for our online **business** outside North America," says Williams-Sonoma creative director Anna Last. "This was a sign a store here would be a success."

Last, who is based in San Francisco, disputes the idea that Australia is playing catch-up in food retailing. "I think Australia is actually ahead of the curve when it comes to being food-savvy. Look at all the cooking shows and great chefs the country has. Australia is a nation that loves to cook, eat and entertain," she argues. "Some of the best produce in the world comes from Australia; good food has always been part of the culture."

Gill agrees with Last on this point. She believes the reason Australia doesn't yet have a Marks & Spencer or a Whole Foods Market, where you can pick up a pre-prepared dinner, stems from a combination of Australia's culture and small population. "We are just really different. We have a very strong restaurant culture - fish and chips, **Chinese**, Italian, etc. In the 1970s, restaurants started developing take-away, so our grab-and-go experience became a take-away experience and this is how we grew. In England, Marks & Spencer developed chicken Kiev as a take-away. It was the first ready meal and it went crazy. They couldn't keep up with demand, so they developed a supply chain that could produce fresh food really quickly and they had a very big population so the scale met demand. We never did that and we don't have the population to support that investment."

Gill says Australians won't **buy** fully pre-prepared dinners ("we have tried it three times") but instead want a halfway option - fresh foods such as salads or high-quality marinated meats that can be quickly thrown together. "We did a lot of research on this to work out where we need to invest, and one of the things

about Australians is that we are very generous people. So if you come to our house, we are not going to serve you something out of a box; we are going to give you something that we made, but we want to save time as well," she says. "So we think the growth will be in little things that help you get that great thing on the plate faster ... we need to take some of the learnings [from overseas experience] and adapt them to the Australian psyche."

Both Moore and Bate believe the rise of the celebrity chef and the huge popularity of television shows such as MasterChef have forced supermarkets to provide better produce and rethink the long-held cookie-cutter approach to supermarket design with the same product lines in every suburb. All of a sudden, people are going to their local Coles or Woolworths and demanding ingredients they have seen used by chefs on cooking shows - from kale to truffle oil. Bate says the public is intrigued by these programs because they show dishes that can be tried out at home. "It's been a big influence on why the big supermarket chains are manipulating their stock to meet demographics," he says.

This foodie obsession was on display in Double Bay when WISH visited. Nutritionist Joanna McMillan was there and her son was complaining about her slow pace because she was photographing everything for Instagram. Moore sees the gourmet trend in his grown-up children, who "spend all weekend looking for the perfect produce to cook in our kitchen - because it is bigger than theirs - and then spend the rest of the time cooking. I would never have done that in my 20s!"

Gill describes the Double Bay store as a guinea pig to test new initiatives that, if successful, may be rolled out across the country. "They take a long time and a bit of courage," she says. "Basically we are looking at all of our stores to see whether we have the best on offer." The next step is getting people to stay for dinner in-store. "Whole Foods in the US is a great example of getting it right. In terms of having that abundance of fresh food, helping people to actually take it and do something great with it or grab something to eat. The whole trend of coming in to eat ... wouldn't it be great if you could have your full dinner here?"

**CO** whofoo : Whole Foods Market Inc

**IN** i6411 : Supermarkets/Grocery Stores | i64 : Retail/Wholesale | i641 : Food Retailing | i654 : Specialty Stores | iretail : Retail

**RE** austr : Australia | sydney : Sydney | apacz : Asia Pacific | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | nswals : New South Wales

**PUB** News Ltd.

**AN** Document NLWISH0020141002eaa30000d