



M&S: still a front runner leading the field

Nellie Nichols, Pret's ex-head of food and now turned consultant, continues her series of undercover reporting for *Sandwich & Snack News* with an assessment of M&S's new sandwich offerings, including its new baked in-store filled baguette trial

BY my reckoning it's about twenty five years since M&S pioneered the first pre-packed sandwich in the early pre-Pret eighties.

Unlike today the places to get a good sandwich were few and far between. I can remember the unbelievable toasted scrambled egg sandwiches with double cream butter and black pepper lovingly made by Franco in Lexington Street. He's long since gone but M&S's Pantheon



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store up the road still has the same indomitable presence, with its double entrances on Oxford Street in the front and Great Marlborough Street backing onto the heart of Soho.

So how have their sandwiches developed since trailblazing into the successful production of millions of skilllets of Chicken Tikka and Prawn Mayonnaise all those years ago?

It goes without saying that the sandwich arena now is a tad

overcrowded and highly competitive. A recent analysis of BLT's in the market place left me dizzy with choices and new improvements to an old classic—a multitude of new bacon cures and smokes over new woodchips, a wealth of tomatoes from roasted, blushing, sun dried, vine-ripened, vine-matured (same thing, different marketing speak), not to mention the plethora of low calorie, low fat variations clearly popular at this



time of year.

Low Calorie, Low Fat sandwiches and indeed all food fulfilling those criteria is an art to get right if it's honestly going to taste good enough to buy again.

M&S's Count On Us, in its clinical no nonsense packaging, with highly informative nutritional information constantly pushes the boundaries of choice in the convenience diet food category.

First off I tried Count on Us British Ham and Salad (No Mayo, less than 3% fat, 265 cals, Salt Balanced). This is a well filled affair, on low fat oatmeal and poppy seed bread - the poppy seeds livening up the sandwich, giving an overall crunchy texture. The tomatoes were really sweet and delicious, not tasteless or bland and pappy as they invariably are in the winter, and the dressing has a valuable hint of mustard. Every possible angle has been

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Next is the Count on Us (New) Chicken and Stuffing (No Mayo, less than 2% fat, 245 cals, Salt Balanced). This one should never have left the chopping board. Visually it's completely brown and unappealing. A little spinach and tomato would brighten it up and encourage it into a shopping basket or two. When you take your first bite watch out ! – tiny shrapnel pieces of chicken (why are they so small?) all fall out everywhere as nothing is holding them in place. The stuffing is tasty enough but neither the dressing nor the stuffing is spread to the edges, so the requirement is to eat mouthfuls of dry bread. Not me.

Count on Us Cheese Apple & Grape, less than 2% fat, 270

cals, Salt Balanced is another truly great diet product. Seeded white bread, lots of grapes, good lettuce, cheese with attitude and stunning value at £1.50. So two out of three on the sandwich count.

Turning to salads, I tried two which bowled me over. Count on Us Strozzapreti Pasta with King Prawns and Vine Ripened Tomatoes is less than 3% fat, 270 cals, Salt Balanced, 300 grams and a very affordable £3.00. The colours are beautiful and bright, fresh spinach, generous King Prawns, delicious chopped tomatoes, very interestingly shaped pasta with the silly name cooked to perfection, and a very good chilli dressing. Attractive. Delicious. Filling. Good Value. Excellent.

Count On Us Chicken Tikka and Rice Salad comes in under 3% fat, 410 cals, Salt Balanced, 390 grams and again £3.00. It's got a Yoghurt and Mint

dressing to mix into the salad and all the flavours marry up together very well. The chicken tikka is well charred and flavoursome but personally I'd like bigger than Dolly Mixture size pieces of cucumber and pepper in the rice which would also lift the colour.

I struggled and didn't finish the generous 390 grams. A little less would also bring down the calories a little. Nevertheless impressive.

Less than 3% fat Bacon Rashers and Nacho Cheese Flavour Corn Bites at 70 and 90 cal respectively complete the snacking choice for a weaker moment. There's even a Tiramisu for 140 cal for pudding (bit sweet and could do with more of a coffee kick) and I tried some wonderful Honey Sultana and Sesame Bars with only affordable 75 cal each .

M&S provide superb nutritional information and that's what dieters demand to be able to manage their weight loss confidently.

Not so then with the new baked in-store trial baguette range.

Freshly made on site means no legal requirement for an ingredient listing and this seems strangely out of place in M & S where you expect to get the full nutritional story. The baguettes are crispy and freshly filled and the attention to detail of the ingredients spilling out of the front of the baguettes is tempting and inviting. Kept crisp by a short ambient shelf life, this trial takes M & S into new territory and long may it last. Do a lot of stores have the space to be able to produce them ? I somehow think that's a challenge they'll get over.

Also new is their distinctive new Speciality range in brown card sandwich boxes – with their easy to open front panels. The Wiltshire Ham Hock with Piccalilli was scrumptious – big pieces of proper Hock and

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tangy Piccalilli and a very reasonable £2.50 – this one goes straight to the top of my favourites list. Goats Cheese and Balsamic Roast Onion was a good looking product with good flavours but again the ingredients were heaped into the middle of the sandwich leaving areas of dry bread with visible tram lines from the buttering machine. This looked like a sandwich made far too fast. £3.00 for a vegetarian

sandwich, even if it was Goats Cheese, is also I think, far too steep.

So how do I think M & S have moved on over the years ? They constantly try and succeed in breaking new ground in the sandwich and snack arena – a little more attention to detail here and there would improve their product even more but unquestionably, in my estimation they are one of the front runners leading the field.

MY SELECTION

Count on Us British Ham & Salad	£1.80
Count on Us Chicken & Stuffing	£1.80
Count on Us Cheese Apple & Grape	£1.50
Count on Us Strozzapreti Pasta with King Prawns Salad	£3.00
Count on Us Chicken Tikka & Rice Salad	£3.00
Count on Us Bacon Rashers	£ .40
Count on Us Cheese Corn Bites	£ .45
Count on Us Tiramisu	£ .79
Count on Us Honey Sultana Sesame Bars (6)	£1.39
Tuna Baguette	£2.30
Speciality Wiltshire Ham Hock & Piccalilli	£2.50
Speciality Goats Cheese & Balsamic Roast Onion	£3.00