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Food courts: A change of taste

When it comes to dining in shopping centres, say goodbye to the days of stale, cramped spaces filled with fluorescent lighting, and hello to new experiences and creative retailing. **By Jo-Anne Hui-Miller**



Chifley's Level One, Sydney
Victor Gaspar
Group general manager, Ipoh

What was the thinking behind the Chifley's Level One precinct?

Victor: The dining scene in Sydney has shifted dramatically over the past five years, and we recognised the need to enhance the offer and overall retail experience. Chifley Tower has always been considered one of the most prestigious buildings in Sydney's financial district and we set out to provide a sophisticated dining environment that reflects the building and the needs of our customers.

What is Level One's target market?

Our target market is predominantly professional workers within the tower and the surrounding CBD. Level One caters to their needs by providing a convenient and interesting mix of

food outlets in a space that lifts the environment well beyond the typical food precinct. The dining area offers a diverse range of seating options that can be used for casual dining, but also encourages people to step out of their offices and hold meetings in an informal yet elegant environment as an extension of their own businesses.

How was the mix of food retailers and restaurants chosen? Were you looking for particular types of retailers?

We did research to identify the mix of cuisines that would appeal to our customers, and we sought retailers aligned with our vision of creating a premium dining space. Our aim was to provide a quality mix of new and exciting concepts by signature chefs, combined with familiar favourites and fresh and healthy options.

Simon Goh's Ella Blues is inspired by American blues and provides a mix of Chinese, Indian and Malay to create

“ The demand for higher standards has grown along with the overall experience and dining environment. ”

a fusion of Malaysian flavours. Poku by Flying Fish founder Jack Fonteyn and chef Jason Roberts is introducing Hawaiian fish salads, a first for the CBD. Super chef Luke Mangan has opened his first fried chicken concept, Chicken Confidential, and we've also brought in Encasa, renowned for its bocadillos, Spanish-inspired rolls.

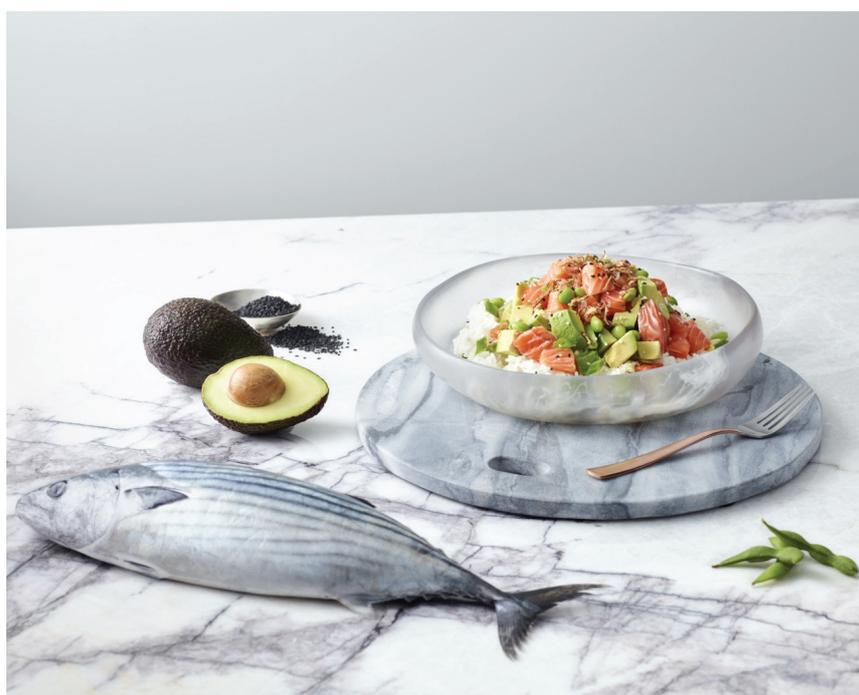
To satisfy broader and more staple needs, we also sought out well-established outlets such as Roll'd, Soul Origin, Sushi Hub and Top Juice.

How have food courts evolved over the years?

While the focus remains on convenience and the offer, customer expectations of quality, service and environment have shifted dramatically. With more choice, the demand for higher standards has grown, along with the overall experience and dining environment. Fresher and more healthier options in the food offer along with quality "comfort food" seem to be trending.

What will the expanded restaurant offering involve?

We are excited about the impending opening of District Brasserie at Chifley, which will offer customers an à la carte restaurant with an extensive wine list, in-house bakery and a connected lobby espresso bar. We are also hoping to announce another restaurant concept in the near future.





Spice Alley, Sydney

Marcus Chang

Executive director, Greycliff

How would you describe Spice Alley?

Marcus: Spice Alley is part of Kensington Street – the laneway behind it, where there were once backyards for terrace houses. We've created little covered and uncovered courtyard areas. We have Hong Kong, Korean, Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai and Vietnamese food, with different zones and separated spaces, so it feels like you're travelling through different areas with colour, artwork and the kitchens.

What was the inspiration behind Spice Alley?

We used our experiences from when we travel. That was the brainchild behind Spice Alley. Sydney is on the doorstep of Asia. Everyone I know has travelled to Bali and Vietnam, and they're seeing all parts of Asia, so we thought we should have that experience in Sydney.

When you travel, what is your favourite thing to do? Eat and shop. We always have fun in the hawker markets in Singapore – you get a cheap meal, go to a few different vendors and it's

good for families. That's what Sydney doesn't have.

Chippendale has a young demographic, so we target more for volume. We keep things affordable to keep the traffic going, so we can replenish our food stocks constantly and have fresh product because we're constantly churning.

What kind of retailers were you seeking when creating Spice Alley?

We didn't want the already successful big brands. If you go to Spice Alley, you won't see a Gloria Jean's, you won't see Neil Perry. That's not us. We don't want big, recognisable brands – we're edgy. Chippendale is the cultural artistic centre of Sydney, so we wanted fresh talent at Spice Alley.

We didn't want the best companies or top-end retailers, we wanted the number twos or threes – the up-and-coming people.

We've known some of these guys for 10 to 15 years, so we've eaten at their restaurants over the years. Finding the right people was all about those relationships for us. There are always new food offerings and menu changes. We're always bringing in new pop-ups and changing over the restaurants and retailers.

“ People see Spice Alley as a specialist destination spot. It has always been a journey of discovery. ”





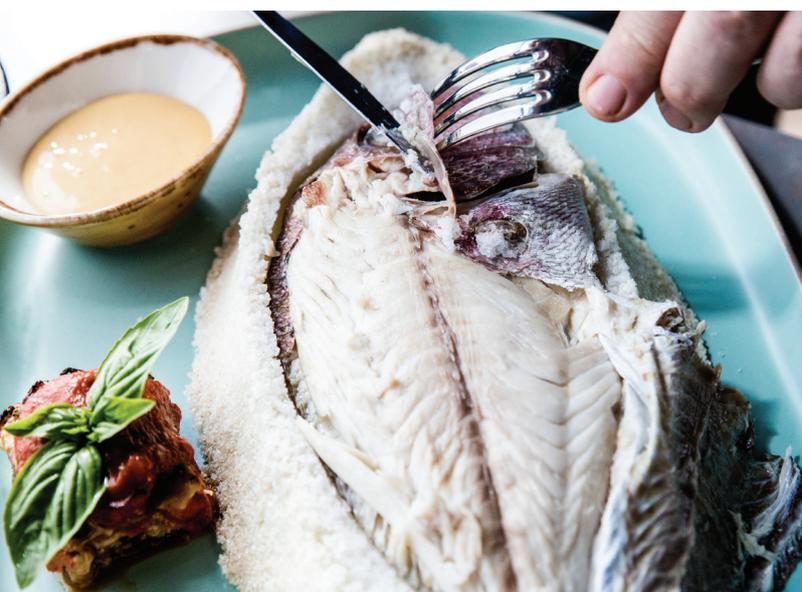
How does Spice Alley cater to its community?

Chippendale is the natural expansion to Chinatown and Sydney's growing and swelling, so it forms part of the city now. There are the universities nearby and 50,000 students, a lot of teaching and admin staff and the ABC, government departments and residents. People can just sit, hang out and enjoy everyday dining, or we also have middle and upper-end restaurants like Automata, Bistro Gavroche, Eastside Grill, Kensington Street Social, Koi Dessert Bar and Olio, so we cater for everybody. People see Spice Alley as a specialist destination spot. It has always been a journey of discovery. We want people to come in and go, 'Wow'.

How does Spice Alley differ to traditional food courts?

In my opinion, food courts are the domain of the Monday to Friday lunchtime worker. We are a destination for couples, families and foodies, serving lunch and dinner, whereas food courts are predominantly lunch only.

We've curated the space so that each outlet has its own offering and no vendor offers the same product.





The Kitchens, Queensland

Mark Landini

Creative director, Landini Associates

Describe the structure of The Kitchens.

Mark: We wanted a place where people can hang out. It is a cross between a food court and factory. The factory is implicit in the name, but the food court and food hall are things that you have to merge sensitively, so there are lots of communal seating areas – you can sit wherever you like.

We also wanted to build a theatre and make it a place where you could learn and watch. We came up with the idea of all the retailers having a kitchen with no back-of-house, so they'd be all open to the public and on display.

We wanted to encourage the retailers to manufacture products, but because not many retailers do that, we chose to hothouse manufacturers to become retailers and use the space for hothousing brands. That in itself is quite unusual.

The other thing we suggested was there should be an atmosphere of collaboration, where retailers were encouraged to collaborate with each other, and we wanted each retailer to have a signature thing they were known for.

The building owner, the Queensland Investment Corporation (QIC), had

expected us to put all the retailers on the floor under this magnificent undulating roof. To use that volume, we thought of the bridges in England that were full of little interconnected buildings. So we created the space on a duoplane and created lots of little buildings that were connected vertically with staircases, dumbwaiters, lifts and bridges. Retailers can work out of both floors, so you can visit the tea shop downstairs then go upstairs to drink it.

What different ways can people retail at The Kitchens?

Every time people visit, there is something new – there are lots of pop-ups, short-term leases and plenty of spaces where people who can't afford to rent a shop can actually have a medium-term lease. They'll be hothoused there then move on.

We've encouraged QIC to give the tenants food bikes, so if you want to sell croissants and coffee outside Uniqlo, fine – off you go, get on your bike and peddle away. So it breaks down that idea that you can trade only from a specific space.

I hate the word 'foodie'. It suggests someone who is superior to everyone else. This place is for real people, and most people are interested in cooking but don't know much about it, so it had to be a lab where you learn stuff but not inappropriately. We encouraged QIC

“ [Food is] one of the few things that glues people together and reminds them what being a human being is all about. ”

to lease the tenancies to people who would do simple things well and not overcomplicate things. For example, we said the fishmonger should have the best range of prawns you can find in Queensland, as opposed to exotic fish that no-one wants. It's food you want to eat every day.

In London, there's Selfridges, where there's a cafe called The Brass Rail, where they're known for one thing – a great pastrami sandwich. We wanted our retailers to do that – maybe the deli guy could do a fabulous sandwich, but maybe he doesn't bake bread, so he

buys bread from the bread guy, or he buys pickles from the pickle guy.

We wanted all the retailers to have a classic, signature item as part of a collaboration.

How do you think food courts help connect people?

What I like about food is it doesn't matter how rich or poor you are and what I love about Australian food is that it's egalitarian. That's why we didn't want there to be restaurant-quality food. We wanted it to be simple stuff done well. Everyone wants to eat a great shepherd's

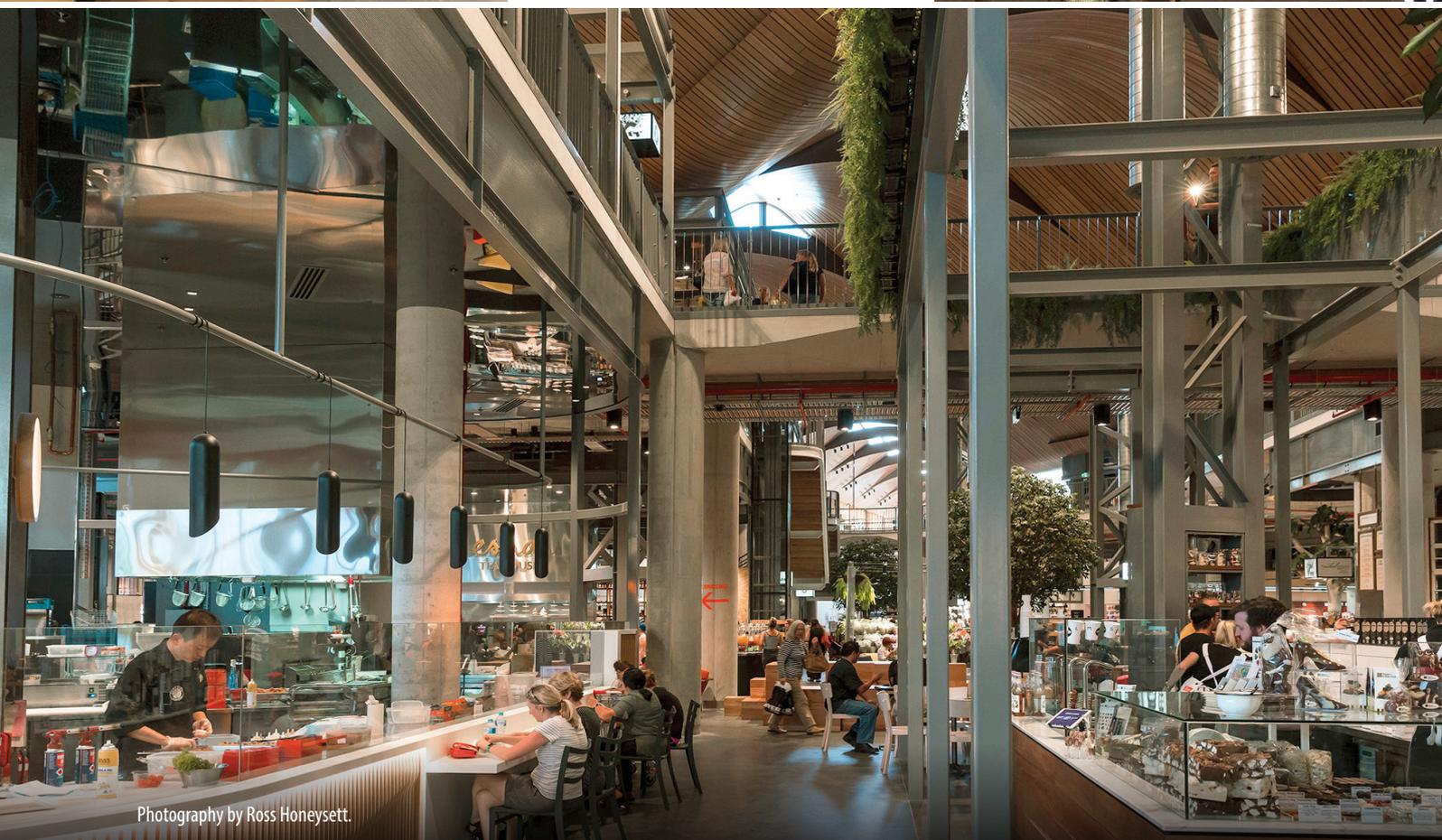
pie or piece of meat, and that's what it should be about.

There are also cultural programs. We have buskers, theatre, live music, film and an outdoor amphitheatre. We wanted a mix of fashion as well, so we encourage designers to have shows.

I think food is becoming even more important in today's technological world. It's one of the few things that glues people together and reminds them what being a human being is all about. And that's what we do at The Kitchens – we're trying to connect people through cooking. ■



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Photography by Ross Honeysett.