

# The future eaters

**John Lethlean** You're sitting comfortably at a cafe table, surrounded by timber veneers and stainless steel, flicking through the pages of the latest overseas food mags. A chilled glass of sauvignon blanc is at hand. Paul Simon's *Graceland* glides from the sound system. Calm descends. Suddenly, a pager goes off. Work? Home? Client? No, your ginger, garlic and shrimp meatballs are ready, and just as well too, because three guests are arriving for dinner in an hour and the fridge is empty.

You pop downstairs, hand the pager to a chef who has just cooked your dinner (you paid earlier and received an ingredients breakdown with your receipt), pick up the package and head for the door when panic strikes.

One of the guests is a wine buff. What on earth do you serve with garlic and shrimp meatballs? Moving to a nearby intranet terminal with touch-screen commands, you make your way through a series of menus to discover a Clare riesling or Marlborough sauvignon blanc will be perfect.

So you race to the liquor department/wine bar, grab the wine, fortify yourself with another glass (a chardonnay this time, from a selection of a dozen by the glass, which you drink while you watch a CD ROM about wine making in the Yarra Valley) before bolting for the car via the antipasto counter.

Welcome to the future of food and wine retailing. Let's Eat, the Coles Myer specialist food store that opened three weeks ago at Prahran Market, is unlike anything yet in Australia. The development, in an old arcade-style hall on the western side of the existing market, is integrated into the market but still self-contained, with its own butcher, greengrocer and fishmonger. It is a multimillion-dollar hybrid - part supermarket, part wine bar, part restaurant, part deli/bakery, part cookery school, part cafe, part take-away, part personal chef - that



Let's Eat at Prahran Market: an attempt to come to grips with our changing, food-mad society

Picture: EDDIE JIM

attempts to come to grips with our changing, food-mad society, and cash in. Coles won't put a set-up cost on the project, although a figure of \$20 million has been rumored.

If you fit the cash-rich, time-poor "young optimist" demographic - in other words, you are affluent and care about food - Let's Eat has you in its stylish sights. You may be the sort of instant-gratification junkie who needs its heat-and-eat meals - perhaps wood-fired pizza with smoked salmon, or barbecued veal cutlets with a red wine sauce, already cooked, then chilled - prepared in the kitchens here daily. Cooking probably isn't important to you but quality, hygiene and nutrition are. Let's Eat will happily provide a nutritional breakdown on its 1600 individual dishes, via the online computer system to which customers have access.

Or, you may be the kind who likes to cook but hates to shop. Let's Eat offers a touch-screen video cooking presentation, built around tear-sheet recipes and comprehensive pre-packaged ingredients packs, right down to a teaspoon of sugar or a pinch of salt.

You may have a favorite chicken recipe but no inclination to cook it:

grab a (free-range only) bird from Let's Eat's fresh meat department, hand the recipe and the chook to a chef and he'll hand you a pager. While you wait, you might want to grab a quick laksa or pizza for lunch and eat in the courtyard.

Or you might be part of the apparently dwindling majority who simply shop for raw ingredients, take them home and cook from scratch.

Whatever your angle, Let's Eat is Coles's attempt to grab a slice of the foodie market. It is the result of three years' planning and overseas research by a management team headed by Coles executive John Barrett. What he has come up with is a gastronomic theme park, where multimedia, food, wine and commerce come together. "The customer we are looking for is affluent and fussy," says Barrett.

Let's Eat is a radical departure from mainstream food retailing: more of the 150 staff come from hospitality backgrounds than retailing. The brigade of chefs and cooks alone numbers 60.

According to Barrett, everything in the store, down to the last shelf sign, has been designed to work for the consumer. Signage is witty, touchy-feely and informative, rather than hard sell.

The store, says Barrett, doesn't

underestimate the intelligence or product knowledge of its audience. You might not find toilet paper here, but you will find "private label" (house brand) pastas from Italy, aged balsamic vinegars and even unhomogenised milk in glass bottles.

Premium and rare produce, such

as exotic fruits, share space with "commodity" but necessary products, such as simple iceberg lettuces. Barrett says instead of offering the widest choice of product, what they sell represents a recommendation from their chefs.

Several customers that we spoke with said they had found items

within Let's Eat that they thought would only be available in a specialist store or market stall. Their perception of Let's Eat was of a rather incredible supermarket.

But it remains to be seen what effect Let's Eat will have on existing businesses within Prahran Market. Barrett concedes there was

## 10 attractions at the Let's Eat Theme Park

- Pager service to let you know when your meal is ready
- Giant screen display for intranet system or for projecting activities in the demonstration kitchen
- Nutritional and ingredients breakdown printed with every meal prepared in-store
- Touch-screen terminals connected to a multi-media system with food and wine information and images, food-related websites
- Cafe area with in-house library as well as books and magazines for sale
- "Digitised" video cooking presentations on screen matched to ingredients packs
- Licensed sushi bar
- Licensed wine bar within liquor department
- Vast, open kitchens where the people who take your order cook it as well
- An array of hard-to-find grocery and fresh produce items

apprehension among stallholders prior to the launch, but now the operation is open, "they don't see us as a competitor".

Let's Eat's advertising points to its Prahran Market location, and Barrett says the store's "destination shopping" appeal will benefit the greater market.

Fruit and vegetable stallholder Joe Vasile agrees. "Hopefully it will make some of us lift our game," he says. "People like to see new things. It will bring people to the market, and we all need that in our businesses." In his own lines, he says, he'll be happy to compete on price.

Delicatessen trader John Pilakis, of Cleo's, says it's a good thing for the market, despite Let's Eat's heavy concentration of cheese, antipasto and other deli lines. The store will attract new crowds.

"But they'll never have the expertise, the product knowledge of the little specialists," Pilakis says.

• Let's Eat is open daily from 7-10pm.

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Menu changes weekly

A la carte is also available