

A craft baker's perspective

Speaker: Roy Flint, President, National Association of Master Bakers
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It is the year 2000 and if you are lucky you still have a master baker making real fresh bread. Of course, it has to be ordered in advance and costs £5 a loaf.

The less fortunate make do with supermarket part-baked bread or the Milton Keynes preformed variety of bread. The sham of bake-off has worked!

Or will it? Let us examine what is happening. The Government has at last come down in favour of the high street, and has put a halt on out of-town retail development. Very late in the day, maybe too late. However, certainly in our area local government is, it seems, determined to pursue the policy and this has to be good news.

To make the high street work again, however, they need to do several things. Firstly, Uniform Business Rate has to become just that - uniform. Why should the high street trader pay anything up to four times more per square foot than the out-of-town retailer, particularly when out of town he has parking and the road system to attract more customers?

Secondly, the use of pedestrianisation schemes in town centres has to be reexamined. Colliers Erdman Lewis Research & Consultancy recently stated in a report that: 'The average economic effect of pedestrianisation appears to have been negligible from a retailer's perspective. Our research suggests that the average pedestrianisation scheme does not generate higher sales or increase profitability.'

Why do we allow them to do these things? A one-way system with on street parking would be better for business surely.

The positive side is that the economic climate of the last few years has created not only many empty shops in the traditional high street, but also a greater sense of reality on the part of landlords. Shops which were unaffordable are now within reach of the bakers. If councils are sensible, then I believe we can regenerate the high street.

There are other factors which I think will work in our favour. The public are becoming slowly aware that if they are not careful, they will lose their future freedom of choice, that the convenience of local shops will disappear and in many areas has already done so.

Derek Cooper of Radio 4's Food Programme told me the other day that in his local area he does not have a baker, greengrocer, butcher or fishmonger - and he lives in Richmond. He did say that his local supermarket, however, sold good bread, which I found quite pleasing as I was able to tell him I had supplied it.

Not all the public can travel to out-of town shops. They have also realised that they have the inconvenience of serving themselves, then queuing to pay and having to put their own shopping into bags. No one has even said: 'Good morning, Mrs Smith, how are you today?' or indeed 'Thank you!'

The large retailers are aware of this but can never replicate the level of service that the good master baker can give. Freshly produced goods, sandwiches and filled rolls made to order, an

individual celebration cake to a customer's own design and choice of colour and inscription, piping hot savories and the warm atmosphere of a family business - too rosy a picture, you are thinking?

Quite rightly. 'Auld Flourie', otherwise known as Norrie Stuart, writing in the Scottish Baker said recently: 'The supermarkets and multiple stores set the standards your customers expect in cleanliness, brightness and customer facilities. No longer will tatty paint, broken counters, missing lights, frayed and torn floor coverings and hand scrawled notices in Biro be acceptable to today's shopper. None of us have a God-given right to survive in our industry just because some of us have been in business longer than we care to remember. It does not mean we can go on just like the old days. We must stay young in outlook and not be afraid to innovate, invest and increase our appeal to our valuable assets, our customers.'

Auld Flourie, I could not have put it better myself.

Bakers have not marketed themselves or their products and they have got to learn to do so if they are to prosper. The National Association of Master Bakers has, I believe, made a start this year. We have engaged public relations consultants. We have a new logo, which features the words 'master bakers' much more strongly and emphasises quality, service and freshness. The message we intend to get over to our customers is very clear.

We believe that the master baker must tell his public that he produces a quality product from quality ingredients, uses methods like sponge and dough which create flavourful bread, sells it - and all his goods - fresh that day, and provides superb service.

I believe that we have a wonderful opportunity to influence Government, the public and our own destiny. It is all too easy to talk business down, but I believe we should take the opportunities which the current climate is presenting to us. Shop premises that were unaffordable before are now negotiable, and good staff are available - albeit you have to look hard. Councils are now worried that they have gone too far in moving out of the high streets. Talk to your local councillor, and you will be amazed how cooperative he or she will be. Many are small shopkeepers.

Do not be afraid to learn from other retailers. The supermarkets have introduced continental lines and American

But don't copy everything. Try to be an innovator. Make your shop different, change your lines, give value for money. Why not use a customer questionnaire to find out what your customer thinks of your business and why they like to shop with you, and what else they would like to buy from you.

We did, and were surprised by the answers we got. The idea came from a work experience boy - you can learn from everyone! Customers told us that they came to us for freshness, product quality, a range that was different, good service, but above all value for money not cheap, but good value.

Do not let your business be judged on price alone. It devalues your craft, your business and the industry. It is time we shed our Cinderella image. The exponents of cheap food do themselves and the industry no favours. If we are to improve our standards it will take

money, to provide good equipment, shopfittings and training. The alternative cannot be contemplated. Let's stop bemoaning our lot, and do the positive thing.

If we do, then we will not fear the competition of bake-off in supermarkets. Our customers will be able to tell the difference because we will continue to produce goods with flavour and use methods that promote that flavour - sponge and dough or bulk fermentation. These not only give better flavour, but improve crust colour and formation, and overall eating quality.

Sponge and dough has all the benefits of a bulk fermenting system, but with the added advantage of being a no-time system at the doughmaking stage. We have used this system for many years and it really does produce flavourful bread, with a good keeping quality that your customer will appreciate. She will be able to use the loaf the next day and the next, unlike some loaves that are available.

Yes, you can enhance bread flavour with dried sours, but why face the extra expense when a properly controlled sponge and dough system will do it better and give a far more tolerant dough?

Another strength that the master baker has is in morning goods. He can produce a much more interesting range than his in-store competitor, use his skills and imagination, good quality ingredients and recipes to make a very profitable and attractive range which will always win customers.

To sum up, where will the master baker be by the year 2000? It will depend very much on his ability to rise to the challenge, but if he can raise his game, produce quality goods with unbeatable freshness and offer superb service to his customer, he will not only survive but prosper - so long as he prices his goods properly.

The good baker has an excellent opportunity if he gets a level playing field on which to compete.

If the Government is serious about arresting the demise of the high street, then it must look at town planning and at rates. If the will really exists, as we are being led to believe, then our businesses can prosper and grow, and we can continue to give employment opportunities to the thousands of local people who work in our industry. If not, it will be very much a case of our bread coming from 'over the hills and far away', baked yesterday or even earlier.

If you are a baker and you do not belong to the National Association of Master Bakers, it is time you joined because it is only by using all our voices that we will influence Government and local authorities and achieve that level playing field.