

HOME » NEWS » FEATURES

The green dream

Tessa Boase

12:01AM BST 05 May 2007

It's swept across America and now it's planning to conquer Britain. Tessa Boase reports on a US food giant that claims to put principles before profits.



A new way of food shopping is crossing the Atlantic and, like many things American, it will seem obscenely proportioned at first. But, like the SUV and super-size Snickers, we will soon get used to it and then come to expect it.

It will offer an extraordinary superabundance of choice and an eco-idealism found nowhere else on such a scale. From the chickens on the butcher's slab to the shelves of hair conditioner, there will be no trans fats, no parabens, no E-numbers, no cruelty.

Whole Foods Market, America's most aggressive and successful "natural" supermarket, is coming to Britain.

On June 6, the three-floor former Barker's department store in Kensington, west London, is set to be transformed into the company's signature hanging gardens of Babylon.

Planet Organic's largest London store is 5,500 sq ft; Fortnum

& Mason's recently expanded food floors boast 18,500 sq ft. Whole Foods will be 80,000 sq ft - the size of the new Wembley Stadium.

Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh are next on the list. In Ireland, Dublin is targeted.

"We're looking at 30 to 40 stores in the UK high street, at the rate of one a year," regional vice-president David Lannon tells me over a sparkling water when we meet in New York at the latest downtown Manhattan branch (72,000 sq ft). A large man who looks partial to the odd organic brownie, Lannon is supremely confident about the company's first European venture.

Wherever you live in Britain, if you have a favourite natural food store you should take notice, because not much survives when Whole Foods comes to town. It is a behemoth, to which independent retailers are just so much small fry.

The Telegraph

HOME NEWS SPORT FINANCE COMMENT BLOGS CULTURE TRAVEL LIFESTYLE FASHION TECH Dating Offers
UK World Politics Obituaries Education Earth Science Defence Health News Royal Family Celebrities Weird News



As it happens, "small" is the current food buzz-word in Britain. Farmers' markets are booming; small producers are fêted. We cherish the notion that natural and organic equals small, slow and preferably local. Why is Whole Foods so confidently importing its wholly different approach and why does it think it's going to work here?

"You journalists," Lannon chuckles. "You romanticise small."

He tells me we so have to move on from this idea. For some time now, big has eclipsed small in the US wholefoods and organics market. The crops are grown on a scale to rival conventional agriculture; the stores have grown at a speed and size to rival Wal-Mart. Whole Foods Market is the biggest of them all.

It started in 1980: a small, vegetarian co-op in Austin, Texas, tapping in to a growing anxiety about what we eat and how it's grown. Through a series of aggressive takeovers, it morphed into America's fastest growing mass retailer, a Fortune 500 company that turned over \$5.6 billion last year.

Picture a little yellow Pac-Man chomping its way across America: 1986, Bluebonnet Natural Foods, chomp; 1991, Wellspring Grocery, chomp; 1992, Bread & Circus, chomp; 1995, Bread of Life, chomp... and so on, until it quietly crossed the Atlantic and chomped seven Fresh & Wild stores in 2004 for £21 million (the name stayed the same: this was just a probe for a future British mega-store).

In February it chomped 110 Wild Oats stores for half a billion dollars, which brings to 304 its total of stores across the US and Canada.

Whole Foods would rather tell you about its ethical, touchy-

feely side. John Mackey, its Birkenstock-wearing, chicken-keeping founder and CEO, doesn't draw a salary and has donated his stock options to the company's charities and set up a fund for staff with emergencies.

"I have enough money," he announced last year at his Texas ranch.

"My deeper motivation is to try to do good in the world." Mackey, 53, is an intriguing mix of hard-headed businessman and idealist. His "bottom up" company disdains fat-cat profit, pumps money into green causes and rewards its "team members" handsomely. His business ethos is admired: Whole Foods Market has been voted among the 100 best companies to work for by Fortune magazine for 10 years running.

And yet there is something about its sloganising, ethical smugness and greener-than-green image (shored up by a public-relations phalanx) that arouses suspicion. Can big really be that good where food is concerned? I go to New York to find out.

The first Whole Foods store I walk into at Columbus Circle has a wall of organic broccoli in the basement - and I mean a wall - with the tightly bunched heads facing out, like something put together by artist Andy Goldsworthy. Shoppers stop to stare, but only for a second or two, as food theatre is pretty ubiquitous in-store. Still, it is arresting: very on-message, very witty, very green.

The rest of the spotlight basement is similarly exploding with rude health. Shoppers tug at hedges of golden beet, mustard greens, bok choy and tiny, speckled radishes. There are bushels of fashionable dinosaur kale and purple kohlrabi.

The Telegraph

HOME NEWS SPORT FINANCE COMMENT BLOGS CULTURE TRAVEL LIFESTYLE FASHION TECH Dating Offers
UK World Politics Obituaries Education Earth Science Defence Health News Royal Family Celebrities Weird News



There are blueberries, rare kiwiberries and even rarer gojiberries. All roots, shoots and fruit are mechanically spritzed with morning dew so that they seem freshly plucked from the earth rather than trucked 2,500 miles from California which, reading the small print, is mostly the case.

The superabundance continues upstairs. Every conceivable cut of meat and fish glistens behind glass.

There are salad bars to make the indecisive weep, grind-your-own peanut butter and pallets laden with tubs of "two-bite" macaroons - "So moist and chewy you can picture Mom just taking them out of the oven", the label says, along with the ubiquitous Whole Foods pledge that no artificial preservatives, colours, flavours, sweeteners or hydrogenated fats have been anywhere near them. You can get cellulite with a clear conscience.

Labelling is big at Whole Foods. Every item noisily beats its eco drum. Not everything is organic - a good half of the produce isn't - but every purchase comes larded with idealism.

Chicken breasts come, I read, from Pennsylvania's Amish country: "Our chickens get plenty of access to fresh air and sunlight, a 100 per cent vegetarian diet and are raised without antibiotics." They aren't strictly free-range or organic, but, hell, they are vegetarian. The care label on an organic cotton T-shirt reads: "OK to iron". Do people really iron T-shirts?

People aren't so much shopping with purpose as browsing. A geeky man keeps picking up and putting down a carton of "classic mashed potatoes". A yummy mummy in pink wedge espadrilles, cart piled high, stands paralysed in front of the paraben-free shampoos while her toddler munches on black

tortilla chips.

This is supermarket shopping turned on its head. Here is a place where you can hang out and graze on anything from sushi to "custom-blended gelati" - a seductive, calm space laid out with the help of an in-house feng shui consultant. (One store, I was told, wasn't making enough money - until Mr Feng Shui was called in.) It is also celebrity-spotting Grand Central. Is that Jim Carrey by the eco cleaning products? Kirsten Dunst, Angelina Jolie, Kim Cattrall and Jake Gyllenhaal have all been glimpsed in dark glasses, stocking up.

"You make me feel so young," sings Frank Sinatra over the sound system. "Team Members" pass around oven-warm chocolate brownies, freshly-whizzed guacamole and cave-aged Gruyère. The 41 cash tills bleep incessantly. Not for nothing is the chain wryly known as "Whole Paycheck".

Despite Whole Foods' much-trumpeted ethics and its professed commitment to small producers and organics, something about the four whopping outlets I visit in Manhattan makes me feel uneasy. In this I'm not alone. The New York Times journalist Michael Pollan wrote a scathing critique of Whole Foods in his recent book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, suggesting that its local, organic and artisanal food is just window-dressing to help sell an ordinary industrial product jetted in from all over the world.

This clearly stung Mackey. Efforts have since been made to give "local" food (within 200 miles) greater prominence. But when you have a chain of stores that big and a distribution system that vast, the small producers clamouring to sell tiny quantities become irritants on the sleek hide of the behemoth.



Opposite Whole Foods' Union Square branch is the Greenmarket, New York's favourite farmers' market, which has been in operation for 30 years. "When we opened Whole Foods, the farmers worried that it would affect them," the store's team leader Carlos Osorio tells me. "But they complement each other. We're just selling the same kind of stuff seven days a week."

The stallholders see it rather differently. "It's been really bad for the farmers' market," said Mike Betit, an organic pig farmer.

"Whole Foods sells the perception of quality. The meat is not all organic, it's natural, which in the US means minimally processed."

Wheatgrass farmer Stewart Borowski dislikes the way Whole Foods displays pictures of bucolic small producers next to processed food. "That's an unfair marketing tool," he said. "Small producers? That's lip service. It's clear they're evolving away from what they started as."

The hard-core green movement in America has fallen out of love with Mackey's stores. He didn't even make the list of 88 "Global Citizens" in Vanity Fair's Green Issue last month.

As I walk the aisles, it is clear that not everything lives up to the company's core promise of "highest quality, least processed, most flavourful and naturally preserved foods". Mozzarella Stix? Ian's Alphonso's? Amy's Toasterpops?

The food store of the future, according to British designer Rodney Fitch, will be a place to gather; a "portal". You don't

have to go there (most commodity shopping will be done over the internet), but you'll want to, because there will be something tantalising about the experience. As well as a strong eco angle, "food theatre" was the buzz-phrase at the World Retail Congress in Barcelona in March.

It sounds as if Whole Foods has got there already. British supermarkets have some way to go, but the American interloper is upping the ante. Sainsbury's, Tesco and Marks & Spencer trumpet schemes to buy more local produce, reduce food miles and offset carbon emissions.

Tesco has impishly trademarked the name "Tesco Wholefoods", while all supermarkets have been frantically sewing up UK organic contracts.

The Kensington store's initial promise was to buy local; the reality is that it can't fill the shelves this way. Its food, organic and otherwise, will now be "regionally" sourced, which means the length and breadth of the British Isles - and the Continent. Add to this certain American brands that have been flown over to make up the shortfall and you have a typically cosmopolitan food hall.

In one key respect though, Whole Foods has an edge on the competition: John Mackey and his team bring an idealism that is utterly alien to British supermarket culture. Yes, they are here to make money. But if they sometimes fall short of their stated ideals, they are genuinely trying to make the world a better place. If American customers are anything to go by, many of us will be persuaded.