

RAW ENERGY

Surrey firebrand Alan Martin has broken the mould with his Food For Thought stores in Kingston and Guildford. Here, he tells **Denise Barrett** just how he went about carving that niche.

We caught up with Alan Martin in a happy but messy "foodie mood", making vegan versions of well known confections such as Mars and Snickers.



Alan Martin prepares to make a batch of Vegan 'Snickers' bars.

I have a favourite personal mantra inspired by Food For Thought: "If this environment has the wherewithal to inspire the desire within you, this environment has the wherewithal to deliver it to you – no exceptions."

In other words, my life changed when I 'stopped going to work' and opened my two stores. I've always loved what I do and do what I love. And I've mostly been in retail. But Food For Thought was something else.

I'm a pretty off the wall guy (ask anyone in the natural health industry) but I'm deadly serious about our two stores. And about our suppliers, our customers and our staff. In fact we set out from the beginning to create and deliver not only a fabulous lifestyle experience, but to break the 'independent retailer' mould.

And I think we may have cracked it.

Let me give you a taste of my day. This morning I got up really early, showered and had

breakfast, which usually consists of fruit and some kind of smoothie loaded with superfoods. My smoothie of the week is water melon and goji berry, with all that wonderful citrulline. Had a quick flick through my emails, checked our Facebook page then decided to make a video.

I fancied making a quick tasty vegan snack, with tortilla chips, mixed beans, olive pasta sauce, vegusto vegan sausage and vegan cheese. So I headed straight for the kitchen (I am lucky to have a house with loads of space, over four floors) then a quick trip to Kingston Food For Thought. Back I came, armed with the ingredients, prepared the snacks, shot and edited the video and uploaded it to YouTube. Then the prepared snacks went to the store for tasting on our now legendary sampling table. So, there's my

first marketing exercise to share with you: Create a delicious, dedicated space in-store!

ON ANOTHER PLANET?

I am lucky to live in the middle of town and when I step outside the house I'm surrounded by the vibrant historic backdrop of the market place in Kingston. It's called 'the jewel in Kingston's crown'. So I know I am blessed but I put a lot back, so the karma is good.

Now, if I'm visiting our other store, in Guildford, I can immerse myself in another historic town (also in Surrey) but also soak up the countryside. With this, who would want the daily grind of commuting?

I may be a retail animal, but I'm very creative, and I like to see some 'theatre' on the shop floor. In the welcoming section of both stores, we allot a creative space: the impressive wooden table in Kingston that I mentioned earlier, which is brilliant for promotions, displays and tastings, and some funky decorated tables in Guildford.

I'm really into raw food, so it's great to be able to demonstrate the goodies. I'm actually working on a raw vegan 'Mars' bar recipe at the moment (renamed my Curiosity Bar, geddit?), and the joke is I'm going to send it to my (equally Scottish) brother up in deepest West Lothian, to deep-fry it. He's already told me he was inspired to start making smoothies after he and his wife Nicky stayed with us a few weeks ago. My brother's idea of a smoothie turned out to be a Mars bar and Irn-Bru version. He's a maverick Martin too – and has a passion for writing. He's working on his second book on football and has bought a house because it's near a UFO hot spot! *Quelle famille*; you couldn't make it up.

LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU

Back at the display table, I'm working on a new idea, and this is where we really get 'theatrical'. I'm auditioning solo acoustic musicians to come and perform over the lunchtime period for our customers, to create ambience in-store. There are a lot of really good buskers in Kingston, and who knows we may discover the next Robbie Williams! And we might not have far to search with our own industry's talented Bertel from Windmill Organics on our Kingston doorstep.

I like to think of Food For Thought as kind of installation art, with the products and our wonderful dedicated staff making it all happen. Incidentally, this isn't all altruism, I am quick to identify an opportunity for PR and marketing and Food For Thought has a prolific Facebook and Twitter following.

I also see Food For Thought as a platform and even a launch pad for artisan and indie

companies. I love scouting for what's new and quirky and not necessarily tried and tested.

Food For Thought is a kind of organic barometer for our marketplace. We are very busy in the stores, so I can afford to do it while indulging myself at the same time. We have guest spots, too: Justin, who comes in and prepares delicious raw vegan food, spends one day a week in each store. We have a lot of fun together creating recipes, making sure they work, taste good and are practical and sensible.

But, this is punk health and I am a punk nutritionist! I have labelled Justin 'Just Incredible', because he makes just incredible raw food. We also have Carrie doing a day a week in each store creating more theatre, from whacky electrical devices, to whipping up BonPom* Soul Drink to creating a French Bistro in-store for sampling of the Vegusto range of vegan foods.

Raw talent at the Kingston Food Festival

For me, nothing could be better than rustling up a tasty raw vegan rice pilaf at the Kingston Food Festival with the Big Food Market and the Live Food Show in the town centre, just outside our store.

The show, rated among the top five Food Festivals by the Sunday Telegraph, ran on a weekend in August. Food writer Andrew Kay acted as compere and we were up against chefs from leading multiples like Zizzi, Las Iguanas and Frankie and Benny's as well as other independents like Cappadocia and Riverside Vegetaria.

Dedicated foodie Andrew was, he said, "very keen to try the raw food being processed on stage by Food For Thought." There was a five-minute challenge at the end of every chef's presentation when Andrew picked four or five items for the chef to create something, a kind of mini Ready Steady Cook.

There was a brief moment when I thought I might be going from raw food vegan to preparing a meal with ingredients that still had a pulse. I needn't have worried – he kept to the spirit of what I was doing and I beat the clock, managing to make my dish in three minutes, best time of the weekend!

**BonPom is Alan's first foray into manufacture – see page 25*

THE HOLLAND & BARRETT FACTOR

I have always had a flair for retail, it really is in my blood. I started out running John Menzies newsagent stores in my native Scotland. I was brought to London to 'Menzify' some branches in the Smoke. I immediately knew this was where I was meant to be. One day, emerging from Bond Street underground station, I spied a health food store bearing the name Holland & Barrett. Now this was the time when H&B were pioneering and cutting edge. There were millions of people milling around waiting for the personal appearance of the late, great, Rod Brennan from Blackmores, the renowned Australian company.

Rod advised me on my diet and it changed my life. No wheat, dairy, red meat or eggs, all irritants to my asthmatic condition. He also advised me on supplementation. Soon, I felt better and then much better. My Road to Damascus! I was hooked. So, goodbye to John Menzies and hello to H&B and managing their flagship store (at the time) in Bond Street Tube Station.

Multitasking as ever, in between all this, I had bought into the upmarket convenience store Cullen's franchise opportunity. I had three branches under my belt, which I sold in the late 1990s. Fast-forwarding to 2008, two stores in Surrey called Food For Thought needed some general rescuing and some TLC. I bought the stores with my business partner Rob, and, luckily, we have never looked back.

EMBRACING THE VISION

What did we have at the beginning of all that, apart from dented bank accounts? Vision! And the fabulous thing was that all the staff from both stores wanted to stay for the journey. We gained two stores and around 20 staff. Everyone embraced the change. Lisa, my manager at Kingston, has run the store now for around 12 years and Alja, now managing Guildford, has been with the company for over six years. Since 2008, despite credit crunch, recession and double dips, the only doubling we are doing is in turnover! We've also kept many, many customers, but have attracted a new customer dynamic of both sexes in the mid 20s to early 30s age range.

The core of my retail philosophy is engage, be generous, be aware, be imaginative and be brave. Put things out there. We've done work with Kingston University and Kingston College. And by the time you read this we will have shared food and given books away for Humanitarian Day (August 19).

Also important: visualise. Create the seeds of the process and see it through.