

QUICK EATS

The continuing evolution of the 'quick eat' restaurant is a high street phenomenon and for shoppers the choice is massive, as **John Ryan** reports

Quality fast food

Those with long memories and (unless it's dyed) grey hair, may remember a time when if you wanted a quick eat the best on offer tended to be a Wimpy or, if you were blessed, an Angus Steakhouse or perhaps a McDonald's. That was a long time ago, however, and today the hungry masses in search of a quick hunger fix have a broad panorama of options to choose from.

The choice is vast, with everything from the ultra-healthy to the lard-encrusted, although 'light' choices are increasingly the order of the day.

As far as 'store' design is concerned, the choice is almost as broad as the food that is on offer, but when it comes to graphics, variations on meal deals and food porn-style images tend to be de rigueur. There are also great similarities between what is being done by the quick-food restaurant chains and the large supermarkets, although which influences which is something of a moot point.

Contemporary, but utilitarian, is an apt description of the style this part of retail/hospitality seems to be adopting.

EAT

Old Street, London

Billing itself as 'The Real Food Company' (and just which food is not 'real?'), EAT is one of the newer chains. The bulk of its branches, there are more than 110, are in London and it typifies the new-look, quick-bite sector.

One-pot meals are served from a plain wood and grey metal-trimmed counter, which has digital screens above it and a white tiled wall that acts as the backdrop. Everything is pre-prepared and the emphasis is on speed – nobody wants to hang around at lunchtime – and a functionally pared-down dining area.

As in so many of the chains of this kind, stress is placed on the range of hot beverages that can be bought. The graphics reflect this with a tasteful grey poster on one of the bare concrete pillars informing visitors of the options as far as 'Coffee made the EAT way' is concerned.

In keeping with the servery, the seating is low-key and neutral in appearance, and plain wood plays a major part once more. There is a lone graphic towards the back of this area that shows sandwiches piled on top of each other with a message about 'fresh' – it's a theme that all of the quick-bite merchants are keen to hammer home.



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Pod Old Street, London

In London's Old Street, Pod is next door to EAT and its interior bears very close comparison architecturally, as the unit interiors are more or less the same. This means more bare concrete pillars and a glass frontage. The serving counter is also similar, although brightly coloured printed graphics take the place of EAT's digital screens.

Pod is also keen to promote the fresh nature of its offer, but the overriding message is one of convenience, with a fair portion of the exterior devoted to a graphic featuring a picture of a bicycle accompanied by the words 'Delicious. Delivered'.

Within, the delivery offer is reinforced by a bike trailer, decked out in Pod corporate colours

and accompanied by the tagline 'Full of heathy energy'.

There is nothing terribly clever or different about either the Pod or EAT offers, but they do succeed in taking the visitor away from the hurly-burly of 'Silicon Roundabout' and into an environment of relative peace. And to emphasise this quick eat's urban credentials, the mid-shop concrete pillar has been given the inner-city graffiti treatment.

Pod's overriding message is one of convenience



Pret A Manger City Road, London

A name so familiar, to Londoners at least (this is where the company does around two-thirds of its business), that it needs little introduction, and in many ways this one has been the template on which others have based their offers.

There is less of a focus on hot food (although soup is on the menu) compared with Pod and EAT, and the bulk of the selection takes place away from the cash and drinks counter, via chillers situated along the perimeter.

It is the use of exposed brick, wooden tables and metal seating that gives this one its distinctive character, and if the name were removed from the door, most customers would probably still know where they were. It's a test that few others in the sector would pass.

As with others of its kind, free wi-fi is a prerequisite and this is a strong enough draw to ensure that many of its tables remain occupied for long periods and for it to function well as an ad-hoc meeting venue.

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▶ Apostrophe

Great Eastern Street, Shoreditch, London

In spite of the French name and graphics on the wall, there is a modern Japanese ambience about this interior, with its high wooden stools enabling diners to perch in front of narrow mid-shop wooden tables.

Apostrophe neatly straddles the divide between upscale cafe and quick eatery, with a counter that once more uses plain, varnished wood and glass to show off prepared sandwiches, salads, bagels and suchlike.

Wood, in fact, plays a much greater part in the fit-out of this chain than in its rivals, with the walls behind the counter being timber-clad, as are many of the under-counter modules. The rest of the interior is tricked out in hot pink and black – which provides a dramatic interior and an eye-catching logo outside.

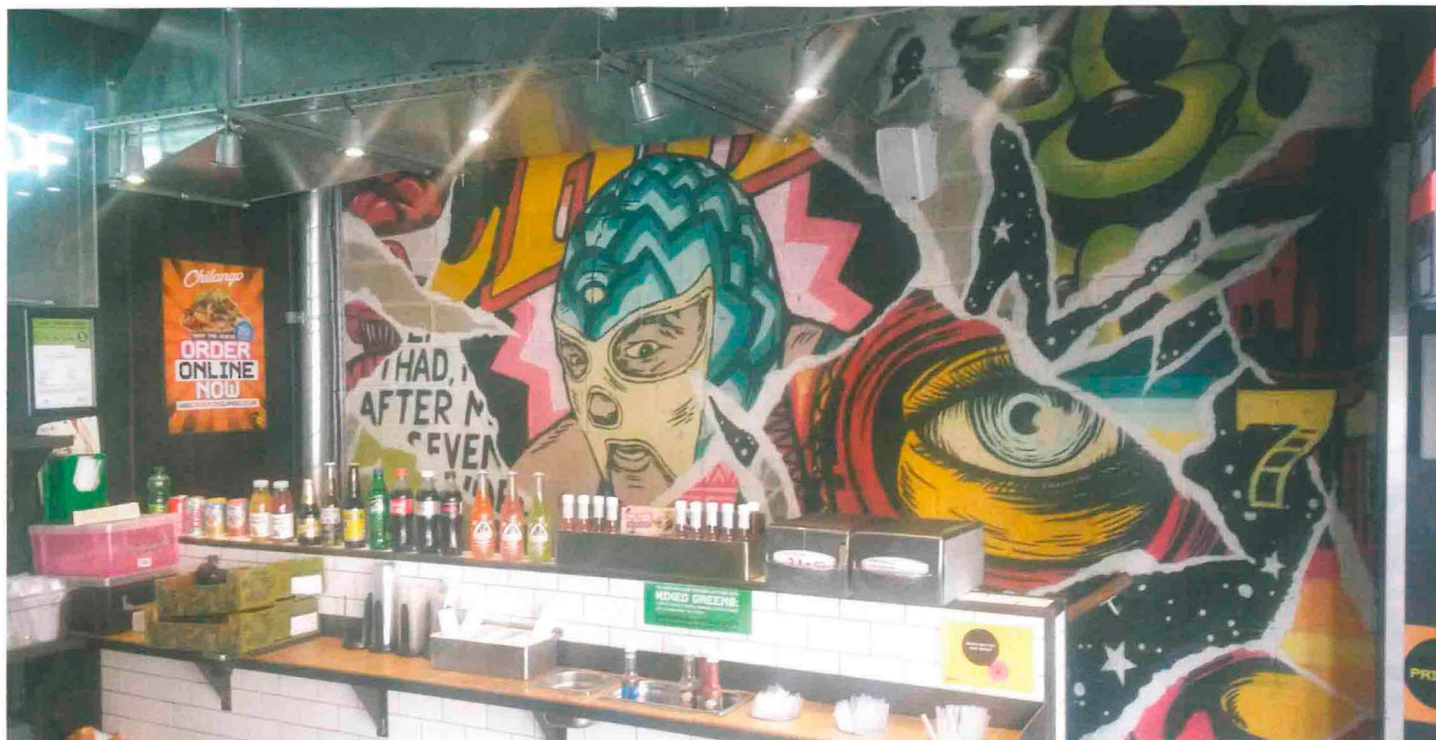
With the exception of Gatwick and Heathrow airports, this chain, which started life in 2001, is an entirely London metropolitan phenomenon.

Relative to its competition, the offer at Apostrophe is aspirational when it comes to price, but this is a highly styled and expensively fitted-out eatery, so customers will be getting what they pay for.

Apostrophe neatly straddles the divide between upscale cafe and quick eatery



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Chilango

Brushfield Street, London

Glance at Chilango's website and you might think you were in for a little slice of a Rio-style carnival in London – and the interior lives up to this.

There are just eight branches at the moment and this is the newest of the quick-eat restaurants visited, and in many ways the most niche. If burritos and all things Mexican are not to the diner's taste, then they may want to keep walking, but in terms of an idiosyncratic interior, this is probably the most unusual, with great play made of superhero-style graphics.

From the outside, it's clear that this is an outfit on the move, with a pink poster in the

window asking if onlookers 'Want to help us expand'. Adjacent to this, another poster reinforces the dining-in-a-hurry ethos with the message 'Skip the queue. Order online'.

When it comes to sitting down to eat, this is the least conducive environment in which to do so as there are just a couple of garden furniture-style metal tables and chairs on offer. That said, this is on the fringe of Spitalfields and there are plenty of areas in which to sit and enjoy the surroundings.

In design terms, there is nothing restful about this interior, indeed if there were one overarching theme it would probably be 'frantic', but in a positive way.