

STORES

Upscale grocer Waitrose's newly opened branch in Horsham embodies the strength of the brand's appeal.
John Ryan reports



Waitrose refines its big-box offer



Food retailers tend to be second-class citizens in the flagship sweepstakes. While fashion empires always have a showpiece store that others in the group can aspire to and which will provide something for shoppers to gravitate towards, typically what food retailers try to do is create consistency across a large estate.

That means no particular store is a star, they are just bigger or smaller.

When a food store acts in concert with a department store, does this change the dynamic?

A visit to Horsham might provide the answer. This is the location of a recently opened Waitrose that shares its premises with a branch of John Lewis at Home.

According to Anthony Wysome, Waitrose head of store design, Horsham is not a flagship. But it does mean a few more 'destination shoppers' (ie those visiting the John Lewis part of this long-fronted building) will make their way into the Waitrose alongside the food shop regulars.

WAITROSE/JOHN LEWIS AT HOME, HORSHAM

Opened June 17

Design In-house

Waitrose highlights

The wine and juice bars

Ambience Warm(ish) and efficient

Standout product

£175 Cristal Champagne



The grocer did have a store in Horsham's town centre for 25 years but it closed the day this new branch opened.

Store equality

Standing outside the store, there is an equality about what has been done. At one end, the Waitrose logo has been positioned above John Lewis's, while

at the other it is John Lewis on top.

The same is true when the shopper walks through the ground floor entrance. A large, empty foyer acts as an effective decompression zone while shoppers decide whether they will head for John Lewis or Waitrose.

While externally this is a joint store, the two parts of 'the partnership' are

See more pictures of the Waitrose store at
Retail-week.com/waitrosehorsham



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clearly discrete although there is no sense of special treatment having been given to either.

For those heading into Waitrose, much of what is on view will be familiar if they happen to have been to either Swindon or Salisbury recently, but this does not mean that everything is the same.

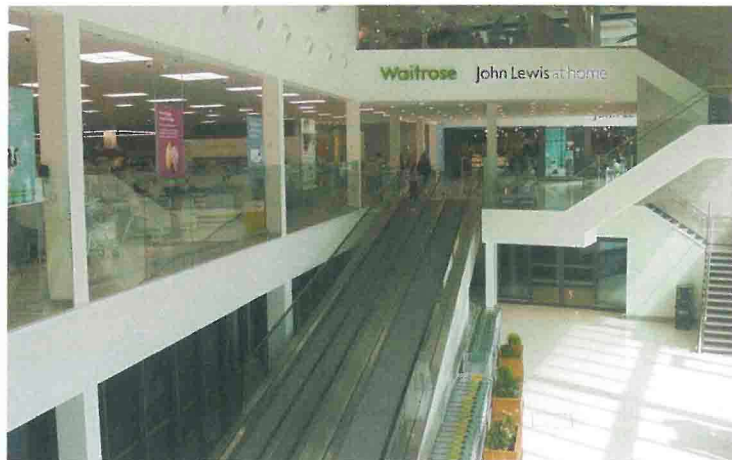
Wysome says: "We tend to work by making stuff and then scaling it and by seeing what we need to do."

That means elements such as the juice bar, which was first seen in Swindon, have been moved from a secondary position to centre stage in Horsham, where it is the first thing that shoppers encounter.

It is 9.30am and the juice bar has customers. Juice tends not to be the cheapest way of enjoying a beverage, but in affluent Horsham this doesn't seem to concern customers. The same, it would appear, is true of the wine bar at the other end of the shop.

But pause for a moment to enjoy a joke. A man walks into a supermarket, buys two bottles of Cristal Champagne (at £175 pop), a jam doughnut and a car ▶

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► magazine. Well, actually it is not a joke. The scene took place in the store on a Friday evening a couple of weeks ago, when the rappers' delight champagne was selected from the wine department that backs onto the wine bar. And this is perhaps the point about the store.

It may be Waitrose and it may be in Horsham, West Sussex, but there is a breadth of offer that means the Cristal-loving, doughnut-munching, Top Gear presenter wannabe can find everything that is required.

Supermarket democracy

There really is something for everybody. But it all takes place in a relatively low-key, unpressured and pleasant environment. It is supermarket democracy in action.

In part, that has to do with the size of the store. According to Wysome: "We find that around 30,000 sq ft works well for us. It's big enough that you can find everything you want and not so big that you have to work the perimeter too hard to avoid the danger of people losing interest."

But the perimeter has been quietly and highly effectively developed. Take the fresh meat counter. Wysome says that the tiles which back the counter have been "worked on", although the change is not so radical that the shopper might remark on it, which surely is what evolution is all about.

There are some aspects that stick out, however.

A graphic halfway along the back wall states 'free from'. Beneath it there is a wide range of



products that are free from ingredients that may cause problems for the increasing number of people with allergies. These products can be found in other supermarkets, but here the decision has been taken to group them together to create a new category.

Wysome says that makes sense because one of the "future battlegrounds for supermarkets" will be health and it will be a matter of retailers putting their best feet forward to show there is more to life than Cristal and doughnuts.

In-store dining

The aisles look similar to Waitrose's other new branches but what has been done is all about the detail and some will be modest incremental change to features that have already proved their worth.

The big difference in this John Lewis at Home/Waitrose (there is another in Ipswich) is when it comes to in-store dining. All John Lewis stores of any size have an element of hospitality and Waitrose is increasingly doing the same.

In Horsham the baton has been passed to Waitrose and so, in effect, the cafe on the first floor may be a Waitrose cafe, but it is shared with the John Lewis at Home. At present it has room for around 140 people, but Wysome says it could be expanded to close to 160.

The cafe also affords views across the travelators (that provide access to the two stores from the car park) to the bakery, where more shoppers can be seen enjoying tea and cake.

The store looks like a kit of parts that has been assembled carefully and where the whole is very much better than the sum of the parts. It is also essentially Waitrose and if there were such a thing as 'Waitroseness', then this would be its embodiment.

In a few weeks, the grocer opens the doors of its store in a 160-year old train shed at King's Cross in London. That will be a completely different proposition architecturally, but will also, in large part, follow what has been done in Horsham.

At a time when many of the big supermarkets are beating something of a retreat, this continues to look like a force that others should be reckoning with. ■

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