

STORES

The Turin-based grocer has brought Italian fare to Elephant & Castle and turned food shopping from a chore into a pleasure. **John Ryan** visits

Mercato Metropolitano brings a little taste of Italy to food retail

What is it about Turin and food markets? For those who have been to New York, Munich, Istanbul or Milan recently, there is a strong possibility that a visit to Eataly was part of the experience. Eataly is in effect a 'slow food' theme park for Italian fare that has become a global hit since founder Oscar Farinetti opened the first outpost in Turin back in 2007.

Today the Eataly loyalties of the Torinesi are being tested by Mercato Metropolitano – an indoor market with onsite eateries and an oversized Italian deli. It may be on a smaller scale than Eataly, but it packs a gustatory punch and will most certainly be monitored by its senior rival.

However, until about two weeks ago neither Eataly nor Mercato Metropolitano had seen fit to open a branch in this country. However, that has changed and people in London can experience Mercato Metropolitano first hand.

Down south

The location is Elephant and Castle; aka 'the Elephant', a road junction less than a mile from Waterloo and where south London proper begins. It's been overrun by traffic for many years and although it is gradually being redeveloped, it remains a place that many hurry through on the way to somewhere else. The arrival of Mercato Metropolitano provides a reason for those who like Italian food and dining to stop and take time to reassess the area and its cosmopolitan attractions.

Access to the new arrival is likely to be via Borough or Elephant & Castle tube stations, both of which

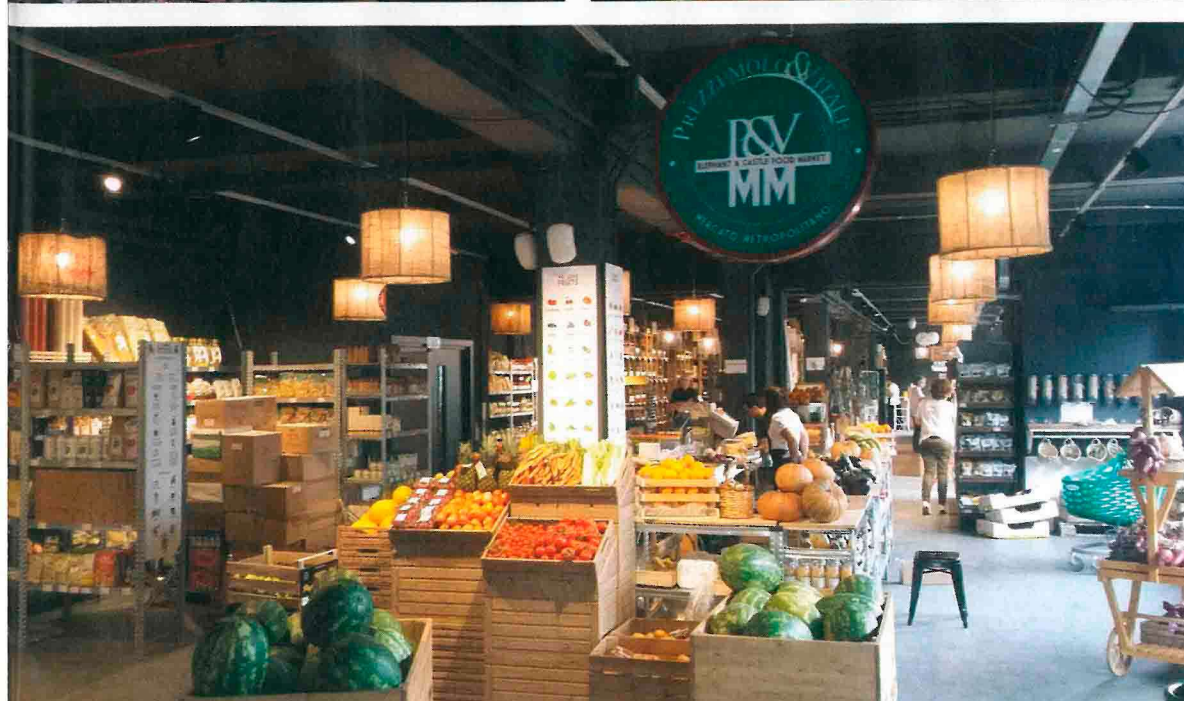


Mercato Metropolitano, Elephant & Castle
Opened July 22, 2016
Format Market meets deli
Ambience al fresco, indoors and out
Highlight The cheese counter
Store reliant upon Visual merchandising and product
Customers Urban foodies

are a short walk away. On arrival it is immediately apparent this is a former light industrial unit. From the outside, the only clue about what lies within is a Mercato Metropolitano sign picked out in a bold white font on a black background.

There are, in fact, two entrances. The first leads to a courtyard where there are a scattering of designer-style chairs, tables and a food kiosk (it has no food and is instead used as a vehicle for a display of pot plants) bearing the legend 'canteen' while

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▶ the other leads to a deli-meets-market space laden with almost anything you might think of when the words 'Italian' and 'food' are mentioned in the same breath.

And on to the courtyard. Pass through this area and you approach a covered warehouse space with high ceilings and a number of market stall-style counters around the perimeter offering everything from homemade mozzarella to a 'doppio'.

In the middle, yellow tables and benches provide seating for those who fancy dining al fresco, but indoors, as it were.

The sense is that you have arrived in the main square of an Italian town and are a little peckish. It's actually pretty similar to the experience the shopper is likely to encounter when visiting any of the Eataly stores, where dining plays a major part in what is on offer.

And for those who don't crave the outside-but-inside eating ambiance, there is always the option of heading back into the courtyard with a purchase and sitting down in the open air proper.

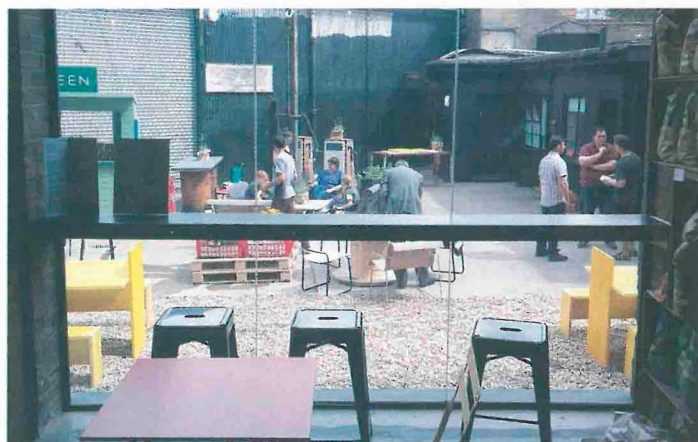
An urban experience

The shop itself is long and relatively narrow and has an industrial bearing which no attempt has been made to disguise. It also plays all the tricks that have increasingly become associated with the urban market.

This means concrete floors, matt-grey painted walls and low levels of ambient light with pendant lights (aided by a few strategically placed spotlights) doing a lot of the work.

For most of the summer opening hours (11am to 11pm) daylight does the work as far as illumination is concerned, with large metal grid windows running the length of one of the walls. However, at night the pendant lights serve to provide product highlights across the store and help in fostering a sense of this being more 'mercato' than shop.

And this is rather the point. The shop is certainly a shop, but the many counters – cheese, cured meats, vegetables and so on – are about making the interior



look and feel a world away from a supermarket. In this, it has much in common with Borough Market, about half a mile north, and it seems a fair bet that the metropolitan foodie crowd will be making their way along Borough High Street to get to this one.

Worth noting too is the wine department. Bottles are displayed along part of the perimeter in an

open-fronted structure made of reclaimed wood with a wooden table and brightly coloured chairs directly in front of it. The message is that this is not about the rapid restocking of the wine rack, but about taking time and perhaps enjoying a glass or two of wine while considering what to buy.

There is nothing fancy about the display equipment that has

been installed. Instead, it is the visual merchandising and vibrant colours of the produce that do the work, and throughout a heavy emphasis is placed upon being served rather than simple self-selection. This is once more closer to a traditional market than any kind of modern food retail and it manages to offer a sense of the personal as part of the shopping experience.

The success of slow

Finally, mention should be made of the graphics. For the most part, these are attached to the concrete pillars around the shop and take the form of naïve art drawings of the products that can be found directly beneath them. This does mean they are, to an extent, visual statements of the obvious, but it helps in confirming the feeling that slickness forms no part of the blueprint for this interior.

Plans are in place for a gym to be installed above the shop and for the covered market area to be expanded. At the time of visiting, the latter was almost complete, but even without these additions Mercato Metropolitano is worth taking a look at.

Much of what is on display can be found in supermarkets, but it is the manner in which things are slowed down and food shopping is turned from chore into pleasure that make this feel different.

This is Mercato Metropolitano's first foray beyond its home-town – and only its second outlet – and the big four will doubtless be taking a look in due course.

Meanwhile, this is a standard-bearer for the renaissance of a part of inner London that has been overlooked.

