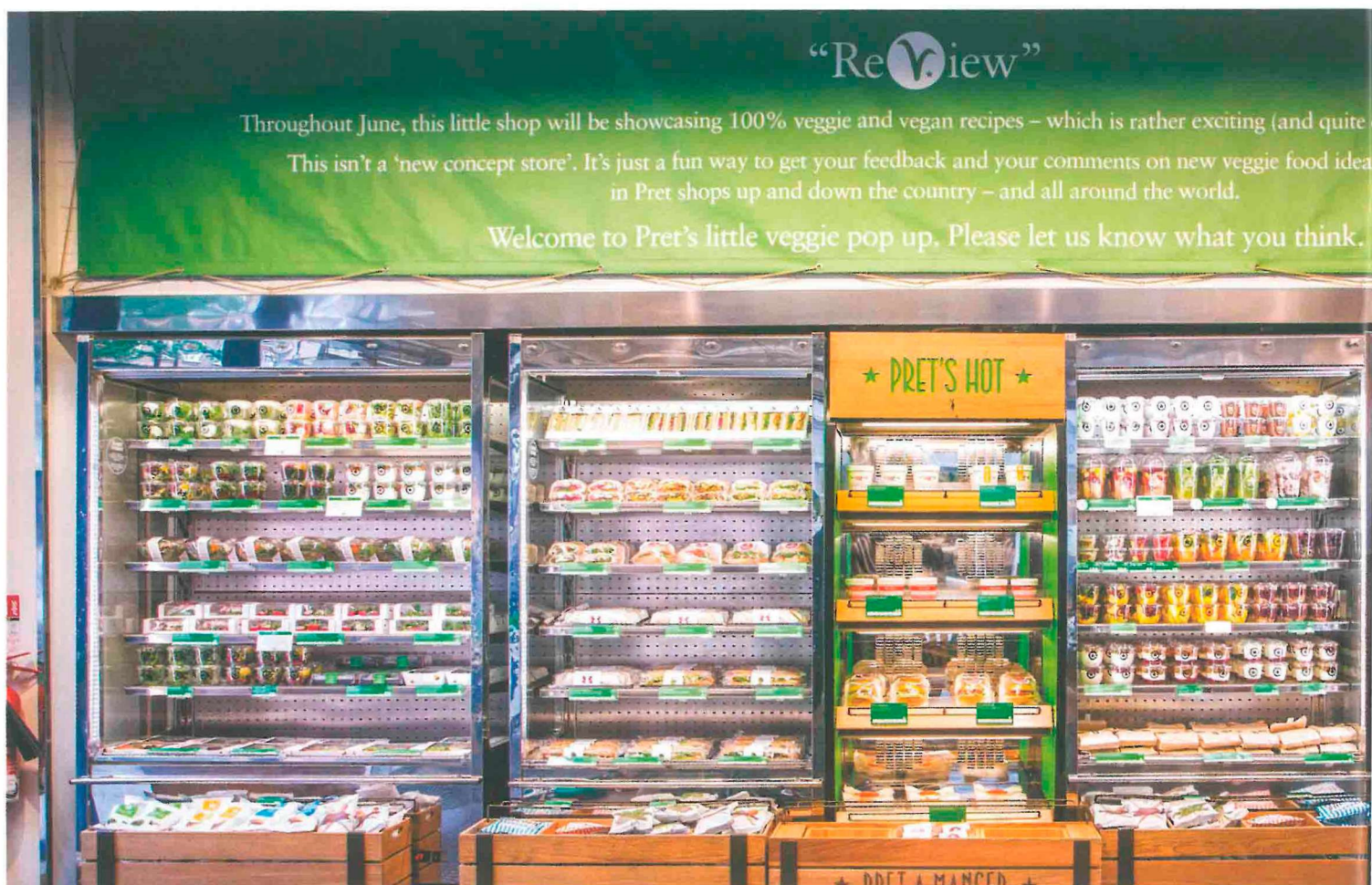


PRET

Pret A Manger's trial-turned-permanent vegetarian store in London's West End shows there are still areas where demand remains unmet. **John Ryan** reports



Something for everybody

When it first appeared, there was something almost exotic about Pret A Manger. This was a place where you could get sandwiches that you might want to eat, made the same day and in an in-store interior, which combined the merits of industrial architecture, steel floors and shiny shelving, with speed. The idea was that whatever the time of day, a Pret customer would be kept waiting no more than a couple of minutes and that in the normal run of things it would be possible to walk in, get what you want and exit without even noticing the other browsers.

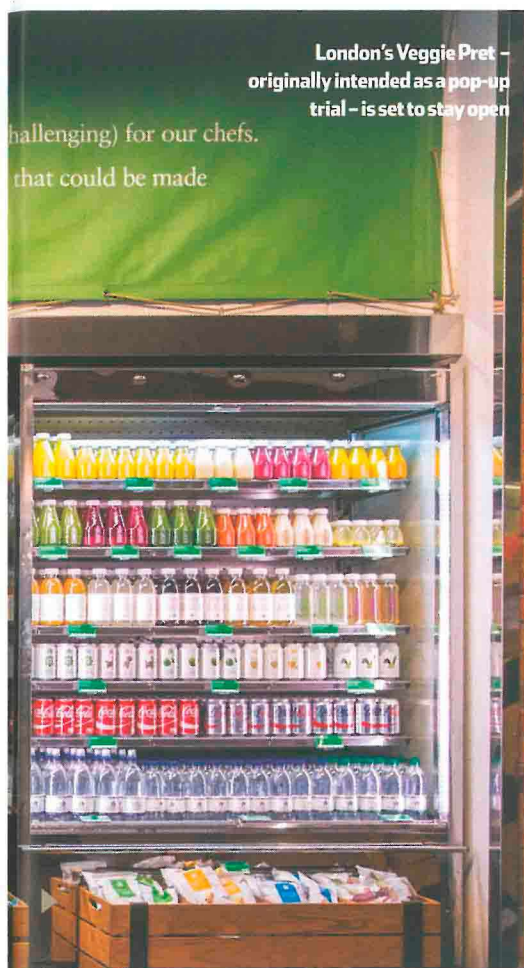
That was some time ago – 1984, in Hampstead – and since then Pret A Manger has become part of the fabric of many UK, and

“A debate is now under way at Pret about what to do next, with some pushing to convert ‘every fourth Pret’ into a Veggie Pret”

indeed global, high streets. There are more than 350 stores worldwide including the US, China, Dubai and France. Pret can probably be credited with having introduced hundreds of thousands of people to ‘sushi-to-go’, a multitude of different sorts of coffee and fizzy drinks, aka ‘seltzers’, flavoured with cucumber, among other things. Yet to date it has not been noted as a destination for veggies, although vegetarian food has always formed part of its offer.

Over the summer, however, this perception changed perhaps. Pret A Veggie does exactly what you’d expect – it sells solely vegetarian food – with not a slice of salami or hand-reared chicken in sight.

This lone store popped up in June on Broadwick Street, in the heart of London’s Soho, and shows how a successful format can be tweaked and turned into something different



from the original, but which retains many of the features that make it noteworthy.

While the exterior logo uses the same font as the parent, the store is dubbed Veggie Pret with, somewhat predictably, the background colour to the white words being green.

OK, so a 'concept' store from a very large food corporate which, if successful, is destined to be rolled out more generally across selected locations.

Actually, not so. A large green banner, using the same white font, informs visitors to the store they are in fact taking part in a trial to establish what sort of vegetarian food should be more widely available across regular Pret outlets. It also encourages shoppers to 'Let us know what you think'.

This is a fairly radical approach as the normal modus operandi for this kind of thing is to test things on carefully screened focus groups and then hope that what has worked at a highly specific level will find a ready audience more broadly. The Broadwick Street Veggie Pret pop-up is an example of what might be termed a mass focus group using a well-established location to assess whether products, rather than store, have a future.

Equally interesting is the fact that this 'pop-up' was originally intended to trade as a vegetarian store for June only, but its lease of life has been extended. A quick glance at the



'veggie-pret-what-next' section of Pret.co.uk states that it was predicted the "Veggie Pret shop would see sales drop 30% and the project was expected to be an investment (ie, a loss-maker)". In fact, according to Pret boss Clive Schlee's blog, "the warmth of the public response has taken us completely by surprise". Indeed, sales at Broadwick Street are 70% up on last year, when it was a standard Pret store. Schlee adds that an exclusively veggie shop seemed "radical when we first thought of it, but it has come to feel very natural". And more recently he

revealed that the store is "here to stay" as a permanent fixture.

All of which has meant that the ground under what was to have been an outsized focus group in the shape of a store is shifting rapidly. A debate is now under way at Pret about what to do next, with some pushing to convert "every fourth Pret" into a Veggie Pret.

Sometimes happy accidents result in something more permanent becoming the norm, and it looks as if this might be the case with Pret as vegetarianism goes mainstream.