

INDEPENDENT VIEW

MYSTERY SHOP

Indies will stock veggie lines if asked

Britain's three million vegetarians are an important but tough group to cater for. Our mystery shopper finds out how well the independents are doing

Vegetarian action groups, politicians and even Sir Paul McCartney have been calling on consumers to cut down on their meat consumption for environmental, ethical and health reasons – or simply to reduce their food bills.

Although only an estimated three million people in the UK consider themselves vegetarians so the market technically remains niche, more non-vegetarians are buying into it, encouraged by manufacturers actively marketing their products as healthy rather than vegetarian.

The sector was generally well-served by the stores we visited this month. Our shopper was able to purchase four out of the five products on our list. None of the stores stocked a cheese suitable for vegetarians but all of them offered a vegetarian lasagne or a macaroni cheese in some form.

Although not strictly a c-store, frozen food retailer Iceland fared best for vegetarian options, stocking four of the five products on our list. The products were all reasonably priced but staff directed our shopper to the local Sainsbury's for the cheese because it "catered for more of these types of speciality foods", they claimed.

Mace, The Co-op and Woodberry News all stocked three of the five items, but S&G Convenience Store could only provide the vegetarian lasagne and macaroni cheese.

The retailers told our shopper that they felt that vegetarians weren't adequately catered for, though they stressed that if their customers asked for more vegetarian products, they would consider increasing their product range.

Vegetarians were often overlooked by smaller stores, said the Vegetarian Society. "It's a real shame because although the number of committed vegetarians is relatively small, about a third of the population consciously eats less meat these days," a spokeswoman said. "Unlike meat-based products, vegetarian foods can be bought and enjoyed by all customers."

PRICE & SERVICE COMPARISON

TO CONVENIENCE PRODUCTS

	S&G CONVENIENCE STORE	WOODBERRY NEWS	ICELAND	CO-OP LATE SHOPS	MACE STORE
Sliced white bread 800g, cheapest brand	0.99	1.15	1.20	0.75	1.20
Milk 1-pint, semi-skimmed	0.49	0.46	0.45	0.51	0.45
Banana	DNS	DNS	0.14 ¹	0.28	DNS
Painkiller 8-pack, cheapest brand	0.68	0.68	DNS	0.59	0.50
Coke or cheapest cola, 500ml	0.99	0.89	1.00	1.05	0.99
Walkers crisps cheapest variety, standard packet, 34.5g	0.45	0.45	0.19 ²	0.39	0.40
Water 500ml, cheapest	0.99	0.89	0.50	0.47	0.79
Mars bar standard	0.45	0.45	0.32 ³	0.45	0.45
Filter coffee 227g packet, cheapest	DNS	DNS	DNS	2.09	DNS
Catfood Whiskas pouch or cheapest brand	0.54	0.45	0.30	0.39	0.39
TOTAL	£5.58	£5.42	£4.10	£6.97	£5.17

VEGETARIAN PRODUCTS – 1 point for each stocked

Frozen or tin macaroni cheese	1	1	1	1	1
Frozen vegetarian lasagne	1	1	1	1	1
Frozen vegetarian burgers	DNS	DNS	1	DNS	1
Animal rennet-free cheese clearly marked as suitable	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS	DNS
Any non-meat pastry eg Cinsters cheese & onion slice	DNS	1	1	1	DNS

CUSTOMER SERVICE – 1 point for each criterion

Courteous	0	1	1	1	0
Knowledgeable	0	1	1	1	1
General helpfulness	0	1	0	1	0
Standard of dress	1	1	1	1	1
Personal hygiene	1	1	1	1	1

SERVICES – 1 point for each criterion

Cash/bill pay	0	1	0	1	1
Lottery/bingo	1	1	0	1	1
Communication top-up/post office	0	1	0	1	1
Administrative fax, photocopying, email or collection	0	0	0	0	1
Fresh food deli, local produce, bakery, coffee machine	0	0	0	1	0

COMMUNITY – 1 point for each criterion

Bus stop/local service	1	1	1	1	1
Local events advertised	0	1 ¹	0	0	1
Personal adverts advertised	1	1	0	0	1
Charity collection boxes	0	0	0	0	0
Locally made products and/or loyalty card scheme	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	7	14	10	13	13

Notes: 1. multipack of seven for £1. 2. multipack of six for £1.35. 3. multipack of five for £1.59.



Sales of the Linda McCartney range haven't always matched its celebrity status but it remains a staple in the freezer cabinet of most retailers. The brand recently added three new variants – vegetarian mince, vegetarian meatballs and vegetarian chicken-style pieces – to capitalise on the trend for frozen vegetarian food (up 6.5% year-on-year) and the positive health associations these types of food enjoy.

S&G Convenience

Address: 161 Campbell Road, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, ST4 4EL

Time & date: 3 November 2008 at 9.00am
Located in a poorer area of the city, this independent store was in some disarray, with boxes cluttering the floor and no logical layout. There was little PoS information and shelves were arbitrarily stocked with little product categorisation. The solitary salesperson was unhelpful when asked where our shopper could purchase filter coffee and bananas.

Woodberry Stores

Address: 6 Woodberry Close, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, ST4 5LU

Time & date: 3 November 2008 at 10.20am
Our shopper received a warm welcome at this small, independent store. The outside was covered in a sea of posters advertising community-based events and services. Despite the relative lack of space, the logical layout made it easy to find products. Although there was no fresh fruit stocked, two aisles contained chiller cabinets with fresh and frozen produce. Eight of the 10 items on our main list were available.

Iceland

Address: Unit 2, Bothen Park, London Road, Stoke-on-Trent

Time & date: 3 November 2008 at 12.00pm
This was a large Iceland store that also sold electrical goods. Staff did not offer advice on where our shopper could purchase unstocked items. However, on the plus side a new till was opened to prevent a long wait.

Co-op Late Shops

Address: 23-25 Knypersey Road, Norton, Stoke-on-Trent

Time & date: 3 November 2008 at 2.30pm
This shop was clearly the hub of its local community and the cashiers were chatty with customers. The store was neat and tidy, which made the items easy to locate and this was the only shop visited to provide all of the items on the shopping list. A shortage of staff did result in a five-minute queue at the checkout, however.

Mace Store

Address: 44-46 Chartwell, Tamworth, Staffordshire, B79 7UG

Time & date: 3 November 2008 at 3.30pm
The majority of products on our list were easy to find at this medium-sized store, which is situated in an attractive residential area. The store scored highly on services, with everything except hot food and snacks to go. There were also plenty of community events advertised. The manager, however, was unhelpful and queried what our shopper was writing down on her shopping list.



INTERVIEW: MUKESH KUMAR, WOODBERRY STORES

Tell us a bit about your shop.

It's seen a lot of changes in its time. It used to be a newsagent, then a Spar. We took it over three years ago. **How do you feel about the Mystery Shop?**

I've been in the trade for 25 years and we've never had one before. I never thought we'd get one down here, although we have had Trading Standards and HM Revenue & Customs checks. We're really excited and we know your magazine well. We love to help our customers and the local community. **Who are your suppliers and are you happy with them?**

Bestway and Booker are the main ones. And yes, we get deliveries every day and don't have any problems with them at all.

How has the mix of products and services changed at your store in the past 12 months?

We got the Lottery machine just over a year ago. Otherwise there has been no new

additions in the past 12 months. When we moved here, this store did not have many services. There was no cashpoint, top up or lottery – we have put them all in ourselves.

What is the worst thing to have happened to your business in the past 12 months?

There has been a slight decrease in sales with the credit crunch, but nothing drastic.

How do you feel about the proposed legislation to restrict cigarette sales to under the counter?

It's just stupid. At the end of the day, if customers are going to buy them they will anyway, you can't deter them. And where are we supposed to put them? There isn't enough room under the counter.

What is the best news you have received so far this year? Just the recognition that customers are happy to come here as it's a community shop



STORE FACTS

Name: Woodberry Stores
Owners: Mukesh and Rakesh Kumar (husband and wife)
Tenure: three years
Local rivals: "There's a Tesco in town. That would be our closest rival. As for convenience stores, there is a Bargain Booze and a Night & Day about half a mile away."

and the staff are good with school kids. The area used to have a bad reputation, but things have changed. We are local ourselves and we don't tolerate misbehaviour so they respect us. The standards we set are much higher than they once were.

How is the recession likely to affect your business?

The multiples are putting on more and more offers and the customers are filling their trolleys. They are putting us out of business, yet they are not nice to shop in because they're impersonal. Here you get a natter, which is what people want – the friendly approach.

Do you think there will be an increase in theft as the recession kicks in?

Probably. There's not much you can do about it though.

What are your plans over the next 12 months?
This time next year, we hope to have retired happy and proud of the shop we've left behind.