

NO ORDINARY BARISTA

Chef, coffee fanatic and **M&S** hospitality boss Jason Danciger has big plans for its catering future, with an Olympic store and more upmarket expansion on the way. **Sue Scott** reports

There aren't many places in London where you can enjoy a bottle of Côte Rôtie 2006 in an upmarket deli bar for under £50. Whether you'd choose to do it in **M&S** is another matter.

But this is no ordinary **M&S**. The 100,000 sq ft Westfield store in White City's swanky, American-style shopping complex hosts one of only nine such bars in **M&S**'s 600-store estate. At Westfield you can also drop in on a café lounge, a food-to-go servery, and an alfresco version of **M&S**'s full service "kitchen diners". Another will be opening soon at the chain's flagship Westfield Stratford store at the entrance to the Olympic park where diners will have one of the best views in London, according to head of hospitality Jason Danciger, the one-time sous chef brought in to add "food theatre" to **M&S**'s clothing and home aisles.

"Look after our best customers," was his simple instruction at his single briefing with Sir Stuart Rose.

"What we discovered very early on was that our best customers were sitting in our hospitality areas," he says. "It's really a business within **M&S**'s business."

With the entire food hall and 200 wines at his disposal (which can be drunk in the deli bars for just £5 corkage), Danciger says the retailer's catering offer is one of its best kept secrets... and possibly the one most ripe for expansion. "We wouldn't rule out standalone catering outlets," he says.

Danciger would be the man to roll them out. The first English sous chef to serve under the Roux brothers - "they didn't think Englishmen could cook back then" - the then 45-year-old Danciger brought a lifetime's experience of foodservice to **M&S**'s retail environment when he joined in 2008. He'd previously worked with Café Rouge founder Karen Jones, building her Pelican restaurant empire into a £133m

acquisition target for Whitbread in 1996, and again six years later for the launch of her Spirit pub group. He was also on the team that took a large chunk of the Slug & Lettuce chain off administrators and sold it on.

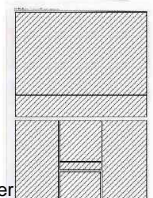
Danciger clearly relishes a challenge - whether it's learning French to understand what the chefs were yelling at him (it also came in handy to woo his now wife), or touring Italy to find exactly the right coffee machine from which to serve Sir Stuart's "best customers".

Danciger talks about "latte art" as though it were a Leonardo. So passionate is he about coffee that he's introduced an in-house e-learning and awards scheme to bring baristas up to his standards. It is that attention to service that makes **M&S**'s hospitality model hard for other retailers to replicate, he says. "In restaurants you have to get all the elements right. You can have the greatest food, but if you haven't got the greatest service, it falls flat."

Next Friday, his baristas will be demonstrating that service during the biggest coffee morning in the world to raise cash for Macmillan Cancer Support. The event was a "perfect fit" given that **M&S** is the fourth-largest and one of the most ethically sound coffee chains in the UK, says Danciger.

And does he make good coffee? Yes, he says. But never instant.

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