

FIRST RESPONSE

Not only is Nottingham Trent University constantly innovating its menus in response to customer demand, it's leading the way to be kinder to the environment, writes Rebecca Martin



The University Caterers Organisation



Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is the 14th largest university in the UK, with 27,920 students split over three campuses – City campus, Clifton and Brackenhurst. Founded as a university in 1992, it was named University of the Year at the 2017 Times Higher Education awards, and Modern University of the Year by the Sunday Times in the same year.

We catch up with head of catering and hospitality, Ivan Hopkins, a former army chef, who was awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) for services to higher education. Ivan oversees seven outlets across City Campus, two at Clifton, and one at Brackenhurst and has seen great revenue over the last 12 months, with sales up 11% year-on-year across the department.

"We have seen particularly strong trading at our newly refurbished Bonington Taste café, where sales rose by 28% in the last 12 months," says Ivan. "We looked to create a theme based on independent high street coffee shops, as opposed to mirroring the major brands and we are currently looking to incorporate a 'Roasted in Nottingham' coffee brand by partnering with a local coffee vendor."

The Clifton campus catering offer has been transformed with a new barista coffee bar, a grab and go outlet, and deli bar. Also new are hot food concepts including stone-baked pizza, Korean fried chicken, Lebanese-style filled flatbreads, as well as British classics, with a vegetarian or vegan option.

Ivan notes that best sellers include

MSC beer battered pollock with chips, mushy peas and homemade tartare sauce, and rustic vegan mushroom, lentil and spinach shepherd's pie, topped with root vegetables and honey mash.

Meanwhile, catering at the Pavilion building is currently trading 20% above budget year-to-date.

"Our Starbucks branded café, within Boots Library at City campus, continues to thrive, and the addition of a range of grab and go snacks has supported a 27% rise in sales on the previous year."

REVAMPS & PARTNERSHIPS

These positive sales don't mean NTU is standing still, however. Ivan and the team are working on a call order-style staff and visitors' restaurant for lunch meetings and breaks. This will form part of the refurbishment of the recently purchased University Hall.

"We are also excited about the construction of the new reception and environment centre at our Brackenhurst campus, which will feature a new student

dining facility with grab and go concepts, a deli bar and national and international hot dishes," says Ivan.

"We recently partnered with The Litmus Partnership catering consultants who reviewed our catering operation and as a result, we are looking to upgrade our deli bar and grab and go coffee pod.

"The deli bar will gain an express facility, reducing queuing times, and will offer more vegan and gluten-free products. Partnering further with Starbucks, we will create a high street brand for our grab and go pod, with an additional outlet for sandwiches and meal deal-style products."

Additionally, a growing relationship with TUCO framework supplier Love Joes will see the Chaucer building fast food site offering a range of fried chicken, burgers and jacket potatoes. Ivan adds: "We are optimistic that we can treble revenue over two years following project completion."

EVER-CHANGING MENUS

Over the last year, NTU has seen a notable increase in international catering concepts. Through newly created pop-up-style facilities, the catering team have been able to offer cuisines including Korean, Middle Eastern, Asian, Mediterranean, plus a selection of gourmet burgers.

"We have also added a number of grab and go hot options to our café menus such as varieties of mac 'n' cheese, including a Christmas vegan version of roast parsnips, Brussels sprouts, carrots

SPEND THROUGH TUCO FRAMEWORKS	£1,702,581
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	£1.46M
CASH SAVINGS	£150,000
PROCESS SAVINGS	£12,000
TUCO ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION	£100
TOTAL NET SAVINGS	£162,000



and cranberry,” says Ivan. “Our chefs have also converted some of our vegetarian recipes to vegan, which has been well received by students and staff alike.

“We are never going to develop the next big thing, but by using TUCO frameworks for best price ingredients, listening to our customers and watching the high street, we are able to retain students on campus even in our city centre locations.”

HOT TRENDS

Listening to customers has been a particularly useful exercise. A recent staff/student catering survey has led the team to increase the number of vegan options, international concepts, flavoured waters and low-sugar drinks, as well as extending gluten-free pastry and sandwich ranges.

Almond milk and sugar-free syrups have been introduced to all the cafés, along with a range of authentic Chinese cold beverages at the international pop-up facility. They will also be launching a range of flavoured milks. Plus, there are plans to install ‘healthy option’ salad bars in three outlets.

The department has also recently purchased a barbecue grill with rotating skewers.

“I first saw this demonstrated at the TUCO Conference and just had to have one!” says Ivan. “We’ll be launching this at various NTU locations after Easter and are confident students will like the excitement and quirkiness of the concept, as well as the great flatbread kebab offer it delivers.”

All of these innovations have been in response to the fall in set meal times and Ivan and the team are noticing that

customers are wanting more on-the-go options but that doesn’t mean lots of sandwiches and paninis.

“We’ve had excellent uptake and great feedback on our mac ‘n’ cheese range, noodle broth bowls and takeaway homemade soups,” Ivan explains. “In our restaurants, the international street food has been a real winner. Popular dishes include Korean fried chicken, sticky rice & kachumber salad, Lebanese-style wraps, stone-baked pizza, and fresh pasta.”

Not forgetting the drinks, trends at NTU include their own frappuccino range, flavoured water and coconut water.

“Reduced calorie drinks are extremely popular, like skinny latte with sugar-free syrup, and Jimmy’s skinny iced coffee,” says Ivan.

A new vegan pop-up will tour all three campuses, plus there will be new grab and go hot options, including vegan falafel with giant couscous and spiced Middle Eastern sauce, and vegan butternut squash, spinach and split pea lasagne.

Also, hot pots like mushroom and bean fricassee with wild rice, penne with grilled vegetables and arrabbiata sauce, and chicken tagine with couscous and mini pitta, will be served in a takeaway pot.

BEING GREEN

NTU was awarded the title of ‘the most environmentally friendly university in the UK’ in 2009, by The People & Planet Green League – the only independent ranking of British universities’ environmental and ethical performance.

Since then there have been many impressive green initiatives implemented. Ivan tells us: “A garden was built at our city centre campus to enable

us to grow a range of herbs, which are used in our restaurant kitchens on the day they’re picked.

“NTU students and staff have joined forces to transform the gardens at our Clifton campus into Foodshare allotments, which grow pesticide-free fruit and vegetables. We hold cookery sessions, teaching them how to turn the food they’ve grown into healthy and nutritious meals.”

Ivan says that, wherever possible, they choose local suppliers to reduce food miles and support the local economy.

“We purchase all our fresh meat from Nottingham butcher, Owen Taylor & Sons, which is sourced from Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire farms,” explains Ivan. “All fresh poultry comes from Norfolk. This butcher also enables us to incorporate the lamb and beef farmed at our Brackenhurst campus into the graduation dinner menu.

“Animal welfare is a major factor in our procurement processes, so all meat in our freshly prepared dishes must be at least Red Tractor certified or the equivalent.

“For over five years, we have used Nottingham fruit and vegetable supplier, Millside Barrowcliffe, which has resulted in a rise in products supplied from Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire farms. Many are grown within a 50-mile radius of Nottingham, and the fresh potatoes are farmed in Lincolnshire.

“We also use locally-grown strawberries for our student graduation ceremonies where, over five days, we provide approximately 1,380kg of strawberries to 15,000 students and parents. These are picked from a local farm 15 miles from NTU.” They use local suppliers for bakery

products and desserts too.

On the recycling front, the university uses cold press rapeseed oil in dishes, which is supplied direct from farms in the Cotswolds. Once it has been used they return it to be recycled as bio-diesel for the fuelling of tractors and delivery vehicles. R-Oil also ensures any of the crops left over after oil extraction are used as animal feed.

All of the food waste is removed by NTU’s nominated waste management contractor, and then recycled for use in the production of electricity through anaerobic digestion.

Ivan says that as part of the Food for Life Served Here catering mark programme, they regularly monitor plate waste in the restaurants with a view to correcting portion size, product popularity and quality.

“Our recipes are designed to ensure that as much of a product is used in food production as possible, such as bones and vegetable stalks and leaves, therefore minimising food waste,” he says.

“We have developed a kitchen waste policy which includes the recording of all food waste produced by each kitchen and splitting these into prep waste and spoilage. The data collated has been examined and trends identified, which have resulted in procedures being put in place to further reduce the waste. The scheme won a Green Impact project award in 2017 and plans are in place to expand on this project for 2018.”

NTU began working to support local charity Tracy’s Street Kitchen last year, which collects unsold pre-packed sandwiches, salads and fruit pots and distributes them to homeless people in Nottingham and Mansfield.

As for Fairtrade, Ivan says that NTU has held Fairtrade status since 2008 and



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makes the products available as widely as possible. All the coffee is Fairtrade, organic and certified by the Rainforest Alliance; the tea is Fairtrade and sourced from certified plantations. They also stock One World muffins, flapjacks and snacks.

During the Easter and Christmas breaks, most of the fridges and freezers are switched off to reduce energy usage, and stock is consolidated. Energy consumption ratings are now also a major consideration when purchasing new cooking and refrigeration equipment.

New plans include switching cleaning chemicals to more environmentally friendly plant-based products, originating from sugar beet, maize, wheat bran and coconut, which are also 100% biodegradable.

“We constantly strive to build on our sustainability credentials, and two main objectives and challenges will be reducing plastic usage and further reducing food waste,” says Ivan.

EVENT CATERING

The Newton Arkwright building has 10 designated conference rooms delivering day conferences, banquets, wedding ceremonies and receptions, and bespoke events. Also, there are plans to extend the conferencing service to the Clifton and Brackenhurst campuses for both corporate and non-corporate events.

Ivan says: “We can deliver banquets for up to 500 at any one time and weddings for 200, we are licensed to facilitate civil ceremonies. During July, we cater for 20,000 plus graduates and parents over five days.”

He’s seen increasing requests for meat-free and vegan-only menus, as well as demands for health and wellbeing events and menus. Ivan adds that variations on barbecues and theatre-themed cooking continue to develop.

Ivan says that requests are becoming more and more bespoke with clients increasingly expecting them to theme the

catering aspect of an event, for example, ‘carnival’ and ‘fairground’, sporting-themed and casino-style events, and food from a particular country or style of cuisine.

Future plans include further development of the delivered service, with themed street food-style menus.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Like all foodservice operators, one of Ivan’s greatest challenges ahead is balancing food price rises with offering value for money.

“However we have confidence in our product, and the support of TUCO and our suppliers is vital to achieving this,” says Ivan.

“Student fees mean there is understandably an increased expectation from our customers. Universities aren’t just judged on teaching – supporting elements, like catering and accommodation, are vital to our future success. Which is why we need to offer a high street-comparable, multicultural and appealing provision.

“We are excited about new and upgraded catering offers, which will support the university’s overall aims and objectives, as we look to build on our 70% customer satisfaction score.”

NTU is also entering the TUCO Competitions for the first time this year. Good luck!

**Find out more
about TUCO**

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TUCO

The University Caterers Organisation



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TUCO is the leading professional membership body for in-house caterers operating in the higher and further education sector and is used by universities and colleges throughout the UK. We also support in-house catering teams in the wider public sector, including local authorities and NHS trusts.

We are very much the voice of our members – championing excellence, facilitating the sharing of best practice and giving in-house caterers the profile they deserve. TUCO offers a comprehensive programme of subsidised training and events designed to inspire and provide practical insight. It includes the TUCO annual conference, now firmly established as a key date on the university catering world’s calendar, and international study tours.

The TUCO Academy offers training designed specifically to address the professional development needs of caterers in higher and further education.

On top of that, every year we stage a competition designed to showcase and celebrate the depth of talent we have across the industry.

TUCO responds to the changing needs of its members by acting as a forum for networking and learning and ensuring they are kept up to date with the latest trends and analysis via our own research. Membership is open to all in-house catering operations in the higher and further education sector.

If you are not a further or higher education institution, then it is still possible for you to join TUCO. Just contact us to find out more.

OUR MEMBERS RECEIVE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE FROM TUCO IN FOUR KEY AREAS:



SHARE

TUCO provides a platform where members can combine ideas and achievements to collectively raise the profile of university and college catering in the UK. We also help members to network with other professionals and industry experts, sharing best practice and culinary trends.



LEARN

We offer a wide range of subsidised courses, training, study tours and professional advice, to maximise each member’s potential.



GROW

We help our members to keep up-to-date with the latest market research, industry trends and consumer preferences and gain insight into studies on topics affecting the foodservice market.



BUY

TUCO has significant buying power, purchasing £150m of goods and services every year for universities and colleges as well as local authorities and NHS trusts. Members can choose from a variety of EU compliant catering frameworks and a wide range of suppliers.

“In four years, I have seen TUCO grow from a purchasing consortium into a true vehicle for the benefit of university caterers.”

– Jeremy Mabbutt, Head of Hospitality Services at Aberystwyth University

For more details of how to join TUCO call **0161 713 3420** or email **info@tuc.ac.uk**