



# OPEN ALL HOURS

ARTICLE NUMBER SEVEN FROM THE ACCLAIMED INDUSTRY FOOD EXPERT JOHN PORTER. THIS MONTH, JOHN PORTER ADVOCATES NOT SO MUCH OPEN ALL HOURS BUT MORE OPENING ALL THE RIGHT HOURS.

The illicit appeal of a mid-afternoon pint is still very strong for those of us who learnt our drinking habits in the days when the licensing laws appeared to have been calculated to require pubs to close at more or less the exact point you wanted another drink.

Not, I hasten to add, that I have very many opportunities to while away the afternoon in the pub, but I still like to remind young upstarts that, like bank holidays and universal suffrage, all-day opening is a hard-won freedom that should never be taken for granted.

At this point, I know there will be a few older hands cursing me, kicking the dog, and recalling the days when a licensee could get a few hours' break from the daily grind by calling "time" and putting the bolts across the door. I don't underestimate the long hours and hard work that running a successful 21st century pub involves.

It's not simply more hours, but a more diverse offer as well. Increased competition as well as changes in consumer eating habits that mean we 'graze' more, means that pub food, in particular, has required a rethink.

From Sunday lunch to sharing platters, pubs need to cater for a wider range of expectations. During National Curry Week in October, I was lucky enough to spend an evening at Fuller's pub The Red Lion, in Barnes, eating an authentic meal that would have put most 'specialist' Indian restaurants in the area to shame.

It's not just food, of course. New figures from the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers (ALMR) show that pubs sell more coffee than the specialist coffee chains, with 3.6m cups sold each week.

Experts forecast that the need for a more diverse operation will continue. Analyst Horizons believes that the high fixed costs of running

a food business means that outlets which effectively run several food formats from the same site are best placed to thrive. That may sound too complicated, but a stroll through the average town centre shows how many needs a pub can meet:

## “ PUBS SELL MORE COFFEE THAN THE SPECIALIST COFFEE CHAINS, WITH 3.6M CUPS SOLD EACH WEEK ”

- ❖ **Breakfast café** – hot drinks, toast and bacon sandwiches or the full English if there's enough demand, to eat in or take away.
- ❖ **Coffee shop** – with a menu of specialist teas and coffees, along with a few packaged snacks such as muffins and flapjacks, pubs can keep the morning coffee and afternoon tea market happy.
- ❖ **Sandwich bar** – a simple sandwich menu and some sandwich bags could boost lunchtime trade.
- ❖ **Family meals** – a kids' menu of burgers, fish and chicken will appeal to parents looking for a change from fast food.
- ❖ **Sit-down restaurant** – pub food remains the nation's favourite when dining out.
- ❖ **Late night menu** – if customers head for the kebab shop at closing time, a simple range of quick-to-cook hot snacks will keep them in the pub while they wait for a taxi.

Each pub has to make its own decisions based on staffing, facilities and local demand – but if you don't try, how will you ever know what the potential for extra trade is?

John

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