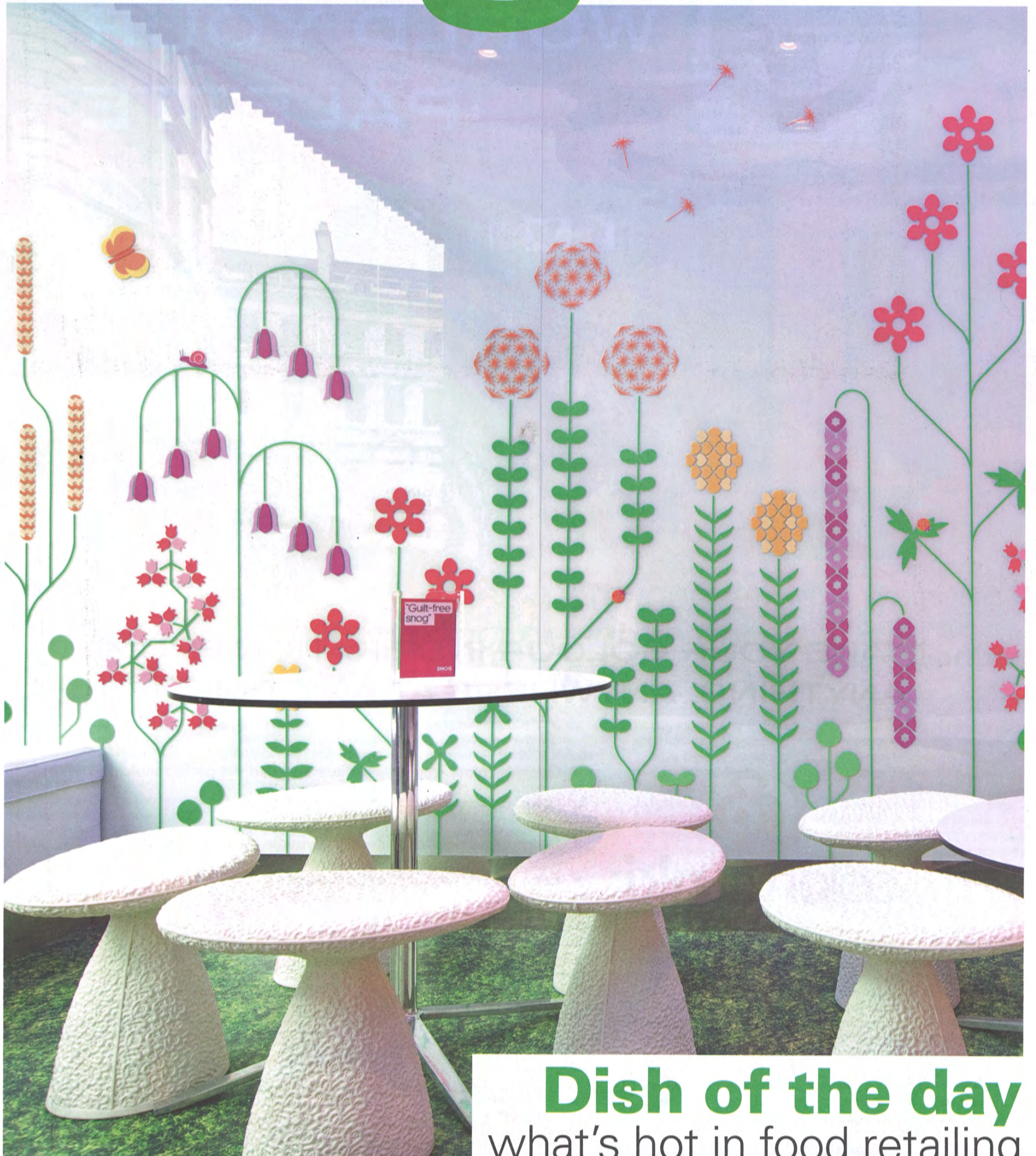


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Dish of the day
what's hot in food retailing

The taste test

London's streets are awash with food retail concepts that muddy their offers with coffee and sandwiches. **Clare Dowdy** looks at three new players taking a different approach, using branding and interiors to stand out in this crowded market

ARE LONDON'S consumers really gagging for a cup cake, a hotdog or a pot of frozen yogurt? Three entrepreneurs and their design consultancies obviously think so, and are hoping that their individual concepts will hit the spot.

Snog, which opened earlier this month, sells frozen yogurt, and was created by Ico Design and Cinimod Studio; the Gourmet Hotdog Company, which opened in January, is by R&D&Co and Mackenzie Wheeler; and the Douglas Wallace-designed The Hummingbird Bakery opened its second outlet last year.

Each is supremely single-minded in its remit, demonstrating the courage of its founders' convictions. There's no dilution of the brand, as yet, with sandwiches or salads – or even coffee, in the case of Snog and Gourmet Hotdog – sneaking on to the menu.

This is in sharp contrast to those café-style chains that mushroomed in the late 1990s. While the coffee shop brands like Costa Coffee, Caffè Nero and the Seattle Coffee Company mostly stuck to their caffeine guns, throwing in a few sandwiches and cakes, the concepts that followed in their wake were not such purists.

A handful of soup chains (including Soup Opera, designed by Lippa Pearce and Din Associates) opened with the promise of just soup, but soon muddied their offer with sandwiches and salads.

Likewise, the string of bagel bars (the Pocknell Studio-designed Oi Bagel, for example) followed suit and diversified. And at Whittard's T-Bar, designed by Carte Blanche, tea shared the menu with a myriad other items.

None of these businesses has mimicked the coffee chains' success. That could be because the original retail proposition wasn't strong enough (hence the diversification), or the brand execution let them down.

The latest crop of wannabe chains must be hoping to avoid a similar fate, and it will surely help if they stick to their knitting. But these operators also seem to recognise the value of distinguishing themselves through branding and interiors.

Unlike the soup, bagel and tea offerings in the past decade, these retail formats are less likely to draw their design inspiration from the coffee chains. What coffee bar, for instance, has floral Japanese graphics up the walls, like Snog? Nor are these latest ventures referencing US retail inspirations.

It remains to be seen whether these brands appeal to their target audiences over the long term – though Hummingbird sells 20 000 cakes a week. But, in the meantime, they're a breath of fresh air on the all-things-to-all-people high street.



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The Gourmet Hotdog Company by R&D&Co and Mackenzie Wheeler

The gentrification of lowly products like burgers (think of the Gourmet Burger Kitchen) is a modern trend, but this Soho site in London also has a new visual language. Instead of the diner/gastro pub-look of brown banquettes, wooden flooring, tiling, chrome and menus on big boards, this brand boasts specially commissioned elements including Mackenzie Wheeler's bronze counter, or 'pod'. R&D&Co also brought in Somethingelse to design the 'sleeve' packaging, New York's Village foundry for the Dachshund typeface and Orangutan for the interactive menu screens.

To convey the fact that these hotdogs are made with fresh, organic and locally sourced produce, R&D&Co creative director Rob Andrews says, 'We had to create something that implies quality, to get over the hurdle of the guy with a trolley in front of football grounds. [We also did not] want to do something retro-American, with red banquettes and 1950s type on the menu.'

Mark Yates, the restaurateur who is also behind The Real Greek and Livebait chains, is planning a second outlet this summer, destined for London's Oxford Street.



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1-3 Snog, featuring floral wall graphics by Ico Design illustrator Akira Chatani, interiors by Cinimod Studio and Shitake stools by Marcel Wanders

4-6 The Gourmet Hotdog Company, designed by R&D&Co, with a bronze counter by Mackenzie Wheeler and packaging by Somethingelse

7 and 8 The Hummingbird Bakery, by Brandarchitects and Douglas Wallace



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Snog
by Ico Design and Cinimod Studio

Colombian architect Pablo Uribe and his US-born business partner Rob Baines claim to be the first to bring the frozen yogurt retail concept to the UK. But rather than referencing the mushrooming 'froyo' chains Pinkberry and Red Mango in the US, they wanted a wholly original positioning.

'They wanted it to be British, fun, young and edgy,' says Ico Design's in-house writer Gerard Ivall, 'and that's where the name came from.'

Visually, this has been translated into a 20m² space which aims 'to evoke the feeling of summer', says Uribe. Hence the floral wall graphics by Ico's Japanese illustrator Akira Chatani, and Cinimod's bright, stylish interiors.

Marcel Wanders' Shitake latticed stools sit on 'English lawn' vinyl flooring, and are illuminated by a digital 'sky'. Cinimod director Dominic Harris sees the ceiling as key to creating the 'perpetual summer' feel. 'More than 3000 individually controllable LEDs are deployed behind a Barrisol stretched plastic ceiling to create a bright, lightbox video surface,' he says. 'Digitally captured and manipulated clouds move gently above the store, their colour and speed determined by the time of day.'



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The Hummingbird Bakery
by Brandarchitects and Douglas Wallace

With its signature colours of brown, pink and cream, the Hummingbird Bakery harks back to some mythologised America, where Grandma always had a cake in the oven. The dark red velvet armchairs take their cue from owner Tarek Malouf's best-selling cake, the Red Velvet (a red vanilla creation, with chocolate and a cream-cheese frosting).

The Portobello Road and South Kensington outlets in London both feature pink mosaic tiles and American pressed-tin tiles painted white. The South Kensington café also boasts a hummingbird mosaic, created using Bisazza tiles. The next outlet is planned for the end of this year in London's Soho.

The brand was created by Sue Wheldon's Brandarchitects consortium in 2003. Last year, Douglas Wallace – the Irish design and architecture practice of which Wheldon is a director – designed the South Kensington site.

'The interior colours, plush materials, textures and furnishings that have been used reflect the colour and textures of the product ingredients,' she says. ●



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