

LUNCH ISN'T FOR WIMPS

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Some days, Faith MacArthur feels chained to her stove, but as founder of EAT sandwich bars, she wouldn't change a thing

When Faith MacArthur was a child, she'd pluck chickens and pick potatoes during the harvest. She lived in "Cow Town" – Calgary, Alberta – in the Prairies. Her mother, a minister's wife, would hang home-made noodles around the house to dry. Sitting on her mother's knee, four-year-old Faith would pummel bread dough and make carrot curls for garnish. Now Faith, 42, is standing in her fashionable Notting Hill kitchen, knee-high in ingredients for soups: cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, ginger, chickpeas, chillis. Rows of saucepans are steaming on an industrial oven and scribbled, half-complete recipes litter every surface. Soon, some of these ideas she's trying out at home will be made into the five tonnes of soup she sells every day.

Faith is half of the husband-and-wife team behind the EAT chain of cafés. ("I'm the boss," Faith laughs, mischievously.) As Pret A Manger fights back from losses of £20 million and Coffee Republic sheds branches faster than you can say skinny decaf latte, EAT is mushrooming over London and up to Birmingham. Why? Isn't it just another fast-food shop?

"I don't know of anyone else who sells quality home cooking with a one-day shelf life," replies Faith, in her soft Canadian accent. "We cook our soups ourselves in our own kitchen and make our sandwiches and salads fresh every day." She wrinkles her nose. "We don't do heat sealing, flow-wrapping, nappy pads or gas flushing."

EAT sells 35 different sandwiches – from a simple egg mayonnaise with mustard cress to toasted smoked chicken ciabatta – spicy crayfish noodle salads, Mexican chilli soup with tortilla chips and guacamole, and hot pies with beef and stilton mash. "Food is fashion. I like to try new ideas and pitch the range ahead of current expectations," explains Faith, "and to be creative and daring. Customers get excited and love what I do." She pauses. "If they don't like a product, we drop it quickly and start again."

We're sitting in her large Victorian house, a mix of Parisian apartment and Beverly Hills bungalow. The style is personal and confident with Arts and Crafts pieces, cowboy kitsch, slick modern designers and flea-market finds. Her dining room has a Victorian table that seats 14 – and no electricity. It is lit entirely by the candles from a chandelier. It was in this room in 1996 that Faith started her business with her husband Niall, a former investment banker who has just been shortlisted for an Entrepreneur of the Year award. Where now there are abstract Twenties paintings on the walls, there were then flow charts and recruitment posters for the company, which started with one shop and six staff. "It's amazing," Faith reflects, "to think that today we employ 500 people and turn over about £30 million."

Faith had the idea for EAT when she was sitting in a Vancouver café. Pregnant with Dougal (now eight years old), and with Ewen, then aged two, strapped in the back seat, the MacArthur clan had taken off on a six-month road trip around North America. "One day we went to the Seattle fish market. The energy, buzz and service were incredible," says Faith. "We went out for coffee, and the same thing was happening. That was the moment we decided we wanted to start a café business in London."

Niall saw a niche in the market for home-made food. Pret was already big, with a mass-produced feel about it, so the MacArthurs opened their own kitchen (in a warehouse under railway arches in South London) and cooked everything themselves. Within two years, they had scooped awards for Sandwich Bar and Sandwich Chain of the Year.

Faith is passionate about food and design. While reading art history at Toronto University, she started catering. "I'd always wanted to have a café," she explains. "So I opened one in a Toronto bookstore – long before Starbucks did coffee with books." She worked as a commis chef, ending up in the hot Hollywood restaurant, Linda's. "They started fusion and did home cooking before anyone else." She also designed and sold silver jewellery in LA – where she met Niall in 1986; did a year's chef's training in Milan; moved to Paris and ran her own style consultancy; and moved to London with Niall in 1992.

These days Faith is Brand Director. She's responsible for recipes, food production and development, ingredient sourcing and the food range. With her fashion background, Faith knows how to spot a trend. Or create one. "I'm constantly ten steps ahead, looking for the next big thing," she says. When she launched EAT Soup, it was radical. "We did soup long before anybody else. Before Soup Opera, Soup Works or Pret." And what soup. She'd blend fresh mint, coriander, lemon oil and garlic into a kind of North African pesto called chermoula to make Moroccan soup, and cook chicken pot pie soup with a little puff-pastry lid.

Faith perceives a huge rise in customers' expectations. "Standards have reached a new level. People's knowledge of foods is more sophisticated. A vanilla smoothie, for example, now has to contain vanilla pod seeds to illustrate quality." She also sees an increasing demand for traditional, home-made food. "People are tired of too many complications," she says. "I hate the complex, unidentifiable sauces in so much novelty food in the market today."

So what is the next big thing? "British food. Pies are the new sushi," she replies instantly. "We do a bangers and mash pie with a twist – Cumberland sausages topped with crunchy potatoes drizzled with olive oil and a poppy seeded pie crust. They are a big success."

Meanwhile, expansion continues apace. By 2005, there will be 50 shops, employing 1,000 people and turning over £45 million – in effect, reaching the position Pret was in a decade or so earlier. Next month, EAT receives royal approval when the Queen opens a branch at the Tower of London, where once Pret plied its trade. So how will she ensure EAT doesn't become another impersonal chain?

"Producing bigger volumes of food for us is a question of greater numbers of people doing more of the same thing. For example, more chefs with more soup pots, not a sudden move to high-tech automated equipment or processes," she says. "At the moment we cook our soup as you would at home but in bigger pots, and this is what we will continue doing."

Right on cue, Faith's four-year-old daughter, Andie, runs into the kitchen. She hops on to her mother's knee. It must be time to make carrot curls and taste the soup. ■

