

# Fresh approach to convenience

Symbol group Simply Fresh is making its mark as a local retailer with a distinctive offer. By John Ryan

**T**hink of a convenience store and it's highly probable that one of the images that springs to mind is of tired-looking fixtures, grubby freezers and a lot of alcohol, with the latter normally being located behind the service counter. And that's about it for many independents.

This is perhaps the template for the 'corner shop'. If the gaze turns towards the grocery chains' version of convenience however, then it's Tesco Express, Sainsbury's Local and maybe, in posh(er) places, Little Waitrose.

Morrisons has begun to make inroads while Asda is approaching convenience from a multichannel rather than format perspective.

It might seem therefore that this store model might not be alive with innovation. Given that so much hard work has been poured into it over the past few years, the question might be where next?

## Something fresh

One answer is to look at the symbol groups. That Budgens has raised its game, thanks to diligent shopkeepers operating on a franchise basis, is reasonably well documented.

But for something different again look no further than Simply Fresh. It is a Midlands-based organisation that started life with a store in Kenilworth about half a decade ago. Since that time it has expanded beyond the original store's hinterland and is now on the verge of becoming a national force.

And the point is that every store is different, tailored to suit the local demographic in terms of ranging and links with the community as far as the supplier base is concerned.

The store on east London's Roman Road, in Bethnal Green stands out like an organic beacon among some of the area's many tired-looking shop fronts. Stand outside and the wood-

### SIMPLY FRESH

**Founded** 2009  
**Number of stores** 25  
**First store** Kenilworth  
**Ambience** Local and reflective of the community  
**Format highlight** The visual merchandising

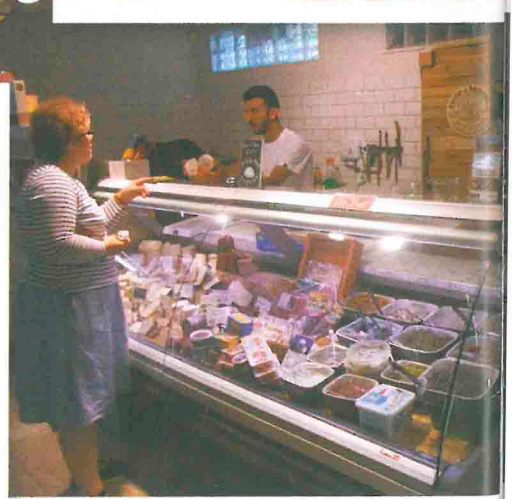
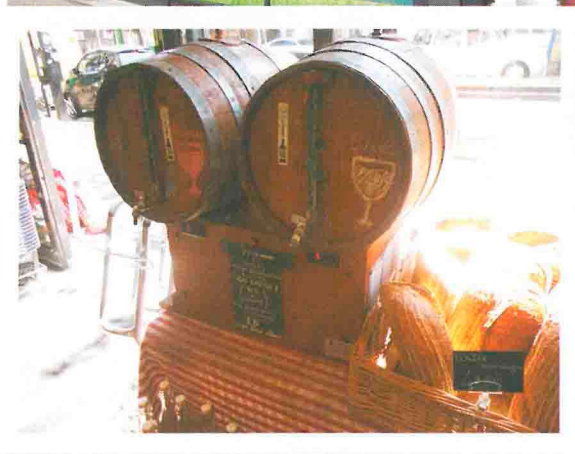
clad fascia, coupled with windows filled with pictures of fresh vegetables and wine bottle corks, immediately raises expectations.

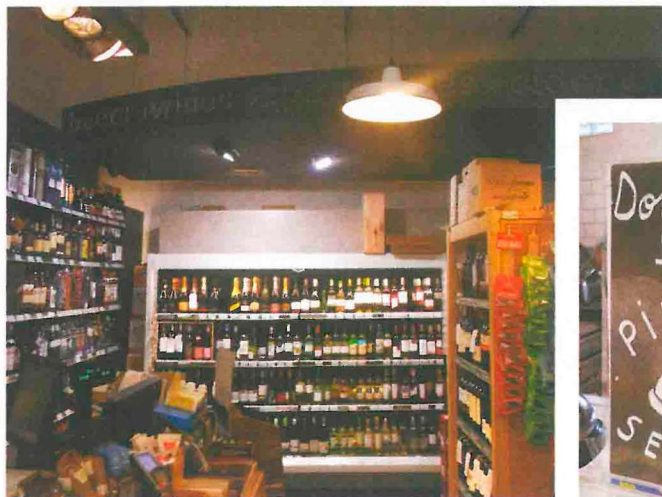
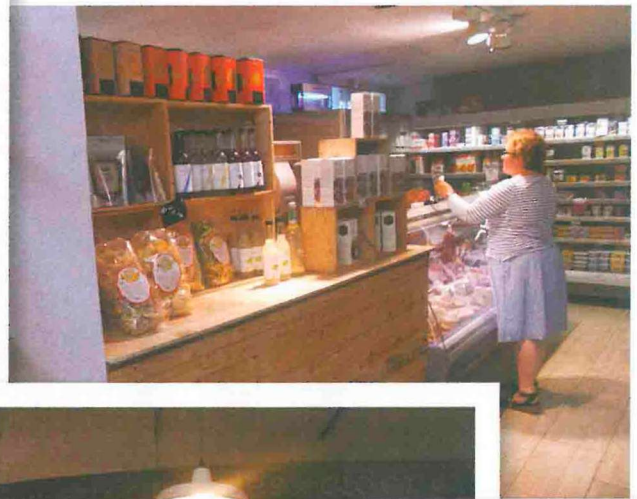
The message, at first glance, is that this Simply Fresh will deliver organic. That is reinforced by the words 'fresh organic veg' across the window next to the door. All of which means that it is set to appeal to the affluent set who have moved into this part of Lon-

don over the past decade.

Now head inside and the wooden promise of the exterior continues. The first thing that the shopper will encounter is a high, raw wood unit that has fresh vegetables on it, predominantly tomatoes, but beyond there is a winsome display of more fruit and veg. To the left and next to the service counter sit a pair of small wooden barrels. One has a white chalk

## BETHNAL GREEN





drawing of a wine glass with the word 'blanc' above it, while the other's glass is red and, predictably, bears the legend 'rouge'.

The two wines come from London wine merchant Borough Wine and are part of what the store manager says is an effort to source locally, although he adds that "this is quite difficult in east London".

That said, local bread, baked less

**"EVERY STORE IS DIFFERENT, TAILORED TO SUIT THE LOCAL DEMOGRAPHIC"**

than a mile from the store, crisps and sundry other items make this a store with a strong interest in promoting the efforts of local suppliers.

**Cheese and charcuterie**

Head through the wood-clad fixtures that form the aisles and at the back of the shop there is a cheese and charcuterie counter that has British cheese and a smattering of French fromages as its call

to the customer. A faux blackboard on top of the chiller unit announces: 'Don't be shy! Ping for service'.

It is fair to remark that the cheeses are not cheap, but there was no shortage of customers on the day of visiting and within the Bethnal Green context, it is close to being a unique offer.

Worth noting too is the beers, wine and spirits section of this 1,500 sq ft store, which is close to being

# IN BUSINESS STORES



◀ the sort of thing that the shopper might encounter in an off-licence or specialist wine shop, rather than a convenience store.

And again, Borough Wines is to the fore as one of the major suppliers for this part of the shop.

Couple all of this with, crisp white tiling and bare floorboards and this is a world away from corner shops or the convenience stores that are offered by the big supermarkets. There is more of the independent deli about this Simply Fresh franchise than the convenience store.

## West side store

Across London in Thames Ditton, a leafy and very affluent stockbroker suburb on the outskirts of Kingston, is another Simply Fresh.

This branch is very much smaller and narrower, but the same treatment has been afforded to the frontage, along with the legend across the

top of the fascia: 'convenience just got better'.

In some ways this is more typical of a convenience store inasmuch as it has a counter with confectionary towards the front and a machine dispensing lottery tickets.

All of that notwithstanding, it also has long chiller units with doors that allow shoppers to peer in without looking at the unit itself, fresh displays that use wicker baskets and sacking as visual merchandising props and, once more, wood cladding on various mid-shop fixtures.

Like its east London cousin, the Thames Ditton store has a generally upscale feel that is frequently alien at this end of the market.

Unlike the Bethnal Green store, this branch feels perfectly at home with all the other shops in the area, competing not by exception, but by effecting a subtle blending-in with the rest of the high street.

**"THE THAMES DITTON STORE HAS A GENERALLY UPSCALE FEEL THAT IS ALIEN AT THIS END OF THE MARKET"**

Both stores are clearly from the same stable, but are very different. This is the advantage of the franchise model – the owner/operator/franchisee can tailor the kit of parts offered by the franchisor and make them appropriate for the location.

## A format with potential

At present there are 25 Simply Fresh and Simply Local stores in the UK. The bulk are in the Midlands and there are just three branches in London.

This, however, is a symbol format that really does seem to possess the knack of handing the reins to its franchisees, letting them get on with it while providing the requisite marketing and store ambience support. And its growth to date has been rapid.

Those in search of something new in convenience could do worse than beating a path to one of these stores to see what is possible and how local convenience really can be appealing.