

Espresso to go...

An interesting addition to the BSA's Bev-E awards this year is the class for mobile coffee vans and carts. At the same time, the Cafe2U chain has decided that it is going to put its top barista in for the next UK barista championships. That isn't the first time it's happened - but it's certainly very unusual. It just confirms that the cart sector is asserting itself and its professionalism. So, what goes to make the ideal person to run a mobile coffee business?

Is there even any place in a mobile operation for a signature drink, which is such a big part of national barista competitions?

"I admit the UKBC will be a tough challenge, but we believe it's the right one," says Cafe2U's commercial manager, Alex Dawson. "We have already been to some of the heats and finals and we know of the entrants' desire to win and of their understanding of the coffee market. We will now be doing more to support franchisees that want to further their knowledge this way."

Cafe2U intends to use the concept of the signature drink in an entirely new way.

"This is an opportunity to test new ideas on our very willing customers. We have no counter so we are interacting with our customers on a very personable level. Our franchisees know the majority of their customers' names and their drink of choice so testing new concepts is easy."

How much can any mobile operator vary his drinks? Surely the very limited working space means no chance of a varied menu of ingredients?

"We haven't even touched the surface with flavoured drinks! Those franchisees that have developed flavour and recipes and ideas and fun into their business can sell anything they want.... would you buy an Atomic Mocha knowing that it had raspberries and white chocolate in it?"

"Our best franchisees will create new recipes each week knowing that they are keeping their customers hooked. In summer you add ice, in winter you add extra cream. There is always time to have fun with what will always be a small base to work from - espresso and hot chocolate!"

If the best baristas do that, then what makes a good mobile barista? Are the skills different from a static cafe?

"You need organisation, consistency, the ability to adapt, the ability to work alone, to learn from your mistakes... and to enjoy the job! The



The ideal mobile operator must be as adaptable as the van. Jeff of Belfast (left) shows where the machine fits - and Theresa of Edinburgh displays the quite remarkable amount of space underneath it.

main difference is that our baristas are the business owners as well, so they know the buck stops with them."

To what degree does a mobile operator need to be imaginative in where they work? A shop owner decides his site, and stays there - the mobile operator has to be prepared to work the offices in a business park, to work outside the football ground or the county show on a Saturday afternoon, then be outside the rock concert when the fans come out... and handle all of them.

"Don't underestimate the people who sell mobile coffee..."

- Alex Dawson

"Our business is a combination of local knowledge, understanding of the coffee market, successes in other locations and business data. Put them together in the right order with the right support team behind you and you have Cafe2U."

"Making sure we keep business depends on the quality of the product that we serve. This will only work if the person selling you the product has the knowledge and charisma to make you want to come back. This is what we look for in a franchisee."

"Don't underestimate the people serving mobile coffee - remember, coffee has been considered an essential service alongside utilities and emergency services!"

"Our franchisees all have different circumstances and not everyone wants event work, but those that do can adapt quite easily. Our vans are self-sufficient, so can in effect turn up wherever they are needed."

"Licenses do depend on the loca-

tion; our vans are all registered with their local EHOs which will protect them wherever they work, and all have the correct liability insurances which most event organisers will always ask for in advance.

"The fun topic about events is the fee! Organisers can get greedy, but we will only pay them what is fair. An organiser will always talk up an event, but we know how to look at our database and where to check as to the actual likely success of an event."

Every operator will always claim that the image of staff is essential. In many cafes, baristas are scruffy, and in an outdoors situation, it is even more difficult to keep up a smart appearance.

"The correct image for any mobile operation is consistency, cleanliness and quality of product - get all three right everyday and generally you won't have a problem," remarks Alex Dawson.

His idea of the correct image extends to Cafe2U's choice of vehicle - the Vito, the 'baby' of the Mercedes commercial vehicle range. It has practical advantages for a mobile operator, with long service intervals and a long warranty. It also has sliding load doors on both sides, a key advantage for an operator.

In the Cafe2U model, the drinks are served out of the back of the van - directly under the espresso machine (Brasilia in our pictures) is a hot cabinet for croissants, pain au chocolat, sausage rolls, pasties, and paninis.

There is a little latitude for variation - barista Laurie Lee of Edinburgh has adapted the space next to the pie warmer to take a flat screen TV hooked up to Freeview. He never misses the sports news!