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The desserts are
magnificent
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Revving up at Brooklands

Charles Campion lunches with Olive Catering Services at JTI

www.jti.com

www.olive-catering.com

www.charlescampion.com

In 1907, workmen put the finishing touches to a state of the art, 2.75 mile racing circuit and Brooklands throbbed to the sound of highly tuned engines while 'the Bentley Boys' risked life and limb for the sake of speed records. Today, Brooklands is home to a museum and lots of memories, while its neighbour, Japan Tobacco International UK (JTI), occupies a large and impressive office building on Brooklands Road. You rarely see this much space and the JTI property would be in line for the atrium of the year if there were such a prize. It's a huge steel and glass bubble five stories tall with full size trees growing inside. From the atrium, the view is largely of greenery; this is a very sophisticated place.

Olive Catering Services was set up in 2004 and has seen steady growth. In 2015, Olive won three high profile contracts, topping off a period when it won £3.6m worth of new business. Based in the Midlands and initially specialising in education, Olive is now targeting B&I contracts in London and the south.

The JTI contract has become Olive's flagship in a portfolio that turns over £25m on 120 sites and employs 750 team members. Like Damon Brown, Olive's co-founder, almost all the second level ops managers started out as chefs. Brown says: "When an ops manager turns up, puts on the whites and goes into the kitchen, it gives cooking a purpose. Nine out of 10 people eat to enjoy food – it is

about more than merely refuelling. I want our customers to think of the dining area as their favourite restaurant."

Olive is focused on food and it relies on the innovation team headed up by Jacqui Mee, who is director of food, to keep the offer fresh. The dining area at JTI is light and airy with some seating outside for those elusive sunny days. JTI regards the food offer as being an employee benefit and prices are subsidised – you could eat lunch here for £1, or spend anything between £2 and £3. Because the offices are situated off the beaten track it is quite difficult to go 'out to lunch', which in turn puts pressure on Olive to continually keep the offer fresh. In the JTI building, Costa coffee and fruit are both supplied free to staff.

Many of the elements common to most B&I contracts are to be found at JTI, but Olive tends to have a new twist or some

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new thinking. The head chef at Brooklands Road is Elisa Jade-Gratton and she is also part of the Olive Food innovation team. The stations of the dining room are laid out with the serveries down either side and a central island. Take, as an example, the soup offer which changes every day – for 46p (or 60p with a slice of home-made bread) you could tuck into Asian vegetable broth – a rich and limpid chicken stock with a decent chilli hit, lime juice and star anise that can be customised with all manner of croutons and vegetables. There is definitely plenty of flavour. All the bread is made on site and loaves are for sale to staff. Jade-Gratton is a talented baker – a caramelised focaccia (£2.50 a loaf) and a classic white bloomer (£1.50 a loaf) are just two of the nine loaves on offer.

Another station is the Kerb offer, which is described as 'Fresh authentic street food' and changes every day. This may be homemade kebabs, a hotdog bar or tapas. The tapas is well done – patatas brava, chicken and chorizo, garlic mushrooms, pork meatballs, garlic prawns (cooked to order) and tortilla. Fresh food with defined authentic flavours and all for £3.25. Every day there is also a conventional grab 'n' go, and the 'bistro dish of the day', which may be anything from Roast King Arthur roast beef with Yorkshire pudding to Three little pigs – three different ways with pork.

Other standouts include the daily 'healthy life dish'. This might be Crispy skin salmon with courgette tagliatelle, roast

heritage tomatoes and wild garlic dressing. A large and well-cooked tranche of salmon makes a good foil for the crunchy courgettes. Then there is the hot deli counter where they prepare a bread-free Cauliflower cheese toastie with home-made piccaililli (£1.95) – an interesting dish.

The desserts are magnificent, particularly the Summer pudding with clotted cream. It is made without a basin by rolling out white bread and adding the fruit, before rolling the bread up so you get something that is rather like a summer fruit spring roll served alongside a coulis and a blackcurrant jelly. The kitchen also prepares all the dessert pots for the grab 'n' go in two sizes. The smaller 'tasters' prove to be very – just a mouthful of something sweet to go with the free Costa coffees.

You can see the footprints of the food innovation team right across the food offer. Sensibly, their approach to menu writing is pragmatic – if there is a demand for less glamorous dishes there is always the baked potato with baked beans, but you will get an extra-large potato and the beans must be Heinz!

There are a lots of skills on display in the kitchen at JTI. The breads are worthy of special note, but then so are the cakes and desserts. In general, all the dishes look very good, fresh and appetising. There is a bustling atmosphere and having options that change every day is a real boon to the JTI workforce. Good and imaginative food is one employee benefit that is worth having.

