

THE GOOD WEEKEND

The order of the day: D Dog. Hold the MO

BERWYN LEWIS explains the language of fast food

AMERICANS are eating out more than ever and their feeding habits are changing. According to a US Department of Agriculture economist, Michael Van Dress, eating out increased by 80 per cent between 1966 and 1979.

Over that period he found some interesting new developments. Cucumber use, for instance, increased by 253 per cent, cauliflower use by 79 per cent but the number of sit-down service restaurants declined by 6 per cent. By contrast, fast-food outlets grew by 82 per cent.

Fast food, he said, has become instinctive and an integral part of American eating patterns. He went on to report that the use of pizza cheese and cheese substitutes had increased by 236 per cent in 10 years and sandwich breads by 69 per cent.

So what is the big draw behind these roadside attractions known as short-order (fast food) diners?

To satisfy my curiosity, and possibly my hunger, I set out, starting from the bottom of the fast-food chain, one Sunday morning at 11 o'clock, the ritual hour for picking up some brunch in California.

"D Dog. Hold the MO."

The short-orderese for a double hot dog without mayo or mayonnaise was snapped, machine-gun like, through bullet-proof and greasy windows.

"CB. Through the garden. Walkin'."

This is short-orderese for cheese burger, with salad, to take away, as in walking.

This is the language spoken by those who serve at fast-food outlets, like Biffs, on Broadway, Oakland, CA.

Biffs is where California eats, quickly. It specialises in sides and giant potatoes in a variety of states, hashed, baked and stuffed.

At Kwik Ways Hamburgers, a little further down the road, Chevrolet, Malibus, Lincoln Continentals and pick-ups rub bumper bars with each other in the short-order diner car park.

Shrimps, fries, corn dogs (hot dog wrapped in a corn batter), shakes and Diet Pepsi and Cokes slide through the bullet-proof plexiglass service hatches straight into the outstretched hands of waiting passengers inside their still-running cars. This fast food is consumed by the whole family in the fast lane of the freeway minutes later.

Next, the Doggie Diner, on the

corner of West MacArthur and telegraph, Berkeley, visible for kilometres with its 6 metre high dog's head wearing a chef's cap. (Rumour has it that prostitutes offer a varied and alternative menu at night in the car park).

Doggie Diner is part of a big chain of fast-food outlets which has squeezed out smaller, family-orientated eating houses, almost an extinct form of life in the fast-food lane. Now it is drive-in and drive-out loaded with doughnuts, dogs and polystyrene cups brimming with coffee.

But the real shock to the system comes when you try to sit down in a short-order restaurant.

Denny's, where the art of roadside breakfasting has become an institution, is a chain, covering the length and breadth of the United States. In each of its outlets the decor, the music and the reception you are given are designed to encourage a fast turnover.

In the one at the side of the on-ramp of Interstate 80 (although locations make no difference, all the menus are identical), you can literally watch the world go by, at about 100km/h.

The menu is the only place where the eyeballs can find refuge from



the blur of speeding cars until you have to look up to order your eggs. "How would you like your gggz?"

This must be the only country in the world where the egg is served in a multitude of ways.

"Cooked," I reply. "Over easy, over medium, over hard, sunnyside up?" The waitress regards me with cold scorn, and immediately confronts me with the hotcake situation.

They come in short stacks and grand slams and they are accompanied by everything, syrup to links (sausages).

The American sausage, father of

the frankfurter, begat the hot dog which now has official recognition as America's No 1 snack food.

Twenty-six years ago the US Chamber of Commerce declared July National Hot Dog Month. Its birth, it is believed, took place on a cold April day in 1901 at a baseball game in the Polo Grounds of New York City.

Ice-cream and soda sales were falling so an enterprising commissioner, Harry Stevens, sent for dachshund sausages and rolls.

Sold from the familiar portable hot-water tanks, they were an instant success. They were later named hot dogs by the sports cartoonist Tad Dorgan. The term stuck.

Since 1973 all hot-dog labels must show ingredients in decreasing order of quantity but these days some products have replaced the beef and pork in hot dogs with chicken, turkey, veal and, in some cases, vegetable proteins.

But the flavour is still the same. Or is it? Taste-bud baffling is part of the science in fast food production.

For instance, milk — or non-dairy creamer as it has come to be known on the counters, tables and service sections of every coffee bar across the nation — is not real milk.

But do your taste buds know? Can they tell the difference between the real thing and the combination

of sodium caseinates, dipotassium phosphates, mono- and diglycerides and sodium silico-aluminates in the coffee?

Taste buds are at a disadvantage when it comes to unscrambling the flavours of all the food slammed onto one plate in the American fast-food tradition. Potato salad on lettuce alongside hot cakes, syrup, bacon, butter pats and hash browns jostle for your attention with slices of grapefruit, grapes and melon.

But nothing quite beats the soullessness of the all-pervasive, all-American, home-made apple pie for singular artificiality with its array of hydrolised fats, artificial colours and flavours.

However, the short-order diner is not the complete pariah in a desert of non-food.

At Bette's Oceanview Diner in 4th Street, Berkeley, CA, there is no ocean view but the jukebox, with its *Walkin' The Dog* by Rufus Thomas, *Blue Suede Shoes* by Carl Perkins and Toscanini's *The Barber of Seville*, is a delight to behold as it competes with the whirr of fast-food blenders, the crash of spatulas on the griddle plate and the call of the waitroids (non-sexist Bette's Oceanview Diner term for table attendants).

This is re-created 1930s diner cultism at its best with authentic black and white tiled floors, art deco style aluminium counter tops and bars, and vinyl covered dining booths.

This is where Sunday brunchers from Berkeley, refugees from gourmet gulch (the nouvelle cuisine end of restaurants and food stores) and the freeway diner come to indulge in oral and instant gratification.

"BLT walkin'." A bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich is about to leave the premises as a takeaway.

The calls fly between kitchen and counter, they echo along the sizzling grills, they volley back and forth over the frothing fruit shakes.

"Adam'n'Eve on a raft." Two eggs are about to be launched on a slice of toast. "Wreck 'em," two eggs are broken.

"Liverbag." A liverwurst on a baguette or French break is requested.

"OE and an OM." More egg talk. It is over easy and over medium.

"Scram and a grid." More egg talk, this time scrambled with a griddle cake alongside.

"SOB." This is not a term of abuse. It's a South Of The Border, meaning a Mexican omelette with avocado and salsa sauce.

"Dogwalkin' SmGF." This means a hot dog to takeaway and small grapefruit juice.

"Herb ommmmmm!" This is not a mantra but a herbal omelette.

Shouts of "guac" or "RB sands" are simply requests for guacamole or roast beef sandwiches and a "chick sai" and "thousile" means a chicken salad with thousand island dressing as opposed to a "blooch" (blue cheese) or Oil'n'vin (oil and vinegar).

Bette's, which is open from 6.30 am till 10.30 pm specialises in "soufbanpans" (souffle banana pancakes), "bags'n'butts" made on the premises (hot buttered baguettes, as in French Bread) and bagelbutts (bagels and butter) served at "two or three tops" (two or three seater tables).

It claims to be the only gourmet diner in the country.