

Bee Wilson : The Kitchen Thinker

Google-icious

'It's my belief that people are inherently lazy. That's why you need to be on the first page.' I am talking to Neil Johnson, the owner of Humble Pie, an East Lothian catering company and cookery school, about how Google has transformed his business.

When you do a search on Google, you get two kinds of results. The first is 'natural', including blogs, articles, encyclopaedias or whatever people have thrown out into the swirling ether of the web. The second is commercial. Of these, the most coveted slot is the box at the top of the first page. Why? Because most of us do not bother clicking through to page two.

Five years ago Humble Pie started as a tiny operation selling frozen home-cooked meals (made by Neil's wife, Lisa). But when Neil's property business was hit by the credit crunch in 2009 they decided to 'gear up Humble Pie'. A techie friend suggested Google Ads. By the time Neil drove home from the friend's flat, where he set up the ad, the first enquiry had already come through.

How do you get on the first page? There is no mystery. 'Google were very good,' says Neil, 'and explained that if I paid 25p per click I'd probably end up on the second or third page.' To guarantee the top spot costs Humble Pie 50 to 60p

per click. It sounds expensive, especially since 90 per cent of the clicks are 'time wasters' asking them to bake a single loaf of bread or cook supper for two.

However, for Humble Pie the strategy has paid off. Neil believes Google enabled them to 'accelerate the business by 10 years'. They now do catering for huge weddings and have expanded into a cookery

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school in the countryside. Turnover is more than £30,000 a month. They are living the dream. And Neil continues to place ever more Google Ads.

Google works well for food producers who know how to play the game - and have enough capital to throw at it. But what about us consumers, who just want to find better things to eat? In May the American food writer Amanda Hesser attacked the new Google Recipes search engine, noting it favoured sites that used the right key words rather than those with the best recipes. Hesser saw that small food bloggers offering carefully

tested recipes could lose out to sites promising 'lamb shank cassoulet' for 77 calories a serving (impossible!) or 'fried chicken in six minutes' (double impossible!). Google seems to prioritise fantasies of food over the real messy business of cooking. A spokesperson replies that Google uses 'more than 200 signals to rank results'.

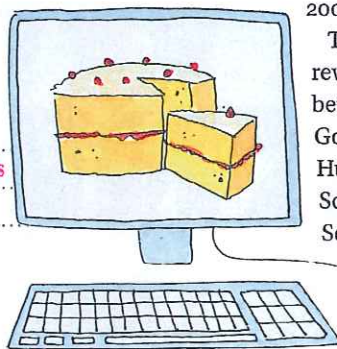
The search words we idly type reveal our ambitions to eat better/live longer/do it all. Google tells me the success of Humble Pie is part of a sudden Scottish interest in gastronomy. Searches for 'cooking classes'

in Scotland have increased 50 per cent over the past three years.

Scotland has overtaken England in searches for 'healthy eating'.

Also up are searches for 'pesto' (70 per cent), 'olive oil' (30 per cent) and 'Thai curry recipe' (a whopping 250 per cent). As for 'deep-fried Mars Bar', searches have declined.

The interesting question, though, would be whether this correlates with an actual increase in healthy eating. Google certainly has an awe-inspiring ability to uncover our aspirations. It remains to be seen how much it helps when we pick up a real wooden spoon in a real kitchen. ●



MY DAY ON A PLATE

Jo Leedham basketball player

8am Muesli then scrambled eggs for protein and some water. **8.45am** Get to the gym to stretch and warm up. I'm at a training camp in Poland. **9.30am** Team training starts with shooting skills and cardio. We finish with a very competitive five-on-five game. **11.30am** Recovery shake (mainly carbs with a bit of protein). Just enough time

to shower and put my feet up before lunch. **12.30pm** Sit down with the team to eat chicken with boiled potatoes, salad stuff, carrots and broccoli, then fruit salad. **3.30pm** Practice games, with a big focus on team tactics. **6pm** Off to a quick weight-lifting session. **7pm** Can't wait to eat. Not a big fan of fish so stick to chicken, and lots of

veg and pasta instead of potatoes. I was injured recently and wasn't allowed to eat many carbs while not in training. Now I'm packing on the carbs - I need the fuel! **10pm** So tired. Skype my family then early to bed. *Follow the Standard Life GB Basketball Teams' progress towards London 2012 (london2012.fiba.com)* **Amy Bryant**

NIGEL DENBY, DIETICIAN
Jo needs energy for both endurance and short bouts of high-intensity exercise. Her regime of starchy carbs combined with lean proteins is spot on. She includes plenty of fruit and veg, which is important for everyone - athletes and couch potatoes. Her approach is based on commonsense nutrition, not pseudo-science. Well done, Jo!