

IT'S PRET-TY MESSED UP

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WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?
Customers shop for a snack at the Broad Street Pret a Manger store.
- Elizabeth Lippman

April 10, 2003 -- Pret A Manger, the British sandwich chain that took a bite of the Big Apple only to wind up with indigestion, has overhauled senior management as it re-evaluates its expansion plans, a company spokeswoman confirmed yesterday.

Andrew Rolfe, chairman and CEO, was ousted two weeks ago after clashing with founder and largest shareholder Julian Metcalfe over the company's expansion strategy, Jane Botros, a spokeswoman, said.

Rolfe, a former executive at Kentucky Fried Chicken, wanted to step up the pace of store openings, which totaled 10 last year, while Metcalfe insisted on a slower approach.

At one point, Rolfe promised to have 40 stores open in New York by 2004. The company currently has 13 New York stores, after recently closing three.

Also out is Jay Willoughby, president of the company's U.S. operations.

Replacing Rolfe in the post of chairman is Larry Billet, a managing director of Billet Group, a private equity firm, and a former managing director of Societe Generale.

Clive Schlee, a former executive with Jardine Matheson & Co. and a managing director of Itsu, a chain of sushi restaurants that Metcalfe owns in London, was named president.

Tim Cocker, a seven-year Pret A Manger veteran, was appointed president of the U.S. operations.

The bulk of Pret A Manger's 140 stores are in Britain, though it also operates about 7 stores in Hong Kong and Japan.

Underestimating finicky New Yorkers who are accustomed to getting it their way, Pret A Manger initially served up sandwiches that had turned heads in Britain, typically slathered with mayonnaise or loaded with fashion-conscious no-no's like bacon and cheddar cheese.

Claudia Fleming, the former Gramercy Tavern pastry chef who joined Pret A Manger last year as food director, is overseeing a gastronomic makeover with a line of no-mayo sandwiches that will debut next month.

"They sorely missed the mark of what New Yorkers like to eat," said Arlene Spiegel, a restaurant consultant.