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An enthusiastic and international work force is the secret to Pret A Manger's success.

Pret A Manger

Britain, food service

Take hundreds of the high-energy twentysomethings who descend on Britain every year to learn English. Add them to a rapidly growing fast-food company that makes all its sandwiches fresh daily and donates the leftovers to charity. Mix in two weeks of training annually and weekly beer bashes. And *voilà*, you've got Pret A Manger, a London-based chain of more than 100 sandwich shops—and one of Europe's most pumped-up work forces.

Pret has become a hit. Buckingham Palace is said to order more than \$1,500 worth of sandwiches a week, and Prime Minister Tony Blair has had Pret deliver lunches to Downing Street. Though its name is French for "ready to eat," Pret A Manger had shops only in Britain until 2000, when it opened its first of four stores in New York. This month it is scheduled to take its successful recipe to Hong Kong. McDonald's was so impressed that last year the ultimate fast-food chain bought a third of the com-

pany, which will help Pret take its sandwich philosophy global.

We met with two groups of "team members" at Pret's headquarters in a nondescript office building near London's Victoria Station, a few blocks from where the first shop opened its doors 15 years ago. Jenny Di Nuncio works at a Pret shop on Tottenham Court Road. She recalls her first day on the job, when she walked into a store at 6:30 in the morning with pop music blaring in the background as the crew was busily making the day's sandwiches. One of her co-workers told her that the unofficial slogan of the company was "Let's have fun and get the work done." And, she says, "that's the way it's been for the 3½ years I've been here." She especially appreciates the chain's commitment to quality—from its use of fresh ingredients (no preservatives or additives) to its shiny aluminum décor. "Everything has to be on-the-spot perfect," she says.

Pret's high standards are maintained by a cheerfully mixed work force. Fewer than a third of Pret employees are British, with Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and French being the other most common nationalities. The resulting concoction is what CEO Andrew Rolfe, a South African, calls a "uniquely European culture." At 35, Rolfe is one of Pret's older employees. Only 8% of the staff is over 35; some 38% are younger than 25. When he was brought on board to run the firm in 1998, Rolfe had to go through the same regimen as every other new hire: two weeks in a shop making sandwiches and serving coffee. The top brass also spend one day every three months working in a shop. Executives mingle with the troops at the subsidized Friday

night parties held at a local pub, to which all London team members are invited. The company lays out some \$400,000 for its summer and Christmas bashes. To further assure that the top leadership keeps in touch, all team members are given the mobile-phone numbers for Rolfe, as well as for chairman and co-founder Julian Metcalfe. Metcalfe once received a call from a team member who'd been arrested and needed bail.

Nurit Raich is a professional chef who works in the corporate kitchen preparing recipes for new sandwiches. She contrasts working with Pret and working with her previous employers, including a large supermarket chain, "where there were a lot of rules." At her other jobs, she says, "you may try to do your best, but the company was only interested in what gave the basic results. That really annoyed me. When you work at Pret, everybody tries so hard to do their best, looking for perfection, and that's exactly what is expected. So everybody goes the extra mile." Darren Sayer, who works in the Holborn shop, agrees: "It's fun to work here. You're free to use your own ideas so long as it makes logical business sense." ■

MARTIN PAPER/MAGNUM