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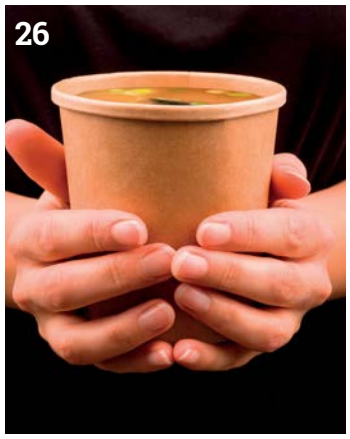


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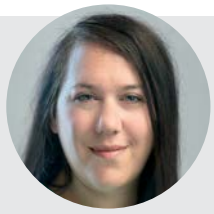
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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the October edition of *Speciality Food*. As I write this, I'm still bursting with enthusiasm from the team's recent visit to the Speciality & Fine Food Fair at Olympia. It was my first time at the event, and I was, quite frankly, overwhelmed by how huge it was. A complete assault on the senses. Not only was it fantastic to meet so many visitors and clients at our stand, but I loved walking around, discovering new and established producers, and seeing the innovation that's happening all over the UK (in what are very difficult trading times). Key upward trends I noticed included more snacking and drinks options that fall in line with HFSS legislation, the increased use of so-called 'superfoods' such as turmeric and adaptogenics, and some more thought about gut-friendly ingredients. The food landscape is always changing, which is, I think, what makes it so exciting!

CHARLOTTE SMITH-JARVIS | EDITOR (MATERNITY COVER)

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What does the single-use plastics ban mean for indie retail?

New rules around sales of certain plastic products are in force from this month. *Speciality Food* reveals how your business might be affected

The statistics from scientists are stark. According to estimates, there are now more than 171 trillion pieces of plastic in the world's oceans – a figure that could triple by 2040 if no action is taken. Part of the UK's plan, echoing that of a wider EU objective, is to continue to roll out the ban of certain single-use plastics.

Following the successful single-use plastic bag charge introduced in 2015 (which has shown a decrease of more than 98% in main retailers), ministers hope the new plastics ban, coming into force this month, will have an equally positive impact on the environment.

What's included?

From October 1st businesses can no longer sell single-use plastic plates, bowls, trays, containers, cutlery or balloon sticks to the public.

- The ban affects sales both online and in stores.
- It affects new and existing stock..
- The term single-use extends to biodegradable, compostable and recycled plastic, and items that are partly made from or lined with plastic.
- There are exemptions for bowls, trays and plates supplied to other businesses, or pre-filled or pre-packed at the point of sale (ie salad bowls/ sandwiches) and trays used to deliver food.
- There are no exemptions for plastic cutlery.
- Polystyrene is banned, and retailers must not use it to supply ready-to-eat food or drink. Exemptions here apply only to polystyrene containers that require adding hot water, finishing in a microwave or toasting.
- Local inspectors can carry out spot checks, with fines for businesses not adhering to the new rules.

What do retail leaders have to say?

Andrew Goodacre, CEO of Bira (the British Independent Retailers Association), admits the change will be costly to businesses, but said it's critical retailers are ready. Breaches of these new regulations will result in fines for the business owners.

"The regulations are a measure to improve recycling and ultimately the negative impact on the environment. Given the recent heatwaves around Europe, we can see all too well some of the changes taking place. We should all want to do what we can, but it has to be reasonable for the business. Retailers will need to start now (if they've not done so already) to source replacement stock. I have seen increasing use of paper bags and re-usable nets in food shops. For delis the same rules apply, but food served at the counter can still be served in single-use containers – however now might be the right time to change everything and establish stronger environmental credentials.

"The message is clear, get to know the rules, start planning, and tell the customer you have made the changes. It might even be possible to turn this into an opportunity."

New opportunities?

While there has been discomfort reported from businesses, who will inevitably feel the pinch of switching from plastic in certain parts of their operations, others believe there are new opportunities to be grasped.

Kantar said the plastics ban, "Offers brands a chance to embrace sustainability and redefine their business models. By collaborating with stakeholders across the product value chain, optimising material usage in supply chains, and prioritising circularity, brands can lead the way toward a greener, more sustainable future while better engaging with their target audience on the topic of sustainability."

Across Europe there is a 77% collection target for plastic bottles by 2025, increasing to 90% by 2029. Kantar said that identifying suitable products for refills could help meet these targets, adding that, according to its 2022 Sustainable Sector Index data, 45% of consumers would be willing to buy products that are reusable/refillable.

"Brands must make usage of refillable products easy. Partnerships with retailers to improve the necessary infrastructures will help people close this value-action gap. Brand owners will need to work out how to encourage people to make the switch for some of their everyday products. It will need to be easy, meaningful and rewarding."

Sian Sutherland, of A Plastic Planet, thinks "tiny tokenistic bans" might seem pointless, but that banning things we know are wrong for the planet can create a "vacuum for innovation to flourish".

"There is a reason why material innovation has lagged so far behind technology. We simply haven't bothered to invent better materials than plastic for decades. But now we know the escalating downside of plastic, we need to increase the rate of bans," she said.

Richard Burcher, commercial director of Naturepac, says there are certainly inroads being made in packaging innovation in light of the bans, adding that his company has seen an increase in interest in sustainable options. "The plastic ban marks a significant milestone in the fight against plastic pollution. This transformative measure presents businesses with a unique opportunity to embrace more eco-friendly solutions, elevating their environmental stewardship.

"With an increasing number of customers already transitioning to sustainable options, the ban will undoubtedly stimulate the market's accessibility and cost-effectiveness of these alternatives, making it easier for businesses to adopt greener practices.

"Embracing this change will not only contribute to a healthier planet, but also pave the way for a more sustainable and responsible future for all."





'Something fishy's going on in fine food retail this autumn'



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

I write this in the 'fifth season'. Confusingly it comes between the second season- early summer and what's known as the third season – autumn.

Obviously even Vivaldi didn't know about it.

It's 'silly season'. The time of the year when frivolous news stories take over the national narrative.

Apparently the term originated as far back as the mid 1800s, but the season is still alive and kicking some 170 years later. In some countries it is called 'cucumber' or 'pickled gherkin' season, perhaps because stories about those vegetables proliferate. It is also the time of the year that coincides with speciality food shops either being very busy, if they happen to be in a holiday destination, or very quiet due to holidays, as if on an abandoned planet.

Partridges obviously falls into the latter category which, due to current trading conditions in 2023, is not for the faint hearted. Customers and sales have fallen, a lot of rain has fallen, and general morale has fallen with them. But it is nothing particularly unusual.

This year's silly season stories have featured wonky buildings, exploding beer bottles, seagull attacks, Loch Ness Monster commentaries, global shortages of pink paint, the Barbieheimer movies, and a surfing dog to name but a few.

It seems the advice from creative agencies is for retailers to embrace the silly season, try to get customers smiling, create fun, and be memorable. Although this is somewhat contrary to the prevailing mood music.

However, there was one story that did actually appeal to me on a deeper level. It was about sardines and tuna and suchlike, and the fact that they are becoming a fashion accessory. Or as the Telegraph put it "the tinned fish fashion phenomenon sweeping the internet".

In fact, the attractively-designed tins and the healthy foods they contain have always held their own on the Partridges shelves.

As I write this there are a number of tins on my desk which customers have asked me to put aside because we do not always have them in stock. A phrase fast becoming a euphemism for Brexit.

On checking the present range on our shelves we actually have over 40 varieties of tins and bottles of tuna, sardines, mackerel, anchovies, kippers, pilchards, sprats and mussels.

The white tuna is actually one of the best-selling ambient products in the shop. And the margins are not bad either - with helpful sell-by dates too. It is another example where the larger food retail outlets cannot compete regarding range with the savvy smaller speciality food shops. Which goes back to the old advice for shopkeepers, that if you have a point of difference flaunt it.

Here's to a good autumn!

> "Attractively-designed tins and the healthy foods they contain have always held their own on the Partridges shelves. As I write this there are a number of tins on my desk which customers have asked me to put aside because we do not always have them in stock"

Could the 'service retailing' trend boost fine food shops amidst rising vacancy rates?

Following the news that Britain lost 6,000 retail outlets over the past five years, innovative future-thinking could help fine food retailers succeed

Retailers continue to face cost pressures as new data from the British Retail Consortium (BRC) highlights growing vacancy rates. Over the past five years, 6,000 retail outlets have closed shop, according to the BRC's data.

The high street was hit the hardest in the second quarter of 2023, as the overall vacancy rate in Britain reached 13.9%, 0.1 percentage point worse than the previous quarter. The situation was brightest in Greater London, the Southeast and the East of England, which saw the lowest vacancy rates, while the highest were recorded in the Northeast, Wales and Scotland.

FINE FOOD HOLDS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Independent retailers, particularly those in high street locations, are facing tough pressures, according to Lucy Stainton, commercial director at Local Data Company. "The high street has seen some of the most notable impacts, with rising rents and increased competition putting pressure on small and independent businesses, who may struggle to meet high operating costs." However, no retailer seems to be immune now. "Across all location types, vacancy has reached critical levels, highlighting an ever-increasing need to redevelop units to breathe life back into retail destinations," she added.

Despite the pressures, is there reason to be hopeful for fine food retailers? Andrew Goodacre, CEO of Bira, the British Independent Retailers Association, believes the sector has unique skillsets that will help it to thrive.

"The figures from the BRC are very sobering and highlight the difficulties faced by shop owners – both large and small," Andrew told Speciality Food. "Some of the losses will be due to high-profile business failures, and some will be down to large businesses changing their business model as they focus on the internet and an omni-channel approach to retailing.

"We also know that many smaller, traditional independent shops have closed, but been re-opened as barbers, nail bars, etc. showing a switch to 'service retailing'. This trend should benefit the fine food retailers who can combine great products with a strong service/ experience offering," he said.

For example, fine food retailers could host wine and cheese events or showcases of local producers as a way to bring in new customers and loyal fans alike.

Lucy said retailers should play to their strengths in this challenging environment. "Retail is a diverse industry; each retail and leisure subsector faces its own unique challenges, but also, importantly, has its own unique strengths."

As fine food retailers know, location is important. Lucy highlighted the innovation of businesses in retail parks, particularly. "Retail parks have shown us excellent examples of agile strategy in action, splitting larger units into smaller ones or converting space for alternative uses to successfully revitalise vacant stock. The current climate is undeniably difficult, but it should not be overlooked that today's retailers are more innovative and future-thinking than ever."

CALLS FOR ACTION TO BOOST RETAIL SECTOR

To "inject more vibrancy into high streets and town centres, and prevent further store closures," Helen Dickinson, the chief executive of the BRC, called on the government to review the business rates system.

"Currently, there's an additional £400m going on retailers' bills next April, which will put a brake on the vital investment that our towns and cities so desperately need. The government announcement earlier in the week about making changes of use to vacant units easier is welcome, but it's important local councils have a cohesive plan, and don't leave gap-toothed high streets that are no longer a customer destination and risk becoming inviable. Government should go one step further and freeze rates bills next year," she said.

The news of rising vacancies comes as confidence among small businesses fell after a strong recovery at the start of the year, according to the UK Small Business Index from the Federation of Small Business (FSB).

Two in five small businesses said their revenues fell over the second quarter, while one in three saw an increase. Most SMEs cited rising costs as an issue, while almost half said an increase in labour costs was causing problems. The number of businesses concerned about utility and fuel costs fell, however, to 25%.

Martin McTague, the FSB's national chair, said that despite the downturn, "the future is looking rosier" for small businesses. "Given the right conditions for growth, small firms have the potential to power a groundswell of economic activity," he said.





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HFSS explained: What are the regulations and when do they come into effect?

Find out what legislation on foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) mean for your business

Since new regulations on HFSS foods were first announced, questions have abounded about what the rules mean for retailers and brands, who is affected and when the different bans will come into effect.

"It's been a particularly complex set of rules to navigate, and there have been changes to the guidelines and timeline along the way," says Liam Keogh, co-founder of food, drink and hospitality PR and influencer marketing agency Palm PR.

Before diving into the details of the regulations, it's important to understand what HFSS means. As an agency that looks after numerous food and drink businesses, from traditional names like Grey Poupon to trendy upstarts like non-alcoholic drink maker LA Brewery, Liam explains that a significant part of his job has been ensuring brands understand the rules.

"We've had an important role to play in keeping our clients up to date and making sure they have a total grasp of all the rules' implications. We had to do exactly the same when the Sugar Tax was introduced," he says.

HFSS MEANING

The HFSS rules aim to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink products as part of the government's pledge to reduce obesity across the UK.

"As a result, there are many products that fall into this, like sugary drinks, salty snacks and processed foods. However, there are carve outs (for example, honey covered nuts)," Liam explains.

It's important for retailers and brands to understand the legislation and exemptions before considering marketing products, choosing new stock or making new product development decisions.

WHAT DOES HFSS STAND FOR?

HSFF stands for food and drinks that are high in fat, salt or sugar.

Examples of HFSS food and drink covered by the regulations include:

- Soft drinks with added sugar
- Crisps
- Granola
- Sweet popcorn
- Chocolate-coated nuts
- Chocolate bars
- All sponge cakes
- Cereal bars

Examples of food and drink which are not covered by the HFSS regulations include:

- Nuts and seeds
- Fruit-based snacks
- Meat jerky
- Drinks without added sugar
- Sugar-free sweets
- Non-prepackaged foods (eg loose bakery items)

WHAT ARE THE HFSS REGULATIONS IN THE UK?

In England, the regulations cover the placement of promotions in store, multibuy promotional offers such as BOGOF (buy one get one free), and any advertising either online or on TV before 9pm.

The regulations apply to retailers with 50 employees or more. Shops with a square footage of less than 2,000 are exempt from the location restrictions. Chocolatiers, confectioners or cake stores are also exempt from location restrictions, but they must comply with price promotion rules.

Wholesalers that only sell food to other businesses are exempt, but if they sell directly to consumers they must comply with the regulations.

Wales has also announced legislation to restrict the placement and price promotion of HFSS products, which will be introduced in 2024 and rolled out across the country by 2025. The Welsh government said it aimed to align its rules with the same products included within England's legislation, however the types and sizes of businesses impacted was not stated.

Scotland last year held a consultation on restricting promotions on HFSS food and drink.

WHEN DID HFSS RESTRICTIONS COME INTO EFFECT?

The regulations on HFSS foods date back to 2018 when then-prime minister Theresa May launched a consultation on restricting the promotion of less healthy food and drink in Britain.

The ful restrictions were originally due to come into force in April 2022, but this timeline has been pushed back several times as retailers and food producers said details remained unclear, and due to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

In October 2022, the ban on HFSS products in prominent store locations began. These regulations were aimed at retailers, and ruled that they couldn't put HFSS products within two metres of a checkout area, within two metres of a designated queuing area, in the end of aisle display or at the entrance of the store.

The ban on HFSS promotions, which was due to come into effect this month has been pushed back to October 2025, and a ban on advertising HFSS foods online and on TV before 9pm is set to come into force in January 2025, having been delayed from the original January 2023 deadline.

WHO IS AND ISN'T AFFECTED IN THE FINE FOOD WORLD?

While the smallest independent retailers will not have to delve into the fine print of these regulations, larger SMEs should look into what the rules mean for them.

"The HFSS legislation...applies to the products sold in retail outlets with more than 50 employees, which obviously covers a large part of the market and will have an impact on the fine food world," Liam says.

He adds that for smaller and independent brands, the legislation is a "double-edged sword".

"On one hand, their size makes them more agile and quicker to adapt, and they don't have to worry about the ingrained identity or legacy that the products of larger brands might have. They also benefit from the fact that the rules only apply to brands with less than 250 employees and retailers with less than 50 employees.

"On the other hand," he continues, "making changes to packaging and the formulation of products is an expensive and resource-intensive business, which smaller businesses can obviously be short on."

For businesses that are nimble, however, he says the rules present an opportunity to gain traction with retailers over non-compliant brands or big brands that are slower to adapt. "Publicising brands to get them on retail buyers' radars is something we've been tasked to do even more over the last couple of years to help make an impact in this area.

"Very new brands are also making hay by making sure that the new products that they launch are within the HFSS rules from day one, which can give them a leg up with retailers at that crucial first stage," he adds.

As well as affecting retailers' stocking decisions, regulations will impact brands' advertising strategies. "A big part of the policy affects how products can be promoted, particularly through advertising and special offers," Liam says. "This includes social media advertising. We've had to provide a lot of advice on how to run successful marketing campaigns in this new landscape."





What the UK's 2030 food waste commitment means for indie retailers

Food waste is a significant contributor to climate change, so what is the UK doing to reduce its impact?

Every year, 1.3 billion tonnes of food is wasted around the world, according to WRAP, a climate action NGO. In the UK, the group says, we throw away 6.6 million tonnes of household food waste a year, of which almost three quarters could have been eaten.

Speciality Food looks into our current commitments on food waste and what they mean for independent food and drink retailers.

WHAT ARE THE UK'S FOOD WASTE COMMITMENTS?

In line with the United Nations' sustainable development goals, the government has committed to halving the UK's per capita food waste by 2030.

The Courtauld Commitment 2030 is a voluntary agreement in the food and drink industry that was created to deliver farm-to-fork reductions in food waste, as well as greenhouse gas emissions and water stress.

In 2018, WRAP and IGD developed a roadmap for how the UK food industry would halve food waste by 2030. As of December 2022, 351 organisations in the UK had committed to cutting their food waste.

"The Food Waste Reduction Roadmap has made significant progress in the four years since launch, often against the backdrop of a hugely challenging external environment. This goes to show the genuine drive our industry has to create tangible, positive change on the issues that matter to us all," said Mark Little, director of health and sustainability programmes at IGD.

IS THERE A REQUIREMENT TO REPORT FOOD WASTE?

While there is strong support for food waste rules, in recent weeks the government was criticised for scrapping legislation that would have made food waste reporting mandatory for large and medium-sized businesses in England.

Defra told the Guardian newspaper, "A regulatory approach which we estimate to cost businesses around £5.3m is not suitable in the current economic climate, especially when any additional costs may be passed on to consumers."

However, Martin Bowman, senior policy and campaigns manager at Feedback, claimed a reduction in food waste would "more than offset the costs of measurement and reporting, saving millions of pounds, and helping struggling families by lowering food inflation".

Food waste reporting is widely accepted by the food and drink industry. Last year, a consultation by the government found 99% of respondents expressed strong support for the proposed law, including 79% of retailers.

WHAT INDIE RETAILERS NEED TO DO ABOUT FOOD WASTE

WRAP's senior specialist for food waste, Sue Riley, told *Speciality Food* smaller retailers can join a 'Target, Measure, Act' approach to tackling food waste that's used by both the Food Waste Reduction Roadmap and Courtauld 2030, as it is applicable to businesses of all sizes.

Following a recent refresh of WRAP's roadmap, there is now a checklist available for retailers, which, Sue said, acts as a 'Quick Start/What to do next' guide.

These steps can be as simple as taking part in awareness days like Food Waste Action Week, supporting staff to reduce their food waste at home, or ensuring you're using best practice guidance for product labelling and storage.

For example, cheese care and storage is something many customers have questions about, so retailers could consider sharing advice with their customers.

WHY SHOULD YOU TAKE ACTION ON FOOD WASTE?

"Citizens are increasingly calling for brands to 'walk the talk' on sustainability, and reducing food waste is a great opportunity for businesses to respond to that demand," explains Evonne Canna of Zero Waste Scotland.

"In doing so, there's potential to increase customer loyalty and gain a competitive edge – as well as saving money by avoiding throwing good food in the bin.

Preventing food waste is one of the most impactful things we can all do to reduce our contribution to the climate crisis, and businesses have a really vital role to play in making that change."



The rich community prospects fine food retail has to offer



STEFANO CUOMO
MACKNADE

What an absolute eyeopener road tripping the Eastern Seaboard of the US has been.

Republican debates, sentencing of the leaders of the Capitol riots, the juggernaut that is the Trump circus all part of the backdrop.

Growing up in the 80s, the US has been an important cultural reference point, but I was never an all shouting all dancing, stars and stripes fanboy.

However, I have discovered a real respect for the US, as it functions on its shores and not just how it is projected to us here, across the Atlantic.

Travelling half the east coast there has been a sense of a simmering tension...nothing really tangible or clear, rather a suggestion of unresolved histories, complex relationships, and jostling futures. Not simply a teetering tension waiting to explode, rather a paradoxical energy that drives the country forward.

I had never fully appreciated the complexities of keeping a nation the size of the US, with all its disparate views, realities and expectations, together under one united flag.

What does bring this country together is a love for charismatic food and drink!

The US has it in buckets.

Having always been a little bit sniffy about American food, albeit aware a country of its size, with its varied topography and rich coastal waters, must have the opportunity to nurture incredible produce, what I discovered had me eating humble pie...as well apple and blueberry.

Knocking around the cheese world, I was aware of the contradiction between the duplicitous Parmesans and Gruyeres of the bulk supply chains, balanced against the world renowned craftsmanship of Jasper Hill's cheese production.

The produce was there, but federal state lines did not support its availability.

How I was wrong. Yes there is a lot of rubbish, folk eat too much, there is too great a use of unpleasant sugars and salts, and an acceptance of feigned service trumping quality produce.

But very quickly I discovered an incredible parallel world of beautiful produce, fantastic markets, eateries pushing the bar, and a real pride in low impact, provenance-rich food and drink. Varied and proudly unique food cultures coming together under one banner.

Always with an eye on the local grocery scene, the highlight for me has been a small coastal town named Belfast (the 'British' towns of New England have been a constant, reminding me of home, of history, a sense of adventure, and opportunity married to the carnage that was wrought by those arriving from these original migrating ports).

When asking the locals of Belfast for the best food joints, the continued response was 'go to the Co-op, it is the heart of the community'.

Now, I have a Co-op in my local village. It is clean and pleasant, really useful, and so adds community value, and it does have a rack of 'local produce' (crisps and spirits), but I would never send a visitor there to experience the soul of my community, least of all to discover our food culture.

This Maine Co-op was a lesson in retail engagement. Yes, Macknade and its peers of independent food halls, farm shops, markets, delis, bakeries, are experiences second-to-none in the world of quality produce, but the real challenge is how do we hit the mainstream with what our enriched grocery retail platform offers?

Too often the narrative-rich, provenance-focused food sector is a bit part player. A wonderful space to visit and a joy to engage with, but not able to truly replace the culturally dictated convenience, price-focussed, pumped-up ranged, marketing dominance of the British behemoths of the mass supermarket industry.

Yet here in a town of less than 10,000, the Co-op was truly the heart of the community, reflecting its richness, and delivering a daily, functional grocery need.

My visit was an absolute joy, full of colour, smells, origin labels and beautiful, beautiful produce, at a price reflective of what could be found in the larger regional supermarkets, and all presented in a practical, ergonomic layout that any casual shopper would find comfort in.

The aisles? Well, they were full of local folk chatting, gossiping and sharing love for the town...it was absolutely at the beating heart of the community.

Here local supermarkets compete and beat their larger rivals.

That America can do this, in a country of its size, where tensions still bubble, and in a landscape often dominated by generic and marketing driven consumption, fills me with so much optimism and inspiration to impact on our own grocery sector, harder and faster. This is our path.

It is what we aim for here in the UK, and a sharp reminder that our food and produce bridge the voids in our society if we can make them available to all.



How (and why) to go B Corp in the UK

Want to do good for people and the planet? Learn how stocking B Corps – or even becoming one – could benefit your business as well as the environment

While the number of certified B Corporations, or B Corps, has grown exponentially in recent years, many still have questions about what this label really means, what the benefits are and how brands, retailers and wholesalers go about joining.

WHAT DOES B CORP MEAN?

B Corps are businesses that have demonstrated that they meet high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.

Earning this label is no mean feat – businesses are required to go through a lengthy verification process by B Lab, the nonprofit behind the movement, and recertify every three years.

"We started our business because we love the landscape of Wales, wanted to create local jobs within the community, and to make products that make life more delicious, with as little environmental impact as possible. Ultimately, B Corp formalises for us a lot of the things we have always seen as very important," said David Lea-Wilson, co-founder of Welsh sea salt brand Halen Môn, which achieved B Corp status in July.

Similarly, peppermint tea and chocolate maker Summerdown, wanted to champion farming for the future, and B Corp certification gave the team a way to honour their holistic approach.

"We view every area of the farm as connected. The health of our peppermint, for example, is dependent on hedgerows and the wildlife found within them. The B Corp environmental pillars formed a structure by which to achieve recognition of these regenerative practises," a spokesperson told *Speciality Food*.

HOW MANY B CORPS ARE THERE IN THE UK?

The UK B Corp community is fast growing, with more than 1,500 B Corp businesses in the UK today, according to B Lab UK.

WHAT ARE THE FIVE PILLARS OF B CORP?

The five categories that are measured in the B Impact Assessment are:

- Governance
- Workers
- Community
- Environment
- Customers

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING A B CORP IN THE UK?

Attaining B Corp certification marks your business as one that puts people and the planet first.
For businesses who aim to be forces for good, it offers an opportunity to showcase your mission for customers and peers.

"As a brand that puts people and planet first, B Corp was a natural step for us," said Amy Moring, co-founder and CEO at Hunter & Gather, which achieved B Corp status in August. "Better business isn't just about profit, it's about the customers we serve, the communities we work with, and the environment.

As a B Corp, we're leading the charge for a healthier future for people and planet, and we're really proud of that."

The stringent certification process gives those who achieve it an internationally recognised standard, enabling them to evidence their good work – as well as give them a framework to guide future work. "Our customers care that they are buying into an ethical company and the B Corp certificate is currently a good indicator of trust," Summerdown's spokesperson said.

"The commitment to base a business's value on more than shareholder returns or revenues departs from conventional business approaches," Jess Lea-Wilson of Halen Môn added. "This shifts the emphasis from competition to collaboration and transparency. B Corp certification offers a way for businesses to invest back into their communities, protect the environment, and serve their employees' needs."

HOW TO BECOME A B CORP

"B Corp is an incredibly rigorous process, it was months in the making," Amy said of Hunter & Gather's certification process.

"During the assessment, every aspect of the business is examined – taking a deep dive into every practice, process and policy. Individual scores are given to the categories of Governance, Workers, Community, Environment and Customers – leaving no stone unturned!"

Jess agreed that the accreditation was challenging because of just how far-reaching it was.

"They look at every single aspect of the business, from supply chains to staff welfare, recycling to volunteer hours," she said.

Plus, the more complicated your business, the more detailed the process. For Summerdown, which includes both its brand and farm, the process took 18 months.

"We were therefore delighted and very proud when we discovered that we were only the second farm in the UK to gain certification."

Cotswold Fayre was one of the founding UK B Corps in 2015, and the B Corp movement and certification process has been hugely foundational in further driving its purpose and mission during the past eight years, says the wholesaler's chief empowerment officer, Paul Hargreaves.

"It's a great springboard to leap forward from towards the more systemic change we need in the world to save our planet, and help reduce the gross inequality in the world. Bad business has been responsible for much of that, and good business is a vital part of reducing it.

We are immensely proud now to have 60 suppliers to have joined us in becoming B Corps too. Only another 300 to go!"

While becoming a B Corp is challenging, brands agree that it's worth the paperwork.

"For any business that cares about the communities they serve and the planet they operate in, B Corp is quite simply the right thing to do," Amy said.

"Not only is it a comprehensive measure of your company's entire social and environmental impact, it demonstrates that you are invested in using business as a force for good, which can in turn help to build customer loyalty, attract investors with shared values and great talent.

"It's also an opportunity to be part of an amazing community of businesses with a shared vision and ethos, which is really exciting," Amy added passionately.

Learn more at bcorporation.co.uk



NFU responds to Efra Committee Food Security Report

The president of the NFU, Minette Batters, says the organisation echos the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Efra) Committee's recent recommendation for strong leadership on the issue of food security.

The report recognised the challenges to, and fragilities of, the British supply chain, impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine, while also considering the impact of high input prices (such as energy and fertilisers), and the effects of consumer food prices on households.

Ministers wrote, "We are concerned that the government's UK Food Security Report, published in December 2021, is already out-of-date. With the government not required by statue to publish the next edition until December 2024, we are calling for the UKFSR to be published annually to accompany an annual food security summit chaired by the Prime Minister.

"There is a need for policy coherence, and for strong leadership of food security, and the Cabinet Office should undertake a comprehensive review of departmental responsibilities and structures regarding food policy and its various facets."

The report goes on to highlight the challenges posed by labour shortages in the food supply chain, and the increased reliance by lower income families on food banks, while noting the increase in obesity levels (30% of the population) nationwide.

"At such a tricky time for many UK households, the report addresses much of the inflationary pressures experienced by both families and farmers and growers," said Minette. "Everyone should have access to affordable, quality, sustainable food, and British farmers and growers need the support of government to have the confidence to continue producing. The report's finding that only 54% of the food eaten in the UK is being grown here is shocking, and it is concerning that this number could decrease further if British food and farming isn't valued."

Minette says food security matters, and added that growers in Britain are well placed to provide, what she calls, climate-friendly food for the nation, while protecting the countryside.

"Last summer the Prime Minister committed to introduce a new self-sufficiency target and annual reporting," she said. "Clearly this needs to happen as a matter of urgency."

> "There is a need for policy coherence and for strong leadership"



PARTNER CONTENT



GETTING READY FOR FESTIVE DELIVERIES

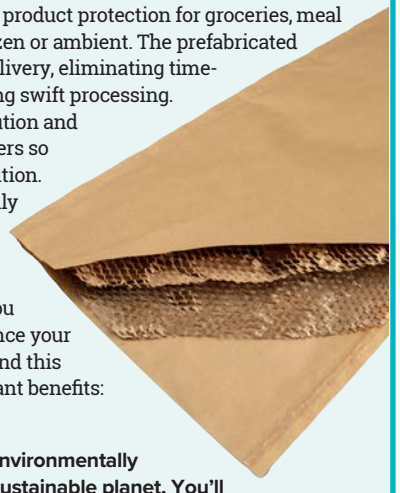
Ranpak's sustainable total cold chain solution

The holiday season is approaching fast, which means it's time to work out how best to meet rising demand for fresh and perishable goods.

Packaging is a crucial part of effective preparation, and Ranpak's innovative RecyCold® climaliner™ and RecyCold® cool packs are a choice that suit your business and your customers alike. Not only do you avoid annoying your customers with plastic packaging, but you also communicate two key messages to them: you're serious about sustainability, and you want their goods to arrive in peak condition.

As true game-changers, RecyCold cold chain solutions are the way to go as you stock up in October so that you're ready for the festive season. The paper-based liners and plant-based cool packs keep both your products and the planet cool, protecting package contents from your warehouse to your customer.

RecyCold climaliner and RecyCold cool packs provide reliable temperature control and effective product protection for groceries, meal kits or speciality food, chilled, frozen or ambient. The prefabricated climaliners are ready to use on delivery, eliminating time-consuming processes and enabling swift processing. They offer a flexible, versatile solution and seamlessly replace traditional liners so that you enjoy a hassle-free transition. RecyCold cool packs are also highly efficient, and we can customize them to match your brand's identity.



Fast turnaround means that you can have all of this ready to enhance your cold chain operations promptly, and this total solution offers many important benefits:

SUSTAINABILITY

Ranpak's thermal packaging is environmentally friendly, contributing to a more sustainable planet. You'll not only improve your business, but also make a positive impact on the world.

RELIABILITY

When it comes to preserving the freshness and quality of your products, Ranpak's thermal solutions are second to none. Your goods will stay in perfect condition from the moment they leave your warehouse until they reach your customers' doorsteps.

EFFICIENCY

RecyCold climaliners and RecyCold cool packs allow you to streamline your entire cold chain process. Say goodbye to complex procedures, and hello to a more straightforward, fast and efficient operation.

BRANDING

Personalisation allows you to demonstrate your commitment to sustainability and quality with packaging that represents your brand values.

In short, you can give your customers the gift of sustainable packaging that aligns with the spirit of the season. Stock up in October and you will ensure that your products can be delivered in style and stay fresh. All while contributing to a better world for all of us.

Don't miss out on this opportunity to enhance your cold chain operations. Visit us at ranpak.com/uk and take the first step towards a sustainable and successful holiday season. For questions or more information, please contact Diana Midson (business development manager UK) via +447881274288 or uk.info@ranpak.com

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Yorkshire bakery announces own-label retail cake range

After four decades of baking for the foodservice market, Yorkshire-based Just Desserts has just launched its own retail classic sponge cake range, due to customer demand.

Each of the newly developed sponge recipes – Victoria, Chocolate, Lemon and Toffee – comes in sustainable and recyclable packaging. They form part of the bakery's vision to expand and develop its handcrafted desserts range for retail. General manager, Kate Williams, says, "We are excited to be able to reveal our first prepackaged products available for the retail market. As part of our growth, Just Desserts products are now available to both business and consumer markets.



"The new sponge cake range really showcases the quality of our brand. This is just the beginning of our retail expansion, and customers can look forward to more retail developments in the coming weeks."

just-desserts.co.uk

New Bircher Muesli from Rude Health

Building on the success of its original Soft & Fruity Bircher Muesli, Rude Health has developed an Apple & Cinnamon variety, made with the same base of finely milled oats that soften in seconds, before adding pieces of real apple and cinnamon for touch of spice.

As the rest of the Rude Health range, the muesli is 100% natural, organic, dairy free, and contains no GMO ingredients.

Founder Camilla Barnard says, "We know more and more people are choosing to have breakfast at home in a bid to save money on their café croissant. However, we also know that people are short on time in the morning and so want a quick and delicious option.



"To meet this growing consumer need, it made perfect sense to build on the success we've seen with our original muesli. We hope that by adding this new softly spiced and classic flavour combination, we will help widen the appeal of our Bircher range."

The new product is available now with wholesalers including Auguste Noel and Suma.

rudehealth.com



Popular Spanish cocoa milk now available in the UK

Specialist importer Empire Bespoke Foods has just made Spanish brand, Cacaolat, available to the UK retail market.

Combining creamy cocoa milk, derived from the best Rainforest Alliance-certified plantations in Africa, and milk from Letona, it is one of the most popular chocolate drinks brands in Spain (with a 62% market share in Catalonia), and can be found in 25 countries.

Cacaolat is still made to its original, 90-year-old secret recipe, is gluten free, and can be consumed hot or cold.

"Cacaolat has touched four generations of consumers since it was launched in 1934," says Empire Bespoke Foods drinks brand manager, Edward Rayment. "We are delighted to be able to bring this daily pleasure of a drink to the UK market."

The drink's packaging is 100% recyclable, complete with a paper straw.

empirebespokefoods.com

Seggiano expands range of Italian essentials with trio of new treats



Artisinal food brand, Seggiano, has expanded its range of best-in-class larder essentials with a new savoury product range and two new sweet snacking products.

Building on consumer desire for unprocessed and healthy vegan food options, the brand has added three soups to its offering, as well as two handmade sweet options. What's more, every single product is suitable for vegans.

David Harrison, co-founder of Seggiano, says, "We're incredibly proud to reveal our new product ranges, which the Seggiano team and our fantastic producers have been working hard to develop over the last few months. Each product is a new journey for us, and we love exploring recipes to bring the most delicious Italian made food to the UK."

Made in partnership with the business's Sicilian producer, the new soup range is an exciting departure from Italian traditional ingredients. Recipes include a deliciously creamy Golden Lentil and Coconut Soup, and a 15 Vegetable Miso Minestra Soup that integrates both Italian and Asian culinary delights. The hearty Organic Bean and Quinoa Soup is the perfect winter warmer and doubles up as a ready made sauce for pasta fagioli.

David continues, "Our soup range is particularly exciting for us, as it's the first time we've incorporated elements from different cuisines alongside those from Italy to create something totally unique. The miso and coconut flavours were inspired by industry trends that are here to stay, and we hope the UK enjoys tucking in."

seggiano.com





Chocolate brand launches biggest ever seasonal range

Free from luxury chocolate brand Booja-Booja has just launched a flurry of exquisitely packaged gifting options, in what the award-winning chocolatier says its biggest winter release to date.



The newcomers include a seasonal box, new truffle shapes (including irresistible loglets) and new gift boxes, with every piece of chocolate being vegan, gluten free, soya free and certified organic by the Soil Association.

Sixteen melt-in-the-mouth truffles feature in the first ever Winter Collection, which debuts the Yuletide Spice, Cherry Bakewell, and Salted Caramel Mocha flavours.

Loglets are available in Salted Caramel Mocha, Hazelnut Crunch, Chocolate Orange and Yuletide Spice.

Two new gourmet gift boxes (Gourmet No1 and Gourmet No2) feature 25 truffles, including a fabulous central truffle star, and flavours such as Gingered Toffee Apple, and Cherry Cognac.

And rounding off the collection are two super premium gifting options, A Grand Adventure and A Magnificent Adventure, in decorative rigid boxes that really stand out on shelves.

Managing director, Matt Gilding, says, "This launch marks the start of whole new chapter in the Booja-Booja story, and we're absolutely thrilled to bringing so many new delights to the market. Not only have we developed lots of incredible new flavours, but we're innovating with how we present our delicious treats too."

boojabooja.com

Scottish brand introduces the UK's first salted honey

Glasgow-based BeeHype Honey has released a new product it believes could rival the ever-popular salted caramel. Its Salted Honey is part of the brand's exciting portfolio of innovative honey products, which also includes the nutrient-dense Ginger Boost (infused with fresh ginger and turmeric).

Salted Honey made with just two natural ingredients – raw honey from ethical beekeepers, and a touch of Alpine salt – and is already being stocked at Selfridges and more than 150 independent retailers nationwide.

"It's truly remarkable how something as simple as a pinch of salt can change the flavour of honey and elevate its sweetness," says co-founder Stela Aleksieva. "When we give out samples of our Salted Honey, people are always surprised how we've made honey taste as decadent as salted caramel, and they love its velvety creamy texture.

"Raw honey is one of the oldest known superfoods that we all need in our busy lives, but more and more people are missing out on it. That's how Salted Honey was born."

The product contains 30% less calories than the average salted caramel spread.

beehype.co.uk





New Toffee Flavour Oaties from Nairn's

Oatcake and biscuit specialist Nairn's has expanded its range of sweet Oaties (which have tripled in sales in the past year) with a new toffee flavour. Infused with British golden syrup and toffee pieces, the Oaties are made with gluten free wholegrain oats, and contain 45% less sugar than comparable products. In fact, according to a recent Action on Sugar report, Nairn's biscuits were found to have lowest amount of sugar per 100g out of the 481 products tested.

The brand's commitment to quality and safety has been recognised by Coeliac UK, with the biscuits independently tested to ELISA standards, and carrying the Crossed Grain logo. Nairn's brand manager, Euan Lutton, says, "Demand for tasty, healthy, but also purse-friendly, free from products has never been higher. However, value offerings are still in short supply in the free from aisle, especially in the sweet biscuit category.

"We are proud to have created yet another gluten-free biscuit that showcases the health credentials of oats, and champions lower sugar content while not compromising on taste, and offering a safe option for those following a gluten-free diet."

nairns.com



THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE DELI

What does the fine food store of the future look like? *Speciality Food* speaks to industry insiders to find out

COMMENTATORS



MARCUS CARTER
ARTISAN FOOD CLUB



CAROLYN HOPKINS
THE TRUCKLE TRUCK



GIANFRANCO PERRI
JUST GOURMET FOODS

Artisan food is arguably something of an institution in Britain. While the past few years haven't been without their challenges for any business, according to some figures there were still 1,493 delicatessen businesses in the UK - up 0.1% 2022 - while others suggest there are more than 1,500 farm shops in the UK. But like any business, the delis, farm shops and artisan retailers of today are not necessarily the same as those we experienced in yesteryears.

Changes in product sourcing, consumer trends and the wider economic backdrop have seen an inevitable evolution in the way artisan retailers operate, notwithstanding huge obstacles like the Covid pandemic and its long-term impact on the sector. But where do all those changes leave artisan retail? Is there still a place for a traditional deli, cheesemonger, farm shop or food hall in 2023? Will they still exist, albeit unrecognisable, or are their days numbered?

In the 30 years he has been working in the industry, Marcus Carter, founder of Artisan Food Club, has seen plenty of change. "Twenty or 30 years ago, there weren't any wholesalers. Independent shops used to source products from all over the UK - they would find the best." That would mean that independent shops and delis would go out of their way to travel the country sourcing items to make them stand out in the crowd, he says.

"There were no geographical restrictions, there was no local, there was just who makes the best, so shops had a very individual feel. Each independent shop had a very independent field because they sourced products from all over the country." But the advent of wholesalers changed all that, which removed some of the unique aspects to each individual store. "I think over the last 10 years, they sort of fell into 'well, we'll just order off the wholesaler'. Which is fine, except all your competitors are now ordering off the same wholesalers."

The drive to 'buy local', while admirable, can also have the same effect, Carter observes. "Consumers started going into independent shops saying 'we want to buy local'. So retailers, instead of finding the best hot sauce or the best chutneys or the best cheese, are now stocking local at the expense of having the best in category."

That may help some local independent producers, he says, but for others, it makes it harder to get stocked in retailers that might not be on their doorstep.

"For the smaller independents that travel 40 miles up the road and visit six farm shops, they get told, 'we can't stock you because you're not local'. And so it's really hard for them to grow."

The kicker is that the same small independent that might struggle to get stocked in an artisan retailer at one point, can later appear in a wholesaler or distributor's brochure and end up in that same deli or farm shop, he points out.

"They'll say no to a producer when they're small and independent, but as soon as they become a certain size and join a wholesaler, it's fine to stock that." The upshot is that certain retailers - whether they be farm shops or delis - might not have quite the same unique range of products that they once did.

"A certain amount have become a chain - they all stock the same product. You can't tell if you're in a farm shop in Kent, Leeds, Cardiff or Truro. Before I walk into any farm shop, I could probably tell you at least 50% of the stock is going to be in there. So as a consumer, I've got no discovery. I've got no wonder."

The drive for convenience has also seen a change in the world of artisan retail, says Carter, with less of the personal, 'led' shopping experience that makes delis stand out from more mainstream supermarkets.

"While you were in the shop, it would be a very much of a led shopping experience - you know, 'come and see what we've got new, this is what we just got in'. And that's disappeared out of the industry. It's almost like a mini supermarket in some places.

People are coming in, picking up what they know, then leaving."

In his view, active 'selling' takes

> "Twenty or 30 years ago, there weren't any wholesalers. Independent shops used to source products from all over the UK - they would find the best"
>
> **MARCUS CARTER, ARTISAN FOOD CLUB**







place less now than it once did in delis and other retailers, leading to a drop in customer loyalty. Without reassurance, time and attention from knowledgeable staff and owners, says Carter, customers have nothing to keep them coming back time and time again, opening them up to shopping around instead.

"It's the reason butchers are bomb-proof - you don't change your butcher because you've got a relationship.You know you're going to get good quality, you know you're going to be told how to cook it, you know you're gonna have a good time. They can open up a butcher's five doors down and you wouldn't use that butcher. But if a deli or farm shop opened up in the area, most people would go and check it out."

On top of that, the growth in additional elements offered by retailers - such as cafes and restaurants - means the shopping experience has been pushed down the pecking order when it comes to consumers' priorities when they visit. "The farm shop cafe used to be the sort of thing you did at the end of your shopping as a little bit of a treat, but not the reason you went to the farm shop. But now people are going to delis and farm shops to eat and drink then shopping on their way out. Everyone seems to have yielded to convenience, without realising they've lost the key elements of what that shopping experience is. I do think that discovery and wonder has gone out of the retail floor. But whether it's gone because retailers are too busy or because consumers have stopped asking I'm not sure."

> "It's more of an experience, shopping with a small business. You get a much more personal interaction between the customer and shopkeeper. People are still looking for that"
>
> **CAROLYN HOPKINS, THE TRUCKLE TRUCK**

Carolyn Hopkins, owner of cheesemonger on wheels The Truckle Truck, doesn't quite agree. In her view, 'faddishness' has gone, leaving people more loyal to brands and retailers in some ways. "You have not got that 'it's here today and gone tomorrow' thing. But that does also make it difficult for new brands to break through," she admits, echoing some of Carter's thoughts about the established artisan brands that are often spotted in retailers. But for Hopkins, experience is still key to securing the longstanding presence of delis and farm shops on the artisan food scene. "It's more of an experience, shopping with a small business. You get a much more personal interaction between the customer and shopkeeper. People are still looking for that."

Given the economic climate, it's unsurprising that experts in the sector admit basket spend is down when it comes to artisan food and drink. But despite this, customer numbers are up anecdotally, which means things are balancing out.

"If you look at basket spend at the moment it's got smaller but more people are doing it," says Hopkins. "So numbers are holding up." Russell Allen, managing director at Midlands-based butchery and deli Aubrey Allen, agrees, saying while things have changed, they haven't changed dramatically. "I think there's been a shift, probably to more British stuff certainly, and people are looking for that local connection a bit more.

"In terms of numbers, I think we have perhaps more customers spending less." It's hard to know why this is, given the squeeze on people's finances, but one might speculate that while some of the more pricey luxuries have had to go, treating yourself to nice food is still an affordable way to feel good.

"I think what we're dealing with here is everyday luxury," says Allen. "If you go to a deli and buy a pot of olives, a couple of nice cheeses and a loaf of bread, it's going to cost you £25. It's not going to cost you £80 or however much it would if you go out. I know a lot of people haven't got £25 but there are some people who have and want to treat themselves, which means they're still getting something amazing, but not paying £100.

"I certainly think that delis are going to benefit from people entertaining more at home with the cost of living and looking for things to serve at home. I think that's a trend." Eating great food at home is something that has benefited Aubrey Allen in recent years thanks to the popularity of its artisan ready made foods, he says, while food gifting continues to be a popular choice - again a positive for artisan retailers - and something Allen doesn't see changing anytime soon.

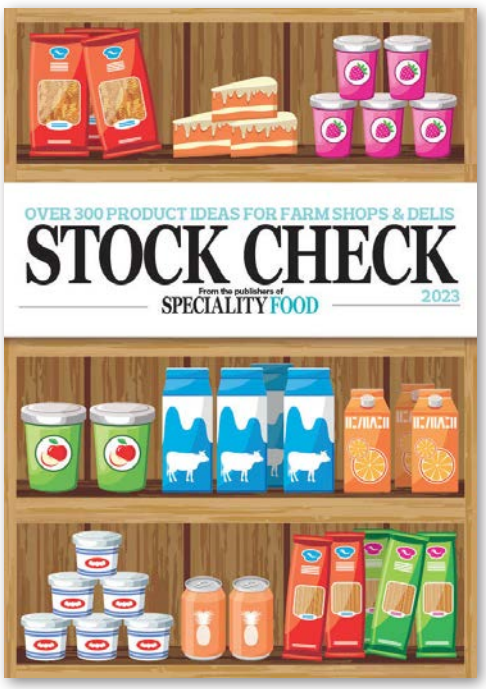
The consensus seems to be that the key elements that make independent retailers appealing will never disappear, but they still need to evolve to be able to compete - something they've done in recent times, but can't afford to stop doing. "Delicatessens

THE **DELI** INDUSTRY IN THE **UK** IS VALUED AT **£926MILLION**, EMPLOYING MORE THAN **10,000** PEOPLE



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> Independent food shops are vital for giving small, specialist brands opportunities to be seen and understood while being able to provide expertise and hands on advice to the consumer

GIANFRANCO PERRI, JUST GOURMET FOODS

play a really important, and still underappreciated, role in independent high streets across the country, and more so than ever as supermarkets have evolved," says Gianfranco Perri, founder and CEO of Just Gourmet Foods, which specialises in the import and distributions of Italian artisan food in the UK. "Independent food shops are vital for giving small, specialist brands opportunities to be seen and understood while being able to provide expertise and hands-on advice to the consumer." But it's not quite as simple as relying on the longstanding love of artisan shops and delis, says Perri, with the onus on retailers to stay one step ahead to stay in the game. "All independents have had to become increasingly nimble and sophisticated in their operations, and now need to use a lot of their energy focusing on how to build a stable community who supports them in the face of changing economic forces," he adds. That could be through offering more in-person events and learning opportunities, to maximising social media reach - working to simultaneously get customers through the door but also manage online offerings.

"Delis need to be open for longer and show more versatility and resilience than ever. This also means that brands need to work harder for them. Shelf space is precious and valuable, and products really do need to be able to offer them meaningful sales and margin as well as a point of difference." The personal touch is another area where experts agree delis and artisan retailers excel. Like Hopkins, Allen thinks the shopping experience will always trump that of a supermarket or more mainstream chain. "People have got to trust you and not feel intimidated, that's the main thing. You've got to be accessible, you've got to guide people." The guidance he refers to is reminiscent of the 'led experience' that Carter speaks of, and for Allen that is still very much present in his own deli.

"When people come up and look a bit puzzled by the cheese counter, for example, you've kind of got to go, 'Well, what's cheese do you normally like?' 'Well, I really like a nice strong cheddar'. 'Okay. Do you like that? Or do you like something a bit different?' 'I'd like something a bit different.' 'Okay, then. What about trying this Irish organic cheese? It's a little bit different, but ticks the boxes in your taste profile.'

You've got to develop that trust with the customers. I think it's about taking people from the familiar to something slightly different rather than completely out of their comfort zone." Perri agrees: "I think the human element should not be underestimated in why people choose to shop in a deli.

It is important for a deli to not feel intimidating or unwelcoming, and for the staff to be able to read the customers' needs with very few cues. Some people will enter because they want to engage and get as much advice and interaction as possible, while others will not be confident in how to ask questions."

He adds, "Having people in the shop who can be sensitive to all the many ways to approach customers is what will make a committed customer base and, ultimately, ensure that everyone leaves buying more than they might had planned!

With the majority of people shopping in supermarkets or online for their core groceries these days, it is also important for independents to build a multi-sensory experience for the customer. Food shopping shouldn't be a sterile process, and we can be positively inspired through all our senses. Good food retailing is an art and one to be indulged with visual impact, smell, taste and through the positive emotions that a customer will hopefully leave your shop with."

With a fine balance between maintaining the status quo and continuing to offer everything people love in their delis and food retailers, and changing things up to ensure they can survive such





IN 2020 **15%** OF PEOPLE VISITED A **FARM SHOP** OR **FARMERS' MARKET** MONTHLY









turbulent times, what does the future hold for these businesses? For Hopkins, change is vital, and there's a chance the days of big delis and shops that almost act as mini artisan supermarkets might be superseded by smaller, more economical operations. "I think delis are going to have to change," she says. "I think the days of the physical big space, like Turnbulls, are slightly numbered. To keep those shelves looking full is a huge expense.

"When you're looking at thousands of pounds sitting on shelves all the time it's a huge investment. I think smaller, possibly more specialist, businesses will thrive." While delis previously had to diversify in order to survive, becoming all things to all people during the pandemic, Hopkins predicts things will be different in the future. "I think now it's going to go the opposite way and will go really small and specialist, so individual cheesemongers, chocolatiers, bakers."

But Allen isn't convinced, saying the "economics don't work out", apart from in tourist areas where people are shopping for novelty value as much as necessity. "I'm not sure our market is sophisticated enough for that," he adds.

"I can't see that someone who comes to buy cheese off us will go 10 minutes down the road, buy something else from someone else. I think these days you have to tick quite a lot of boxes for people. That's my view."

There may be agreement on some things, but it's clear that the 'suck it and see' nature of artisan retail isn't going anywhere, with no guarantee of success and no hidden formula in securing the future of your business.

But there's one thing everyone can agree on, and it's summed up by Perri. "There is very much a place for delis in 2023 – physically and philosophically - but is up to us all as consumers to support them and use their expertise to ensure that our local delis can thrive and continue their role of supporting small food brands so they can have a presence in an ever-challenging, and changing, food landscape.

"Without our independents there would be a rapid homogenisation of the food offer in this country, as well as the reduction in quality available for customers to buy.

It is the grass roots knowledge and care which we need more of in these times and that people will hopefully recognize is too valuable to lose in the face of supermarket dominance. Good delis are keepers of traditional knowledge and food stories and their shelves are filled with opportunities to learn, educate and connect."

FARM **RETAILERS** SAW AN **89%** INCREASE IN **SALES** DURING THE **PANDEMIC**

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>
> **GIANFRANCO PERRI, JUST GOURMET FOODS**

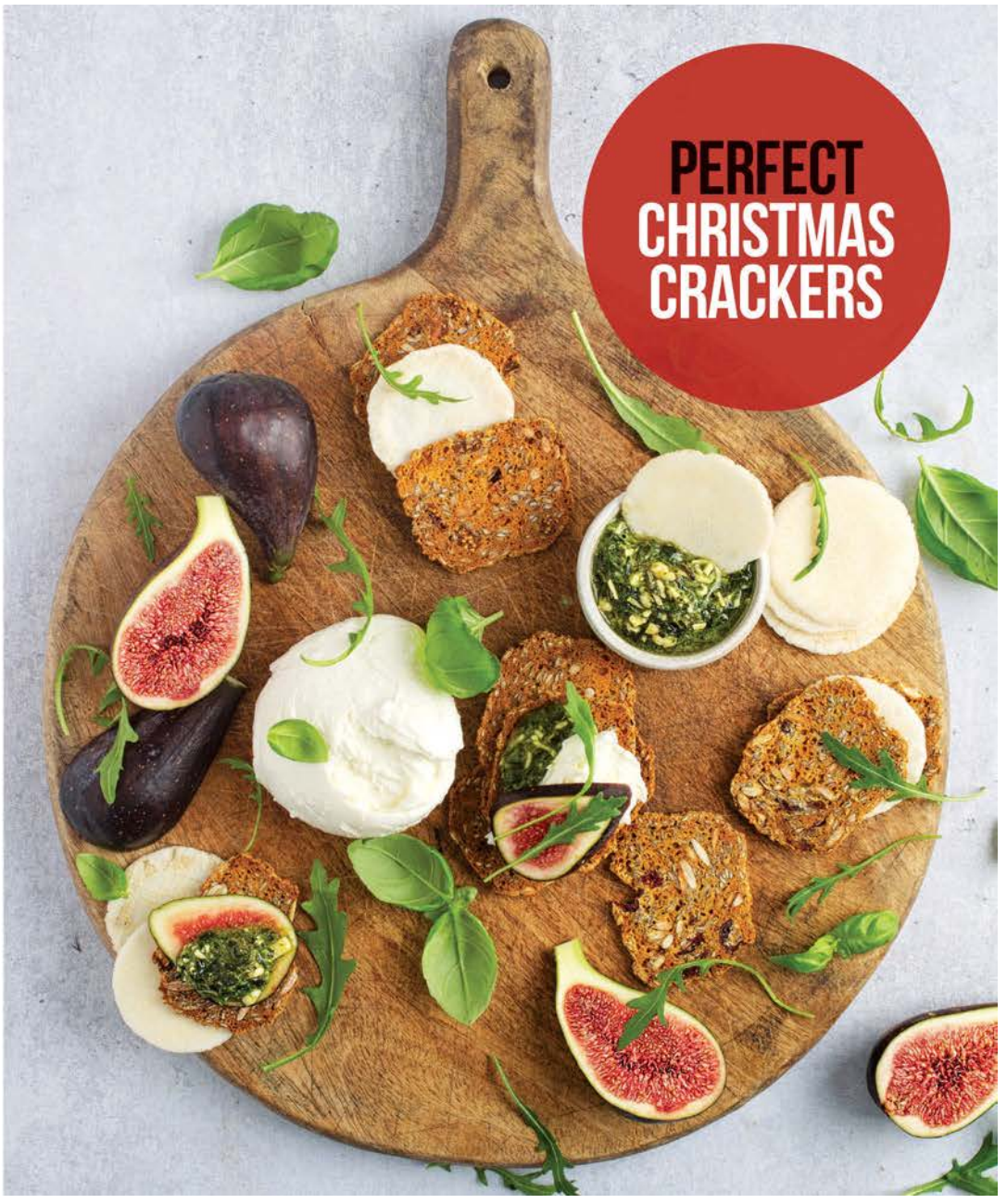
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IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

Retailers from across the UK are busy hanging their decorations, and creating alluring displays, ready for the Christmas rush. *Speciality Food* finds out what makes them tick, and shares their advice and inspiration



BE INSPIRED BY THE PAST BUT LOOK TO THE FUTURE



Bruno Zoccola of Valentina Delis says using data from previous years is important, while keeping an eye on the new and exciting

HOW ARE YOU PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS?
Forward planning is key for Valentina, and by now we've done much of our preparation already. We start planning the minute Easter is over, placing our orders with suppliers in the UK.

We've spent time going through last year's sales - what did well and what we need to replace - and we're always on the lookout for new sellers who we want to work with, and new items we want to stock.

In the weeks and months leading up to Christmas, we generate up a detailed plan to manage our stock levels. Whilst we have a big store, we don't have a huge storeroom and so need to work cleverly to ensure stock arrives when we need it and not to create a bottleneck whilst we're waiting to for shelf stock to be sold.

For us, Christmas begins in the week leading up to Halloween, and after the 31st, we are fully under way. The store is decorated, Christmas products are on the shelves, and our festive promotions begin. It's a long run, but we mix things up - ensuring we regularly move stock around, so customers get a different perspective each time they come in, and are enticed by different products. We also have an in-store Christmas brochure that customers can take away with them, to be inspired by us as they flick through the pages while they're at home.

And we make sure we have an increased number of staff on the shop floor. We believe that it's important to keep many more staff customer side than behind the till so they can share intel and local expertise (especially around the Mediterranean products we specialise in), as well as upselling to customers browsing for something to buy.

We trade up until Christmas Eve and then are back open on the 27th when we usually enjoy a really good trade with people buying presents to visit relatives with or to stock up on delicacies before New Year. From January onwards, it's sale and promotion time!

WHAT ARE YOUR NUGGETS OF ADVICE FOR FELLOW RETAILERS?
You've really got to go for it at Christmas time. Commit to it financially, mentally, and physically, because it isn't an easy time in hospitality. We've had plenty of years that haven't been as successful as we'd hoped, but we've committed to just fighting through all of the difficulties we face.

7 WAYS TO CRACK CHRISTMAS IN 2023



Food consultant Edward Berry of The Flying Fork has plenty of sage advice to share with retailers this season

1 Repetition appeals to shoppers. This is not a season for a great deal of innovation. In my experience, keep it traditional, bring in colour, and look for products customers have regularly bought and loved.

2 Ensure you have plenty of gifting opportunities. When it comes to buying gifts for someone else, customers can be quite a lot more adventurous and impulsive. Make sure you have some stand out pieces around the shop.

3 The most important time of year is immediately after Christmas, gathering data. A good Christmas is so much about the previous year's performance. What sold well? What was overstocked? What did we make money on? What did we have to throw away? Because, come December 26, anything with December 25 or Christmas on it, even with a massive sale, is surely going to go to waste. That analysis is so vital.

4 You will have an awful lot of staff at Christmas. Make sure they are trained well so you get the best value out of them.

5 Consider your opening hours. I think people forget that customers are usually prepared to shop longer – earlier and later. Giving loyalty card holders the opportunity to shop at different times can yield a larger average spend.

6 Hampers still have a place. Have plenty of pre-packed goodies ready so customers don't have to think too much about them. And offer different price points, £10, £20, £50, £100. Hampers are there for the lazy shopper. Offering a delivery service for hampers, if you can, is also worth considering.

7 Indulgence matters. Yes, we are in a crisis, but at Christmas people will spend money they would never consider spending at any other time. Create opportunities for customers to indulge further. Bring stuffings, sauces and stocks into butchery counters, and make sure cheese counters are well prepared with plenty of chutney and crackers.

SEGGIANO


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The worst mistakes we've ever made have been when we've underbought stock. This has been far worse than overbuying, because without enough products to fill the shelves you end up with a half empty store, an uninspiring display, and customers just walking past. With overbuying there is always the option to sell any excess stock in the January promotional period, and at least your shop will always feel abundant – particularly important at Christmas, and a helpful way to build up a customer base for the following year. This year we will be heavily promoting our loyalty card scheme, focusing on a preview of our Christmas offerings.

WHICH PRODUCTS WORK BEST FOR YOU?

We learnt quickly that people want to visit Valentina to buy products that feel outside the box – something special. We don't focus on Christmas puddings that can be bought in any supermarket, we want to offer unusual, artisan panettone, hand-wrapped pandoro, quirky chocolates, and unique bottles of Italian wine.

We also find what people are buying ebbs and flows throughout the Christmas period. In November people focus on gifts (we do a huge trade in kits for pasta making, gingerbread houses and hampers) whilst further towards Christmas it's about stocking up on special delicacies to enjoy around their Christmas table.

ARE THERE ANY PROMOTIONAL OR MERCHANDISING TOOLS YOU FIND USEFUL?

At Valentina we ensure the products are at the centre of our merchandising and promotional tools. We want our shop to feel colourful, unusual, and like a treasure trove of goodies. We don't want any decorations to distract from what we're offering, so we incorporate our stock into the festivities – for example, where other retailers may have a couple of different panettones on display, we create an entire wall of them which looks impressive, shows our expertise, and draws attention to one of our flagship products.

WHAT'S GOING TO BE HOT THIS SEASON?

Definitely our Valentina panettone! People come back year after year for it and regularly gift these to their friends and families.

We think that with the current economic climate, delis and fine food stores will do well as people will treat themselves to quality cheese, red wine, and meats, which are appreciated at this time of year as a spoiling treat, rather than buying 'tat'. We will also be encouraging customers to look at our special, smaller items / stocking fillers, such as Nio cocktails and gianduja chocolate.





NO LONGER THAT OLD CHESTNUT

Across mainland Europe chestnuts have long been a part of the culinary landscape – in the Christmas season, and beyond. They may end up bolstering stews and hearty casseroles. Pureed, they are an essential part of the traditional French dessert, Mont Blanc. And, in candied form, they are a beloved, special treat to be nibbled on with a coffee, or chopped and sprinkled over patisserie, cakes and tarts.

Porter Foods is on a mission to put chestnuts front and centre in British kitchens. Following a modern rebrand in 2022, the team are bursting to share their enthusiasm with fine food retailers, with products already on the shelves of Waitrose and M&S.

The range includes shelf-standing bags of whole or pureed chestnuts, and jars of marron glaces, soaked and gently warmed in vanilla sugar over two weeks for an irresistible flavour and texture.

"Chestnuts are so versatile," says marketing manager Sarah Heath. "They are dairy free, nut free (they are actually a fruit), and gluten free. They're also full of nutrition – high in folic acid and fibre. We could go on about their nutritional value all day.

"They can be used In so many dishes in a catering setting, or in the home, and they really are an all-year-round ingredient. They're not just for putting with your sprouts and bacon at Christmas.

"Whole chestnuts are a great alternative in nut roasts. The puree can be used to thicken risottos, soups and gravy, and the flavour is subtle. It's just a great, natural ingredient we think people should be using more. The puree, for example, can be used in place of dairy as it holds its structure. We've even used it to replace cream cheese in a cheesecake!"



A YEAR IN THE MAKING



Rupert Evans of Denstone Hall Farm Shop says a great Christmas season begins right after the previous one has been put to bed

I have always believed that the magic of Christmas is a year-round journey, not just a seasonal destination. It's about instilling joy, fostering community, and delivering a unique, personalised experience that makes the season truly memorable for our customers. And it all begins with earnest preparations starting in January. From the farm shop and gift shop to the butchery and café, our team work all-year-round to make sure that the next Christmas is as unforgettable as the last.

The festive season is a time of nostalgia, and we pride ourselves on being a part of our customers' traditions. Timeless classics like our famous homemade mince pies, a recipe perfected over many years, continue to be popular, as well as our large range of artisan cheeses, sourced from some of the finest British cheesemakers, and let's not forget our award-winning Denstone Hall rare-breed beef, a centrepiece on many a Christmas dinner table.

In terms of trends, we anticipate a return to comfort and indulgence this year. After the challenges we've all faced, we believe our customers are seeking familiarity and joy in their food and drink choices. We expect to see an increase in sales of luxury items, such as our premium local spirits and gourmet chocolates, as well as a focus on quality, whole ingredients and home-cooked meals, reflecting a desire to make this Christmas truly special.

This year we have implemented a more personalised customer experience through tailored recommendations and exclusive offers. We will analyse customer loyalty data to offer suggestions for festive recipes, wine pairings and unique gift ideas, enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering long-term loyalty.

At Denstone Hall, we also believe in celebrating the season with our community. From November, our café becomes a hub of festive activities. From our much-anticipated afternoon tea with Santa, to our popular wreath-making workshops, tasting events and Christmas fair night, our seasonal events not only bring people together but also help us to create a sense of festive community and tradition.

Amidst all the uncertainty of this last year, we've found success in focusing on what we do best – providing high-quality, locally-sourced and artisan products, as well as delivering excellent customer service. Being authentic, transparent, and dedicated to quality is what continues to set us apart. These are the principles that guide us at Denstone Hall, and I believe they are key to delivering a successful Christmas season.

WE LOVE BEING PART OF OUR CUSTOMERS' JOY



Nick Punter of Suffolk Food Hall says the whole team enjoys getting into the festive spirit in the period before Christmas

WHAT MAKES CHRISTMAS IN RETAIL SO SPECIAL?

I think one of the main reasons is the build up. You're in amongst Christmas and the festive feeling for quite a long time and there's so much excitement when the first Christmas drops start coming in. Having sat near Wendy and Jean, our buyers in the office, I've been hearing Christmas spoken about since March. I know Wendy will be ordering for next Christmas during the end of this year.

The other main reason that it is so special is that you are a part of the joy for customers, whether it's fulfilling Christmas orders, helping build hampers or just seeing the smiles on faces, oh and listening to the Christmas music too (although sometimes it can get a bit repetitive). You know that you are playing a part in such a special day for many people, even if it is a small part of helping them with their shopping.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP SELLERS AT CHRISTMAS?

Obviously being a farm shop predominantly, our butchery is the busiest section, from turkey orders to beef. Second to that would be our hampers. Each year our hamper department has grown, and this year we are expecting an even busier Christmas. We will be offering a selection of ready-made non-seasonal hampers as well as four speciality Christmas hampers and, new for this year, a deluxe hamper. Lucy and the team have been taking hamper orders for Christmas since August and will continue to do so until the very end. They work incredibly hard.

ARE THERE ANY NEW PRODUCTS YOU'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS YEAR?

Our food buyer Jean says she is loving the new packaging from Pump Street chocolate, featuring a local artist's charming watercolours. She's excited about gathering together our largest collection ever of local wines, beers and spirits. There are great advent calendars too, from tea to jelly beans, peanut butter cups, and boozy chocolates. And she is impressed by the gorgeous new biscuit tins from Cartright & Butley, ceramic olive oil bottles with cactus, fish or octopus designs, and some super-cool hot chocolates from Harry's that come in a tin that looks a bit like a paint tin.

> "The other main reason that it is so special is that you are a part of the joy for customers, whether it's fulfilling Christmas orders or helping build hampers"

TAKE ACTION BEFORE THE FESTIVE RUSH BEGINS



Ralph Bishop of Friday Street Farm Shop shares some of his top tips for Christmas preparation.

1 Look at past records on ordering, predicting sales to make sure you have enough stock to avoid running out, but finding that balance of not over ordering unwanted stock.

2 Find out if you need to train up any staff prior to Christmas, even if it's just for the festive period.

3 Promote more gifting ideas for presents, hampers with local produce in and with own branding.

4 Promote any shop offers with your loyalty card scheme to reward shoppers for their custom. This is done visually in our shop as well as via email to our database.

5 Try out vouchers. Last year we gave all customers a 10% voucher off in our farm shop in January when they spent over £10 in December, which worked well and increased revenue

BUYING LOCAL MATTERS



Sam Steggles of Fielding Cottage, says supporting local producers in The Goat Shed farm shop is even more important at Christmas

HOW ARE YOU PREPARING FOR THE FESTIVE SEASON?

Christmas is a really important time for The Goat Shed because it's when all our customers come together and really appreciate the values of buying local more than ever. They're sharing time with their family and loved ones, and that's creating a real buzz around the shop. It's also a time of celebration, and we have lots of great events for our customers to be a part of, from carol singing and storytelling, to the fantastic Christmas menu in the kitchen. We decorate the shop, and open the Christmas shed. It's full flow here as, ultimately for us, it's our harvest season.

WHAT ARE THE PRODUCTS THAT USUALLY SELL BEST FOR YOU?

Being cheesemakers, cheese is at the top of our list! Our award-winning goats' cheese is always in our bestselling products week-in week-out and we do see a huge uplift at Christmas. The cheese goes hand-in-hand with the condiments and crackers from our farm shop to create the perfect pairing.

ANYTHING YOU DO AT THIS TIME OF YEAR TO GENERATE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT?

Successful ideas for us have included creating an Alpine theme in store. We need to recreate that Nordic experience. We want the smell of pine as customers are walking around. We give them mulled wine and mince pies. We have a Christmas event for our loyalty customers to preview the Christmas shed. I think that's really important, because it gives us a chance to interact with our customers whilst still in a work and shop environment, but also on a social basis, and I think that's where retailing has maybe lost its edge from what I can remember as a young boy.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR OTHER RETAILERS TO SUCCEED AT CHRISTMAS?

I think I would be looking at other retailers to give me advice for Christmas! We're relatively new to this game. I think that the important thing, and not just at Christmas but at any point, is to listen to your customers.

Listen to what they wish for, listen to what they're asking you to get, and deliver on it and try to exceed expectations all the time. I think it's important to remember whilst yes, we're here working hard, our customers are here to enjoy themselves and their shopping experience, and we must make that as pleasurable as possible.

Whether that's a mince pie and a glass of mulled wine or a friendly smile and a little chat.

ARE THERE ANY PRODUCTS YOU'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS YEAR?

I'm excited to have our new Christmas menu in our new kitchen going live. I think that's going to be really exciting.

It enables us to make a proper Christmas lunch, and we hope that it will be very well received. I think that, in the shop area, the products which always seem to go well are local beers and gins at Christmas, and we have a wide selection of those as well as our range of cheeses that are perfect for sharing.



COTTAGE DELIGHT A TASTE OF CHRISTMAS

A bundle of treats for customers to indulge in at home, or use for gifting. Including Bucks Fizz marmalade, biscuits, pickle and cranberry sauce.

cottagedelight.co.uk



AHMAD TEA KEW BEYOND THE LEAF INFUSER MUG GIFT SET

A luxurious new gift set from the award-winning Beyond the Leaf collection with Royal Botanic Gardens.

ahmadtea.com



ROSS & ROSS HOMEMADE CURING KIT FOR HAM

This eco-friendly curing kit has been specially designed for Christmas and includes a festive curing mix, roast ham glaze, and easy-to-follow instruction booklet.

rossandrossgifts.co.uk



HAWKSHEAD RELISH BOXING DAY CHUTNEY

A lightly spiced chutney with apples, ginger and sultanas, which encapsulates the taste of winter. Perfect for Boxing Day cheeseboards.

hawksheadrelish.com



LOISON PANETTONE AGRUMATO

Enriched with five citrus fruits – citron, orange, lemon, chinotto, and mandarin, tied together with vanilla notes.

shop.loison.com/en



THURSDAY COTTAGE GINGERBREAD SPREAD

Smooth, creamy and thick salted caramel, with a bold hint of gingerbread spice. Wonderful on toast or pastries, or used in baked goods.

thursday-cottage.com



COCOBA HOT CHOCOLATE BOMBES

Fine milk chocolate spheres, packed with marshmallows. Just pop in a mug with hot milk and indulge.

cocobachocolate.com



THE BAY TREE CARAMELISED ONION GRAVY

Taking the hard work out of Christmas cooking, this vegetarian gravy is packed with flavour. Just heat and serve

thebaytree.co.uk



JAMES ALEXANDER FOODS THREE BIRD ROAST

For the customer who wants everything. Chicken, duck and pheasant, expertly combined and ready to roast.

jamesalexanderfoods.co.uk



TIPTREE ORGANIC CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Made from the highest quality ingredients, including French brandy and thick cut Tawny Orange Marmalade. Palm oil and nut free.

tiptree.com

MEET THE PRODUCER

Belvoir Farm has been delighting customers across the world for nearly four decades

Belvoir Farm may be one of the UK's most recognised premium cordial and sparkling drinks brands, but its heart is firmly rooted in its home, in the midst of the Leicestershire countryside.

This landscape, of wild hedgerows, wildflower meadows thriving with bees and butterflies, and woodland dotted with bird boxes, is echoed in the delightful botanical illustrations etched onto Belvoir Farm's labelling.

"I don't think I've ever been so surrounded by nature," says shopper marketing manager Harry Clark, talking about the farm where he and his closeknit team of 80 colleagues spend their days bringing Belvoir Farm's drinks to life.

The environment they work in is a constant reminder of the core values of the brand. To create delicious cordials and sparkling drinks, while working in harmony with nature.

This ethos has been with Belvoir Farm since the beginning, in 1984, when director Pev Manners' mother Mary conjured a beautifully-bright, delicate and delicious elderflower cordial in their home kitchen, made with dainty flowerheads gathered from nearby trees as they came into bloom in early summer.

Friends and family were so entranced by the drink that Mary took it to local farmers' markets and shops.

Almost 40 years on, this very same recipe remains the beating heart of the business. Something that makes the cordial especially wonderful is the fact that, to this day, the local community is involved in its creation.

Harry explains, "Every year we have an elderflower harvest, which is really unique to us. Between May and June we have six really amazing weeks where our 60 acres of organic elderflower come alive. We have a team of pickers, and we advertise for local people to come and help us.

"What's incredible is that those flowers are bottled within a very short space of time. Once picked, they are infused with sliced lemons for 24 hours and are ready to be bottled just a day later!"







Beyond the lovely, quintessentially English Elderflower Cordial, Belvoir Farm has created a further 19 flavours, spanning the seasons, from ripe Raspberry & Lemon, through to bright and punchy Ginger cordial ideal for the autumn months, and into cooler days with a delicately spiced Mulled Winter Cordial.

As we close in on the cooler months, with consumers switching into sweaters and wellies, Belvoir Farm's ready to drink punches really do come into their own too. Available in a 750ml format, and designed to be gently warmed, they include Festive Fruit, Spiced Ginger, and Mulled Winter varieties.

A delicious alternative

The no and low alcohol market has seen real growth over the past three years, as more consumers look to moderate their intake of wine, beer and spirits.

Constantly innovating, Belvoir Farm was on the cusp of this burgeoning trend, and has responded by expanding upon its already popular Gently Sparkling collection (available in 250ml and 750ml bottles, and 250ml and 330ml cans across 18 unique flavours).

In 2021 a non-alcoholic cocktail range was introduced. "Certainly, since Covid-19, we've found people are wanting a healthier lifestyle, and have been looking for something different," says Harry. The trio of 750ml bottled drinks includes Passionfruit Martini infused with tropical fruit and Madagascan vanilla, Peach Bellini, and Lime and Yuzu Mojito. These are now available in handy 250ml cans, handy for parties and events.

Belvoir Farm has carved out a position as a bartender's friend too, with a new sparkling mixers category added in 2022, designed to be combined with spirits, or simply poured over ice, and crowned with a garnish. At just 20 calories per 100ml, in a 150ml can format, the range pushes boundaries, incorporating evocative, super premium ingredients. Floral Fizz marries elderflower with hibiscus and geranium, while Spicy Ginger is a peppy medley of yuzu, ginger and sancho peppercorn.

As with all Belvoir Farm products, fruit and flavour come first. Every recipe is 100% natural.

> "Between May and June we have six really amazing weeks where our 60 acres of organic elderflower come alive"

A new approach

With new HFSS legislation in place, and consumers increasingly considering their sugar intake, Belvoir Farm has launched into the sugar-free arena. Packed with flavour, and naturally sweetened with stevia, and nothing artificial, the brand's No Added Sugar cordials are available now in three flavours – Exotic Mango & Passionfruit (6 calories per serving), Elderflower & Apple (13 calories per serving), and Sicilian Lemon (13 calories per serving). "They all fit in with our mantra to be naturally delicious. There's no compromise at all on taste," says Harry proudly.

Working with nature

"Our sustainability mantra is to give back more than we take, and to tread lightly on the land," says Harry. "We send no waste to landfill, we've planted 10,000 trees since 1984, and we do lots of things on the farm to enhance and promote nature. Our aim is to run on 100% renewable energy by 2025." Most recently, Belvoir Farm has partnered with The Woodland Trust, to promote the charity (which shares so many of its values), while helping to protect precious woodlands across the UK.

"We have limited edition products with the new special labelling, across our core ranges, in store now. Our aim is to help them restore over 160 acres of wood and trees. Also linking into this is the artwork on our bottles. We asked students at the University of the Arts London to come up with the design, so we're hopefully helping to foster the next generation of creatives."



Stocking a range of Christmas gifting options is essential to help bring in additional revenue this winter



1 FURNISS OF CORNWALL
CHRISTMAS TUBES

Try the multi award-winning products from Furniss Of Cornwall - from biscuits to shortbreads and cookies.Each treat is baked with exceptional care and passion, with attention focused on producing the highest quality delights. A gorgeous gift option is these beautifully packaged Christmas Tubes full of the most divine Clotted Cream Shortbread, delectable Dark Chocolate Gingerbread and an elegant Plain Gingerbread.

furniss-foods.co.uk

2 BONDS OF LONDON
WINTER WONDERLAND CANDY CUP

Bring tasty confectionary to your Christmas offering by stocking the Bonds Winter Wonderland Candy Cup. This bright sweet assortment includes blackcurrant flavour jelly penguins, sugar-coated raspberry and vanilla snowflakes, white chocolate flavour buttons, and marshmallows in the festive colours of candy canes. The candy cups make the perfect gift this season and are ideal for putting alongside other stocking fillers. Available in a case of 6 x 265g cups.

worldofsweets.co.uk

3 SNOWDONIA CHEESE
LUXURY CHEESE TOWER

Beautifully presented in recycled cellophane tied with a branded ribbon, this Luxury Cheese Tower makes the perfect Christmas gift for cheese lovers – or a centrepiece for the festive cheeseboard. A truckle of Black Bomber (Snowdonia Cheese's signature extra mature Cheddar) forms the base of the tower, topped with the vintage Red Leicester, Red Storm, and a mini Truffle Trove, combining extra mature Cheddar with with black summer truffle.

snowdoniacheese.co.uk

4 DRIVER'S PICKLES
PICKLE SELECTION

Founded in 1906, Driver's Pickles is a fifth generation family pickle manufacturer based in Leicester. Its award-winning pickles, relishes and chutneys combine the finest ingredients and vinegars from around the world, to deliver a traditional product with a modern twist.
The full range, from Red Cabbage with Onion, to Chunky Picalilli, and beautifully-curated gift sets to suit most dietary requirements, can be viewed online

pickle-lovers.co.uk



5 COTTAGE DELIGHT
A TASTE OF CHRISTMAS

Bringing the sparkle to the festive season, Cottage Delight's range of fabulous foodie gifts includes this eye-catching and great value gourmet pack filled with essentials. Shoppers will be delighted to find three of the trusted and popular brand's signature gold label jars within the set. They include Bucks Fizz Marmalade, Perfect Party Pickle and Classic Cranberry Sauce, alongside crumbly Crunchy Chocolate Biscuits as an extra little treat.
cottagedelight.co.uk

6 BY JULIA
GULLANE GLÖGG

The answer to delicious mulled wine, without all the fuss and effort. The mulling has all been done for customers, with the brand combining the perfect blend of spices and orange, so all that is needed is to add some red wine, heat through and serve. The concoction can also be added to sparkling wine and enjoyed as a delicious chilled spiced winter cocktail. An essential for the drinks cupboard.
byjulia.co.uk

7 WALKER'S NONSUCH
LUXURY TOFFEE SELECTION

Unique to the family company, this selection includes four exciting slabs of traditional toffee with a real hammer, for added theatrics. Made with whole milk and sugar, and over 125 years of cooking experience, the taste and chew is second to none. A little history and instructions on how to break and enjoy this delicious treat are shown on the back of the pack. Perfect for impulse purchasing whilst offering quality at affordable prices.
walkers-nonsuch.co.uk

8 HAWKSHEAD
CHRISTMAS GIFT BOX

A selection of four delicious Christmas-inspired condiments perfect for the festive season. This gift box includes Christmas Chutney, Boxing Day Chutney, New Year Relish and Fruity Cranberry Sauce. All the products are gluten-free, nut-free and suitable for vegans. Other gifts and hampers are available across the range, with relishes, sauces and chutneys that will bring a little something special to customers' tables this December and beyond.
hawksheadrelish.com

IT'S TIME TO PARTY

The festive season isn't just about the 'big day' itself. There are pre-Christmas get-together to plan... and New Year's Eve fun. *Speciality Food* finds out what the must-haves are for retail in this category



COMMENTATORS



CLAIRE WARREN
THE EAST STREET DELI



LAURA ROBERTS
LAURA'S LARDER

The holiday season is a busy time. Working out who's going to be where on Christmas Day. Present buying. Arranging travel for your aunt June. Frantically assessing whether you've got enough chairs and table space. Ordering the food. Cooking. The list is almost endless. And the result? So many of us feel fraught, frazzled and, frankly, at the end of our tether by the time it's time for the turkey feast.

Inevitably there will be parties and gatherings in the run up to the day. For family who can't make it. For friends. Colleagues. But most of the population will probably be in agreement that going full pelt in the kitchen simply isn't an option. Limping tiredly towards December 25, consumers are looking for quality (something to impress), convenience (as little cooking as possible) and value for money.

You can't go wrong with classics

The team at Cotswold Fayre, says, "Creating a memorable party food spread requires a balance of flavours, textures and presentation."

The specialist wholesaler recommends stocking up on products that are visually appealing, easy to grab, and, crucially, easy for customers to prepare and serve.

A variety of dips, crisps, chips and dips are a must, as are pre-packed portions of cheese, charcuterie, antipasti and spreads.

"Finger foods are a party favourite," the wholesaler adds, saying you can't go wrong stocking savoury filled pastries and pies – especially if they're frozen, and can be whipped out at a moment's notice. Cotswold Fayre's buyers recommend The Original Baker sausage rolls, pasties and quiches, Samosa Co Indian party selection packs, and Crosta & Mollica's pizzas.

"Don't forget the snacks and nuts for texture – with cocktails to wash them down. We like Xochitl tortilla chips, award-winning Cambrook nuts, and Two Farmers' party tins, along with REAL sparkling tea, Belvoir's non-alcoholic cocktails, The Uncommon canned wine, and Crumbs beers (made with bread that would have gone to waste)."

Hassle-free hosting

Fine food retailers, especially delis and farm shops, are in an excellent position to serve party planners, as their shelves and counters naturally burst with fuss-free options.

As Claire Warren, co-owner of The East Street Deli, says, her job is to take the hassle away from customers. "We are more than happy to talk them through every area they need, from cheese, meats and antipasti, to sweeter treats such as Italian cannoli, or maybe a tray of locally made chocolate brownies."

Using your expertise to guide customers, again, making shopping as easy as possible, is vital. "We have a great range of beers, wine and spirits, so we'll happily look at cheese and wine pairings, or make sure they have a selection of local craft ales," Claire adds. "We never expected to sell as much off licence as we do, but I think it's a reflection on how people are eating and drinking at home with friends rather than going out."

A point of difference

It's easy for customers to head to supermarkets, where they can forage for the same old generic products, so speciality food stores need to make sure they have a comfortable welcoming environment, and plenty of off-the-beaten-track goodies, Claire points out.



"Through offering great service and having knowledge about the products you stock, you will show the consumer the real added benefit of shopping in a small independent delicatessen or fine food shop."

Claire thinks having a wide range that covers all aspects is vital. "Our deli might be small, but you can get everything from cheese, to crisps, to salsa and dips, local lager and the finest English sparkling wine."

Her personal favourites for parties are Perello Gordal Picante olives, Spanish Torres crisps, and the Superbon artisan crisp range. "That's been a great introduction over the last 12 months."

"For parties, people are grabbing things we tend to sell really well all-year-round," says Laura Roberts of Laura's Larder, adding that she will supersize some products as the festive season draws nearer. Like Claire, her customers are also huge fans of Perello olives. "We sell a lot of the 350g tins, but will have 600g tins for Christmas so people can cater for bigger gatherings. Also, where we might sell single packs of cured meats and salamis, the whole salamis or selection packs seem to be more attractive for people at Christmas. They can just open the packet and lay them out."

Laura says she's being asked for more products flavoured with truffle, and that truffled Baron Bigod is always a huge hit at this time of year.

FROZEN FOOD FITS FOR PARTY SEASON



Rupert Ashby, chief executive of the British Frozen Food Federation, says embracing frozen products is a cost effective and consumer friendly way to stock up this Christmas

Traditionally, frozen party food was associated with convenience and affordability, being the go-to choice for busy family households and budget-conscious shoppers. However, due to factors such as the current cost-of-living crisis, there has been a shift in consumer attitudes towards frozen party food.
Shoppers are searching for, and finding, restaurant or professional caterer options in the frozen aisle, which impress their guests without stretching their constrained budget.

The cost of eating out in Britain has risen by almost 15% over the past year, making restaurant dining unaffordable for many. Whilst shoppers are eating out less on special occasions to save precious pounds, they still want to treat themselves and their friends when it comes to having parties within the comfort of their own homes.

Fine food stores and farm shops are perfect places to find frozen party food that offers high-quality and ingredient transparency. We are increasingly seeing more artisanal and crafted frozen party food appearing, offering unique, innovative flavours. Farmyard Frozen was founded in 2021. A team of chefs make all their frozen dishes by hand, which are now stocked in approximately 28 farm shops and specialist outlets across Norfolk and Suffolk. Their Farmyard Gold Bar, which contains caramelised white chocolate mousse on a dark chocolate base, won Retail Innovation Product of the Year at this year's British Frozen Food Awards. This brings the taste and texture of restaurant quality desserts to consumers, making it perfect for parties and large family gatherings.

Even when it comes to party food, the shift towards healthier eating is undeniable. More consumers are on the hunt for mouth-watering food that is healthy and nutritious. According to Public Health England, approximately 61% of people are now looking to consume healthier foods. We have seen many brands and retailers react to this change in consumer preference and there is now a wide array of frozen party food options that combine health-conscious considerations with vibrant flavours. For example, Aldi launched their range of frozen Argentinian prawn skewers, with the garlic and herb variety boasting only 50 calories per 48g serving.

According to statistics from YouGov, as of July 2023, vegans, vegetarians and flexitarians account for 21% of the British public. With the growing interest in this type of diet has come a diverse range of frozen party food that makes vegetables and meat alternatives the star. Delicious vegetable spring rolls, crispy bang bang cauliflower bites, and sweet potato falafel balls name just a few of the innovations that allow consumers to serve party food that caters to all tastes and requirements.

Many British Frozen Food Federation (BFFF) members have been innovating in this market segment to push the boundaries of conventional finger foods. Each year, the BFFF hosts the British Frozen Food Awards, which recognise the highest quality, tastiest and most innovative frozen products on the market. With the level of innovation we are seeing, I am looking forward to seeing the excellent products that are entered in 2024.



She's also seen an uptick in sales of Mexican food recently, which lends itself to parties – especially as tequila is reported to be THE drink of the season. "This trend isn't going anywhere soon. People are loving proper tortillas, really good spicy sauces like salsa macha (we get it from the lovely Chili Maven), and we have the most incredible pre-mixed bottles of Margarita from Bottle Bar which would go perfectly alongside any of those things. It is insanely good. We always have it in our house on Boxing Day."

Around the shop, Laura will place enticing nibbles in colourful packaging to catch customers' eyes. Salad dressings and warmer weather products are relegated to the back of the store (with signage telling customers where to find them) so party centrepieces can take the stage. "It really is time to throw a light on things we don't sell all year. So chocolate-covered crostini, different jars of dips, honeycomb bites. Things that look cute."

Grazing craze continues to grow

"The people who spend more money for gatherings are those who are really comfortable with having friends over, and they know what they're going to grab," says Laura. She's seeing an ever-increasing growth in interest for grazing platters and charcuterie boards, as well as more 'out-there' fads such as butter boards, or even whole balls of soft cheese covered in potato skins. "People are so influenced by social media and what they see. They want to recreate everything at home. They want impressive, photographable centrepieces."

"We love guiding our customers through the process of putting a grazing board together," says Claire. "Obviously cheese is always a winner, with it being the biggest department of our shop. As we are leaving summer picnic season the offering will change slightly from soft cheeses to the bigger flavours, such as hearty Cheddars and blue cheeses."

Claire says recommending baking Camembert and Raclette for parties is a fun idea for grazing. "And each board needs a good selection of charcuterie. We offer big packs of local charcuterie from The Real Cure, and a few flavoured salamis such as Italian finocchiona or truffle salami, which have always been a big hit with our customers."

Her other musts for grazing are olives and stuffed vine leaves.

Anyone with an interest in food who's been scrolling through social media this summer will likely have found their feeds flooded with vibrant pictures of tinned fish, and fish boards. They're fast becoming the supermodels of the grazing world. The trend is brilliant for retailers, ushering a whole new (often younger) audience to the tinned food market.

CRUNCH TIME

No party is complete without a bumper sharing pack of crisps. They're the nation's favourite snack – especially in the festive season. A brand that lends itself to celebrations is Two Farmers, which prides itself on being one of the most sustainable crisp makers in the UK. Two Farmers grows its own potatoes before seasoning with prime, natural flavours - from the nation's favourites Ready Salted and Cheese and Onion, to Woodland Mushroom and Wild Garlic.

They're available in 500g tins (ideal for gifting or taking along to any shindigs customers are invited to), and in 150g, fully compostable sharing bags. The 100g tins make excellent stocking fillers.

Laura says she's been tracking the fish trend for a while, adding that more and more customers are visiting her, asking for sustainable varieties, in flavours that pack a proper punch.

"It's so great. Suddenly, for delis, stuff that might have sat on the shelf for a little while is flying out. I'm so pleased I got in there early."

As well as many of the tins (from heritage brands to the funky new wave) being beautifully packaged, the draw for consumers towards fish is its versatility, and the fact it doesn't need lots of accoutrements. "All they need really for a platter is some lovely butter and bread. It will take them back to those holidays in the sun."

Laura thinks it would be a good idea this Christmas for retailers to keep on top of their tinned fish stock, looking for anything quirky or interesting. "We've got scallops in a Galician sauce, mussels escabeche, tuna in chimichurri, mackerel and tuna pates, tuna in olive oil, spiced sardines, anchovies, and these brilliant baby squid stuffed with rice and ink."

2023 STOCK CHECK



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CAVIAR

A byword for luxury, caviar adds opulence to your offering and saltiness to sales. Sally-Jayne Wright finds out more

In April, London's first-ever caviar cafe and deli, Petrossian, opened in south Kensington, and in May, Elsinore launched Masago - orange caviar from capelin roe - into 191 Waitrose stores.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CAVIAR TREND?

- Asian-inspired cooking and make-at home sushi kits
- The popularity of sushi topped with salmon roe (Ikura sushi)
- Social media. Champagne and caviar 'bumps' went viral in 2022. Bumping is where you dab caviar on your hand, let it warm for a few seconds, throw it into your mouth and follow up with bubbly.
- Consumers spending less on eating out and more on gifts and luxuries for home consumption

WHAT IS CAVIAR?

In the UK there's no strict definition. The word caviar is used equally for Oscietra Russian sturgeon eggs (50g for £110 at a Chelsea deli) and Lykkeberg Lumpfish roe (100g for £4.80 from Tesco online). However, there are two entirely separate markets: real caviar and more affordable fish roe.

ISN'T REAL CAVIAR THE LIGHTLY SALT-CURED, UNFERTILISED ROE OF STURGEON FISH?

You're right, and there are many types including Beluga, Ossetra and Sevruga. The genuine article is black, brown, graphite or olive, never red or orange. The golden-yellow eggs of the small Albino sturgeon - £4,000 a kilo - are an exception.

WHAT DOES 'MALOSSOL' MEAN?

It's a Russian term for quality meaning 'little salt' - traditionally used to distinguish higher grade caviar from ordinary caviar.

WHY DOES REAL CAVIAR COST UP TO £100 FOR A 30G JAR?

It is never pasteurised so more fragile than fish roe. Unopened, it has about three months' shelf life.

Tarek Azabbi of Caviar Elite supplies Antonius-branded Russian and Siberian caviar to Partridges deli in London. He says, "It takes patience and skill to hand-rear sturgeon, and it can take 12-14 years for the females to reach egg-laying age. Overfeed to rear them faster, and the eggs will be fatty." He refers to those farmers who for profit, harvest eggs when fish are only five to eight years old.

HOW DO YOU FIND A SUPPLIER?

Partridges' manager Androulla Lambrou says, "You don't find a caviar supplier, they find you!" Partridges buys real caviar from Caviar Elite on a sale-or-return basis, and their minimal stocks can be replenished within 24 hours, ensuring freshness. Caviar Elite provides gift packaging and in-store tastings.

CAN THEY HARVEST THE EGGS WITHOUT KILLING THE FISH?

Yes, though experts told us 'eggs from the second harvest aren't nearly as good'. If your customers would like to buy British and support a conservation project, then stock K.C. Caviar, produced in Yorkshire. Lifelong angler John Addey aspires to protect two of the most endangered sturgeon types; in the wild this pre-historic fish lives 60 to 100 years.

WHO BUYS THIS SUPER-PREMIUM PRODUCT?

Azabbi says, "Three types of customer: those for whom caviar is part of their food culture such as Russians, Ukrainians, Iranians and Poles; wealthy show-offs; and gourmets treating themselves."

IS REAL CAVIAR PRODUCTION SUSTAINABLE?

Wild sturgeon fish are critically endangered, so farming sturgeon for caviar offers some protection. With most caviar production fish are killed, though the fish is often sold and eaten. Sturgeon tastes like halibut.

ANY TIPS FOR HOW TO SELL REAL CAVIAR?

- Quality is everything. Customers paying top dollar expect the best
- Oscietra outsells Siberian
- Bundle as a gift with vodka, fizz or mother-of-pearl caviar spoons
- Check labels carefully. Fakery abounds

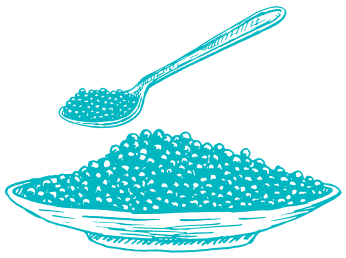
WHOSE FISH ROE PRODUCTS DO YOU LIKE?

Elsinore, owned by Golden Acre Foods, offers masago, lumpfish, trout and salmon caviar. Ronde des Mers and Le Lien Ltd are other brands seen at top delis.

WE DO A LOT OF PRIVATE CATERING. IS THERE SUCH A THING AS VEGAN CAVIAR?

Yes. A Danish company, Jens Moller Products, makes an exciting range of seaweed caviar called Cavi-Art. The brand will be at the Plant-Based Expo this November. Its wholesale partnership with Vegetarian Express starts in late Autumn.

If you're looking to garnish canapes, then Burren Balsamics' Citrus Pearl Bursts may well fit the bill. They 'add a vibrant burst of colour and flavour to smoked fish and cocktails'.



'QUALITY IS EVERYTHING. CUSTOMERS PAYING TOP DOLLAR EXPECT THE BEST'

HOW DO WE MAKE THE MOST OF THE TREND?

- Would your supplier subsidise paid-for, sushi and canape-making demos and in-store tastings?
- Introduce a Scandinavian brunch with a luxury price to match
- Black lumpfish roe outsells salmon roe, likely due to being a more affordable option at around half the price (Elsinore)
- Younger customers may prefer Doritos to blinis as a carrier
- Sales peak at Valentine's, Father's Day, Easter and Christmas

WILL THE TREND LAST?

It will take time as consumers lack confidence. Casper Gorniok, product brand manager of Golden Acre Foods says the "UK palate is 'cautious' about caviar and indeed fish in general". Yet 40 years ago, the idea of eating raw fish in sushi was incredibly radical.

With award-winning masago, Elsinore aims to tap into the phenomenal growth of the UK sushi market, the volume of which rose 29.8% YOY to December 2022 (seafish.org/Nielsen IQ).

Most consumers think of caviar as eye-wateringly expensive and exclusive. Time to sell them value alternatives and offer how-to-eat tips.

> "Black lumpfish roe outsells salmon roe, likely due to being more affordable"



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MEET THE PRODUCER

The demand for premium ready meals, just like you'd make at home, is on the rise. With 30 years of expertise, Lodge Farm Kitchen has all the products you need to deliver this category in your store

All's well that ends well...or so the saying goes.

Someone who can wholeheartedly relate to this is Louisa Stout, who has spent the last three decades crafting delicious ready prepared meals for the fine food retail market alongside husband John, as Lodge Farm Kitchen.

Each of the range of 50 dishes (sold from Glasgow to the tip of Cornwall) is painstakingly researched, trialled, and sampled in their professional kitchen in Herefordshire, and made using only the best, all-natural ingredients, just as their customers would rustle them up at home.

As is the case with many artisan food producers, the business was never in Louisa or John's 'five-year plan'.

Newly imported to a smallholding from London, each of them with big careers, the couple had designs on living 'the good life' when they arrived in the countryside 30 years ago. A field was converted into a kitchen garden. There was plenty of space for their three young children to run about in. The house was ripe for renovation. But, says Louisa, things changed very quickly.

"I ended up not working, and John's job lasted six months, so we ended up with three children, no income, and a farmhouse falling around our ears!"

It was time to change tact, with Louisa drawing inspiration from her family to start a restaurant from their home two evenings per week. Very soon she began to think about food in a more commercial way, and after a year of deliberating, Louisa and John gained SALSA accreditation, and launched Lodge Farm Kitchen with a collection of six ready meals based on the farmhouse favourites they loved to eat at their own table.

It's been full steam ahead since moving the business to a new kitchen in Ross-on-Wye, where the couple work alongside 15 dedicated



members of staff.

"We are a small business though," Louisa says. "We're not in supermarkets, nor do we want to be. We try to set ourselves apart as we're a kitchen, not a factory. Everything we cook is made by hand. I want seven-year-olds to be able to spell the ingredients on the deck.

I don't want to use ingredients people don't recognise. We only use what people might have in their kitchen at home. It is real, wholesome food."

In addition to using locally-sourced meat (including free-range chicken) and as much other local produce as possible to ensure the very best





quality, Louisa says one of the most important things to note about Lodge Farm Kitchen's food is that it goes through a blast freezing process. "When you put it on your plate, it's as if I just cooked it fresh for you. It retains all the nutritional qualities that make it so fresh."

Each of the 50 meals is sold frozen in single, double, or some family-sized portions. Louisa's absolute favourite is the Beef and Root Vegetable Casserole. "It's inspired by a trip to Provence John and I went on with our son, Sam. We walked into this very very uninspiring-looking café. It was like a greasy spoon, with plastic chequered tablecloths.

But there was this amazing French woman cooking this beef casserole, and it was just incredible. Full of red wine and herbs de Provence. She gave me the recipe."

Lodge Farm Kitchen's Lancashire Hotpot was developed alongside a friend of the family, Josh, who



worked in the business for a year to gain experience before setting his sights on positions in Michelin restaurants.

"What really helped," says Louisa, "was having a Northern male in the kitchen! He had a completely different perspective. He said 'why don't we put some black pudding in this?'. I hate black pudding, but he said it would be really good, and it's been a huge success. I love it now."

The range includes options for vegetarians and vegans too, with several vegan products waiting in the wings for Christmas, including a Gaia Wreath, two Wellingtons, and bread sauce.

The spice of life

Louisa and John are delighted by their new line of curries, available from the beginning of November, with a tremendous amount of love, care and attention put into ensuring the recipes are as authentic as possible.

"These are the meals I've found hardest to make," Louisa admits. "It's because we don't buy any pastes. We easily could have done that, but then our meals would taste like everybody else's, and I didn't want that. We've developed our own blends of spices, which we roast to really carry the flavours through"

While mass market producers may boil the chicken for their tikka masala, Louisa insists on the best, so at Lodge Farm Kitchen it's marinated and grilled, adding body, texture and a truly smoky flavour.

Completing the line-up are Aloo Gobi, Beef Massaman, Chicken Jalfrezi, Jackfruit Jalfrezi, Lamb Rogan Josh, Lentil Daal, Paneer Tikka Masala, and Squash Curry. Several of the dishes are certified organic.

Food that sustains

Every part of the chain that Lodge Farm Kitchen can control in the making of its meals, is as sustainable as possible, which is incredibly important to Louisa and John. Every product is presented in a wooden tray (which customers are encouraged to recycle in the garden, perhaps for starting off vegetables). Sleeves are made with recycled cardboard and printed with vegetable ink. And there is little to no waste, with food regularly donated to a local food bank. Additionally, the kitchen is palm oil-free.

Contact Lodge Farm Kitchen directly online for enquiries, with delivery available across the UK.



READY MEALS GETTING A ‘GLOW UP’ IN FINE FOOD RETAIL

Fresh, convenient and full of flavour, premium frozen meals are the ultimate fast food solution, with delis and food halls stocking up to meet growing customer demand

Spending time in the kitchen, conjuring up something delicious, is one of life’s ultimate pleasures. During the Covid lockdowns more people discovered the joy of cooking, with recipes topping Google search in this period, and Youtube reporting a 20% surge in interest for recipe-based videos.

But, say some retailer insiders, the bubble of making everything from scratch has well and truly burst for many. “Definitely the euphoria of cooking has slightly waned since lockdowns,” says David Josephs of Panzer’s Delicatessen. “People are cooking, but once in a while they want their meals made for them… and they’re quite happy to pay for a premium product.”

Lockdown, it seems, as well as being an opportunity to practise those sourdough baking skills, proved a period of reflection, with some consumers telling retailers they value their time more…and don’t necessarily want to be tied to the kitchen sink seven days a week.

This is where quality ready meals can fill the void. According to Mintel’s 2022 report on the sector, 30% of UK consumers surveyed would purchase a pre-prepared dish that usually takes a long time to cook from scratch, and 63% of adults agreed they bought ready meals as a more affordable alternative to takeaways.

Challenging perceptions

The phrase ‘ready meal’ might instinctively lead to thoughts of pile-it-high, cheaply-made, ultra-processed products – the kind of food found in abundance within discounting multiples.

But there are lots of ‘new kids on the block’ in this category, pushing the boundaries, educating consumers on the benefits of fresh frozen, and challenging perceptions.

Amongst them is Supper Club. The Lancashire-based brand, launched in 2022 by family-run Althams Fine Foods, has seen sales of its premium frozen prepared meals grow tenfold in just 12 months. On top of that, more than 60% of sales are from repeat customers. And rather than limping through the summer (as is often the case with this category) Supper Club saw continued interest, especially via its campaign targeting UK holidaymakers, who perhaps didn’t have as much cash to splash on eating out this year

Marketing manager Katie Clarke says the business, which has a background in farming and butchery, saw a potential niche for super premium ready meals, responding to rising consumer demand for better products they can heat at home.

“Supper Club really was driven by Covid,” Katie explains. “So many people wanted to have quality food at home, but weren’t able to. Our demand has grown since then. We put so much time into product development, focussing on making sure everything is made with the best ingredients.

“The offering for frozen meals traditionally hasn’t been great. I think there’s a massive amount of education to be done in this area, but also for frozen food in general. It can be very good if you use fantastic, high-quality produce. The thing to get across is that just because something’s ‘convenience’ it doesn’t mean it isn’t premium.”

On the subject of ultra-processed food, Katie adds, “Retailers need to invest in products like ours that are made traditionally and don’t go through lots of processes. You’ll see on the back they contain the right kind of ingredients, with no additives or artificial preservatives.”

Waste, and environment are also key concerns for Supper Club. According to the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) UK households account for 70% of food waste each year, amounting to around 6.6 million tonnes. Preparing ready meals is a way for Althams to control its stock from the butchery in a way that adds value to the business, while also helping customers cut down on waste.

“We’re talking to customers a lot more about food waste,” says Katie. “Particularly our online customers who are a bit older. They don’t want to buy a lot of food that could get wasted. We offer single portions, so they have exactly what they need. And because our meals come in foil packaging, they can be cooked in an air fryer, which, again, is helping customers who have air fryers save money.”

Lasagne is the best-selling option for the brand. “But it’s really British traditional dishes people want. After the lasagne our top seller is cottage pie, and then we do a fantastic lamb hot pot – which we should do, because we’re from Lancashire!

“People are looking for heart-warming dishes. We have 15 in our range and have just launched another 13 after lots of NPD and speaking with customers. We’ve added in more Italian options, so a mushroom risotto, chicken risotto, and black truffle chicken pasta. Then there’s a Thai range, and we expect our beef and red wine stew with dumplings to do well.”

Sampling in stores is absolutely crucial to getting the message across about premium ready meals, she adds. “Since we launched, we’ve focussed on doing as many tastings as possible. They don’t cost the earth, and the feedback from most customers is that they would buy after trying.”

The ultimate convenience

Convenience drives huge sales of ready meals for Andrew Storer of The Black Dog Deli, who says they’ve brought greater diversity to his outlets. “Since Covid I’ve noticed people are spending more time at their local deli. They love to pick up bits and pieces, and especially having access to something tasty they don’t have to prepare for themselves, in a portion size that works for them. That’s what we’re here for. Having ready meals and a counter of tasty things is a massive plus. It draws people in, and gives them real options and alternatives to a pub lunch or restaurant dinner. We’re finding we pull customers in to sit for a coffee, and then they’ll take something interesting home for later.”

This chimes with Milly Bagot of ByRuby who says consumers are recognising that good value doesn’t always mean cheap, and gourmet ready meals enjoyed at home are a treat. “We have lots of customers who ‘let Ruby do the cooking’ on a Friday night instead of eating out or ordering a takeaway.”

Milly says ‘classics done well’ are the brand’s best sellers - fish pie, lasagne, and chicken tikka masala.

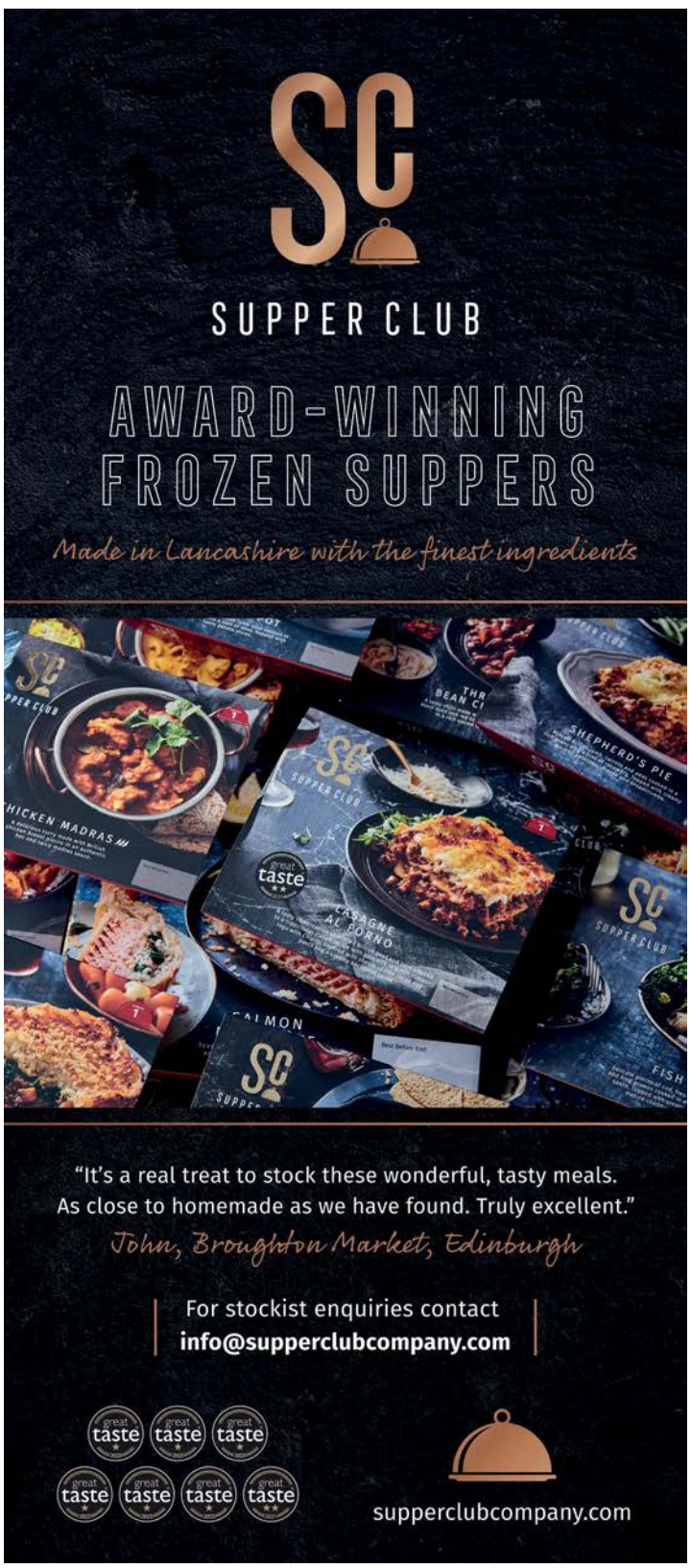
Fieldfare MD Matt Whelan says frozen, ready-made food, offers busy shoppers the ultimate solution on days when they can’t ‘do everything’.

“Premium frozen, in particular, perfectly addresses the needs of the modern shopper. The combination of innovation and a focus on taste and quality makes them really appealing, and the perfect solution for those





> “Growing pressures on household incomes will lead some consumers to curb their dining out behaviours, enabling the ready meals and ready-to-cook market to step in as a more affordable alternative”
>
> **MINTEL**



needing a night off from cooking, or looking for a delicious dinner treat at home." As we get closer to Christmas, reliance on these kinds of products usually increases, with time and budget being key considerations for consumers, who will find the convenience of popping a frozen meal into the oven appealing.

"But shoppers do not want to sacrifice quality and taste," says Matt. "So many look to their local farm or speciality store for new and exciting frozen foods to choose from." Fieldfare's own range includes the multiple award-winning Creamy Chicken, White Wine and Asparagus Puff Pastry Purse and, for vegetarians, an Asparagus and Gruyere Crown.

Changing household dynamics are, Matt adds, driving the premium frozen market, with an increase in single and two-person households, and the fragmentation of dietary preferences within households, which can add complexity to a shop. "This is where loose or individually-portioned products respond well to what shoppers are looking for.

"They want a range of options to choose from, in particular when it comes to dietary preferences,



sustainable options (including reduced packaging), and flexibility on portion sizes or how much they need to buy."

Value is a huge consideration, says Matt. Especially at Christmas, when household budgets are stretched. Shoppers being able to choose exactly what they want or need means they can exercise better control over their budget, giving them more flexibility.

"Christmas is also a time of the year when we tend to over stock or over cater. Frozen foods can really help both shoppers and outlets reduce food waste, thanks to the naturally long shelf life. Consumers can stock up on convenient ready meals with confidence, and only need to prepare what they need, when they need it, which in turn helps save money, and is a more sustainable option."



Boosting sales and managing stock

Offering a range of house-made ready meals has had numerous benefits for Hollow Trees Farm Shop. As well as enticing back regular customers who rely on them, they've proved a fantastic option for visitors to grab and go after spending time in the café, store, or down on the farm trail.

Every dish is made by the onsite catering team, often with meat or vegetables reared on the farm, or otherwise utilising local produce.

The deli area was completely reconfigured six years ago, specifically to allow the shop to grow its ready meal and meal solution options for customers.

Marketing lead, Cat Mason, says, "It gives customers the opportunity to have a mixture of products all in one place. They can buy the ingredients to cook at home, or choose one of our homecooked, hearty meals, knowing they're made with good ingredients."

The shop offers different sizes of lasagne, cut to feed one, two or even four people, all weighed and priced to make the shopping experience easier. "We put ourselves in our customers' shoes," says Cat. We like to make sure everything is a good price, waste is minimised, and that we're providing balanced meals they can cook well in a home oven."

Alongside ready meals, the butchery counter is incredibly inventive and constantly changing, offering solutions such as Wellingtons, and marinated meats tossed in oil with seasoning and vegetables, which can be cooked straight away, or frozen for later. "We do a lot of research on what others are doing, what customers want, and what's popular," adds Cat. "People are coming back every week, and often they'll call ahead to see what we have so they can get something reserved!"

Milly says her business has seen an increase in sales of nearly 60% for the last financial year - a large portion of this in independent retail. Having branded freezers in specialist retail has added incremental sales in stores, in what is being coined a 'new era of premium frozen'.

"As our brand is more widely recognised, we see huge growth opportunity for our retail partners, as more consumers move away from expensive meals out, pop open the wine, and enjoy restaurant quality dishes at home," she says.

Andrew agrees with the sentiment that ready meals are becoming a critical part of most independent retailers, and they've been part of his story since the beginning. "When I took over the deli, a guy called Hugh came in and said there were a lot of elderly people living by themselves in the village who don't always have time to go shopping.

"He said maybe I could make some meals for them, and they'd go down well with holidaymakers too."

The idea was a hit, and now the deli and its sister shops are laden with meals made at the business's production kitchen. Again, as across the board, lasagne is a firm hit, followed closely by lamb tagine, and curries, both of which actually improve in flavour after a spell in the freezer. "They really have been flying out of my deli since I started creating them. They are a huge part of what we do, and they definitely draw people in," says Andrew.

High visibility at the point of sale, and offering a 'menu' for frozen ready meals can help clinch sales, he says. "They are definitely some of the most popular items we sell by a long shot. It's nice to walk into a deli and see homemade products, made by chefs, with local ingredients."

Ready meals, he adds, don't have to be confined to what's in the freezer. He's finding customers are becoming more and more interested in salads.

The kind piled high with interesting leaves, seeds, roasted vegetables, artisan cheeses, and dressings fashioned from 'fancy' oils the average cook might not have in the cupboard at home.

Often, he says, customers will pop in to buy a salad to eat alone, or to put alongside a protein, or perhaps some quiche, to complete their meal.

"Flavoured cous cous goes down a storm. And we can't make enough of our heritage tomato salad, marinated with garlic and basil, on a bed of labneh. Salads are amazing when they're made right. A lot of people don't put enough dressing on them, or season them right, so if they can buy something where the hard work is done for them, they will."

Salad are also a huge deal at Panzer's Delicatessen, says CEO David. The team get through enormous amounts of egg and onion salad (a Jewish speciality). Also popular at the counter are the likes of roast beef with chimichurri sauce, sashimi-grade tuna with sesame seeds, Greek salads, roasted cauliflower with tahini, and schnitzels.

"They are all important," he says of the range, especially soups, which change regularly, and help control waste, with fresh produce rotating into the mix.

Customers of all ages and demographics are visiting the deli to stock up on prepared foods and ready meals. "We're not at the stage of New York yet though," David adds.

"There, they buy everything ready made. But it is picking up in London, especially with the increasing numbers of overseas residents," he says, alluding to customers who perhaps have a bit more money to splash, choosing ready made over home cooking when they're not wining and dining in the city's finest restaurants.

David has particularly seen growing interest in vegan and gluten-free food in the deli, which follows the pattern predicted by Mintel. This plays into the store's ongoing new product development. He says paying attention to trends, and what customers are asking for is key.

COMMENTATORS



KATIE CLARKE
SUPPER CLUB



CAT MASON
HOLLOW TREES FARM SHOP



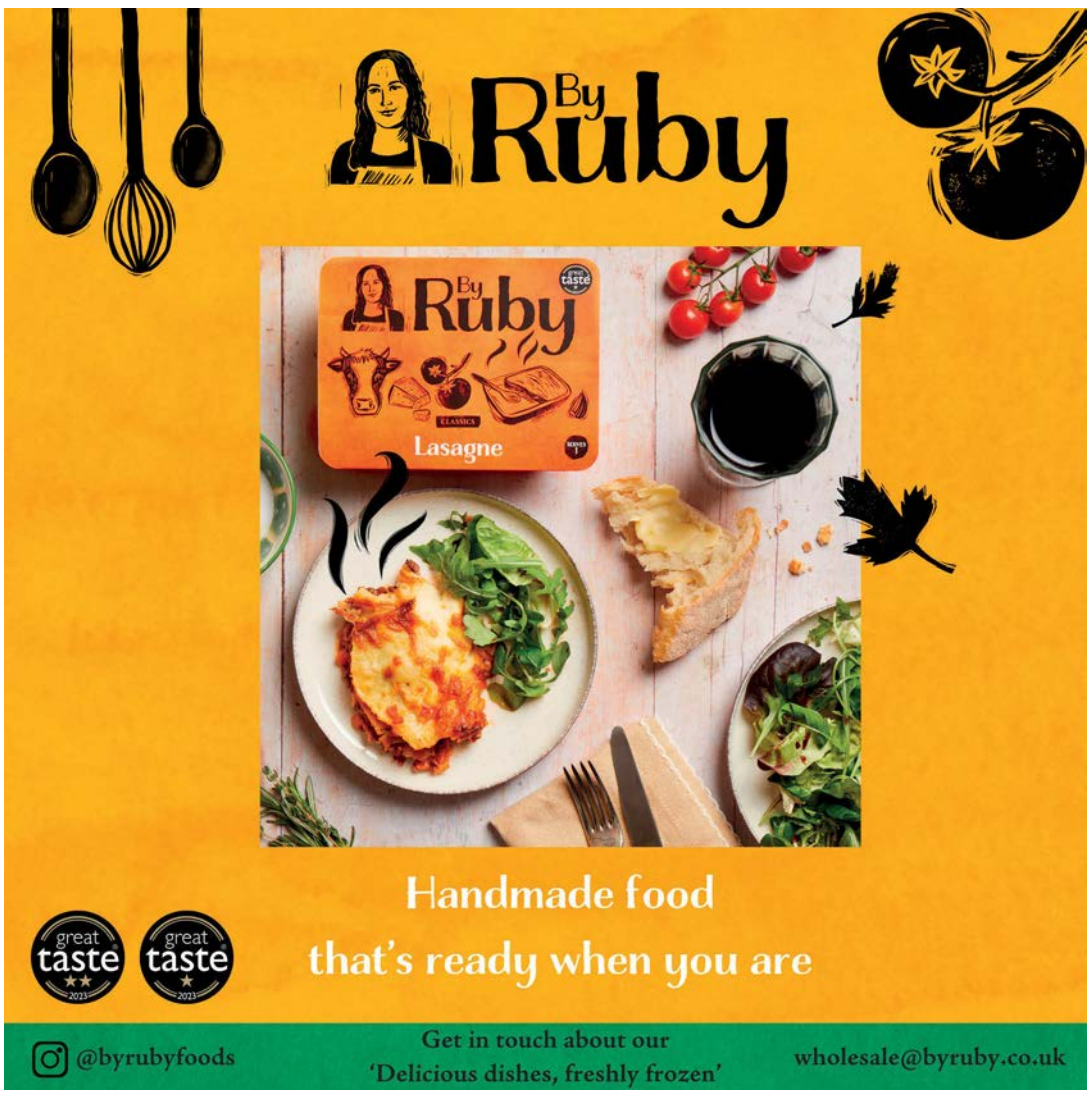
MATT WHELAN
FIELDFARE



MILLY BAGOT
BYRUBY



MILLY BAGOT
BYRUBY



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GOOD LOOKS MATTER AT THE CHEESE COUNTER

How much thought do you give to your deli display? According to these retailers, a few simple tricks could really help boost sales

Triple. Yes, three times as much. That's the staggering uptick bosses at Friday Street Farm Shop saw when they updated their deli section, adding a dedicated cheese room two years ago.

The team spent a long time thinking about the best way to present their cheeses – considering size, type and colour, but also strength and regionality, all of which played a part in their final position in the temperature-controlled room.

Deli and cheese room manager, Toby Edwards, says customers appreciate the visual appeal of the cheese room, and the fact it's a more personal experience. "They can actually see the whole cheese, rather than bits and pieces wrapped in clingfilm. That alone helped increase our sales. We're now getting through around 10, 3kg Baron Bigods a week, and whole Stiltons over a couple of weeks. That's all down to the presentation of the cheese."

Crucially, because of the controlled conditions, cheese can be left unwrapped. "When it's in clingfilm, I've found customers can be too polite to ask us to cut into a cheese. They're too afraid. Keeping it unwrapped engages them a lot more with it."

Cheeses are arranged in order of strength, so staff can take each customer on a journey, from mild and creamy to strong blues, without muddying their palate.

Toby says it's also important to dedicate a section of your counter or cheese room to local producers, so visitors, are easily signposted towards them. "We absolutely champion local here. We pile them nice and high so they catch the eye as customers come in. Seeing local first and foremost gets people talking." Since changing up the display, giving regional cheese its own spot, Toby says sales have gone "through the roof".

Another top tip? "Don't be afraid to move things around in the counter, rather than leaving them stuck in a corner. That keeps the counter looking fresh, and regulars might see something new they want to try that they haven't noticed before."

The art of building a theatrical display

Caroline Blaydon of Wildgoose Fine Foods says there's is a real art to striking the right balance between having an alluring display, or something that appears disorganised and confusing.

"With a good turnover of cheese, you can afford to have large, attractive, whole rounds at the rear of counters – nettle-wrapped Cornish Yarg is a good example – with smaller whole cheeses and cut cheeses towards the front. If a cutting cheese is boxed, for example 1kg and 2kg Baron Bigods, I like to present the cheese on top of the box."

Caroline advocates having attractively shaped, pre-cut cheeses on top of, or nearby whole or larger pieces of cutting cheese to demonstrate to customers what 100g or 200g might look like. "They're often reluctant to ask the question, and so are more likely to buy ready-cut."

When she first opened her store, Caroline says she experimented with many ways of grouping cheese (by country, region etc.) asking regular customers for feedback. "Almost all preferred the simple approach of grouping softs, blues and hards. I intersperse these with interesting accompaniments, which I believe prevents customers from being 'snow-blinded' by an array of similarly coloured cheeses. And, of course, it's an opportunity to upsell!"

Favourites include mini date and walnut cakes, tubs of membrillo paste, and jars of figs in Pedro Ximenez sherry.

Like Toby, Caroline rotates the position of her cheeses often to keep the display from appearing stale, and tries to incorporate at least two or three new varieties each week. "Every morning each cheese is trimmed as necessary and rewrapped to ensure it is presented as well as possible.

"For labelling, I use small blackboard cards, which display the name of the cheese, its country or county of origin, whether it's pasteurised, whether it's vegetarian, and the price per 100g. I believe presenting any further information is confusing and prevents the opportunity for customers to ask questions and hence strike up a conversation about the cheese."

More is...more

Being bountiful has proved a good sales tool for Walsingham Farms Shop says general manager Sam Bagge. "The best thing we do is we have quite a selection – probably 30 to 35 with our grab-and-go cheeses. We focus predominantly on local, mixing in cheese from other parts of the UK, and with a few French, Italian and Swiss cheeses. When we supplement these it's with things that are a bit different that you can't get in the supermarket, like Alp Blossom."

Within the display Sam ensures 'local' is clearly defined, especially as the shop is in a key area for tourism. Other than this, the counter is arranged 'like a cheeseboard' which he says "helps explain things better."

> "When it's in clingfilm, I've found customers are too polite to ask us to cut into a cheese. They're too afraid!"

"We have our blues, then our Cheddars, hard cheese, soft cheese, and medium soft in sections. It makes it easier for customers to identify what they need. Then, if someone says 'oh, I want a soft cheese' we can explain them all in that one area of the counter."

Like Friday Street, Walsingham Farms Shop also displays cheese by strength, giving plenty of testers for customers, taking them from mild to powerful, so they can draw comparisons and work out what they really like.

Cheese is 'glass wrapped' for a smooth, clean appearance, with a 'working piece' on top remaining unwrapped for tasters. "Having a working piece minimises cheese drying out, but if we need to we will 'face up' a cheese, taking off the top layer so it's always fresh and looks appealing – that's quite key if something is slowing down on sales."

To keep it in peak condition, the team ensure the holding temperature is correct regularly, and they only buy what they need. "We don't hold onto stock. We're lucky enough to get deliveries several times a week, or to pick up locally whenever we want."



Rowcliffe acquires Hawkridge Farmhouse Dairy Produce

One of the UK's leading artisan cheese importers and distributors, Anthony Rowcliffe, has added family-run Hawkridge Farmhouse Dairy Produce to its portfolio.

Hawkridge offers an extensive product range, and has relationships with many delis, farm shops, specialist retail outlets, and the catering industry in the South West of England, and the business will continue to be managed by brothers Simon and Daniel Baker.

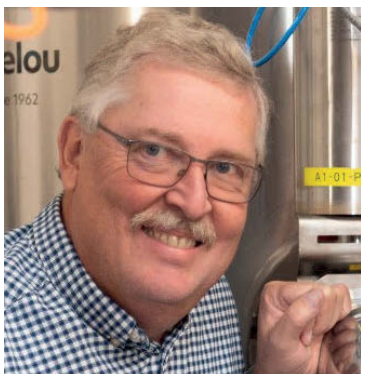
Rowcliffe managing director, Sunit Mehta, says, "Rowcliffe has always strived to offer quality products that support the commercial needs of our increasing customer base. This acquisition enables Rowcliffe to continue developing our independent business and, working with both Simon and Daniel Baker, to continue offering our customers premium products and exceptional service. We welcome the Hawkridge family business to Rowcliffe and the Lactalis Group."

Graceburn is back in production

Following devastating flooding in December 2022, caused by a series of pipes bursting in freezing weather, Blackwoods Cheese Company has announced it is back in production again. The damage, says the company, was severe, with the entire dairy having to be gutted and rebuilt, halting all cheese making at what is usually the business's busiest time of year.

Blackwoods' first Graceburn cheeses of 2023 went back into production at the end of August, with the team now running at full steam to meet demand. The Original, Chipotle & Lemon, and Truffle-flavoured cheeses will be back in stock soon, with wholesale availability from this month.

Renewable energy investment at Appleby Creamery



Appleby Creamery, in Cumbria's Eden Valley, is celebrating a £150,000 investment in renewable energy to futureproof the business. "This is all part of our ongoing commitment to sustainability at the creamery," says managing director Maurice Walton of the project, which included the installation of 480 solar panels.

"Electricity usage is very high here, and we want to be as green as possible in our operation." The project has been part-funded by a grant from The Lake District Foundation and Westmorland and Furness Council, through the 'Greening Eden' initiative.

Maurice continues, "During the day the panels are supplying all our power and, once we install a suitable battery storage system in early 2024, which will be partly funded by Cumbria LEP, we hope to become almost self-sufficient in electricity and reduce consumption of LPG (Liquified Petroleum Gas)."



New spirits boost dairy

The makers of one of Scotland's most recognised cheeses have launched a a trio of new spirits, made using whey from the cheesemaking process.

Isle of Mull Cheese's Isle of Mull Spirits sit alongside their Mull Cheese and Hebridean Blue. They include a smooth and strong Cheesemakers Strength, botanical blend, Coo J'n, distilled with many foraged ingredients from their own garden, and Sgriob-ruadh – a sweet and smooth drink with vanilla notes and a hint of chocolate.

Isle of Mull founder Christine Reade, says, "We have made Isle of Mull cheese for many years. Over that time, we have used the whey in various ways, including feeding the calves, and even the cows. It has always been hard to manage, and feeding a few pigs has been the simplest. We have never wanted to keep pigs on a large scale, so the remainder has been spread on the fields.

"We began to worry, when Findlay [Christine's grandson] came home from agricultural college and enthusiastically dug a hole in the field to look at the soil structure. He reported that there were almost no worms to be found and the drainage was very poor. After some discussion, an old idea that my father had thought about came to the fore - fermenting the whey in a controlled environment with the correct yeast would produce a little alcohol that we could distil."

The family's on-site distillery is powered by the same wood chip boiler used to make their cheeses, with the cooling water warming up the milk each morning.

"The whole system is symbiotic and sustainable," adds Christine.





Classic Ayrshire cheese returns for Christmas

One of Scotland's few PGI status cheeses will be ready for retail this festive season thanks to I J Mellis Cheesemongers.

Traditional, historic Ayrshire Dunlop (given its status in 2006) is only produced by Anne Dorward, and I J Mellis remains its sole stockist, having taken delivery of a number of three-month-old truckles in June.

The cheeses have been brushed, turned and tasted over the course of late summer, and are now available to order, in time for Christmas.

Dunlop can trace its history back to 1690, when it was first made by Barbara Gilmour, using milk from her Ayshire cows, known for its high butterfat content.

The cows fed on the lush pastures of the area – perfect for producing a creamy, Cheddar-like cheese with a distinctly nutty, tangy flavour. As a hard, clothbound cheese, it was easily transported to markets across the country, where it grew in popularity. To add to its lore, there are records of Robert Burns having a brief stint in Dunlop-making when his poetry career wasn't lucrative.

Mrs Temple's Cheeses picked out for sustainability



A dairy in North Norfolk has been marked by Arla as having the lowest carbon footprint (amongst its 900 or so members) in the UK, and has also just been commended for climate sensitive agriculture at the CREAM awards.

Catherine Temple produces a variety of cheeses at Copy's Green Farm in Wighton, near Wells, including Binham Blue, and Walsingham – each one named for a nearby village.

Sustainability is at the core of everything the farm does, and Catherine says it is a real coup to hear that the measures they're taking to reduce their impact on the environment, are making a difference.

A key part of the farm's green strategy is growing the cows' food on site, using regenerative methods which help mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon on the land.

"We grow lucerne," says Catherine. "We were trying to reduce our use of applied fertiliser, and lucerne is a great crop because it has really deep roots to reach down into the soil when there's a water shortage, and it fixes nitrogen, so we don't need to apply any. Also, we only have to plant it once every five years. That means you're reducing the energy you'd have wasted preparing the land, like you would with annual crops like wheat and barley."

This project is only the beginning of the farm's eco endeavours. Rather than importing soy beans for protein, field beans are being grown as companion plants alongside the lucerne and oats as animal feed. The plants physically support one another, while supplying vital soil nutrition, and flowers that attract pollinating insects.

An anaerobic digester burns manure and organic farm waste, providing all the electricity, not just for the self-sufficient farm (and many of its electric vehicles), but for 400 neighbouring houses.

The Brown Swiss cows grazed at Copy's Green have been specifically chosen for their hardiness, and increased yields (up to 10% more than many other dairy cow breeds), owing to the higher volume of protein in the milk.

And plastic is constantly being checked and reduced as far as possible. "We've always used minimal packaging for our cheeses, but with animal feed we've gone back to using bales and clamps, and we have cattle food delivered in lorry loads rather than individual bags," Catherine says.

In a personal challenge, Catherine has also started working with the Norfolk Pond Project and Norfolk Rivers Trust to reinstate farmland ponds and protect local chalk streams. "A load of us filled in ponds from the 50s to the 70s because the government told us to," she says. "But they are so beneficial in terms of the insects they bring to farms. I've been out on my bike surveying places where ponds might have been in the past, and persuading other farmers to do this too. And we're keeping cows out of the river so they don't stir up the mud. Water management has become a big issue and it's just one of many things we're happy to do, in order to do our bit."

Catherine says she welcomes other farmers to visit her in North Norfolk to learn more about sustainability in dairy farming and cheese making.



Derbyshire cheese goes back to its roots

One of Britain's oldest cheeses, with a heritage dating back to 1670, has returned to its homeland. Sage Derby (the only flavour-added classified territorial cheese in Britain) started life in Throwley Moor, Derbyshire, but has most recently been produced in Warwickshire.

Adrian Fowler (the 14th generation of the Fowler cheesemaking family) says he is delighted to report the cheese is back in its rightful place, adding that he's handed the baton over to Hartington Creamery near Newhaven, which has taken on Sage Derby's production.

"It's only a few miles away from where the original Fowlers started making cheese," Adrian says. "You couldn't get closer if you tried."

Adrian says the cheese is, "A nice piece of heritage. It has a great flavour profile. It's got a truly earthy taste that takes you back to the roots of traditional cheesemaking. The original idea behind putting sage into the cheese was to keep it from blowing, because it was considered a medicinal herb. It also brings a nice balance to the cheese."

New format for a British classic

Charles Martell & Son (which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2022) has just launched a 200g Stinking Bishop cheese to fill a niche in the 'grab and go' market, in time for the Christmas rush.

The cheese, made on the farm near Hereford, complements the existing range, including a 1.8kg cutting version, and the recognisable 500g variety.

Its name comes from its distinctive odour, conjured during the ripening process, which involves immersing the cheeses in a type of perry, which is made from the local Stinking Bishop pear, every four weeks as it matures.

Charles began his career with 10 acres, hand milking three Gloucester cows, without a penny to his name. He says they didn't get around to celebrating their landmark five decades in business, but are proud to mark the occasion with their latest incantation of Stinking Bishop. It joins the dairy's other products, from Double and Single Gloucester, to Hereford Hop, May Hill Green, and Slack-ma-Girdle.

New buffalo milk feta unveiled



Laverstock Park Farm in Hampshire has added to its range of buffalo milk products (including mozzarella, gouda and Buffalomi) with the release of Buffeta.

"We love to challenge ourselves to make cheeses that are not traditionally made in the UK. But, what's more – we want to make them better than their originals," says managing director, Michal Kolinek. "We are passionate about our buffalo milk and all its nutritional benefits. Our latest success is this 'feta' style cheese made with a blend of cow's and buffalo milk."

The farm's cheesemakers spent six months refining the recipe, testing it against similar products on the market. Michal said, "We are confident this cheese is going to be a great addition to our range. It tastes fantastic and has the signature creaminess from our buffalo milk."

Laverstock's herd of Asian Water buffalo graze freely on organic land, eating a range of grasses, clovers and more than 30 herbs which they believe add to the quality and nutrition of the milk.



Devonshire Cheddar named the People's Choice

Cheesemaker Quicke's took the top prize at the recent inaugural Great British & Irish Cheddar Challenge, being named the People's Choice at the event, which was livestreamed from Bra, Italy.

The challenge, founded by James Grant of No2 Pound Street, saw cheese lovers, makers, mongers and commentators come together in celebration of artisan Cheddar, and was compered by comedian and cheese fantastic, Marcus Brigstocke.

Thousands of people tuned in for a live tutored tasting, having purchased special boxes of six British Cheddars, with viewers learning about the journey from farm to plate, and a spotlight on soil health, pastures, cows, milk, cheesemaking, maturation and more.

At the end of the process viewers were invited to vote for their favourite, opting for Quicke's Extra Mature Clothbound Cheddar, made by Mary Quicke in Newton St Cyres.

Mary says, "I'm so excited to win the Great British & Irish Cheddar Challenge, amongst so many wonderful Cheddars. I'm so proud of our cows that make the lovely milk and our team that produce and mature the cheese that so many people voted for. Thank you!"

James Grant adds, "It was truly special to bring some of the UK and Ireland's greatest Cheddar makers together and to share this with cheese lovers everywhere. The event offered a wonderful insight into



what makes traditional artisan Cheddar so amazing, from the work that's being done to regenerate the soil and nurture the land, right through to producing exceptional artisan Cheddar, with all of its nuanced flavours, varied textures and the joy that these bring. I'd like to say an enormous thank you to everyone involved, and it was an honour to stream the Cheddar Challenge live from Slow Food's prestigious cheese festival in Bra. Well done to everyone at Quicke's, although I hope artisan Cheddar will be our biggest winner."



Charcuterie is an essential part of the circular economy



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

I was invited to judge at the World Charcuterie Awards (WCA) after a chance meeting with founder Henrietta Green at Chiswick Cheese Market.

The vision for the WCA is to help raise the profile of charcuterie in the UK, and to raise the bar on product quality and innovation.

Over almost two decades our taste for cured meats has steadily increased.

James Swift, founder of Trealy Farm based in Monmouthshire, was probably the first producer of quality cured meats.

I remember meeting James when he was touting samples to top restaurants in London and one day dropped a sample at mine. The head chef, Jerome Ponchelle, a former student of Michelle Bourdin, was a little sceptical that the British would be capable of producing anything palatable. There was genuinely a sacré bleu moment when the kitchen team all agreed that this was very good.

From a handful of producers in the early noughties, there are now over 200 registered cured meat producers. The trend is not slowing down, as more and more people are seeking out quality charcuterie. Brexit has done its utmost to build trade barriers and help create labor shortages. On the flipside, it has seen passionate artisan British producers surge and take on new exciting ventures - cured meats being one of them.

Not discounting Trealy Farm, another of my favourite producers of salumi is Westcombe Charcuterie. Paul Burton joined Westcombe, famously known for its exceptional Cheddar and Caerphilly, to work in their farm shop. Paul had formerly been a chef on the Isle of Mull. Given the restaurant's proximity, being so far from suppliers, his creativity as a chef turned to experimenting with fermentation, and utilising whatever was local and in season. When he started working at Westcombe his vision was applauded, and Westcombe Charcuterie was born.

The methods of production at Westcombe really need to be applauded. The vision of a circular economy is really in sight. The product is second to none and embraces the flora and fauna perfectly. When you buy a Pomona Salami, you will experience the taste of Somerset. The taste is woody, smoky, appley, grassy, herby and peppery. The inspiration for Pomona came from Somerset autumnal walks, breathing in fresh warming scents as the leaves start to fall. This took Paul and his team over a year to master, and it really is a winner.

What I love about the Westcombe project is that it is all-encompassing. I feel a sense of family with the team that work there. Tom Carver, who manages Westcombe, is open-minded and can see the benefits that a holistic approach to his team can bring. What is important is his mindfulness of the whole farm.

British Artisan food is clearly on the rise. We need to take inspiration from these brilliant people that just love what they do. Given that over 90% of what we consume is industrially made, it is time that we made a change for the better.

A recent study by professor Karen Charlton insists that current food systems not only contribute to climate change, but also to malnutrition in all of its forms. There are billions of people who only have access to highly-processed foods, as nutritious naturally-produced foods become less accessible through price and routes to market.

Let us try to support those small passionate producers, especially in this current climate. Interest rate hikes are only benefiting the rich.

Small farms and business owners are paying ridiculous interest rates to fix our country's issues – why should the backbone of society have to pay such a price?

> "British artisan food is clearly on the rise. We need to take inspiration from these brilliant people that just love what they do. Given that over 90% of what we consume is industrially made, it is time that we made a change for the better"

COMMENTATORS



DAN WILLIAMS
GODFREY C WILLIAMS & SON



SAM WILKIN
FOOD CONSULTANT



MARK KACARY
THE NORFOLK DELI

SUPPORTING BRITISH CHEESE HAS NEVER BEEN SO IMPORTANT

With new rules on imported foods coming into force early next year, the cost of deli essentials (including cheese) looks set to rise. Could this present a golden opportunity for UK-based makers?

The legacy of British cheesemaking can be traced back at least 2,000 years. It was a canny way of preserving excess milk, providing essential nutrition, and bolstering the energy of farmers who took time to make it.

Today, artisan British cheese has become an artform. Over the last two decades, in what's been billed as a 'cheese renaissance', a new wave of makers have dedicated themselves to the intricacies of what was once a humble profession, elevating it to new heights.

Alongside much-loved, ancient territorials, the nation's makers are proudly churning out award-winning raw brie, fragrant, Alpine-style wheels, and headily aromatic washed-rind cheeses that have been turning heads around the globe. And they sit front and centre in deli counters up and down the UK.

Why we need to buy British

"When things change again with import costs, it's going to be very hard to get hold of sensibly priced, high quality continental cheese in the UK," says food consultant and cheese specialist Sam Wilkin, alluding to the new regulations around paperwork and border checks on high-risk foods coming into Britain in 2024.

"If you want to fill your counter with delicious things people can afford, then British cheese should be top of the list. I think it would be a shame to ignore what's on the doorstep. France makes some amazing cheeses. And the PR for cheese in France, Italy and Switzerland is unparalleled. But we have some fantastic cheese in this country, and we've been talking about buying local for decades now.

"It's time to get behind what's on your doorstep!"

Sam spends much of his time visiting cheesemakers across the length and breadth of England, and says more is being done now, than ever before, to ensure the continued success and sustainability of British cheese, so it can remain viable in the circular economy. "People are doing amazing stuff! Changing their farms to be more biodiverse. Dairy has a terrible reputation, which is unfounded, certainly in the people I work with. They go to incredible lengths to make the life of their animals happier, because it makes the product way more delicious."

Welfare is, he adds, another reason to support our artisan cheesemakers, with Britain having some of the most stringent rules around the treatment of animals. "And quite rightly! I would say our farming standards are comfortably some of the best in the world by law."

"It's so important to support British farms and cheesemakers as much as possible," says Dan Williams of Godfrey C Williams & Son. "The role of a farmer goes so much further than just being the producer of a product."

He adds, "They are vital contributors and influencers to jobs and the rural economy, custodians of the land, and providers of national food security. To lose a farm or producer, is to lose part of your area's identity and heritage."

Dan encourages retailers to, as well as backing British at the counter, get involved with organisations, events and awards that celebrate the nation's food and farming. "A special mention," he says, "must go to initiatives like last month's inaugural Great British & Irish Cheddar Challenge – which raised the profile of traditional Cheddar."

Engaging with customers

One of The Norfolk Deli owner Mark Kacary's favourite things to do is to educate and excite customers about the wonderful world of British cheese. But, he adds, "As with many things in life, if you want people to enjoy it, to flock to it, to come back again, to recommend it to others, you have to make sure it's good."

In fact, he says, there's pressure for our cheeses to be "better than good" in order to stand up to the big name, familiar continental products customers recognise and tend to grab out of habit.

Marketing British in store is an absolute must, particularly as, "The French and Italians, as well as other established European cheesemaking nations, have always been better than the Brits at promoting their cheese heritage," says Mark, echoing Sam's sentiment.

The majority of our exposure to cheese is via a supermarket.

Mark says this is a "dismal experience" that gives "little or no indication of the dizzying array of cheeses out there".

"Fortunately, there are still plenty of people (although there should be many more), who have experienced excellent cheeses when travelling, and who have gone out of their way to find cheesemongers, and who are prepared to buy cheese made locally. It is only due to the support of retailers and their customers than cheesemakers in Britain have demonstrated the much-fabled 'inventive' streak to be found here, with the result being that there are now well over 1,000 different cheeses made here.

This is approximately twice as many as are made in France!"

The cheese renaissance

The last two decades have redefined the British cheese industry, which has been swept up by a revolution in the way producers and the public think about food. It is a huge change to a vastly traditional industry.



KEEPING IT **CLASSIC**



With customers returning time and again for traditional favourites, Tim Collings of Rowcliffe says it's vital you get the 'essentials' right. He shares some counter must-haves

- Westcombe Cheddar, which Rowcliffe cuts for our Clemency Hall brand, is a true testament to the art of traditional Cheddar making. It embodies the essence of Somerset's rich agricultural heritage, and has garnered worldwide recognition for its exceptional quality and flavour. When young, it has a mild, creamy taste with hints of fresh grass and butter. As it ages, the cheese becomes crumbly and more robust, with nutty and earthy undertones.
- For soft cheese lovers it's hard to look past the wonderful Baron Bigod. What sets Baron Bigod apart from the crowd is the meticulous attention to detail and traditional methods employed in its production. The team at Fen Farm take pride in using raw, unpasteurised milk from their herd of Montbéliarde cows, a breed renowned for its rich and flavourful milk.The cheesemaking process involves a careful balance of science and skill. This artisanal method results in a lusciously creamy interior and a bloomy, white rind. It has rightfully earned its place as a jewel in the crown of modern british artisanal cheesemaking.
- When it comes to discussing tradition in the world of artisanal cheese, few names evoke as much reverence as Colston Bassett Stilton. This crumbly, creamy blue cheese, hailing from Nottinghamshire, is not only a gastronomic masterpiece, but also a testament to centuries of cheesemaking tradition. The cheese is handcrafted using traditional handle ladling methods. This process results in a rich, creamy texture, punctuated by the perfect amount of blue veining, and a harmonious balance of flavours.





"Historically we've been making cheeses in farmhouses for hundreds of years," says Sam. "There was a near-collapse of the industry after WWII. But, on a practical level, cheese is a way for dairy farms to add value to their milk. It's a way for them to be viable as businesses and to keep that tradition running."

He points to young makers doing exciting things, who are shaking up the cheese world. "We've still got the old classics, which should be heralded, but then we've got people like Curlew Dairy who are reinvigorating what Wensleydale can be. We've got David Jowett, who's in his 30s, over at King Stone Dairy. The guys making Pevensey in Sussex – which is a style of blue you don't really see here in the UK. There are just some amazing things happening in cheese, and it's something retailers should be excited about, and proud of, helping to tell those stories to customers."

Mark says, undoubtedly, it's the improvement of British cheese that's triggered its renaissance. "And there's more of it. There's greater choice, and it's the pride and passion of cheesemakers, alongside individuals who have a passion for good tasting quality cheese, to look after it, promote and sell it."

The future of the industry, Mark adds, rests of the shoulders of passionate retailers, who can help garner interest from the public so they "understand that when they're looking for a cheeseboard, the ONLY place to get anything decent is a specialist shop.

"The last thing anybody should do is buy a pre-pack lottery cheeseboard from a supermarket. I truly believe that, unless they have an allergy, there is a British cheese everyone will love.

But it's like in life – you have to kiss a lot of frogs to end up with your prince/princess. Your local cheese retailer is the equivalent of a dating agency – pairing customers up with a cheese they'll love."

PERRY WAKEMAN
RENNET & RIND



"Over the last decade, the evolution of British artisan cheesemaking has been profound. We've seamlessly blended time-tested techniques with contemporary innovations to produce unique artisanal delights. Yet, while our growth in quality is evident, there's an underlying narrative that often goes unspoken.

As the people of Britain grapple with its economic challenges, I sense a palpable yearning for genuine connection and authenticity among our customers. They're weary of vast, impersonal corporations where profits disappear overseas. Instead, they're drawn to what artisans represent: passion, craftsmanship, and a direct line to the source.

Engaging with a cheesemonger or a maker, understanding the love poured into each wheel, and genuinely grasping the value they're getting not only enriches their cheese tasting experience but also brings a profound sense of fulfilment. It's about knowing their hard-earned money is endorsing British talent and supporting a community that cherishes its craft."

SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE · 2023 · STOCK CHECK



THE INVERLOCH CHEESE COMPANY
A cute, Christmas pudding shaped Cheddar truckle.
scotcheese.com



CLEMENCY HALL VICTORIOUS VINTAGE
Vintage Cheddar, aged for 18 months, and sealed in a beautiful wax casing.
rowcliffe.co.uk



PITCHFORK CHEDDAR
Clothbound with lard, then matured for 10 to 12 months to develop its signature flavour.
trethowanbrothers.com



STRATHEARN
This cheese's rich, semi-soft texture contrasts very well with its flavoursome whisky-washed rind.
strathearncheese.co.uk



BUTLERS FARMHOUSE CHEESES BLACKSTICKS BLUE
An eye-catching and versatile blue cheese, handmade in Lancashire.
butlerscheeses.co.uk



FELTHAM'S FARM RENEGADE MONK
A soft organic cow's milk cheese, washed in ale, and with a touch of blue.
felthamsfarm.com



OXFORD CHEESE COMPANY OXFORD ISIS
A flavourful soft cheese, its rind is washed in Oxfordshire honey mead.
oxfordcheese.co.uk



YORKSHIRE PECORINO FRESCO
Through a reduced ageing process, this cheese is creamy and soft with a yoghurt flavour.
yorkshirepecorino.co.uk



KILEEN GOATS' GOUDA
Aged for a minimum of nine months, this cheese develops a greater depth of flavour as the sweetness and toasty roasted hazelnut notes shine through.
thecourtyarddairy.co.uk



ASHLYNN
Creamy goats' cheese from Worcester. Ash coated, with a line of charcoal through the centre.
harveyandbrockless.co.uk

SHOULD INDIES INVEST IN FREE-FROM?

Products catering to special diets can prove costly but, say retailers, the rise in consumers reaching for free-from can make them a valuable addition to shelves





COMMENTATORS



BRUNO ZOCCOLA
VALENTINA DELI



LIZZIE DOWLING-NASH
FLOURISH

Over the last few years, the free-from movement has expanded to include all kinds of specialist products, but this can sometimes present a challenge to indie fine food retailers. Small independent delis and farm shops can't stock everything, but at the same time they want to make sure everyone is included in their shopping experience. Bruno Zoccola, owner of Valentina Deli, has seen a rise in demand for free-from, and knows how important it is to offer options while keeping it core.

"We feel that it is important to offer a large, but tailored, choice of options for consumers. Luckily, much of our offering is, by nature, allergen-free, but over the past few years we have really noticed a wider demand for accommodating dietary needs. We made a conscious decision that we wanted to ensure everyone is able to shop here, regardless of their dietary requirements or preferences. We get a lot of families in, and often different members of the family have different needs.

We would rather offer a variety of options than risk losing out on the entire family's custom."

Creating a free-from family

For Bruno, it's that family element that drives the determination to cover all dietary requirements. He is selling from one family to another.

"At our family-run delicatessen we mostly stock Italian produce, with some options from other Mediterranean countries. Much of what we stock is naturally allergen-free – think passata, pesto, and antipasti. However, obviously staples such as pasta are a key part of an Italian diet too, and we do stock specialist gluten-free and vegan pastas. Interestingly, we have found that these ranges are hugely popular, and often people without a specific dietary need buy our free-from ranges for the taste or for the positive health connotations."

Offering these products also creates a kind of family that includes the retailer and the customers. It builds loyalty, as Lizzie Dowling-Nash, marketing and events assistant at Flourish, knows.

"We offer gluten-free, vegan and dairy-free products. We have a large number of customers that return because we stock these free-from options, and many people have purchased and tried free-from products because it is an option.

We have had customers ask if we do certain items in a free-from version which has sparked the idea to look into what other things we could supply."

Costs versus inclusivity

The idea that some customers who don't follow a free-from diet buy products simply because they like them or because they want to be healthier, is an interesting one. It's a case of opening up choices. But it isn't always that easy.

"Unfortunately, as we choose local and sustainably produced products, we have less options ourselves to choose free-from stockists," says Lizzie. "Luckily there are local businesses we can still source from that have these options, along with our talented team who can accommodate them.

Having this choice makes the customer feel more included.

"Like many places we started without many free-from products, however from listening and talking with our audience we discovered there was a need for these options. Not forgetting those who have allergies and rely on them. We began to grow this range of free-from to having snacks, cakes, and decaf teas. Where there are simple changes that can be made to be more inclusive, we aim to try them."

How difficult or easy adapting is for a fine food retailer will depend on their starting point. For Bruno, his Italian heritage plays into this, and he views free-from as a part of all areas of food.

"The concept of free-from is not new to us – the Mediterranean diet has been around for tens of thousands of years and is focused on healthy fruits and vegetables, oils, and proteins. It feels normal to make sure our customers can find what they need in our shops."

But there must be a cost issue to look at here. Stocking specialist items that appeal to only a small section of customers ties up stock. For Bruno, it's less about seeing stock stuck on the shelves and more about making sure free-from customers aren't paying more than they should.

"There is no negative financial implication for us with our free-from ranges, especially as the products we stock tend to have relatively long shelf lives which makes quick turnover less of an issue. However, where retailers like us have to be careful is ensuring the free-from ranges are not prohibitively priced, as often they are more expensive than their counterparts."

Does it make financial sense to stock such a wide range of products? Is it cost effective?

"For us, it does, yes," says Bruno. "It ensures we aren't alienating any of our shoppers and appealing to a wider customer base, whilst staying true to our Mediterranean roots."

Lizzie agrees, but also sees the issue in a more 'big picture' way.

"I believe we are very lucky to be a business that puts people and the planet first. So if you ask, 'does it make sense to stock free-from products when only a small number of our customers choose this?' we would say yes, as what we make goes right back into Flourish and helping the planet and people where we can."

Is free-from here to stay?

There will always be those indie businesses that are ahead of the curve, but the question with any wave is will it persist? Bruno believes free-from has always been around and always will be, it simply has better publicity now than ever before. It's perhaps this publicity that's driving more consumers to take up a free-from diet.

"There is a real demand. It feels like it's possibly beginning to plateau after a huge rise in free-from demand two or three years ago driven by an increased awareness of intolerances and allergens, along with a great deal of media exposure."

ACCORDING TO **OATLY** AN ESTIMATED **32%** OF **UK HOUSEHOLDS** ARE NOW BUYING **DAIRY-FREE** MILK



> "We have a large number of customers that return because we stock these free-from options and many people have purchased and tried free-from products because it is an option"
>
> LIZZIE DOWLING-NASH, FLOURISH



> “I believe it definitely limits your customer base if you aren’t able to cater for different dietary needs”
>
> **BRUNO ZOCCOLA, VALENTINA DELI**

It isn’t always a good idea to follow fashion, but in the end it’s the customers who drive demand.

“We are always aware of what our customers are looking for and the changes in habits, but we need to make sure that the produce we offer is always up to Valentina quality standards,” says Bruno. “We have been in business for over 30 years and know what tastes good, and so we won’t stock anything that is ‘trendy’ but not good enough for our customers, or that might risk us losing new customers. For example, it has taken us a long time to find vegan meat alternatives, but we are thrilled with our selection now, and our vegan burrata is so delicious and creamy you couldn’t tell the difference from a traditional one.”

We’re all in this together

Viewing free-from products as a part of the whole, rather than something special and separate could be the key. For Bruno, this is something he carries forward into how he presents the products and where they can be found in store.

“Our ambient products are grouped together by type (for example, pastas together, jarred vegetables together etc) and our free-from options are found within the sections. We find this makes it easier for customers with dietary needs to find what they’re looking for, as well as encouraging other customers to try different options. We have also found that this way also generates more conversation between shoppers and staff, ensuring we can share our knowledge and expertise.”

Lizzie agrees, and when it comes to marketing and promoting these products there’s no line to be drawn.

“We promote these free-from products the same as we would any other product, however the fact they are sustainable, local, and good for people does help.”

So, maybe it’s not about cost or inclusivity, but more about choice and variety.

“I believe it definitely limits your customer base if you aren’t able to cater for different dietary needs,” says Bruno “For example, at Christmas we stock a huge variety of panettone (including gluten free, vegan, and alcohol-free versions) to ensure no one has to miss out. People who shop in independent retailers are often very loyal, so if they know we’re able to offer what they need, they’ll come back time and again.”

But perhaps even more than that, it’s about creating an atmosphere of family, a family where no one has to go without.

“It’s hugely important to us,” says Bruno. “We don’t want to leave anyone out – by nature of the Valentina business, we’re family-owned which means everyone’s welcome. Italian family gatherings are all about trying to accommodate as many people as possible, and I think we want to run our business like that too. We don’t take any customers for granted and want to make their shopping experiences as enjoyable and accessible as possible.”

STOCK CHECK



SWEET F.A CRANBERRY & ORANGE COOKIES

From the experts at Island Bakery. Delicious new gluten free biscuits.

sweetfa-glutenfree.co.uk



KINDA CO SMOKED CHILLI

This smoked chilli cashew cheese packs a spicy punch with the heat of chilli and smokiness from paprika.

thekindaco.com



ROOTS & WINGS MULTISEED BRITTLE ORIGINAL

Made with organic pumpkin, sunflower, sesame, flax, and chia seeds, with coconut and maple syrup.

rootsandwingsorganic.com



NETTLE MACADAMIA WHITE

Creamy plant-based cheese made from macadamia and cashew nuts marinated in extra virgin olive oil and cold-pressed rapeseed oil, infused with black peppercorns, garlic and thyme.

nettle.london



SUPERGOOD! FLIPPING LOVELY PANCAKE MIX

This free-from pancake mix is both vegan and gluten-free making it the perfect breakfast for everyone.

supergoodbakery.co.uk



CREATIVE NATURE CHOCOLATE CAKE MIX

This light and fluffy chocolate cake is free from all 14 major allergens, vegan, and palm oil-free.

creativenaturesuperfoods.co.uk











ANCIENT RECIPES FUEL NEW FOOD AND DRINK BOOM

From kimchi and kombucha, to miso and natto, fermented foods, prized for generations, have taken off in a big way. But how can the fine food retailer adopt them in store?



COMMENTATORS



STEVEN VAN MIDDELEM
FHIRST



JON WALSH
BIO&ME



Fermented foods may have been around for centuries, but in 2023, the funky flavours of these products are a must-have for many health-conscious Brits. Despite some fermented foods already being a staple on retailers' shelves – think wine, cheese and yoghurt, to name a few – the globalisation of the food and drink sector means that inspiration from abroad is more popular than ever.

The rapid rise of the gut health category has been well documented, but Steven Van Middelem, founder of FHIRST, a soda with gut-friendly active cultures, believes it is far from over. "To me, it's not a trend. It's much bigger than that." This is down to the changing awareness of how a healthy gut impacts the whole body, he says.

"Scientists and experts are just starting to understand the impact and importance of our digestive health," Steven says. "Thanks to the medical research in recent years, we are starting to grasp the impact our gut plays in our overall health. If you look at consumer trends this year, gut, brain and immune health are all in the top 10, and I'm sure that this will continue to increase over time."

As this sector gains momentum in clinical studies and tests, Steven believes awareness will only go up. "Gut health isn't a trend, it isn't a diet, it isn't hype and it isn't anything new – it's just science catching up on with the beliefs of ancient medicine!"

Breaking down the knowledge barrier

When it comes to the gut health sector, there is a lot for consumers – as well as retailers – to learn. Shoppers, it seems, are keen to get up to speed with the latest in gut health science. "We are seeing that consumers are proactively looking to educate themselves and seek out gut-friendly products," Steven says. "For instance, Google searches on gut health are up 243% over past two years. Overall, consumers are more engaged now than ever before as to the importance of good health generally. The pandemic played a key role in this, shocking the public into acknowledging that good health is something we should all be striving for."

As consumers educate themselves about terms like fermentation and live cultures, retailers can't risk falling too far behind. Here, we'll break down the questions on the sector's mind.

What are the types of fermentation?

There are three main types of fermentation:

Lactic acid fermentation is the method behind most fermented food products, like sauerkraut, sourdough bread, kimchi and yoghurt. Lactic fermentation occurs when bacteria break down starches or sugars into lactic acid.

Ethanol fermentation or alcohol fermentation creates wine and beer, and it takes place when yeasts break down starches or sugars into alcohol and carbon dioxide.

Acetic acid fermentation produces apple cider vinegar and kombucha. This happens when starches and sugars from grains and fruit ferment, creating acetic acid, or vinegar.

How speciality retailers can tackle gut health

BUILD TRUST

Fine food businesses are uniquely placed to capitalise on the demand for natural, healthy fermented foods. These days, consumers are increasingly knowledgeable in their search for gut health products. "We're finding that consumers are becoming increasingly more savvy. They want to know that the products they buy are genuine and really work," Jon Walsh, CEO and co-founder of Bio&Me, told *Speciality Food*. The company said having a trusted gut health source as its co-founder and figurehead, Dr Megan Rossi, also known as the Gut Health Doctor, has been "pivotal" in building engagement and trust with customers. Retailers could take a similar approach by educating a member of staff to become a resource for customer queries about health and wellness. What's more, to help customers recognise which brands are the real deal, retailers themselves need to be in the know.



TAP INTO THE KOMBUCHA CRAZE

If you're wondering how you can make inroads into the world of fermented food and drink, kombucha is a good place to start. This category has come a long way over the past two to three years, and is now beginning to mainstream into retail, finding positions in major multiples. It's an easy, consumer-friendly way to introduce gut-friendly products into your store, with appeal to a range of demographics. Triton Market Research predicts 20.64% growth for kombucha in the UK by 2027 as shoppers look for healthier, functional beverages.



LA BREWERY SPARKLING ENGLISH BLUSH
A gently bubbling, complex alternative to sparkling wine. Perfect for celebrations.
labrewery.co.uk



GOOD EARTH POMEGRANATE AND BLUEBERRY KOMBUCHA
A fruity, juicy kombucha. A nice entry-level variety for newbies.
goodearth.co.uk



TEAPIGS PEACH AND MANGO KOMBUCHA
Teapigs' high quality tea is fermented into a refreshing, tangy cold drink.
teapigs.co.uk



"Like all new categories, there's always a surge of entrants," Steven says. "What's really important for independent retailers to ask is: do these products actually stand credibly as gut healthy?

"Questions to think about include: Are they highly processed? Do they contain artificial ingredients, sweeteners or preservatives? Do they contain too much sugar? What type of gut beneficial ingredients do they use? Does the stability and level of these active ingredients degrade after production or over a short time? If the answer is yes to any of these, then they probably aren't the best-in-class gut friendly products to stock," he says.

SIMPLICITY AND CONVENIENCE

Steven agrees that trust comes first and foremost, but he says consumers are also looking for natural ingredients. "Consumers want trustworthy products and are looking for ingredients that are beneficial to their gut microbiome, such as products that contain living probiotic cultures and dietary plant fibre. And they're also on the lookout for products without sugars or artificial sweeteners," he says. "They want pure, natural ingredients and to see clean ingredient panels."

On top of that, convenience is a key element to consider. "As more and more people are returning to the office post-pandemic, we're finding they're demanding healthier to-go options to choose from, (and actually, they're wanting that even when they're not going into the office – they want easily accessible breakfast/snacking solutions 24/7)," says Jon.

Looks and packaging matter too, simply because of the age profile of the audience interested in gut healthy foods. "They are often drawn to brands that have kerb appeal, and that are driven by an aspirational purpose," Steven says.

DON'T FORGET FLAVOUR

Independent retailers are known for their focus on fantastic flavour, and this is just as important a consideration with health and wellness products. "We see it all so often, where food and drink brands enter the health/better-for-you category, with promising credentials, but they really don't taste great," Steven says. "At the end of the day, something might be good for your customers, but if it doesn't taste good, that's a hard sell!"

By building your knowledge, curating your range and becoming a resource for consumers who are keen to learn more about the gut health trend, fine food retailers can make their pivot to gut-healthy food and drink a success.



FLAX & KALE ORANGE FANTASY KOMBUCHA
A unique take on kombucha, made with cold-pressed fresh juices.
flaxandkale.com



EQUINOX HEDGE KOMBUCHA
Inspired by autumn hedgerows, infused with sloes, rosehips, juniper and green tea.
equinoxkombucha.com



ZAG DRINKS
A lovely combination of kombucha, cucumber, mint and citrus.
zagdrinks.com



WHAT ARE **FERMENTED FOODS** AND **LIVE CULTURES?**

Fermented foods are made when bacteria and yeast break down sugars in food and drink. Fermentation has multiple benefits, including increasing the shelf life of fresh foods to prevent waste and, according to some studies, improving our health and wellbeing. Live cultures or probiotics are bacteria and yeasts added to food or taken as supplements that are thought to help balance bacteria in the gut.

ARE FERMENTED FOODS GOOD FOR YOU?

Yes, although in some cases more research is needed to prove their health benefits. Many fermented foods contain live bacteria called probiotics, which can have benefits when eaten regularly. These good bacteria are important in a number of healthy bodily functions, from producing certain vitamins to helping to fight infection.

WHAT HEALTH BENEFITS DO THEY HAVE?

Fermented foods are understood to boast a host of health benefits, such as:

- Improving digestion and gut health
- Boosting immunity

Lowering the risk of conditions like type 2 diabetes and heart disease

12 EXAMPLES OF FERMENTED FOODS AND THEIR HEALTH BENEFITS

- **Kefir** – Including this fermented yoghurt-like drink in your diet is said to improve digestion and reduce inflammation. It also contains beneficial vitamins and minerals, including essentials such as Vitamin B12 and calcium.
- **Apple cider vinegar** – Created when yeast breaks down the sugars in apple juice while bacteria, known as the 'mother', makes the vinegar. ACV (with the mother – you'll recognise it by its cloudy appearance) can help maintain healthy blood sugar levels and keep you fuller for longer.
- **Kimchi** – Found throughout Korean cuisine, kimchi is made from fermented vegetables, like cabbage and radish, and spices like ginger and garlic. It is said to help manage cholesterol and balance blood sugar levels.
- **Kombucha** - A fermented tea made from either green or black tea. Kombucha has been shown to decrease blood sugar, lower cholesterol and even protect the liver in animal studies.
- **Cheeses** – Yes, certain cheeses contain probiotics that contribute to gut health. These include both soft and hard cheeses – as long as they have been aged but not heated. The list includes Gouda, Edam, Gruyère, cottage cheese and more.
- **Miso** – Popular in Japanese cuisine, this seasoning is made from fermenting soybeans with koji, a type of fungus. Possible health benefits include lowering blood pressures and protecting heart health.
- **Tempeh** – Also made from fermenting soybeans, this high-protein cake ticks two trend boxes, gut health and plant-based, as tempeh can be used as a meat substitute. It's also high in probiotics and is believed to boost heart health.
- **Sauerkraut** – This popular dish is made from fermenting cabbage with lactic acid bacteria, and it is high in antioxidants and believed to support digestive health.
- **Sourdough bread** – Although sourdough bread is made with a fermented starter, it doesn't contain probiotics. However, it's still associated with numerous health benefits, like balancing blood sugar levels and improving digestion rate.
- **Natto** – This Japanese food is made of fermented soybeans. Although it contains fibre and vitamins and is said to boost your immune system, its slimy, stringy texture and strong flavour have prevented it from reaching mainstream status here in the UK.
- **Kvass** – This fermented drink has been tipped to be a hit in the non-alcoholic beverage space thanks to its naturally low alcohol content and beer-like flavour. It's made from stale sourdough rye bread and contains probiotics.
- **Yoghurt** – One of the most common foods on this list, probiotic yoghurt is milk fermented with lactic acid bacteria. It contains many healthy nutrients and is thought to reduce blood pressure, prevent weight gain and improve bone density. But remember, not all yoghurts contain probiotics.



FINAL CALL

As I write this, hot on the heels of Speciality & Fine Food Fair, I'm thinking a lot about exciting innovations in the fine food industry. It's amazing every year to see dozens of new, up-and-coming brands flooding onto the scene when trade show season comes around. Whether they are pioneering unexpected flavours, honing their artisanal techniques, testing the waters with global tastes, or at the forefront of niche superfoods, it's invigorating to feel the buzz of new launches.

For customers, discovering new products is such a key part of what makes fine food retailers special. They come to farm shops and delis to explore the products they know they won't find in cookie cutter supermarket chains – to be wowed by heritage products from the continent or to try a cool, new beverage with packaging that will have all their friends asking where they can get one.

It's easy to lose sight of this when your head is down in the day-to-day work of emails, logistics and firefighting problems as they arise, but take a step back and look at a jazzy new product with the fresh eyes of a food-loving customer, and you'll have a welcome reminder of why we all do what we do.

The inspirational story of a start-up founder sharing their passion for their product is contagious, and you can't help but be optimistic about the future after one after the next. That's what makes shows and exhibitions so exciting (and exhausting). 'Networking' isn't anyone's favourite word, but I think 'collaboration' is a better way to think about it anyway. When we come together, we can foster an atmosphere of collaboration. What does that look like? It might be sharing business advice with a fellow start-up, sampling a product that could lead to a new addition to your stock list or even making a connection that could one day be a business partner.

Whether you've been attending shows this year or not, take a moment to get out on your shop floor and take a look at all those fantastic products on your shelves. What else might excite and delight your customers? Who could you collaborate with to make some more magic happen?

We love hearing from our readers. Do you have a story to share or expertise to pass on? Please get in touch with courtney.goldsmith@artichokehq.com

5 MINUTES WITH
FRANK LAWS, FOUNDER OF FRANKLY DELICIOUS

WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
Music maybe? I've got a degree in modern classical composition, so I guess writing some obscure music in a studio in the middle of nowhere.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
Saturday sales assistant in Boots. I had a massively oversized Boots branded shirt as they didn't have one small enough for me.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
Seeing and tasting other people's food. Sweet food to be more precise. I love pastries and tarts and all the wild and wonderful flavour combinations that are out there.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
I had an apprenticeship at a small bread bakery, which was night shifts. The head baker wasn't a great teacher and I quit after my second night!



WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE THING ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS?
The platform for change and information I've created. I grew our social media following to be quite large for a small indie business and have reached lots of people. I'm a fully self-taught chocolate maker and I wanted to pass on my knowledge to anyone who needs help.

AND THE LEAST?
The underlying anxiety of trying to survive the past few years.

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I love how friendly and collaborative everyone is. From other chocolate professionals to people who bake, and chefs. Some of my favourite people to natter with are in the coffee industry.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
There's a great vegan chicken place in Leeds called Doner Summer - so a basket of their classic chick'n with scotch bonnet hot sauce and gravy.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
Honestly, I don't have one that I can think of, but I'm always asking people I meet 'you wanna try some chocolate?'

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
One of my own creations - vegan broccoli white chocolate, made and flavoured with real freeze-dried broccoli.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE COOKBOOK?
Anything Nigella - she's who I aspire to be when I grow up!

BE CONNECTED



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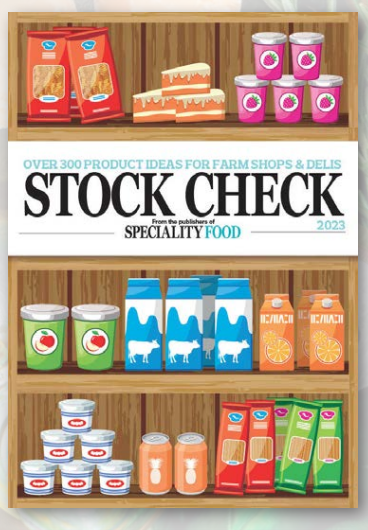
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SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE

- Italian Food Special
- Low Alcohol & Adult Soft Drinks
- Last Minute Christmas Ideas
- Storecupboard Essentials
- Boxing Day Centrespread
- Blue Cheese
- Hot Drinks
- Plant Based

STOCK CHECK
From the publishers of SPECIALITY FOOD

Stock up for 2024
300 exciting product ideas for independent retailers

To feature your products contact
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TRIED & TESTED

JOE & SEPH'S LIMITED-EDITION MILLIONAIRE'S SHORTBREAD POPCORN



The maestros of flavoured corn have come up trumps again with a range of four new limited-edition varieties, based on some of the public's favourite cakes. They include Chocolate Fudge Cake, Peanut Butter Blondie, and Birthday Cake. We sampled Millionaire's Shortbread. Every single kernel of air-popped corn was smothered in caramel, with tiny shortbread pieces, and a generous hint of cocoa. Light, crunchy, and (crucially) not too sweet, they were a huge hit, especially with grown-ups in our group, who crave something a bit darker at snack time. Lovely as a hamper or gifting option.
joeandsephs.co.uk

MOVENPICK HAZELNUT CREAM



Whenever there's chocolate spread about in our house, we have to hide it! This was doubly the case with Movenpick's smooth, rich spread, available now via Empire Bespoke Foods. Free from colours and preservatives, and made without palm oil, the spread is crafted with a whopping 20% whole roasted hazelnuts and cocoa. It has a deeply delicious nutty flavour that feels incredibly luxurious, standing up to (actually surpassing) the leading market brand. Available in a 300g format, in elegant navy blue packaging, it could make an attractive addition to your spreads and preserves selection.
empirebespokefoods.com

GUNNA DRINKS MISS MOJITA



The impact of HFSS legislation has led to numerous innovations in the soft drink industry. Anti-plastic campaigning brand GUNNA Drinks' products feed naturally into the low sugar category. Each of the quirkily branded cans comes in at under 100 calories, and has been infused with ingredients that have health-boosting benefits. Miss Mojita, GUNNA's twist on lemonade, blending natural lemon, lime and mint with added vitamin C and zinc, is juicy, bright and refreshing. It was a hit with all age groups, who couldn't believe it contained only 66 calories. GUNNA is double carbon negative, offsetting 2g of carbon for every 1g produced. It also invests in The Clean Oceans Project.
gunnadrinks.com

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Richard Bainbridge, chef patron of Benedicts in Norwich



Producers are absolutely key for chefs, and using local produce is, I think, the only way you're going to be able to survive this industry, whether you own a restaurant, or are a head chef. Knowing the seasons and what grows around you is hugely valuable. Over the last eight years of running Benedicts in Norwich, we've built up a little black book of amazing producers who make things from cheese, to cured meats.

When we're trying to come up with a menu, it's to do these producers proud, as they try to do us proud. Showcasing the best of what's around us is our job. A phrase I use about Norfolk is 'bounty of the county'. We have such an array of diverse ingredients. Cromer crabs, for one, are exported around the world for their sweet meat and texture. Then there's Norfolk barley, which I've banged on about for years. It really is some of the best in the world, sent to Scotland, American and Japan for whiskies, as well as being used in stews and risottos.

In the restaurant, the relationships you build with these people is hugely important. I've worked with one of our veg growers, Lucy, for 15 years. She grows some of the most incredible organic produce, and ethics are really important to her. She wants to broaden our minds, so we're always learning from each other. Every year we go and have a sit down with a coffee and talk about what we'd like and what she can grow. It's incredible.

I love working with Fen Farm. Jonny, the owner, is a great friend. So down-to-earth. His passion is to make awesome cheese, and that hasn't changed. Baron Bigod has become super famous. But, for us, very early on, we also had a conversation about his ex-dairy cows and what happened to them. We decided, together, he would let them go a bit further, taking them out into retirement, and putting them into the food system. It's become an ordinary thing now, to use ex-dairy cows, for their flavour and texture.

We use Sharrington Farm in North Norfolk for berries (some of the best strawberries in the world, if you ask me). Norfolk Peer potatoes come from Heygate Farms, out in Swaffham. To me, their potatoes, fresh out of the ground, and into the kitchen in 24 hours, are better than any Jersey Royal!

Something else I love about Norfolk is the products readily available on the doorstep. We forage a lot for the restaurant. We've always got our eyes open, with a bag, a book and a pair of scissors ready. From wild strawberries and wood sorrel, to wild garlic and ceps, we're so lucky to have such an array of beautiful ingredients at our fingertips. All it takes is a bit of knowledge and effort. That's the circle of life, going back to ancient ways, using our land, and seeing what Mother Nature can bring to the table.

> "Showcasing the best of what's around us is our job"

PARTNER CONTENT

Garofalo

GO WITH THE GRAIN

Is it time to broaden your pasta appeal with something a little bit different?

In Italy, pasta is life. A staple. Most commonly made with durum wheat, the best is cast in bronze, creating a rougher surface texture, perfect for attracting sauce, giving it something to cling to.



But what if wheat is a no-no?

According to Coeliac UK, one in 10 Brits has coeliac disease and must actively avoid wheat and gluten. Add to this the growing number of people avoiding wheat and gluten for health reasons (including those with autoimmune and inflammatory diseases) and it's easy to understand why intelligence specialists Mordor, predict a CAGR of 8.7% in the UK by 2028.

Thankfully, innovation has meant pasta can still be on the menu, with premium manufacturers investing in alternatives that not only meet the gluten-free demand, but also boast increased health benefits (especially when it comes to nurturing gut-friendly bacteria with fibre).

Let's take a look...

Teff: Teff is a tough ancient grain that stands up to tricky weather conditions, which has made it a staple in many countries. It's being used more and more in the bakery world, but is also finding its way into pasta, where it has a mild, gently nutty taste that is made for absorbing other flavours. Teff is an excellent source of protein and, like quinoa, contains all the essential amino acids our bodies need.

Buckwheat: Hearty and filling, buckwheat is one of the most commonly seen wheat alternatives in gluten-free products. The 'pseudo-grain' brings a very nutty, distinct flavour to pasta, which is best paired with something bold, such as a mushroom sauce, or garlicky pesto. It's rich in antioxidants, said to be useful in controlling blood sugar levels, and high in fibre and magnesium.

Amaranth: Another 'pseudo-grain', and one of the world's oldest crops. Amaranth produces a high protein pasta with a slightly malty, nutty taste. It tends to cook a bit more quickly, and errs on the softer side, so works best cooked just before eating, and tossed in a very light pesto or perhaps an olive oil-based sauce or dressing.

Sorghum: The cereal grain contains good levels of B vitamins, copper, iron, magnesium, and makes a pasta that's high in both protein and fibre, with a lot of body – meaning it can stand up to thick, creamy sauces. With a nutty, wholesome flavour, it's an excellent alternative for customers who are used to eating standard brown wheat pasta.

Sampling in store is a fantastic way to introduce customers to flavours and textures of pasta made with alternative cereals and grains. Why not partner with a local chef this autumn, to rustle up some gluten-free tasters? You just might win over some new fans.



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