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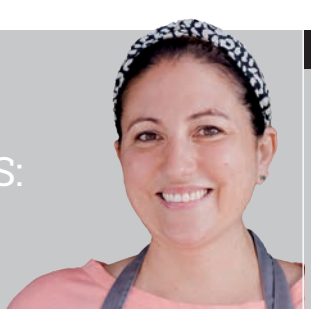
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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the latest edition of *Speciality Food* – the final edition of 2023. And I hope you'll agree, it's a cracker!

Christmas is a very special time in fine food. For many consumers, shopping in speciality food stores during the latter part of the year is almost a ritual. Those who don't, perhaps, visit in other months, may flock to pick up their panettone, indulge in artisan cheeses, buy hampers for loved ones, and to treat themselves to the finer things in life – be it a lovely tin of biscuits, or a box of crackers they just wouldn't find in a supermarket.

Retailers, now is your time to shine! We have plenty of inspiration within these pages, including everything you need to know about Christmas gifting and hampers...and a guide to that seasonal favourite – blue cheese.

We're also delighted to bring you the 2024 Stock Check magazine, which is crammed with hundreds of inspirational products for you to browse as you begin to make your buying decisions for 2024.

Have a wonderful Christmas.

CHARLOTTE SMITH-JARVIS | EDITOR (MATERNITY COVER)
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Now is the time for farm shops to really shine

As a campaign is launched calling for fairer farming, those shops that grow their own, and contribute to the circular economy, have the opportunity to show what they're made of

There was outcry in February when consumers found supermarkets stripped of their favourite salad items. Tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers and more disappeared from veg aisles.

This only further highlighted the importance of having shorter, localised, and more agile supply chains. But, say farmers and lobbyists, it appears lessons haven't been learned.

In a campaign, Get Fair About Farming (created by Riverford), an open letter has been drawn up for the 'Big Six' supermarkets, and a petition drafted for government, demanding more support, and fairer prices for growers.

The move comes as Riverford's research revealed more than half of fruit and vegetable farmers fear they will go out of business in the next 12 months, largely due to supermarket buying behaviours, such as not paying on time, and cancelling or changing orders at the last minute.

Around one in five farmers surveyed had suffered a waste crop due to a cancelled order, and 29% said they'd had an order cancelled with no explanation.

These devastating losses come at a time when farms are also being crippled by crop failures due to extreme weather conditions.

One potato farmer, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "I've not grown for the major supermarkets for five years, and I would never go back. It cost me £25,000 to grow the crop –they just said 'we don't want them now' - that was it, 60 metric tonnes of potatoes wasted. We need a fairer, shorter and more transparent food chain."

Get Fair on Farming's open letter, signed by organisations such as The Soil Association and Sustain, calls for supermarkets to pay what they agreed, buy what they committed to buy, agree on fair product specifications, to commit for longer terms, and to pay on time.

Riverford's Guy Singh-Watson said, "British agriculture is on its knees, and that's why most small family farms think that they're not going to be in business the next generation. Is that what we want from our countryside? Is that what we want from our food system? Is that what we want from farmers?

"Given the information, all polls show the British public wants better, and would even pay a little more if they knew it went to support better farming."

Pete Russell, founder of Ooooby, agrees with Guy, saying he feels the dominant players in the food industry are completely detached from the reality of farmers...but that there's the opportunity for a new wave of British farms to come through, producing on a smaller scale for the increasing number of consumers who want to eat better.

"We're seeing an accelerating trend of farms bypassing the supermarkets and selling direct to local households," Pete explained. "There are a growing number of small farms earning good money by selling direct. Interestingly, this crisis moment for farmers is shaping up to be the catalyst that's needed to drive the transition toward decentralising the food system."

Pete says online shopping is "levelling the playing field" and that the poor treatment of farmers by supermarkets will "only speed up the growth of the gate-to-plate marketplace".

"The 'companion phenomenon' is the increase of bright young people moving from urban centres to the countryside to start small farms. This seems to be influenced by a concern around food security and a desire to get back-to-basics in today's economic, ecological, and geographical volatility."

Farm shop, restaurant and dairy farm owner Rebecca Mayhew, of Old Hall Farm, says now is the time for British farmers and farm shops to expand at a local level, demonstrating they can be a reliable port of call for fresh, seasonal ingredients all year round.

"Fruit and vegetable farmers are having a gruelling time at the moment. This situation has really highlighted that if British suppliers can be undercut by non-British suppliers, that's what the supermarkets will do. Margins are tight on food. That's why retailers scrimp on every single penny. They're not protecting the supply chain!"

Rebecca fears another global event, such as a pandemic, would leave UK shoppers short due to the current set up of the larger food supply networks. "We won't have reserves to fall back on," she warned. "We're almost completely reliant on trade, when there's good food rotting in our fields. In lockdown, when there were egg shortages, we had a good supply because a farm near to us had their eggs rejected by a supermarket for being too big." This, said Rebecca, is the value of a farm shop. They can be reactive and flexible.

Farm shops, Rebecca added, can only get stronger. "We can plant enough vegetables to really look after our customers. We should be growing and eating more seasonal food, not relying on getting lettuces at any time of year."

Rebecca adds more land needs to be given over to food production, rather than to produce biofuel, which she feels is too heavily subsidised by government. "The government needs to incentivise those of us growing food and feeding the local economy. Perhaps they should subsidise farm shops, or encourage the building of more farm shops, or local mills so we can have more local flour? More farm shops would be better for everyone. When things go wrong, long supply chains break. We urgently need to shorten them, to get food to people when they need it."

Find out more about Riverford's campaign at getfairaboutfarming.com





Plant Based World Expo predicts long-term growth and forecasts top industry trends

Europe's largest 100% plant-based trade event reveals what we can expect from the food industry in the future ahead of November's expo in London

Long-term growth in the plant-based food industry is being led by the UK, reports Plant Based World Expo Europe.

The global plant-based food market is predicted to soar from £13.6 billion in 2021 to $115.3 billion by 2035, representing a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.5%. Despite industry-wide challenges, including food and drink inflation, the expo is preparing for its biggest show to date in November, and has moved to a larger venue at Excel London to accommodate a 20% increase in exhibitors and registered visitors this year.

With 43% of Gen Z claiming to be cutting meat from their diet in 2023, and 16% already having taken the plunge, a massive 59% of this generation could be meat-free by the end of the year. And so, the plant-based sector continues to innovate with new alternative proteins and textures. From retail to the public sector, the high street to hospitals, plant-based options are becoming more readily available. Meanwhile, within the industry, lobbying increases for plant-based subsidies to tackle the impact of animal agriculture on climate change.

"The plant-based meat sector is hands down, one of the most innovative and forward-thinking categories of the food industry," said leading consultancy, Plant Futures.

"The future market size is considerable. However, to reach mass market isn't easy, and often brands and businesses can underestimate the complexities of moving from an 'early adopter' to a 'mass majority'. This is a pivotable point for plant-based meat businesses. To reach mass market will mean to be ready and prepared for the next wave of consumers, who our insights show are unlikely to be flexitarians. We are excited to be sharing the latest insights into the plant-based meat market at the Plant Based World Expo in November, alongside lead sponsors ProVeg International and Veg Capital."



MEETING DEMANDS OF HIGH VALUE PLANT-BASED RETAIL CUSTOMERS

While it's broadly understood consumers purchasing plant-based products spend 61% more than the average shopper, according to SPINS data, retailers need to provide quality plant-based products and a broader scope of choice to maximise their basket size.

At the start of the boom, companies in the space were innovating cross-category, such as Oatly producing ice cream, yoghurt and cheese in addition to milk. However, the industry is evolving, and a combination of pressure to create quality products and a shift towards new business strategies focused on longer term profitability, means while brands previously diversified, now they are turning their focus to back to core ranges.



The onus will be on retailers to get the balance right, ensuring they have a wide enough selection of quality plant-based products to keep high value customers coming back.

CONSUMER PREFERENCE FOR CLEAN LABELLING AND FLAVOURS

While the argument against over-processed foods persists, producers are evolving, and many are now making quality, nutritious products for those who turn to them for convenience and affordability. Clean labelling will continue to gain momentum as consumers prioritise flavour and health.

Not only do ingredient decks need to be cleaner, but manufacturers must focus on transparency; highlighting exactly which plant-based proteins are used. The public will start to understand new foods and proteins from sources beyond the usual meat and soya. To help meet the demands of the clean label-conscious consumer, manufacturers have also ramped up production of natural vegetable flavours using non-GMO approaches.

FISH AND THE TURNING OF THE TIDE

The UN estimates that nearly 90% of the global marine fish population is overfished or depleted. And while the plant-based food market boasts a wealth of options for red and white meat alternatives, fish alternatives have struggled to take hold.

This is set to shift as plant-based fish becomes a category leader, with innovation now booming. Omni Foods has already been serving its golden fillet to Greene King pubs across the UK, and this summer saw the launch of the first 3D printed fish, representing another milestone in the industry. Meanwhile, fish brands are using algae to deliver nutrients such as Omega 3, achieving nutritional parity with fish equivalents. Expect wider adoption of plant-based tuna, sashimi and other fish alternatives in restaurant chains and high street eateries.

THE RISE OF AFFORDABLE PROTEINS

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, in the UK we will start to see a shift to more affordable plant proteins. Aberystwyth University has recently announced a new £1m pea protein project to reduce the UK's reliance on soya imports, and at Plant Based World Expo, Europe's leading companies will be showcasing affordable protein solutions, including textured pea and fava proteins that don't compromise on food affordability, taste, texture or appearance.

TRADITIONAL PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES APPLIED TO PLANTS

Using traditional production techniques like smoking (salmon) or fermenting (cheese) for plant-based products will be more extensive than ever this coming year.

The Expo team is seeing companies such as Handl Tyrol GmbH (an Austrian family business specialising in producing meat products) now applying the same techniques to plant-based proteins.

THE GOVERNMENT MUST ACT

While the government continues to battle issues, from an unhealthy population, to the impact of food production on the environment, there will always be a need to drive the economy forward.

The plant-based industry could argue that not enough is being done to reduce subsidies to the meat and dairy industries or invest in plant-based alternatives.

The sector itself now has a significant role to play in providing solutions to these problems. 'Uniting the Plant-Based Industry to Lobby for Growth', run by the Plant Based Food Alliance UK, will take place at Plant Based World Expo Europe's conference to help address this issue.

GETTING THE PUBLIC ON SIDE

Global heating demands the public is educated on the importance of their consumption habits, and with no one party responsible, consumer-facing campaign groups will be integral to progress.

An example of a successful campaign with a track-record of encouraging consumers to adopt a vegan diet is Veganuary, which will be celebrated at Plant Based World Expo this November. The event will host the film premiere of 'It'll Never Catch On: The Veganuary Story 10 Years On'.

Vegan food manufacturers are adapting to changing times, and strategies are evolving.

Manufacturers are leveraging economies of scale, and while initial hypergrowth slows, the culture shift is evident; from the availability of plant-based milks to breakfast, lunch and dinner choices available both in the public sector and on the high street.

Plant Based World Expo Europe, now in its third year, takes place at Excel London on 15th and 16th November 2023. Registration for the show is now open to the food and beverage industry, including retailers, foodservice professionals, and investors.

Abigail Stevens, marketing director of show organiser JD Events, said, "It's vital that businesses future-proof themselves and get their offering right. With innovation taking the plant-based industry to the next level, we're calling on all areas of the wider food and beverage industry, governments, and the public to support this path we're on – for the good of our collective health and that of the planet."

Register at plantbasedworldeurope.com.





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Why the food industry must do more to tackle sustainability issues

With food systems reportedly responsible for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, the industry plays an important role in reversing the tide on climate breakdown. But these news stories show the sector has a long way to go to make a change

MORE THAN 90% OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE COMPANIES DON'T DO ENOUGH TO FARM SUSTAINABLY

Big food and farming businesses are failing to protect nature and mitigate climate impact, according to new research.

The World Benchmarking Alliance analysed the 350 most influential food and agriculture companies around the world, including Bayer, Unilever and Walmart, and it found only 2% of companies understood their wider impact on nature.

The group highlighted that while there has been some small progress across the sector over the last two years, with almost 50% of companies having a form of climate commitment, there are still major hurdles for the industry.

For example, just 6% of companies had a time-bound commitment to eliminate deforestation. "To reach net zero by 2050, we know we must end deforestation by 2025," said Jenni Black, WBA's Nature transformation lead. "Food and agriculture companies have a huge opportunity to simultaneously tackle climate change and biodiversity loss by eliminating deforestation. But despite some leading companies committing to end deforestation, our benchmark results show there is still a long way to go."

The group also found that water use and soil pollution were among the top issues that companies need to respond to, and it called for clearer outcome-based strategies for food and agriculture businesses.

IN THE UK, INTENSE FARMING AND CLIMATE CHANGE ARE HAVING DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS ON WILDLIFE

One in six species are at risk of extinction, according to the State of Nature report, produced by UK conservation charities, academics and government agencies. Since the 1970s, the number of plants and animals monitored have decreased by an average of 19%.

The way we manage our land for farming and climate change were the biggest cause of wildlife decline on the UK's land, rivers and lakes, the groups found, and a shift to more wildlife-friendly farming and fishing is urgently needed.

"For Britain's farmers and growers, the environments we work in are our homes and often have been for generations. That's why we care passionately about protecting the great British countryside and huge amounts of work have been carried out through agri-environment schemes and industry-led initiatives to boost nature, create habitats for wildlife, and benefit soil health and water quality," NFU president Minette Batters said in response to the report.

As part of the NFU's ambition to reach net zero by 2040, it is working on a variety of ways to reduce emissions through improved productivity on farms and changing the way land is used to capture more carbon as well as plant more trees and hedges.

"What we ask is that proposals to boost nature recovery simply sit alongside equally ambitious plans for food production," she continued. "It's in everyone's interests to ensure climate-friendly British farming in the future, with a domestic agriculture policy that enables our farmers and growers to embrace accessible schemes that are fit for purpose. These schemes must offer fair rewards and strong incentives for participation, so farm businesses can continue to be productive and profitable while continuing to deliver the environmental benefits we all want to see."

MORE THAN A FIFTH OF OUR GROCERY ITEMS ARE AT RISK FROM CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

As the NFU points out, the UK has seen over the past 18 months just how fragile food supply chains are, and there is a desire to produce more here in the UK to reduce our reliance on imports.

This comes as research by the charity Christian Aid found that almost a quarter of UK grocery items are at risk of climate breakdown and could disappear from shelves in the coming years.

The group found that 22% of fruit, vegetables, pulses and meat products in the UK are imported from countries with high climate change vulnerability and low climate readiness levels. These include Brazil, South Africa, India, Vietnam, Peru, Colombia, the Ivory Coast and Kenya.

"The UK may be an island but in an ever more interconnected world we cannot escape the damage caused by climate change," Christian Aid CEO Patrick Watt said.

"The climate crisis is increasingly disrupting the supply chains of the food in British shopping baskets and risks adding to the cost-of-living crisis. The UK government must work with others to provide the financial support needed to help vulnerable communities adapt to a fast-changing climate."



New reforms hope to boost UK wine production

Reforms to the UK's wine industry have been announced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in a bid to boost investment and grow domestic production. Changes will take effect in 2024 and include removing mandatory rules around bottle shapes and packaging, such as requiring foil wraps and mushroom-shaped stoppers for sparkling wines. They will also allow the use of hybrid varieties of grapes, and reduce post-Brexit administrative requirements for imports.

"We have a diverse and dynamic wine sector here in the UK – but for too long our producers and traders have been held back by red tape inherited from the EU," said food and drink minister Mark Spencer. The reforms are said to make the most of the UK's status outside the EU, scrapping "outdated and burdensome rules so that our wineries, vineyards and traders can continue to innovate and help grow our economy," Mark continued.

Miles Beale, chief executive of the UK's Wine and Spirit Trade Association, welcomed the measures, which he said many members had long been calling for. The new rules should "maintain the UK as an attractive destination market and support our aim for UK consumers continue to have access to the widest possible choice of wine from around the world. And at a time when businesses are doing all they can to minimise packaging waste," he continued, "changes to packaging rules will be good for business, the environment and consumers." Ned Awty, director and interim CEO of Wines of Great Britain agreed, adding, "Sustainability and innovation are at the heart of our domestic wine industry, WineGB welcomes any measures that supports these values.

"We also look forward to any future legislation changes that will help Britain's fastest-growing agricultural sector thrive." Wine production in England and Wales has grown significantly in recent years, with Defra reporting a 74% growth in hectarage of vines in the last five years.



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JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

Recently I have heard the phrase 'Community Clusters' from two different sources.

Although it sounds like a television game show or new chocolate product, it was in fact uttered by individuals who are hoping to transform high streets and town centres.

As we know, delis and speciality food shopkeepers can play a leading role in this process.

Firstly because, as a highly motivated set of entrepreneurial individuals, we can provide a lot of local colour, passion and spirit.

Secondly, by selling top notch products to discerning customers which are not available elsewhere, we are providing a real point of difference.

Thirdly, by holding events and happenings, proportionate to the constraints and resources of our shops, we can add an extra dimension to the local offer.

Not all events turn out to be successful. An example for us being that once, in a spirit of getting totally carried away, we held a fashion show at the back of our shop - the idea being that we were close to the King's Road and all that.

This took not only a large toll on the retail operation, but brought complaints from local residents about excessive noise and scantily-clad individuals cavorting in the shop.

We now tend to focus on wine sampling, food tastings and, more recently, book signings.

We carried out one in the summer which was a great success.

It does help that the author in question, Bill Wyman, is an ex-Rolling Stone and that his excellent and informative book is all about Chelsea. But it attracted a lot of attention far and wide, and Bill is returning by public demand in November for a repeat gig.

Our next one involves the great pioneer of speciality food shops in London and former TV chef Glynn Christian, who has written a highly entertaining thriller called The Deli Detective Wraps it Up.

As a local resident he has kindly offered to sign copies of this ideal stocking filler in the run up to Christmas. It introduces Dan Heath, a deli owner turned detective, who is a character that will resonate with many of us.

However, our best initiative yet has been to launch a competition which we modestly call the World Chelsea Bun Awards. This takes place in May, and any money raised goes to a local hospital-based charity.

By trying to reinvent this historic bun from the 18th century we have struck a chord with the local community.

Now in their third year, the awards continue to grow in terms of local entries and media coverage. We have even created a Chelsea Bun Gin for people whose bun eating days may be behind them but who still want to get into the spirit of things - like me for example.

It actually earned us a slot on the first episode of the Channel 5 documentary called Kensington and Chelsea.

This brings me to a suggestion for speciality food shops looking to make a point of difference. As with Chelsea Buns it may be possible to revive some traditional local foods that have sadly become extinct in recent times. I recently discovered a very interesting book called The Lost Foods of England by Glyn Hughes. Here the author chronicles over 1,000 national foods that have disappeared or substantially changed in form since their conception.

Some are rather fanciful like the Earl of Arundel's Posset, Half Pay Pudding and Jack by the Hedge. Others have geographical places of origin like Oxford Pudding, Chester Buns, Brentford Rolls and Sussex Pancakes. Some do not seem to be extinct at all until it is apparent the recipe has evolved over the years – Mulligatawny Soup, salsify, haggis and fishfingers. Others have fallen out of fashion - for example fried oysters, egg soup and salmagundi. With our own address being the Duke of York Square, perhaps we should resurrect Duke of York Sauce, originally mentioned by Pepys in his diary in 1667?

One tradition that HAS successfully continued is the spirit of Christmas when a lot of our shops will again rise to prominence in the local community. May it long continue. Best wishes to all.

"As with Chelsea Buns, it may be possible to revive some traditional local foods that have sadly become extinct in recent times"

Interest rates: The industry reacts to the latest news

What does the recent freeze on interest rates mean for retailers in the fine food industry?

After 14 straight increases, the base rate has been held at 5.25% by the Bank of England, following an unexpected slowdown in inflation at the end of the summer. *Speciality Food* finds out how the industry is reacting, and what the news could mean for your business

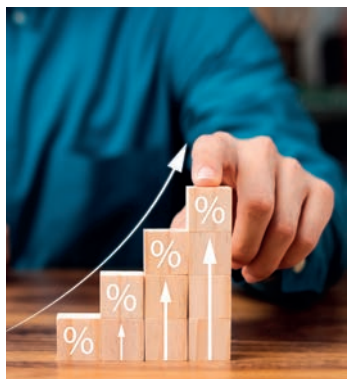
WELCOME NEWS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Emma Jones, CEO and founder of small business support group Enterprise Nation said the news was welcomed by smaller enterprises – especially those that have taken out loans to fuel growth. "Increasing interest rates means higher borrowing costs for SMEs including hospitality and food retail businesses, who often rely on loans and credit lines to fund their operations and growth, and reduced consumer spending, hitting their profit margins."

The Bank's target to halve inflation is on track. "In the meantime," Emma continued, "small businesses need a stable environment to regain confidence and all the support available to navigate the upcoming challenges to recover."

FURTHER SUPPORT NEEDED IN AUTUMN STATEMENT

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) welcomed the news, though national chair Martin McTague warned that high petrol prices could still hamper business for SMEs. "The higher cost of filling a tank could lower consumer spending, with people put off from visiting their local



high street, booking a weekend trip, or going for a meal out. A jump in freight and transport costs could also add yet more pressure to margins for businesses in all sectors."

He called on the Bank to give small firms "some respite" and urged the government to use its Autumn Statement to show "it's listening and understands their concerns".

"We're also calling for an overhaul of business rates and an extension for the 75% discount for SMEs in retail, hospitality, and leisure, due to expire in April, as it is these consumer-facing sectors which have been especially acutely affected by falling confidence levels and economic headwinds," he said.

Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium, similarly warned that retailers are in line for an increase of more than £400 million a year in their business rates bill. "This announcement would put further pressure on consumer prices, just as inflation is beginning to come under control." She added that retail leaders are calling on the chancellor to freeze the business rates multiplier in his Autumn Statement.

INFLATION STILL A WORRY

Following the recent drop in food price inflation, the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) warned that while the drop in inflation was "encouraging" it remains at historically high levels.

"The reason inflation has not yet fallen further is because the costs of food production remain high, including ingredients, energy, transport and labour," said CEO Karen Betts. "Food and drink manufacturers continue to do all they can to keep prices down for consumers while paying a fair price to their suppliers. The pressure on businesses in our sector is very visible in the high rate of insolvencies in the first half of 2023, which were 132% higher than during the whole of 2019."

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SEOUL PLAZA

Why low-sugar treats are trending – and how to sell them

With diabetes and obesity on the rise in the UK, and more people searching for high quality, sugar-free alternatives that taste great, how can fine food retailers tick all the boxes?

Many Brits are now interested in buying products that are healthier for them, according to new data.

People in the UK are taking deliberate steps towards more mindful and conscious eating, with 49% of UK adults currently trying to maintain a healthy diet, according to research from Mintel.

Healthy eating takes priority in home cooking, Mintel found, with the majority of adults in the UK viewing eating out as a treat where the healthiness of the food isn't a deciding factor.

Only one in 10 British diners consider menu options like low-calorie, vegetarian, vegan, or halal diets as crucial factors when selecting a restaurant, but more than 50% of people want to buy 'better for you' food items and avoid ultra-processed foods at home.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE DEMAND FOR LOW-SUGAR FOOD?

The Health Survey for England 2021 estimated that 25.9% of adults in England were obese, and a further 37.9% were overweight but not obese.

What's more, one third of children (37.7%) were above a healthy weight by the time they left primary school.

Obesity-related ill health is estimated to cost the NHS £6bn per year, according to Mintel, rising to £10bn a year by 2050.

According to the Obesity Health Alliance, the UK population consumes 50% more sugar than recommended, with 60% of our sugar coming from just three categories: biscuits, confectionery and desserts.

HFSS RULES

In 2020, the government announced its strategy for tackling obesity, which has centred around the introduction of new rules targeting the promotion of food and drinks that are high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS).

In England, a ban on HFSS products in prominent store locations took effect in October 2022, while additional rules to ban promotions of HFSS products and advertising online and on TV before 9pm have been delayed

.

PUBLIC SUPPORTS MORE RULES ON SUGAR

It might be surprising to hear, considering how much we love our biscuits, chocolates and sweets, that public polling in May 2023 for the Obesity Health Alliance found 68% of the public would support further food levies if the revenues raised were invested in children's health.

It found 73% of the public support action by the government to require food manufacturers to reduce sugar and salt from everyday foods.

"There is no doubt that there is still far too much sugar in the food and drink being sold to us," said Barbara Crowther, children's food campaign manager at Sustain.

"It is shocking to think that tooth decay is the number one reason for children aged five to nine being admitted to hospital, and we're seeing a rise in cases of Type 2 diabetes amongst young people too.

This is all entirely preventable."

Barbara points to the Soft Drinks Levy, which has "bucked the overall trend by reducing total sugar in soft drinks by 34% since 2015".

Meanwhile, a report of the government's voluntary sugar reduction programme from 2015 to 2020 showed the overall volume of sugar sold across product categories being monitored actually increased by 7.2%.

In confectionery, it had risen by almost 27% since 2015.

WHAT DOES THE DEMAND FOR LOW-SUGAR FOOD AND DRINK MEAN FOR RETAILERS?

It's well known that customers enjoy picking up the occasional artisan chocolate bar or bag of traditional sweets at their local fine food retailer. For delis, farm shops and food halls, there's no need to abandon indulgent products completely. But it could be wise to start stocking products making waves in the no and low sugar category.

"Forward-looking and responsible companies should be looking now to get ahead of future regulation, and corporate investors are increasingly expecting food companies to build strategies for better health," Barbara told *Speciality Food*.

"Those companies who change their recipes and adapt their product portfolios now, will be contributing to a healthier, more productive population for the long term, and that has to be better for business and better for everyone."

OVERCOMING TASTE CHALLENGES WITH ALTERNATIVE SWEETENERS

Although customers want to eat more healthily, they don't want to compromise on taste. In Mintel's research, 52% of respondents said changes to the taste of food and drink products should not be made in order to make them healthier, while 38% disagreed with the statement.

Brands that want to continue to hit the sweet spot with their customers will have to find alternative ways to sweeten their products. As of 2021, 15% of new products launched in the UK had a 'no added sugar' claim, and innovators have used products such as sweet flavouring agents and natural sweeteners like dates and monk fruit.

Don't get too caught up in sweeteners, however, as simpler is often better. As Mintel explained, "With the British Nutrition Foundation warning that many meal replacements contain potentially harmful ultra-processed ingredients like artificial preservatives and sweeteners, sticking to a balanced diet and five-a-day is a safer choice for health-conscious Brits."

HOW TO SELL LOW-SUGAR FOOD AND DRINK

Emma Clifford, associate director of food and drink at Mintel, thinks retailers must help customers find products that will deliver on value.

"With the cost-of-living crisis hampering healthy eating, helping consumers to eat healthily on a budget will resonate widely, with the grocers in a strong position to offer meaningful support here," she said.

"Strong nutritional credentials can boost foods' good value for money perceptions, especially if linked to long-lasting satiety.

Meanwhile, forging links to relaxation is timely during this stressful period," she added.

Mintel's HFSS report includes recommendations to group healthy foods together in store to garner interest among customers.

Retailers can also boost goodwill by offering guidance on better-for-you choices.

Even better for independents if there's a local option or artisan producer you can suggest in place of a big-name brand.

"Such clearer signposting of healthier products will appeal both to those looking for help in navigating healthy choices, offering a 'stamp of approval' to products, and to health-minded consumers looking to speed up their shopping," Mintel said.

ByRuby and Fieldfare announce distribution partnership



ByRuby, the fast-growing challenger ready meals brand, is joining forces with the award-winning and Atlantra-recognised Fieldfare with a sales and distribution partnership into the independent sector.

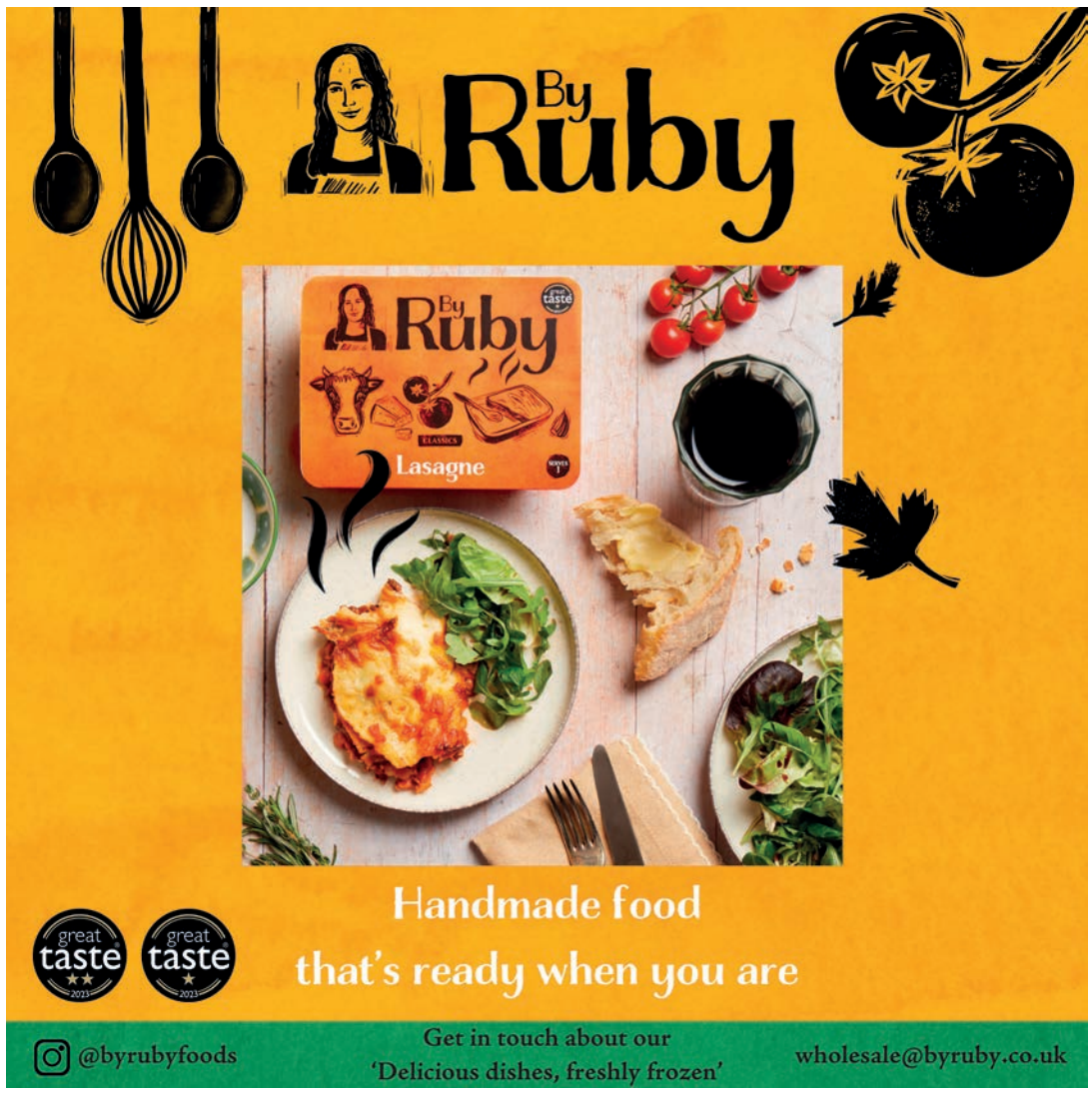
Fieldfare will now be the exclusive distributor of the ByRuby brand into farm shops and independents. The move will help to save retailers time and effort, as it allows them to simply order once to receive both sought-after ranges.

ByRuby, which is proving a winner in farm shops and independents with a contemporary brand image and best in class food quality, has shown how it can bring in incremental shoppers to the category. The brand, owned by leading chilled food manufacturer Charlie Bigham's, is enjoying increased distribution and popularity.

Matt Whelan, managing director of Fieldfare, said, "The offer is complementary to Fieldfare's range of delicious, loose frozen foods, and we believe the partnership will greatly benefit our stockists. We are passionate about quality and taste, and therefore this partnership with ByRuby is an excellent fit for us. Fieldfare really believes in the benefits that premium frozen foods have to offer shoppers and retailers. We are committed to constantly looking for opportunities to improve our stockists' offer, and trust that this collaboration will help to really drive the premium frozen offer to retailers."

Co-founder of ByRuby, Milly comments, "Farm shops and independents are at the heart of what we do at ByRuby. Our collaboration with Fieldfare will expand our reach, and together we can bring a fresh, modern and incremental sales opportunity to this sector – a match made in freezer heaven!"

The full ByRuby range will be available to order through Fieldfare, and interested stockists can ask their Fieldfare sales manager for further information or contact the Fieldfare support team at enquiries@field-fare.com







MEETING EXACTING STANDARDS

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PRODUCT NEWS

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Brand responds to rising demand in gourmet frozen puds



Italian food expert Crosta & Mollica has launched a duo of new frozen desserts, having witnessed growing consumer demand for premium puddings.

The Amaretto Tiramisu is a twist on the Italian classic. Traditional savoiardi biscuits are soaked in Amaretto syrup, layered with sweetened mascarpone cream, and finished with crushed amaretti biscuits and almonds.

While the Crema Cotta is Crosta & Mollica's take on a panna cotta. Enriched with Italian cream, and topped with caramel sauce, it's ready to serve after defrosting at room temperature for 40 minutes.

These launches follow successful activation of the brand's Tartufi frozen gelato truffles, Mascarpone Cream and Marsala Tiramisu, and Gelato range in 2022, and its popular Sorbetto Shells, launched this spring.

crostamollica.com

New plant-powered chocolate bar from Butterm!lk

Butterm!lk has just unveiled its latest treat – the 93-calorie Double Choccy Snack Bar. In what the brand believes is a first in the market, the bar combines a centre of chewy, soft nougat and crispy bits, with a velvety coating of chocolate. The bars are dairy-free and vegan-friendly, and contain no palm oil.



"We believe in creating treats that are not only irresistibly delicious, but also align with the values of our conscious customers," says Butterm!lk founder Tracey McDonnell-Goad. "We wanted to create something to meet that moment when your teeth get bored in the afternoon, and you need a little treat without feeling too naughty. Plus, the added fibre benefits, which is something we as a nation need a little more of in our diets."

buttermilk.co.uk

Fruity non-alcoholic G&T joins Belvoir Farm line-up



Belvoir Farm has added to its growing range of sophisticated adult soft drinks and premium alcohol alternatives with a new Non-Alcoholic Rhubarb & Ginger G&T. Available from this autumn in a 750ml bottle sharing format, it's ideal for the party season, and home entertaining.

The new drink's bright and punchy flavour comes from real rhubarb juice, natural ginger extract, juniper and a touch of quinine, and because it's ready to drink, it requires no effort to pour a delicious cocktail in minutes.

Designed to be enjoyed on its own, it's equally as delicious mixed with spirits, and makes a great swap for flavoured tonics too. The Belvoir Farm mocktail range also includes Non-Alcoholic Lime & Yuzu Mojito, Non-Alcoholic Passionfruit Martini, and Non-Alcoholic Peach Bellini.

belvoirfarm.co.uk



Deeply brings new plant fibre prebiotic drinks to market

New gut health brand, Deeply, has launched a range of prebiotic drinks, especially formulated to make people feel good from the inside out. Recognising the key to better all-round health lies in the gut, the Deeply range has been formulated with a powerful blend of 100% natural plant nutrients, vitamins and prebiotics.

Co-founder Clara Latham, says, "Despite being fundamental to all-round mental and physical health, gut health is largely misunderstood, with most products focused on adding probiotics into your diet. Your gut has trillions of bacteria already – good and not so good – so the key is feeding yourself the foods that nourish and grow the good bacteria.

"In launching Deeply, we wanted to raise awareness around the power of prebiotics as both a simple and effective solution to achieving better gut health, but one that feels nourishing and really tastes great."

The drink is available in two flavours – Spinach & Kiwi with Seaweed, and Carrot & Ginger with Turmeric. Each 65ml measure delivers 7.5g of the daily recommended 30g of fibre, which is twice the quantity of current market leaders.

deeplyfoods.com

The Great British Porridge Co goes gluten free

Just in time for porridge season, The Great British Porridge Co has announced its return to gluten-free oats across the range.

Renowned for its 100% natural, no added sugar, instant, plant-based porridge mixes, the company has revealed its latest recipe upgrade, making its products accessible to all once more.

"We made the tough decision back in 2021 to stop using gluten-free oats due to supply chain issues, but we were always keen for this not to be a permanent decision," explains owner Matt Hunt. "We have worked extremely hard to find a solution, and two years later, we are delighted to announce our porridge is back to being gluten-free."



The change is taking place across the brand's core range of porridge mixes, along with the seasonal favourite Apple & Cinnamon. Known as the 'Winter Warmer', this flavour is perfect for the colder mornings with real apple pieces, warming cinnamon and sweet dates. The range also includes Blueberry & Banana, Strawberry & Peanut Butter, Caffe Latte, and Classic Chocolate.

thegreatbritishporridgeco.uk

MOMO Kombucha collaborates with Natoora

The unmistakeably refreshing taste of fresh watermelon has been captured in a new drink from MOMO Kombucha, in collaboration with Natoora.



The Watermelon Kombucha combines MOMO's unfiltered classic drink with Sentinel watermelons, grown by Oscar Zerbinati in Mantua, Northern Italy – an area renowned for the fruit. The watermelons are cultivated slowly, reaching up to 18kg each, with only one melon grown per plant, to ensure every single one has a rich, dense flesh, and sweet flavour.

Josh Puddle, founder of MOMO Kombucha, says, "We are so grateful to have partnered with Natoora, and to have been able to combine Zerbinati's expertly grown watermelons with our kombucha. I wasn't sure the flavour would cut through the kombucha, but it really does, and has totally surpassed our expectations – all credit to our head brewer, Matt Canham.

"We're also happy to be supporting Natoora's Farm Fund through this partnership."

momo-kombucha.com

Matthews Cotswold Flour launches the UK's first all-purpose regenerative white flour

One of Britain's leading speciality flour producers has unveiled a new flour, made wholly from wheat produced using regenerative farming methods.

Matthews Cotswold Flour's All Purpose Regenerative White Flour is created using grains from a select group of local farms whose techniques aim to restore and improve soil health and biodiversity. The flour is suitable for use in recipes calling for plain, strong bread, or self-raising flour (if used with baking powder), allowing for more diversity of bakes from one packet.

Bertie Matthews, managing director, says, "The grain used in our new all-purpose flour comes from farms which have been implementing a host of regenerative practices for a number of years. We believe it is the duty of all food producers to move to a regenerative sourcing model. For years British farmers have been incorporating these practices and making a real tangible change to the landscape. It is now the turn of food producers, millers and bakers to play their part and get these incredible products into people's homes."

cotswoldflour.com



New mixers from The London Essence Co

The London Essence Co, maker of unique and creative premium mixers, has just launched two new crafted sodas in 500ml bottle formats.

Aromatic Orange & Fig has a vibrant, citrus-forward profile that's aromatic on the nose, combining sweet and zesty blood orange with bergamot. The addition of a fig distillate delivers a smooth, honeyed finish that works alone as a non-alcoholic drink, or combined with premium spirits.

Raspberry & Rose consists of raspberry infused with a hint of sharp blackberry, balanced by lavender and a signature rose distillate for a floral finish. It's ideal as a mixer for a twist on the classic Bramble cocktail.

As the rest of the range, both drinks are sweetened naturally and contain only 20 calories per 100ml.

Melanie Ginsberg, UK head of marketing, says," We're thrilled to be expanding our much-loved Crafted Soda range. Ingrained in our ethos is an uncompromising commitment to quality flavours, and these are no exception."

londonessenceco.com



Gin pays homage to the British seas

Multi award-winning Salcombe Gin has partnered with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) to launch Four Seas – commemorating the charity's 200th anniversary.

For the next two years, every bottle will help save lives at sea, with 10% of net sales for each one sold donated to the cause's vital work.

Inspiration for the gin has been drawn from all four corners of the nation – led by lemons smoked over Scottish whisky barrel wood chips, tangy sea buckthorn from where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Cornish coast, sugar kelp foraged from the Irish Sea, and sweetly tart elderberries from Wales.

"Spending years working at sea, and having grown up learning to sail in Salcombe and watching with fascination as a child when the Salcombe Lifeboat was called out, it's hard to express just how thrilled I am about the collaboration between Salcombe Gin and the RNLI," says co-founder and director of Salcombe Distilling Co, Angus Lugsdin. "It fills the Salcombe Gin team with immense pride to join forces with the charity, knowing that the sale of Four Seas will contribute to our coastal communities and support the RNLI in their crucial mission."

salcombegin.com



Over the Moo launches bite-sized vegan choc ices

Plant-based Over the Moo is already seeing a good uptake for its eight 'chunk' sharing bags of mini choc ices, which are now available for foodservice, food halls and independent fine food retailers.



Both the Vanilla and Caramel flavours are entirely dairy-free, and perfect for the festive party season as an easy, sharable dessert.

Having worked on choc ice concepts from an agency perspective in his youth, Over the Moo's Simon Goodman was convinced this nostalgic treat had historically missed a beat by always settling for sub-standard ice cream, and instantly forgettable dark chocolate coatings.

"My priority, unlike so many other of my peers, was never to prioritise low calorie," says Simon. "My commitment has always been to bite-sized, 'sharing bags' of guilt free coconut milk ice cream. At less than 30 calories a bite, Over the Moo is building an enviable reputation as the perfect pass around permissible treat that's ideally suited to family nights in.

"Over the Moo's reinvention of the humble choc ice brings great taste, sustainable thinking and superior ingredients together into something deliciously distinct."

overthemoo.co.uk



Hot new festive gifts from Eaten Alive

Award-winning fermented foods producer, Eaten Alive, founded by two Michelin trained chefs, has recently unveiled its line-up of gifts for food lovers.

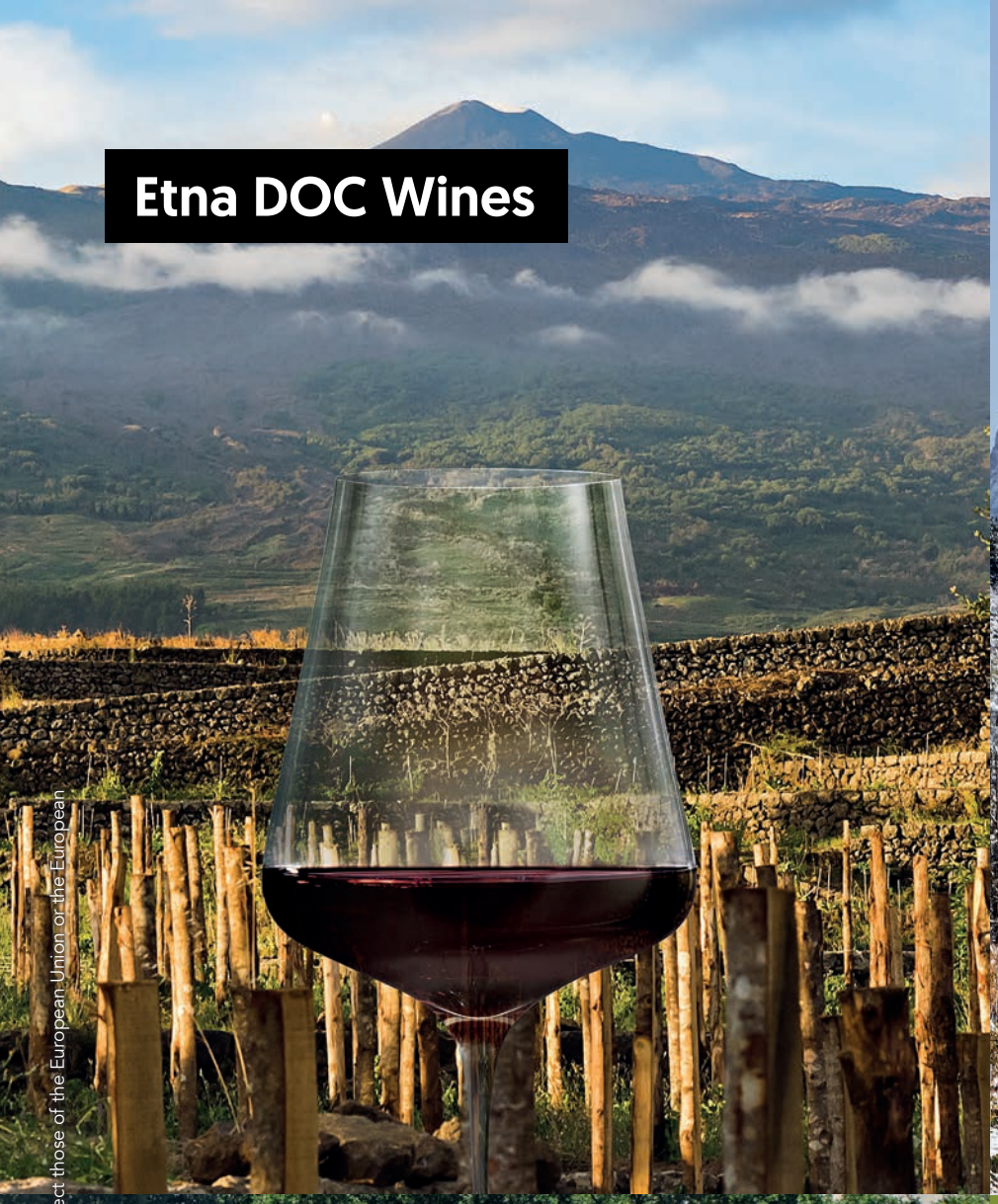
Everything in the range is handmade by the team, is free from additives, raw, vegan, and teeming with good bacteria.New for this year, the Smoked Sriracha and Jalapeno & Lime gift box features two of the most popular Eaten Alive hot sauces.

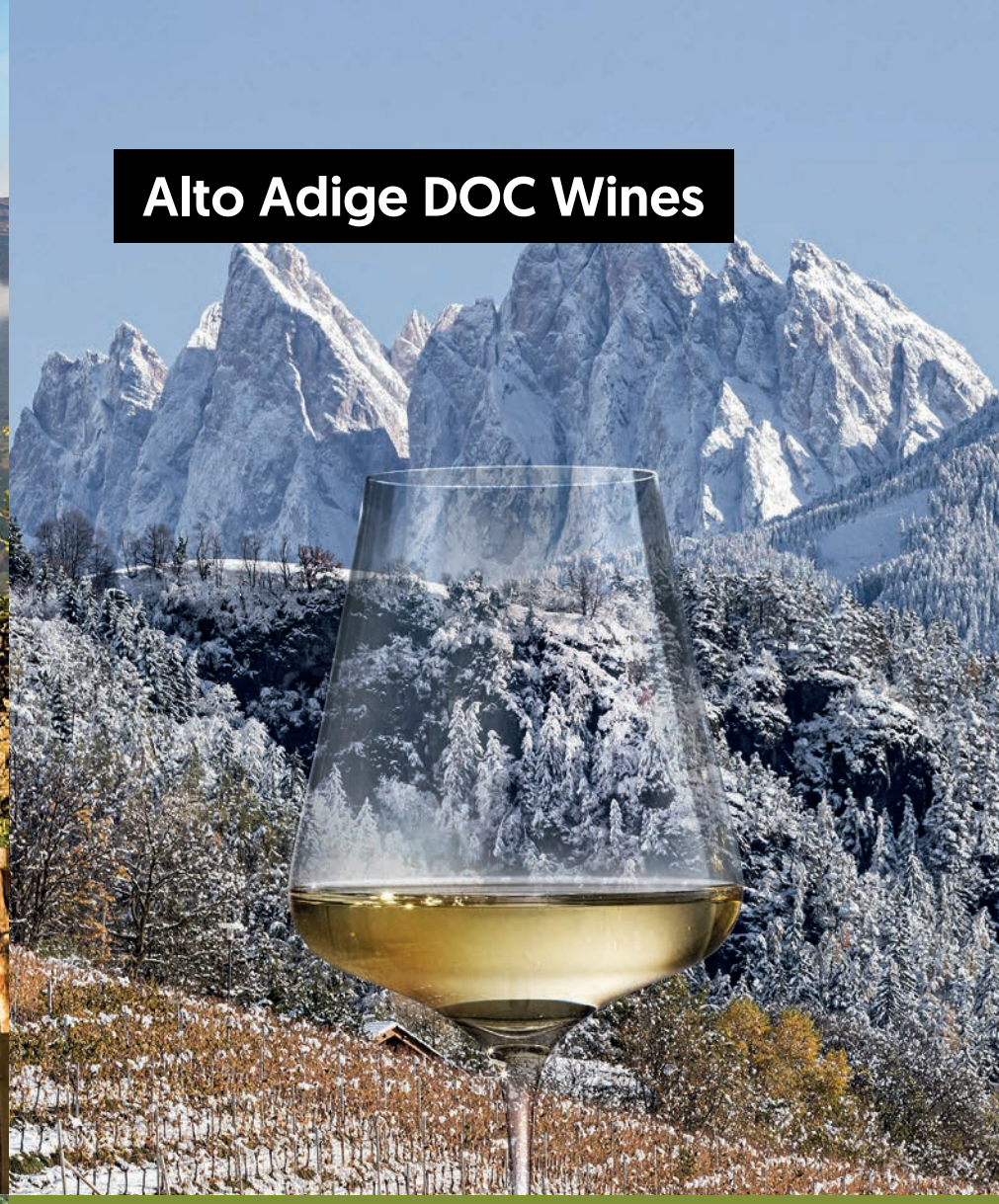
The Gut Booster pack is a perfect introduction to the benefits of fermented foods. And the bumper Discovery Box features all seven of the brand's sauces, from Cacao & Lime to Preserved Lemon.

Back for Christmas 2023 is Eaten Alive's decadent Champagne Citrus XO hot sauce, made with aged and fermented Lemon Drop chillies, yuzu juice, pickled whole citrus fruits and Champagne. The 100ml bottle, complete with a cork stopper, is presented in foil embossed gift boxes, and comes with a branded, reusable pourer.

eatenalive.co.uk









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THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ITALIAN FINE FOOD

From pasta to pesto, Italian fare is a deli staple. *Speciality Food* speaks to industry insiders to help ensure your shelves and counters are stocked with the products that really make this cusine sing

The word 'deli' is an evocative one. For the epicurean, it conjures images of shelves bursting with jars of plump artisan olives, small batch relishes and spice pastes, neatly arranged boxes of chicly packaged chocolates, and gleaming glass counters where big fat wedges of farmhouse cheese nestle alongside cured meats, dips and other delicacies.

There have been incredible leaps in the fine food industry over the last 20 years, with boundless innovation coming through from producers. But the backbone of any good deli, surely, is its curation of timeless classics – and for many, this points to one specific place – Italy.

Britain's oldest delicatessens have Italian roots, from London's Terroni, to Edinburgh's Valvona & Crolla. To this day, these classic delis offer endless inspiration to customers. But, as *Speciality Food* discovers, far from standing still and resting on their laurels, they are continuously changing with the world around them.



The Italian deli in modern Britain



He may be biased, but Antonio Picciuto of Buongiorno Italia thinks Italian food and drink is still some of the best around. "It's so versatile," he says. "And there's so much variety. You can create anything with Italian ingredients. Also, it's accessible. I always say, you can come into my deli and create a whole dinner party. That's what sets us apart, and that's what is so important."



Bruno Zoccola of Valentina Delis agrees, saying Italian cuisine is, "The most popular in the whole world. People know it and understand it. They love the variety of options within Italian food, and the focus on healthy ingredients."

Italian delis, Bruno says, fill the void left by supermarkets, where the Italian offering is limited by space and mass appeal. He likes to follow a 'good, better, best' policy in store in order to have options for a variety of budgets, and encourages other delis (regardless of whether they are Italian or not) to follow this mantra when looking to stock produce from the country. By doing this, "delis can provide the quality and variety that really excites people and showcases the vast range that Italian food can incorporate."

The key to success

"I always say to my staff that our food has to be better than the supermarkets," says Antonio. "It must be better quality. If you supply normal standard Italian food, your deli is never, I think, going to be that successful. You need to have that edge. The salami has to be better. The Parma ham presented better. The olives far superior.
If we choose exceptional products, I believe our customers will taste the difference – and they often tell me that's the case."

Bruno believes having Italian owners and staff gives delis an edge too. "Their expertise, insight and recommendations can add so much to a customer's shopping experience (and can encourage them to add more to their basket).

"Italians are so friendly, and proud of their country and cuisine, that they are keen to share advice and suggestions where they can, helping to recreate the local, intimate feel of traditional Italian delis."

The price is right

Bruno ensures he has stock across multiple categories at incremental prices, saying it's a crucial part of his business planning, as he's noticed many customers' habits have changed in light of the cost-of-living crisis. "There has been a marked increase in our deli and ready-to-go meal ranges, suggesting that more

> If you supply normal standard Italian food, your deli is never going to to be that successful....If we choose exceptional products, I believe our customers will taste the difference

THE SAVVY WAY TO SEASON

Piquant and beautifully savoury - artisanal Italian cheese is an essential kitchen ingredient says Riccardo Pastore



Without a dash of seasoning, even the finest of dishes can fall flat. Around the world, the way we season our food varies. In Britain, a sprinkling of sea salt will lift the humblest of ingredients. Soy sauce trickled over Asian dishes brings a new dimension. Whereas in Italy, hard cheese is king. The most commonly used and recognised 'flavour bomb' has to be Parmigiano Reggiano, which has become ubiquitous in British supermarkets. However, if your customers want to authentically recreate some of Italy's most famous dishes, there's another cheese you should be stocking in your counter – Pecorino Romano PDO. The umami, bold, savoury cheese is a must-have for producing a traditional carbonara, or cacio e pepe.

Pecorino Romano PDO is currently expanding rapidly from the country into foreign markets, and is certainly an ingredient to keep your eye on. "Its versatility makes it a unique ingredient for catering and innovative gastronomy," says Riccardo Pastore, director general of Consorzio per la Tutela del Formaggio Pecorino Romano.

Pecorino Romano DOP, Riccardo adds, has well-defined characteristics that make it incredibly versatile. "It's a hard, cooked cheese, crafted from fresh, whole sheep's milk. Notably, it's naturally lactose-free. Its defining feature is its aromatic flavour, mildly spicy when used as a table cheese, and intensely spicy when grated."







THE TRUTH ABOUT **OLIVE OIL**



Not all oils are made equal, says Yacine Amor, who sheds light on how to source the very best on the market

For Italians, olive oil is liquid gold – and natives take sourcing of their oil very seriously. In growing regions, it's not uncommon for families to rock up to olive groves with giant containers, where they will restock on their favourite variety for the months to come.

Not all oils are created equal, though, says expert Yacine Amor of The Artisan Olive Oil Company, which specialises in sourcing oils from across Europe.

"Good olive oils are produced quite differently from standard oils," Yacine explains. "They tend to be produced fairly early in the season, and the difference can easily be seen in the chemical profile." When sourcing olive oil, retailers can ask for a chemical test to expose the quality of the oils they are sampling. "Extra virgin olive oil should have an acidity of no more than 0.8. The best are less than around 0.3 or 0.4. The second way to discover the quality of your oil is to look at the year of harvest. We are right now in a very different market for olive oil because of the dry weather conditions, especially in Spain. If you look at the price of oil in supermarkets, a lot are priced below the current bulk price in Spain. That means these oils are not from a recent harvest and are probably mixed from old harvests. If I was a retailer, trying to sell premium oil, I would want to know which harvest went into the bottles I am looking at."

Sensory analysis is important in determining quality too. "Very good olive oils," says Yacine, "have a distinct smell. A little bitterness and spiciness to different degrees. This varies from region to region and time of harvest, but it is the opposite of a neutral profile.

It is very easy to test. Open a bottle, and if there's no smell, you already know it's not particularly high quality."

The best Italian oils, Yacine adds, tend to come from Tuscany, Sicily and Puglia. "Puglia is the biggest producer in terms of quantity, Tuscany is super premium with a strong taste, and we sell a lot of Sicilian olive oil at the moment, which hits the right spot for UK consumers with its medium fruity flavours. That appeals to people who want an oil to use for cooking, dipping and finishing dishes."

As ever, Yacine says you should have an open and honest conversation with your supplier, and make sure you try before you buy.





people are choosing to entertain and host at home, rather than go out for a meal. Customers are choosing to prioritise the economy of picking up ingredients from a deli, having been helped by a knowledgeable member of staff, and being able to feed a family or multiple friends at home for the same price as a meal out."

Offering variety in price is a strategy Antonio has adopted too. Despite being based in an affluent part of the UK, he says there does come a point where even the most well-at-heel customer will baulk at the cost of an ingredient. "These people still have mortgages to pay, and family to feed. They don't mind paying a bit more for quality, but if you go too high, it will work against you," he advises. Olive oil is a case in point. "Everybody wants a good olive oil, but £25 for a half litre does become a bit much. If you can get in oil that you can price for around the same cost as a decent bottle of wine, it will always sell."

Antonio recommends, across your Italian range, having a mixture of prices that reflect your nearby demographic's spending powers. "Don't be a food snob! You need to have that £7.95 bottle of oil as a great everyday option. Then, if customers want something better at a higher price tag, you can talk them through what you have."

Start with the staples

Too many delis miss the mark by being 'out there' with their range of products, says Antonio, who insists that for success, you simply must get the basics spot-on. "It's important, at the very least, to have everything a client needs to create an entire meal." They can't be any old products though. "If you have tomatoes, they've got to be amazing tomatoes. You need great buffalo mozzarella, nice bread, superb pasta and wine. Sometimes you go into delis and they've got lots of fancy jars, and you don't know what to do with them. You have to try to provide solutions for all kinds of meals – especially very good sauces. Seggiano pesto is one of our bestsellers."

With interest in charcuterie and grazing boards growing every year, Bruno says ensuring you have a diverse array of choices at the counter, and are ready and willing to inspire customers, is essential too.

"As the individual items can be pretty affordable, we have noticed people are being more experimental with their different choices of cheeses and meats. They love talking to our staff about the nuances and provenance of different ingredients, and this has been heightened by the number of supermarkets closing their deli counters and forcing customers into independent stores for that something special. We have noticed our weekend trade now generates double the turnover that it does Monday to Thursday as people host over the weekend."

What's trending?

During lockdown many home pizza oven suppliers reportedly ran low or even ran out of stock, as people switched from dining out to entertaining their 'bubble' or family in their own gardens.

The desire to create fresh, homemade pizza in our kitchens continues, and Antonio says any Italian deli or independent retailer worth its salt should be catering for these customers. "The 00 flours, pepperoni, yeast, sauce, tomatoes, fior di latte, grated mozzarella – it's very important to have all these things now," he says. "I don't think an Italian deli can survive without them. You just don't want people to walk out and say 'I couldn't get what I needed there so I'm going to the supermarket'. You have to be fully stocked."

In addition to pizza-making essentials, Antonio has seen a marked increase in recent years in the sale of burrata, stracciatella, nduja and guanciale, and sees these as key Italian products that everyone should be stocking right now. "We are selling tonnes of guanciale every week, and we've seen pancetta drop off a bit," he says. "It has to be very





very good guanciale though!"

Coming into the cooler months, Bruno anticipates a boost in sales of what he calls 'stodge' foods as people begin to crave richer meats and heavier pastas. He says he's also seen a real rise in popularity of traditional ingredients with a twist. "For example, our Mamma Emma gnocchi filled with ricotta, beetroot, gorgonzola etc is proving hugely appealing. We are also seeing a demand for cotechino – a large pork sausage that we slow cook over several hours – and zampone is set to be popular over the New year as more people embrace Italian table traditions, hoping the combination of pig trotter and lentils will bring them the supposed good fortune."

The constantly changing landscape of Italian food in British retail

"The evolution of food, like language and other facets of human culture, is an endlessly fascinating journey," says Seggiano founder Peri Eagleton, talking about the changing face of the cuisine, and its integration into British life. "Italy's post-war years were marked by widespread poverty, prompting significant emigration. During this period Italians at home were not enjoying the dishes that Italy is famous for. In fact, food was scarce, and the contadini, or land labourers, survived on a simple diet of legumes and vegetables that they cultivated themselves. This diet, known as 'cucina povera', may well explain the longevity enjoyed by many contadini, who often lead active lives well into their 90s."

In the 60s, spaghetti Bolognese became an iconic dish in London, and three decades later, as the cuisine became established in British culture, Peri and partner David embarked on a journey to establish and Italian food business, selling olive oil from their farm.



"At that time, there were few serious competitors at our level of quality, aside from Carluccio's, before its transformation into a commercial restaurant chain," Peri says. "It was during this time that we forged lasting friendships and partnerships with some of Italy's most exceptional food producers."

As Seggiano's journey has progressed, Peri says they've begun to question what Italian tradition and authenticity really mean. "A recent phenomenon, known as 'gastro nationalism', has emerged in Italy. It denies the role played by Italian Americans in reinventing iconic dishes such as pizza, pasta, and carbonara sauce. Gastro nationalists assert that these culinary traditions belong to Italy alone. Giorgia Meloni's government has even contemplated testing Italian restaurants for adherence to traditional recipes, potentially branding chefs as transgressors if they deviate from established culinary rules and exercise creativity."

On the other hand, Peri says, quality controls do offer tangible guarantees to consumers – such as the stringent production regulations governing extra virgin olive oil, and the production and labelling of balsamic vinegar of Modena.

"These regulations level the playing field, enabling consumers to make like-for-like informed comparisons. Food labelling is all too often influenced by big brand lobbies to the detriment of consumers. The label statement 'Made in Italy' might lead one to assume a product boasts Italian quality. However, numerous pasta brands employ it to conceal the fact their pasta is made from less expensive imported Canadian wheat."

Peri says retailers should be vigilant when stocking Italian products, ensuring they can establish exactly where the items they are buying are from, and how they were made – something Seggiano prides itself on.

Speaking on where Italian food is now, and where it's going, she says there is a bit of a movement currently towards cucina povera - using sustainable, pre-industrial ancient grains and pulses.

> "Don't be a food snob! You need that £7.95 bottle of oil as a great everyday option. Then, if customers want something better at a higher price tag, you can point to what you have"

It pays to be authentic



Consumers are becoming ever more curious about traditional Italian foods from small, family-run businesses who care about what they make, says Just Gourmet Foods' Gianfranco Perri.

When I began Just Gourmet Foods in 2018, it was with a vision to bring authentic, artisanal Italian brands to the British market. There were many 'big brands' in the UK, even in the speciality retail sector, and I recognised the challenges for the smaller, arguably more authentic, Italian brands to gain any traction. Witnessing a range of barriers - from language to lack of understanding around market expectations (as well as the more operational challenges around labelling, importation and distribution) - many producers were simply unable to fit the profile of what the UK market expected. Therefore, our business grew out of a space where we could help them to navigate these expectations and, ultimately, deliver a product fit for the UK consumer.

In the past five years I have focused on relationships with a selection of more than 20 producers who provide an authentic taste of Italy. By investing in warehousing and a small, knowledgeable team, we have acted as an 'incubator' for some truly exceptional products.

I feel it is important to maintain the opportunities for delivering quality into the UK market and, having worked with food for my entire career, also see so much value in the independent sector in the face of the homogeneity of the big box retailers.

Our range encompasses everything from amaretti to zucca (squash) pasta sauce and many delights in between! This year I've noticed an increase in interest across all categories, including Christmas offerings, and we will continue to build on this in 2024. With customers now understanding the nuances of tomato varieties, the Italianavera range has gone from strength to strength as home cooks appreciate that a spunzillo offers qualities over the datterini. Nduja, a spicy Calabrian sausage paste, has also seen a surge of interest over the past couple of years, and we are very proud of our version from Callipo, which packs a good punch on the flavour front. We have also seen growth in Italian biscuits. This signifies a move towards retailers offering their customers a more sophisticated alternative, as well as a growth in focus on gifting options, which the Marabissi range covers so well.

Another brand we have seen develop is BioOrto - a family business which grows all of its own produce organically. And Filotea offers retailers a range of eye-catching packaging and varieties. From Chilli Fettucine to hand formed Cannelloni, it covers shapes and flavours you won't find elsewhere. While quality is paramount to us, how a product sits on shelf is equally important, and we work with our brands to ensure that they stand out. This principle is clear in the wonderful selection of extra virgin olive oils we have sourced in reusable bottles, which look too good to hide in a cupboard! Be it bright ceramic bottles from Muraglia, the metallic finishes of the BioOrto range, or the sophisticated simplicity of Tenute Cristiano, retailers will find a design that works for their profile.

Recent listings are the incredible range of sustainably caught and preserved fish from Armatore. The brand has a great story, as does Gli Aironi, whose Smoked Carnaroli is getting a lot of attention at the moment, as the season changes. Let us not forget the exceptional balsamics from Borgo del Balsamico, which offer incredible quality for the price.

For more information contact info@justgourmetfoods.co.uk



"We have also moved away from Italian tradition with a range of soups, two of which borrow from the Japanese and Asian palate of flavours, though they are made in Sicily with the customary flair of the producer. The third doubles up as an exceptional pasta fazool sauce, known by purists as pasta fagioli." Peri says demand is high for suppliers such as Seggiano, to deliver more in terms of flavour, using 'clean' ingredients, and enhancing nutritional value. "That means making foods that can fit in with plant-based diets, deliver good levels of fibre and protein, and include ingredients with anti-inflammatory, antioxidant properties. This isn't weird science, it's about simple, healthy ingredients, and nutritious food which doesn't require a lot of preparation time. We apologise in advance to the gastro nationalists of Italy for our use of miso, ginger, turmeric and coconut."

While experimenting is always good, particularly in exciting loyal brand lovers, Peri doesn't see the core of Italian deli production changing, but instead predicts the steady and continued sale of pesto, pasta, pasta sauces, olives, and gluten-free products.

"Research tells us consumers are sticking with the mainstays of Italian cooking. They are paying more than they would for an industrial product because it tastes better, and they trust the brand."



CELEBRATE **ITALIAN CHARCUTERIE**

While the British charcuterie boom is in full swing and is absolutely to be celebrated, discerning retailers should still be helping customers put Italian salamis and whole cut cured meats on the table. These products have a rich heritage, and generations of experience behind them. They have been meticulously crafted, using time-honoured methods, resulting in exquisite flavours and textures. The only problem is, many consumers won't know the nuanced differences between the broad range of cuts. Offering tastings, or (if you have a café offering) demonstrating their uniqueness via grazing boards, is incredibly important from an educational perspective. As is spending time with your wholesaler or supplier, to ensure you can weave in the story of each product at the point of sale.

PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA

Made in Emilia-Romagna's world-famous microclimate since Roman times, Prosciutto di Parma can only be produced with Italian born and bred pigs – usually the Large White, Landrace or Duroc. Sweet, salty and buttery soft, the ham is 100% natural, with no additives or preservatives. The real deal is stamped and branded with the Parma Crown.

BRESAOLA

Consumers are on the hunt for high protein, low fat products, and this muscle cut, from Lombardy, certainly fits the bill. Available in several types, from sottosso to magatello, it sees lean pieces of beef cured and aged for two to three months. The result is sweet, with an almost truffle muskiness.

GUANCIALE

Italian specialists and delis are reporting phenomenal sales of this herbal, salty pork jowl cut, which is an essential part of dishes such as carbonara and amatriciana. Unlike pancetta, which can prove a little gristly, guanciale has melting quality that makes it superior in every way for sauces.

SPECK

Lightly pink at the centre, and darkening at the edges, this bold-flavoured cut from Northern Italy brings body, and a real punch of flavour to creamy sauces, and is delicious alongside crusty bread, cheese and a regional wine.

CULATELLO

Considered one of the very best Italian cuts – and increasingly being produced by charcutiers in the UK – culatello is made in the Po Valley with leaner pieces of pork, cured in salt, garlic, pepper and white wine. It's not as robust as other varieties and needs careful monitoring to keep it in top condition, but the effort is worth it for this deliciously supple and delicate ham.

FINOCCHIONA

Difficult to pronounce – so why not help your customers by spelling it out to them on a sign in the counter? This Tuscan salami is a deli favourite, speckled with fragrant fennel seeds and sometimes fennel flowers. It brings a pronounced flavour, and instant interest to any grazing board.

NDUJA

Widely used by telly chefs and in restaurants, nduja is 'having its day' in the UK. The bright red soft salami, originally from Spilinga in Calabria, has a spicy, almost tangy taste, from an profusion of dried, roasted spicy red peppers. There are some decent varieties available in jars, but fresh nduja is infinitely better.





LIMONCELLO DI CAPRI CREAM

A real treat for lemon lovers. Newly arrived on UK shores this smooth, silky liqueur balances the tartness of citrus with a creamy texture.
limoncello.com



CASA FIRELLI TRUFFLE HOT SAUCE

Made with earthy truffles and chillies for a warm, punchy and spicy unique flavour. Adds depth to pizza, eggs, burgers, wings and salads.
pettywood.co.uk



SEGGIANO CLASSIC VIN SANTO PANETTONE

Handmade for Seggiano by a family-run bakery in Tuscany, with the best ingredients, and leavened with mother yeast. Enriched with 12% DOC Vin Santo del Chianti.
seggiano.com



BIO ORTO PUTTANESCA TOMATO SAUCE

Bio Orto grows all of its own produce organically, and this exquisite sauce is an authentically delicious expression of its ripe tomatoes, olives and capers.
justgourmetfoods.co.uk



BELAZU VEGAN BASIL PESTO

A vegan take on the brand's classic Genovese pesto. Free from dairy, soya, nuts and wheat.
belazu.com



GAROFALO FARFALLE TRICOLORE ITALIAN PASTA

Red, green and white durum wheat pasta bringing the enveloping taste of Italian tradition and colour to the plate.
pasta-garofalo.com



FRUITS OF **DAILY COMMITMENT**

The secret ingredient for outstanding **Parmigiano Reggiano** is **commitment**, especially with **animal welfare**. This is why our Parmigiano Reggiano is made at our **mountain dairies**, with a transparent **supply chain certified** according to the **Classyfarm protocol**.

PARMIGIANO REGGIANO

Benessere Animale Certificato Certified Animal Welfare



DalterFood Group

Best Italian Cheese Solutions

Find out more at dalterfood.com

Help your customers make Boxing Day extra special with these delicious festive products



1 JUST DESSERTS YORKSHIRE
STRAWBERRY GLAZED CHEESECAKE
This luxurious dessert features a delightful digestive biscuit base, with a creamy ganache topping, finished with a fruity strawberry glaze, and detailed with dark chocolate to create the most indulgent combination. The festive pudding is sure to take centre stage on any table during this year's celebrations.
just-desserts.co.uk

2 FAIRFIELDS FARM CRISPS
MAPLE GLAZED HAM CRISPS
It's impossible to eat just one of these crisps. They're crunchy, smoky and sweet, with hints of spice that wrap you in a cosy, wintry feeling. Gluten-free, plant-based and made from field to pack at the Strathern family's independent potato farm, the sharing delights are wrapped in eye-catchingly festive packaging that sparkles on the shelf, and on the table.
fairfieldsfarmcrisps.co.uk

3 ORIGINAL BISCUIT BAKERS
CHRISTMAS BISCUIT RANGE
Sweeten up your festive table with delicious gingerbread treats. Made with aromatic ginger, the smooth velvetiness of liquid golden syrup, and the delicate crunch of fine sugar, each biscuit has been hand iced into enchanting Christmas designs, adding that extra wow factor to your Boxing Day spread. From Santa to snowmen, gingerbread houses to snowflakes, there's a Christmas favourite for everyone!
originalbiscuitbakers.co.uk

4 BRAY CURED
BRITISH CHARCUTERIE
Described on James Martin's Saturday Morning as 'Michelin-starred charcuterie', every pack of Bray Cured's British cured meat is made from heritage breeds, reared the right way, and treated with skill by award-winning charcutiers. Ham, bresaola and salami are available from British pork, beef, venison and hogget. And the Coppa and Wild Garlic Salami are two of just 13 Great Taste Award-winning products.
braycured.com



5 MCLAREN'S CHRISTMAS PUDDING
MCLAREN'S CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Nestled under the eaves of London Bridge for 19 years at Borough Market, McLaren's is soft launching its famous Christmas Puddings to shops for 2023. "I take pleasure in sharing the source of what just might be the best Christmas puddings on the planet," said a Financial Times reviewer. Limited stock available on first-come first-served basis.

mclarenschristmaspudding.com

6 PENLYAN PRESERVES
BOXING DAY CHUTNEY

This chutney is full to the brim with apricots, raisins, cranberries, and dates, paired with apples, orange zest and juice, and spices associated with Christmas. It is great as part of a Boxing Day spread, pairing particularly well with poultry (especially turkey) bringing a balance of sweetness to each bite.

penlyanpreserves.co.uk

7 LIMONCELLO DI CAPRI
CREAM

Lemon lovers are in for a great treat, as Limoncello di Capri Cream has just hit UK shores. The smooth, silky liqueur balances the quintessential tartness of lemons with a warming, creamy texture. Combining the lightness of summer, with the warm indulgence of the colder months, the spirit is a great option all year round.

limoncello.com

8 SOUTH CAERNARFON CREAMERIES
DRAGON HANDCRAFTED

Each Dragon product is made to a bespoke recipe, and matured to perfection over a number of months within original Welsh slate mining caverns, specifically converted into cheese caves. The Handcrafted Cavern Aged selection includes Cheddar, Welsh Red, Cheddar with Leeks, and Cheddar with Penderyn Welsh Whisky. A perfect addition to any Christmas cheeseboard.

dragonwales.co.uk

MAKE IT MERRY

From gifts and hampers, to extra special meals, Christmas is the ultimate time to indulge your customers



The most wonderful time of the year is upon us, and while many households are being smarter than ever when it comes to budgeting for the food they eat, we are all looking forward to the special sparkle the festive season imbues on our homes and tables.

Of course, December brings with it a raft of gift-giving, and the cornucopia of delicious food and drink already on *Speciality Food* readers' shelves makes them ready-to-roll destinations come Christmastime. "Gifting is such a great opportunity for shops like Laura's Larder," says business owner, Laura Roberts. "For many people, what we already sell can be seen as special, or an upgrade from the norm, so we're really the place people come if they are bringing something when invited for dinner or they are not sure what to get a father or mother-in-law as a gift. Therefore, when gifting season arrives we can tailor shelves for our loyal customers by getting new and seasonal items, and also expect to introduce our current range to new customers, which is exciting and rewarding."

Hampers are the perfect vehicle for delis, food halls and farm shops to deliver the ultimate foodie treat. Ready-wrapped (therefore a convenient option for time-poor shoppers), ripe for personalisation, and buildable to suit a range of tastes and budgets, they are well worth mastering for the festive season – not least because of the opportunity they provide to stand out from the crowd. "Our hampers and gift boxes really set us apart," begins Laura Roberts. "You can look online and spend a fortune on a hamper which really has a lot of stuffing and not many items, such a disappointment. In contrast, ours are packed with gorgeous items and, more often than not, tailored for the customer."

At Forage Farm Shop & Kitchen, located on the Penllyn Estate in the Vale of Glamorgan, hampers come with benefits for the retailer, too. "From a business perspective, it makes sense to provide ready-made packaged gifts which will increase basket spend whilst giving added value to the customer," begins Katherine Homfray, marketing director. "It also allows us to promote certain staple products, whilst upselling some lesser-known items. Forage is a high-quality brand, and many of our customers would expect to be able to pick up a hamper at this time of year as it enables them to give a present that looks amazing whilst being hassle-free!"

While ready-packed hampers are a great time-saving solution, as well as an easy option for customers not confident in choosing their own products to fill one, personalisation is well worth investing time and effort in. "While we have a range of hampers we promote and sell, people really do like to build them with us in-store," says Laura. "We bulk buy quality hampers and sell them at practically cost as long as people fill them with items from the shop; they really are brilliant." Do hampers well and you'll become a seasonal destination. "Because we do this and don't inflate the price so much, people come back year after year," she adds.

Consider cost

Offering a raft of indulgent items for customers to pick and choose from to fill a hamper is the ultimate aim, but retailers in 2023 must be conscious of the challenges faced by households across the UK – especially during the expensive last few months of the year. Offering value for money is vital, and telling products' story is the name of the game. "Budget is really the key thing this year, as it was last year," says Laura, "so products really need to look and feel like they are worth the money. And if something is a much higher price than they normally find, we need to be prepared to explain why – the quality, the provenance, there will be something – because we don't overcharge, we sell quality for what it's worth. I have again this year taken all this into account and capped a buying price, as I'm just not sure people will spend over a certain amount on an item in my store.

I'm getting used to what customers are willing and not willing to part with, as we see people's reactions to products every day."

Catering to different budgets has proven successful for Forage. "This year we've made sure we have a spread of price points to appeal to more customers, starting at £20, with the most expensive being £150," says Katherine. "Our Luxury Welsh Hamper comes in a wicker basket, but others come in a lovely box wrapped with Forage purple ribbon. This still looks like a beautiful gift but allows us to offer a lower price point."

Sustainability sells

For Zoe Roberts, owner of Out of the Box Gifts, sustainability is another key consideration – as it is for many consumers across the UK. To be featured, products need to be "Eco-friendly, plastic-free and made in the UK. Ideally by a small business," she says. "We work with fellow purpose-led suppliers and have formal targets to increase our purchases from purpose-led business' year on year."

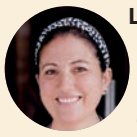
Quality is key – a theme that will be very familiar to fine food retailers. "I create gifts to suit the purpose or theme behind the gift, never compromising on quality or our values," she says. "We want anyone who receives one of our



> This year, we are putting our focus and resources into supporting our stockists with pre-Christmas marketing. This includes a big push on brunch via our website, our social media channels, social media assets for retailers and in-store assets. Responding to consumer needs, we are also updating in-store communication to highlight our product cooking instructions and inspire shoppers with updated backing boards and wobblers

HOW TO **BUILD A HAMPER**

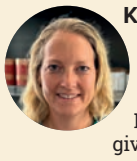
Treating your customers to a carefully curated selection of quality produce from small and local producers is the way to their hearts this Christmas



LAURA ROBERTS LAURA'S LARDER: SUPPORT SMALL

"People have had another pretty tough year, so there will be a push towards treating themselves and others to a good festive experience. I do also feel there's still a want to support small businesses, so offered the choice between a carefully curated hamper and something anonymously bought from a large digital retailer, they will opt for the former. Purchasing nice food and drink for gifts will also be on the rise as people are not really wanting to waste money on rubbish or unwanted items and purchase something that will definitely be appreciated, and eaten, drunk or even (if you're lucky) shared."

> People want to purchase something that will definitely be appreciated, and eaten, drunk or even (if you're lucky) shared



KATHERINE HOMFRAY, FORAGE FARM SHOP & KITCHEN: SPELL IT OUT

"When putting our hampers together we choose products that will complement each other within a particular theme. The name of the hamper ought to give the customer a clear idea of what to expect within it. The contents of our hampers are clearly thought out, are beautifully presented and are Welsh. Many of our customers love to support Welsh suppliers and this is a great way for them to do so at Christmas time."

> The name of the hamper ought to give the customer a clear idea of what to expect within it

THE FUSS-FREE FESTIVE FEAST

We catch up with Matt Whelan, MD of Fieldfare, to gather his meal suggestions for the perfect Christmas get together



Individually portioned sides such as our irresistible, creamy potato gratins make for a great alternative to the traditional roast potatoes or mash. Saving time and effort, our pop-in-the-oven Yorkshire Puddings and tasty potato croquettes make great accompaniments to the traditional Christmas lunch, whilst shoppers can scoop as much or as little as they need of our best-in-class frozen vegetables and vegetable mixes.

Christmas morning breakfasts and brunches have become more of an occasion in the past few years. Last Christmas, we noticed that Christmas day was the busiest day of the entire year on our website, as shoppers reminded themselves of the cooking instructions for our delicious pastries. This was quite remarkable to notice, and we responded with a renewed focus on the Christmas brunch occasion. Retailers can tap into the brunch trend, as Fieldfare's multiple award-winning pastries deliver on taste and wow factor for the perfect Christmas or Boxing Day brunch. Choose from the individually portioned, best-selling classic All Butter Croissant, to award-winning sweet treats such as our Pain Au Chocolat, Cinnamon Swirls, and Maple and Pecan Danish pastries. Fieldfare's website also offers some fantastic brunch ideas in the Inspiration section, such as 'Fancy Eggs Florentine' made with our creamy potato gratin and more.

For party nibbles and pre-lunch nibbles, Fieldfare's range of savouries includes favourites such as Mac 'n' Cheese Bites, Pea and Mint Fritters, Mozzarella Bites as well as the popular, vegan-friendly Sweetcorn Chilli fritters.

Individually portioned mealmakers such as our award-winning Asparagus and Gruyere Crown, or our favourite Caramelised Red Onion and Goats' Cheese Tart offer a delicious alternative for vegetarians. For vegans, the Lentil, Carrot & Coriander Burger makes a great alternative to the traditional nut loaf.

NEW FOR CHRISTMAS

We launched a wide range of new products last year, which are doing exceptionally well. Demand for products such as our Mac'n'Cheese Bites and award-winning Chocolate Fondants is still growing, which is fantastic.

gifts to say 'WOW' - and so, our gifts are beautifully packaged (in home compostable packaging) and memorable."

"Our mission statement is 'To make people smile by creating thoughtful, ethical gifts that don't cost the Earth" and in a recent customer survey, 100% of respondents agreed that their gift aligned with our mission statement."

Thanks to their ability to tick all manner of boxes as required – be it price, message or taste experience, hampers are the ultimate gifting opportunity come the festive season.



STOCK CHECK



TIPTREE MERRY CHRISTMAS - XMAS PUDDING RUM LIQUEUR

Small batch English craft rum infused with Tiptree Christmas pudding.

tiptree.com



ASPEN SPICES CARAMEL APPLE SPICE BLEND

The taste of caramel infused into Aspen's irresistible spice blend, and with a hint of tart apples. Easy to use, and absolutely delicious.

buckleyandbeale.com



LOVE COCOA THE NUTCRACKER

Three twisting layers, each filled with a chocolate delicacy. From Salted Caramel Cocoa Almonds, to Colombian Milk Chocolate Buttons.

lovecocoa.com



BELVOIR FARM FESTIVE FRUIT PUNCH

A non-alcoholic punch made by blending cranberry, blackcurrant and orange juices with extracts of cinnamon, clove and nutmeg.

belvoirfarm.co.uk



STOKES CRANBERRY & ORANGE SAUCE

Cranberry sauce is a Christmas must. And this one's a little bit special, being finished with tangy orange zest and a splash of Port.

stokessauces.co.uk



BOOJA-BOOJA THE WINTER COLLECTION

Sixteen luxurious vegan, organic chocolate truffles. Includes new flavours Yuletide Spice, Cherry Bakewell and Salted Caramel Mocha.

boojabooja.com





COMMENTATORS



MICHELLE STEEL
EARSHAM STREET DELI



TOM NEWEY
COBBS FARM



CLAIRE HARCUP
SUN VALLEY RICE



NICOLA WOODS
MONTGOMERY GROUP



TAKING STOCK OF THE STORE CUPBOARD

It's easy to become distracted by 'newness' when you're in buying mode, but ensuring you've got the basics covered is just as important too, as *Speciality Food* discovers

Fine food stores are exciting. That, fundamentally, is what sets them apart from larger multiples, which simply cannot offer breadth of speciality foods, or expertise, that independents deliver on a daily basis.

The thrill of being able to pop into a deli, where you can chat artisan cheese, sample the latest charcuterie, and stock your basket with everything from charcoal crackers and single estate olive oil, to tins of squid preserved in its own oil, is immeasurable.

Every good retailer in this field knows, though, that beyond the 'bright' and 'shiny', 'shouty' hero products that entice from the window, there has to be a backbone of essentials, so customers truly can use their store as a one-stop-shop. To not deliver on the basics, such as flour, eggs, sugar, yeast, pulses, tinned vegetables, gravies, stocks, sauces and soups, is to miss a trick – especially as some people, in light of price rises in supermarkets, are turning to delis and farm shops for their groceries.

Tom Newey, CEO of Cobbs Farm Shops says across the group they've noticed a growth in footfall of 6%, though that has been tempered by a reduced basket spend of 2.5%. "Like many in the sector, we benefitted from a significant boost through the pandemic on the back of strong retail sales and growth in average spend. What is apparent now is we've managed to not only retain those customers, but also grow the base. Let's be honest, we are always going to be at the premium end of the market, but I've always felt that a key part of our ongoing mission is to help customers put a real value on quality products."

Michelle Steele of Earsham Street Deli says people are more and more using her store for their everyday shopping. "Some come in three or four times a week, to get their eggs, or buy a slice of ham. But then they might also come in at the weekend to treat themselves to a bit of truffle Gouda. I'm finding we're becoming almost like a grocers from the 'good old days'.

"What's really interesting for us, is that we have a shop that is 16 years old, and one that is a year old. We are building loyal customers at both, who want to use us regularly. At the original deli, the fact we have a fishmonger and greengrocer here means people come into our town as a destination for food shopping. But at the other location, we're seeing customers are making a choice that, if they're paying more anyway, they'd rather go somewhere for service and quality, and have a good experience."



The essentials

Michelle says it's important for fine food retailers to be accessible, recognising that the public don't live on luxury all the time.

"We need to be their go-to for every part of their cooking, not just occasions, and we cannot just be stocking exquisite flavours, we need to have the herbs and spices and bags of pasta, but knowing these are of a certain quality."

The majority of Tom's sales, he says, come from fresh products, which is where the margins are. He adds it would be easy to focus on these, but that he's always believed in providing customers with a rounded shopping experience, where they can also find the other things they need to complement the meat, dairy, or seasonal fruit and vegetables they put in their baskets.

Stocking essentials, as well as more speciality ingredients, stands the business in good stead. "If we can support one customer who's looking for that weird and wonderful ingredient, I'm confident they'll be a loyal customer for life."

Tom gives merit to the vinegars, oils and dressings at Cobbs Farm Shops, which have proved popular store cupboard sellers this year, despite the undesirable weather, while Michelle is pleased with the sales of dried pasta, risotto mixes and pasta sauces.

"People want to be able to come in and just buy something quick and easy for an evening meal – and these are perfect for that," she says.

On the subject of rice, with Korean, South American, and Japanese food taking off big time in mainstream cooking, it's worth, says Claire Harcup of Sun Valley Rice, expanding your range so customers can authentically recreate dishes they've seen on TV, in magazines, and in cookery books, at home. "More people are looking for rice varietals," she explains. "UK consumers are used to eating the right type of rice for a particular cuisine out of home, and confident cooks will want to replicate these meals while at home." UK staples, she says, tend to be basmati for Indian dishes, or arborio for risotto. "But extending the retail offer to short and medium grain rice, as a side for katsu curry, sushi, or as a base for a chilli con carne or rice puddings, could prove fruitful."

"Make sure you've got a sensible range to fill up a basket," adds Michelle. "Think about what you would like to take home, and what you could use and combine. It's all well having innovative sauces, but there needs to be day-to-day stuff too. Think about stocking local bread and eggs, things like Brindisa cooked beans that you could pull out on a rainy day for convenience. They all must be of a good quality though. If you have a jar of sauce, or jar of beans, they have to be exceptional!"

Taking up the trends

The annual Speciality & Fine Food Fair is used by many retailers as a

TRENDING IN STORE CUPBOARD

- Chicory-based coffee alternatives
- West African sauces and spice pastes
- Chilli-infused honey
- Kimchi
- Bimimbap sauce
- Gochujang
- Flavoured salts
- Yuzu
- Tinned fish
- Caviar
- Low sugar/fat alternatives
- Sri Lankan sauces and pastes
- Mexican ingredients
- Pizza-making ingredients
- Crispy chilli oil



source of inspiration for the year to come. Event manager, Nicola Woods, says she met many at this year's show, and was pleased to see them buzzing to get back to their stores, to stock up on the next big thing. "Fine food retailers are trusted by consumers to stock quality store cupboard staples and introduce exciting new flavours and ingredients," she adds. "This might be an innovative twist on a traditional staple, such as the award-winning organic chestnut gnocchi from Cornwall Pasta Co, or relatively unfamiliar flavours for UK audiences such as authentic Tunisian harissa paste from Lamiri Harissa."

One of the most surprising trends she's seen in the ambient sector this year is the rise of gourmet tinned fish products. "Forget your standard tuna in spring water, we're talking wild sardines in extra virgin olive oil, wood-smoked herring with wild garlic, and Faroe Islands salmon with sea buckthorn and lemon verbena.

"Another trend that isn't going anywhere is the growing consumer love of spice, which means retailers can't go wrong with unique hot sauces like the new Black Truffle Hot Sauce from The Truffle Guys, and tangy preserves like the Raspberry Jam with Ghanaian Chilli from Schoolyard Chillies."

Michelle thinks herbs and spices in weird and wonderful blends will continue to prove successful for specialist retailers as customers experiment in the kitchen. "We tend to sell the kind of things you can't find unless you go to an international store," she explains.



"I'm also finding people are looking more for Japanese and Korean flavours – chilli oils, and sriracha. My favourites at the moment are Tonkotsu Chilli Oil and Nonya's curry pastes. They are very good. Also Steenbergs for herbs and spices. They are just fantastic and have just had a big rebrand, which I think will help sales."

Tom is seeing a customer preference for experimenting across cuisines too, with more unusual ingredients being checked through the till. "I'm a big fan of White Mausu products. In particular the Peanut Rayu – on everything!"

Vicky McTaggart of Stokes Sauces says the brand is noticing consumers using its store cupboard products in more inventive ways that demonstrate their versatility. The Real Tomato Ketchup and Chipotle Ketchup are going into stews, casseroles and sauces, where they add body and additional flavour naturally. Surprisingly, brown sauce (which brings depth with dates and Persian Spices) is being used in this way too – drawing it away from its traditional place at the breakfast table. "Sales increase at this time of year too in Chilli Jam, Fig Relish, Red Onion Chutney and Beer Chutney," likely in response to people stocking up in preparation for the Christmas cheeseboard.



STOCK CHECK

2023 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



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INNOVATION IS WARMING UP THE HOT DRINKS MARKET

Speciality Food discovers the trends that should be shaping your buying decisions in the category this autumn

COMMENTATORS



CANDICE MASON
TEA SOMMELIER



AMIR MONTAZER
ETUDE



KRISHMA MEHTA
NOFFEE



EMMA HOUSE
COCOA CANOPY

Innovation. Functionality. Boundary-pushing flavour profiles. If you want to up your game in the hot drinks arena this year, it's time to boldly go where you might not have been before.

To look beyond bog-standard 'builder's tea', cafetiere coffee, and dusty hot chocolate powders, and to venture into what is proving to be a rather exciting time for this category, driven largely by consumer demand for 'newness'.

Research from Mintel into hot drinks trends in the UK, demonstrates a desire for teas that aid anxiety, concentration and relaxation, with 77% of those asked agreeing they look to tea as a way to destress.

While 29% of Brits now have a coffee pod machine in their home, Mintel reports that 39% of coffee drinkers are trying to reduce their caffeine consumption.

And eco credentials appear to be incredibly important to shoppers too, with Mintel suggesting ethically-grown tea and coffee, and those brands sold in biodegradable, compostable or plastic-free packaging are more likely to tick boxes for savvy consumers.

In essence, the landscape for hot drinks is changing. It's becoming more nuanced, with higher expectations on retailers to deliver a wider range of products that tick a growing number of boxes.

A nice cup of cha

Surprisingly, recent research from consumer intelligence group, NIQ, showed tea consumers are more willing to experiment than coffee drinkers. Likened to the wine industry, there are many many flavour profiles to pick up in tea, across varieties from common black, to green, white, yellow, oolong, herbal, and exotic pu-erh, which has become more visible.

"Tea is big business," says tea sommelier Candice Mason. "And even more so since the pandemic. The trend towards herbal wellness teas has grown significantly." Candice has particularly seen increased interest in functional additions to tea, such as ashwagandha for stress, and turmeric for reducing inflammation.

Antioxidant-rich matcha tea, which also fits the 'functional' bill, has seen a big rise in popularity in recent years too, NIQ found.

Retailers should be familiar with loose leaf tea, and while it remains a growing trend, especially as an affordable luxury, other formats are becoming available and should be considered. "Cold brews are becoming increasingly popular," Candice says. "You can get really creative with tea. Think about the audience you have and what they might be looking for. If you're a venue with a sober-curious audience, try cold brews and kombucha. If you're a traditional afternoon setting, consider the quality of the Earl Grey and Darjeeling teas you offer and focus on the brewing experience."

A whopping 92% of consumers say sustainability is important when choosing a brand today, according to NIQ, and the tea industry faces several sustainability challenges.

One is the biggest issues is the use of plastics in tea bags. "One tea bag can contain up to 11.6 billion microplastics and 3.1 billion nano plastics! Around 96% of British tea is consumed in tea bags, and 36 billion cups of tea are drunk per year in the UK," Candice highlights. Add these numbers up and you can see why industry is shifting towards compostable options.

As well as individual brands, the wider tea supply chain has historically faced numerous ethical question marks. "The industry doesn't have a fantastic reputation for caring for their workers, however many sign up to schemes that support them with this, but it is something to be mindful of," Candice says. "When purchasing your tea, check where they source their tea from, their ethical considerations and their sustainability. A good tea supplier will openly talk about this."

The changing landscape of coffee

Coffee expert and world coffee judge Amir Montazer says there are a lot of dynamic, exciting innovations happening in this sector...but adds retailers and cafes should be cautious of straying too far from what they know their customers like.

"The biggest trend in the last two years has been in the processing of coffee," Amir says. "The way you do that affects the taste. There have been some more experimental methods like anaerobic fermentation, and carbonic maceration, adding more steps to the process.

"With anaerobic coffee they ferment the coffee cherry in water, sealed away from oxygen. That means producers can ferment it for a longer period, which gives more of a fruity taste to the bean – almost to the point where it doesn't really taste like coffee anymore."

Amir says this is not for everyone. Coffee made using this method accounts for less than 10% of his sales. "There is this thinking, especially around London, that if a coffee is fruity, it is a higher quality. But we're having a lot of talk in the industry. Do we actually want our coffee to taste fruity? I don't."

If you're seeking something a bit 'different', instead Amir advises talking to your coffee merchant or wholesaler about new varieties being grown in traditional coffee regions. "For example, six or seven years ago if you had coffee from Mexico, it would be a very 'local' coffee. But Mexico has changed a lot recently, and there are some really high-end new coffee varieties coming from there. The same in Panama.

"Something else that excites me is countries investing in speciality coffee. That usually means the farmers are more likely to get a better wage, and there is a better situation in terms of their farming practices and the labour."

Amir points out a Kickstarter project he was involved with alongside not-for-profit organisation, Raw Material. "They went to the El Fenix region in Colombia and built a washed processing station. The problem with El Fenix was, because they didn't have the stations before, they were processing using old-school methods.

After that, the quality of what they could produce went up, and it helped them to sell coffee for a better price. It affected the whole region!"

When choosing coffee, Amir says not to lose sight of the at-home market, whether you are a café with some shelf space, or a retailer looking to maximise sales based on current trends. His advice is to make sure you have a very good selection of espresso. "More and more espresso machines are turning up in people's houses. I find there are two kinds of people when it comes to espresso.



Some want to simply press a button, and some want to spend a bit more time making coffee as part of their morning ritual. It is important to offer coffee that's suitable for both."

Desire for decaf is rising

Mintel's 2022 report on the UK coffee market indicates that now is the time to invest in decaf, with strong demand for caffeine-free products. Nearly 40% of coffee drinkers are reportedly trying to reduce their caffeine consumption, primarily driven by concerns over impact on health, sleep and emotional wellbeing.

Expect to see plenty of NPD in this market over the coming year, as well as caffeine-free coffee alternatives.

A new brand seeing exponential growth in this area is Noffee – a naturally decaffeinated hot drink made with chicory root, which is predicted by trendsetters to be the 'next big thing'.

Founder Krishma Mehta has been inundated with interest over the drink, which is not only caffeine-free, but also naturally contains inulin – a prebiotic fibre known to be beneficial for maintaining a healthy gut.

Krishma, who has a background in accounting and finance, changed her diet during lockdown after suffering from insomnia, skin rashes, and other uncomfortable symptoms. She experimented making a coffee alternative at home with chicory root, which she could enjoy comfortably at the many many coffee mornings and play dates she found herself at with her two children. Krishma's friends were intrigued. "Lots of them were going through peri-menopause jitters, anxiety, and inability to sleep."

After trying her chicory blend, without the ill effects they suffered from coffee, Krishma's loved ones pushed her to form a business – and Noffee was born.

"I worked with an expert market roaster and tested different versions to see which tasted best, and which was most versatile," she says.

"I also did a lot of research into the impact of caffeine, and realised the market for non-caffeine products is high at the moment. It's predicted to grow a huge amount by 2032."

Noffee, says Krishma, has a caramelly, sweet taste, and represents part of a new wave of chicory drinks, setting its stall far apart from traditional, older varieties more known for a strong, often bitter flavour. "A lot of older brands are in a liquid form, and mostly used to make cakes. Our product, when you pour it out, looks and feels more like a coffee.

The ground version was created to mimic coffee grounds in every way. And we have compostable pods, suitable for Nespresso machines too!"



Chocolate is hotting up

It's not just coffee machines that saw a surge in growth during the lockdown years. Retailers reported increased sales of hot chocolate shakers, and products such as Hotel Chocolat's Velvetiser, and Smeg's milk frother.

"You can see changes coming from the high street," says Cocoa Canopy's Emma House of the opportunities in this market. "Hot chocolate cafes popping up, the popularity of in-home milk frothers, and consumers seeking to create out of home drink experiences now in the home."

Emma says this is an exciting time for both the on and off trade. "We believe there is a new hot chocolate movement happening, and Cocoa Canopy are driving this."

She adds that retailers have, "the power to bring newness to shelves and elevate hot chocolate."

Artisan markets need help with listings to be found, Emma says. "Consumers are used to the same big brands, taste profile, low quality ingredients and tired branding. I ask retailers to open their eyes to new possibilities, try something different, but know they can deliver a balance of quality and value."



STOCK CHECK



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CUT THE CAFFEINE

Two in five coffee drinkers avoid the stimulant after lunch. Sally-Jayne Wright selects brews that won't give them the jitters

Some 39% of coffee drinkers want to reduce their caffeine consumption. They are primarily driven by concerns over this ingredient's impact on their health, sleep and emotional wellbeing (Mintel).

The sales figures bear this out. In the last four years, for example, the UK's oldest coffee roaster, John Farrer and Co of Kendal, Cumbria, has seen sales of decaffeinated coffee increase by 60%.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE DECAF TREND?

- Concerns over mood and sleeplessness
- Better-tasting decaf
- Healthier processes for extracting caffeine
- Wellness

HOW POPULAR IS DECAF AMONG COFFEE DRINKERS?

One in five regularly ask for it (Mintel). Caffeine sensitivity varies from person to person, but it's advisable not to exceed 400mg a day (British Heart Foundation). That's about four 200ml mugs of brewed coffee or seven same-sized mugs of instant coffee.

IN THE PAST, DECAF COFFEE REALLY DIDN'T TASTE GREAT. WHY NOT? WHAT'S CHANGED?

The older chemical extraction process involved soaking beans in solvents, methylene chloride (as used in paint stripper) or ethyl acetate (as used in nail varnish remover). The beans absorbed some of the flavour and though it passed safety regulations, the process didn't do consumers or the environment much good.

There is an efficient, so-called supercritical method of decaffeination using carbon dioxide but it is too expensive for smaller speciality roasters.

WHICH METHOD DO YOU RECOMMEND?

"Look for organic beans decaffeinated using the Swiss Water Process," advises Brian Williams, sales manager at Farrer's, which makes its own Mountain Water Decaf. "The secret is also in the roast. Choose a light to medium roast to ensure your decaf is as full of beneficial antioxidants as possible."

WHOSE DECAF COFFEES DO YOU RECOMMEND?

Judges in this year's Great Taste Awards gave Rounton Sparkling Water Decaf Peruvian coffee beans two stars, and this coffee is also among coffee expert Celeste Wong's favourites. The key flavour notes are dark chocolate, cherry and brown sugar, the roast is medium, and the beans are organic.

A taste test panel at The Independent (Feb 2023) put Rave Coffee Swiss Water decaf No. 11 top of their list.

WHAT WOULD SURPRISE US ABOUT THE BRITISH COFFEE MARKET?

It's not all baristas and flat whites since 80% of UK households buy instant coffee for in-home consumption, particularly those over 65. (British Coffee Association).

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS ZERO-CAFFEINE COFFEE?

No. A 240ml cup of decaf still contains between two and three milligrams of caffeine.

IS THERE ANY PLACE FOR CARAMEL, COCONUT AND PUMPKIN SPICE IN COFFEE?

Yes, if your customers are younger.

"According to a 2022 Attest Survey, 50% of Millennials and Gen-Zs regularly indulge in flavoured coffee out of home," said Alex Godfrey, PR for Little's of Devon. "We've seen a 76% rise in Millennial and Gen Z shopper spend since Little's rebranded in November 2022."

Little's colourfully-packaged, flavoured, decaf instants are sugar and sweetener-free and stocked by several Devon farm shops including Greendale, Strawberry Fields, Fordmore and Darts; the latter held a successful tasting day earlier this year. French Vanilla is Little's bestselling decaf instant, with Double Chocolate also moving well.

CAN'T CAFFEINE REDUCERS SIMPLY SWITCH TO TEA? IT HAS LESS THAN HALF THE CAFFEINE OF COFFEE.

They can, especially as tea's caffeine works differently in the body, the presence of L-Theanine in tea slowing down its absorption.

Or they can buy decaf tea, sales of which are on the rise as Liz Griffin, Yorkshire Tea's brand manager told *Speciality Food's Café Buyer*. Fans of a bracing cup of builder's will like Thompsons Punjana decaf tea which won two Great Taste Award stars in 2017 and attracted rave reviews on Ocado's website.

MANY COFFEE DRINKERS ENJOY THE BREWING RITUAL. WHAT EXCITING NEW DRINKS CAN WE OFFER THEM?

We were amazed to learn about a caffeine-free redbush tea from Novus which can be brewed just like espresso to make a caffeine-free rooibos latte.



THE UK'S OLDEST COFFEE ROASTER HAS SEEN SALES OF DECAFFEINATED COFFEE INCREASE BY 60%

In September, Clearspring launched the UK's first organic Japanese Kuwa Matcha. Kuwa is Japanese for mulberry leaves and matcha means powdered tea. It's billed as the perfect zero-caffeine alternative for consumers who enjoy the taste of matcha.

HOW DO WE MAKE THE MOST OF THE NO AND LOW-CAFFEINE TREND?

- Decaf's poor-tasting reputation lingers so look for suppliers who will offer in-store sampling
- Don't be snobbish about instant or flavoured coffee
- Choose freeze-dried instant coffees made from 100% Arabica beans; good blends are likely to include African coffee
- Customers care about sustainability

WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF THE LOWER CAFFEINE TREND?

We expect to see more coffee alternatives such as chicory root coffee, and brewable drinks such as matcha, cacao tea and Figgee made from dried figs.

Continued focus on wellness will drive the market, so we'll see products where coffee is combined with Lion's Mane mushrooms and other adaptogens - plant-based substances that help the body adapt to stress.

To quote Mintel's 2022 Coffee Report: "Given the strong demand for more choices of decaf coffee products, the heightened wellness trend, and the increased sustainability focus, now is the time to invest in the decaf segment of the market."

> "Choose a light to medium roast to ensure your decaf is full of antioxidants"



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SPOTLIGHT ON: GOLDEN HOOVES

Speciality Food discovers more about an emerging brand that wants to be a force for good, a force for change, and a deliciously regenerative way to enjoy dairy

Visitors to 2023's Speciality & Fine Food Fair may have spotted (or taken a seat on) a curious sticker this year. An upside-down 'anarchy' symbol inviting them to 'join the regenerative revolution'.

The tongue-in-cheek campaign certainly raised a few eyebrows, and got tongues wagging about one of the hottest environmental topics of recent times – regenerative farming.

Who masterminded the 'secret sticker mission'? The team behind Golden Hooves cheeses are happy to raise their hands. "We want to be fun. We want to be exciting. And we want to show people that dairy can be better," says Golden Hooves business unit director, Leona McDonald.

First Milk, The Regenerative Co-op, launched Golden Hooves to shout about the sustainability efforts its family-run farms put into producing regenerative milk. The co-operative of more than 700 dairy farmers across England, Scotland and Wales, has set out its stall as a leader in the regenerative movement, seeking to be kinder to the planet, improve animal welfare, and to pay a better price to the people who work so hard to get milk, butter and cheese into the nation's fridges every single week.







What is regenerative farming?

All of the milk that goes into Golden Hooves is regenerative, and First Milk has key principles its farmers must adhere to in order to work with the co-operative. "Something that's really important," says graduate sales and marketing assistant, Lily Grime, "is to have grazing livestock. That's where the name Golden Hooves came from. The cows that graze the fields across our farms produce natural fertiliser. Their hooves spread that around the fields, and it improves the quality of the soil, which can better sequester more carbon from the atmosphere."

Farmers within the co-operative must also reduce or minimise soil disturbance, and encourage biodiversity by moving away from monoculture crops, which have been prevalent in the industry for decades.

"Kingshay have helped us develop a first-of-its-kind digital platform that maps out every farm, field by field," Leona adds. "We have regen specialists who visit our farms and help us monitor what's happening. And we're also working with Agricarbon who have collected and tested 21,000 soil samples for carbon from our farms. Our target by 2025 was to have sequestered 100,000 tonnes of carbon equivalent. We don't have the results yet, but our modelling suggests we're on track!"

"Around 72% of British countryside is farmland. That's a lot of biodiversity we, as humans, are custodians of. At First Milk, we've got over 4,000km of hedgerows, miles of waterways and close to 200,000 trees. It's really important that we get it right. It's great when individual farms do good, but we have the power of over 700. We can make a real impact."

A stomping start for Golden Hooves

The Golden Hooves concept arose from a desire to 'really shout about' First Milk's regenerative messaging. While the co-operative already produces and sells cheese, there was a line of thought that, to be impactful, a fun, visually exciting, and (most importantly) tasty product that really drives home the business's values needed to be brought to market.

Golden Hooves Mature Cheddar was a hit when it soft launched at this year's Farm Shop & Deli Show, with a full launch of this, and the Vintage cheese (whose recipe won Supreme Champion at the Global Cheese Awards 2022) following at Speciality & Fine Food Fair in September.

"The mature cheese is rounded and rugged. There are quite a lot of layers to it," Leona explains. "All our cheeses have a slight umami, rather than sweet, flavour to them. It's really long-lasting, quite creamy and soft."

"I've been sampling it at farm shops," says Lily. "A lot of customers have commented that it's got a lovely creamy texture and taste."

Golden Hooves Vintage Cheddar takes the same rich, well-balanced recipe, maturing it for longer to tease out a touch more complexity that Leona says, you really won't forget in a hurry.

This is just the beginning

Golden Hooves has its own dedicated team...and its first two cheeses are just the start of what they hope will become a thrilling new movement on the British food scene. Leona says Golden Hooves wants to put its 'stomp of approval' on many other products, which will have to meet a set of criteria that includes tasting great, being British where possible, having high animal welfare, being made with regenerative or ethical ingredients, and being people-positive.

"We want to be seen as the leaders in regenerative food, and want our 'stomp of approval' to be recognised as the industry standard. We'll also grow our range out of dairy," adds Leona. "And we'll be supporting our farmers. Where they make products, maybe for local stores or farmers' markets, we will put our 'stomp of approval' on them so people learn to understand that they have integrity. Our strapline is 'deliciously regenerative'. When people see our brand they should be able to recognise and trust it."

Golden Hooves has partnered with wholesalers Longmans Cheese and Castell Howell Foods. Will you be joining the revolution?



"Sowing the right seeds"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

What an amazing time I had visiting the largest cheese festival on the planet. Slow Food organises the event bi-annually to celebrate ethically and sustainably produced cheese, charcuterie and more.

The founder of Slow Food, Carlo Petrini is, quite frankly, an exceptional human. In 1986 Carlo formed Slow Food in response to McDonald's opening in Piazza di Spagna, by The Spanish Steps, Rome. Frustrated by industrialisation and heavily processed foods flooding the marketplace, he sought out his friends to help take food back to its roots. Sustainability and ethical practices are key. Produce made with seeds, and livestock that are characteristic of local eco systems are championed. Quality over quantity.

I met Carlo with the fabulous Sam Brice from Freshly Ground PR. Sam and his wife Amy are passionate promoters of independent businesses, innovative projects, and events. They deliver PR that is in harmony with the world to help better our relationship with good food, as poor food choices continue to cause so many environmental challenges. Freshly Ground PR was the voice of the first Great British & Irish Cheddar Challenge. That chance meeting and fleeting moment spent with Carlo and his companion was magical. What he and the global Slow Food movement is doing is brilliant.

So, to cheese. I went to champion our heritage cheese, Cheddar. There were six great Cheddars that were to be tasted. We gave the people the chance to decide their favourite. The event was held and filmed live from Bra. We were kindly introduced to Slow Food, by the UK chair, Shane Holland. What a privilege to have been allowed to use their offices to film the very first Cheddar Challenge, People's Choice. Another thank you must be given to Alessia Pautasso – head of communications and events at Slow Food, Italy. Alessia was our saviour and helped everything go smoothly.

Comedian and cheese lover, Marcus Brigstocke, hosted the event and interviewed all the producers. Cheddars tasted were Montgomery, Pitchfork, Quicke's, Mount Leinster, Hafod and Isle of Mull. All the Cheddars tasted were brilliant. Marcus' love of cheese and charisma perfectly set the tone for an exciting event.

To put on this tasting, cheesemongers up and down the UK sold boxes of cheese that were numbered instead of named. There were over 20 mongers that participated, including La Fromagerie, The Cheese Geek, No2 Pound Street, Pong Cheese and many others. The cheese that customers tasted was hand-picked by the makers, and the complete makes were reserved for the tasting. This meant that the thousands virtually joining tasted the exact same cheeses. Logistically this was challenging, and wholesalers Rowcliffe did a sterling job getting all the cheeses to the mongers. Having had little experience of putting on such a huge live show, my friends at The Academy of Cheese offered their help. Tracey Colley who heads up the AOC and her digital agency, Lighthouse, was instrumental in helping me appropriate the right digital media and structure to get this going. The Academy is brilliant and at the forefront of cheese education in the UK and the wider world. Go to the Academy of Cheese website to find out more.

My mission was to highlight brilliant artisan Cheddar, and this was accomplished. The story behind artisan Cheddars is huge, and one that needs to be listened to. This year sees me embark on my first book. It's about Cheddar and the journey this cheese has been on. Cheese is inspirational. The farmers, mongers and people that champion it need applauding. And right now, our planet needs the right seeds.

> "Even the cheese that customers tasted was hand-picked by the makers, and the complete makes were reserved for the tasting. This meant that the thousands virtually joining tasted the exact same cheeses. Logistically this was challenging, and wholesalers Rowcliffe did a sterling job getting all the cheeses to the mongers"

Putting Scottish cheese on the map

The Fine Cheesemakers of Scotland has launched a Scottish Cheese Map to promote 50 artisanal cheeses to consumers and suppliers across the UK.

This new tool can be used as a visual reminder for buyers, as well as a training resource for marketing teams within the industry to support sales and promotion.

Bringing together a network of 25 producers committed to growing the scale and quality of Scottish cheese production, The Fine Cheesemakers of Scotland encourages exchange of knowledge, experience and communication amongst the sector.

UK sales development manager, Morgane Lambert, says, "Scotland has an amazing selection of artisanal cheesemakers that are so passionate about showcasing the diverse and exciting produce available locally, and for national distribution.

I am so proud to see this collaborative project already generating real buying leads, and getting the industry excited about Scotland's cheeseboard."

The project has been supported by Scotland Food & Drink and the Scottish Dairy Growth Board. Helen Wallace, UK market development manager at Scotland Food & Drink, says, "Collaborative projects like this one go a long way in ensuring that Scottish produce remains front of mind for buyers across the industry. We have been delighted to support The Fine Cheesemakers of Scotland and we have already seen a fantastic response from retailers and distributors who are making it easier for customers to choose Scottish produce."

Access the map on The Fine Cheesemakers of Scotland website.





South Caernarfon Creameries appoints first female board member

Malan Hughes, who was born and raised on her family's 500-acre dairy farm near Pwllheli, has become the first woman to join the board of Welsh co-operative South Caernarfon Creameries since it was formed in 1938.

Following in the footsteps of her grandfather and father, who have also been members of the board, Malan is moving just half a mile from the creamery and is looking forward to the new challenge.

"The creamery has been very important to us as a family and I'm very grateful for this opportunity. I look forward to contributing towards the ongoing success and growth whilst ensuring the co-operative element of the creamery is recognised and strengthened.

"I'm eager to meet the producers and staff that I don't know yet and I hope that all members are happy to have me represent them."

Malan Hughes replaces Gareth Jenkins who retires from the board following 28 years of service.

SCC managing director, Alan Wyn Jones, says, "I would like to welcome Malan to the board, particularly given she's the first woman to be in this position. She will be a great asset, bringing with her knowledge and expertise which will be important to SCC's work.

"I would also like to thank Gareth Jenkins for his long serving commitment and valuable contributions whilst on the board and wish him a healthy and happy retirement."

Limited edition cheese to be released this month

The Book & Bucket Cheese Company in Cranborne, Dorset, has launched a brand-new, limited-edition soft cheese to the market.

Cranborne Dark Sky is a cow's milk, Brie-style cheese, with a layer of dark truffle running through its centre. The layer is added to the curds while the cheese is still being made (rather than at the end), allowing the distinctive aroma of truffle to permeate through the whole product. The team created the cheese following interest from local chefs and customers, and its name recognises the Area of Outstanding Beauty where the dairy is based, which was recently named an International Dark Sky Reserve.

Founder, Peter Morgan, says, "Cranborne Dark Sky has been on my to-do list for a few years now, and I have trialled a number of different ideas. In my head, I wanted something that hit the spot both visually and flavour wise. Myself and the team are so happy and proud. This will be a cheese that will become a must on every cheeseboard."

Cranborne Dark Sky is available for wholesale orders now.





Artisan goats' cheese approved for UK sale

A couple who realised their dream of moving to the countryside in 2019, say they are delighted to have finally been given conditional approval to sell their goats' cheese to the public and retail.

Suzie and Jonty Birrell-Gray moved to Rosedale Abbey in the North Yorkshire Moors just before the Covid pandemic, and their journey to make cheese has been an unusual one. "I asked Suzie if she fancied some goats for Christmas in 2015," laughs former accountant Jonty, who managed to source some within 48 hours, picking them up a month later. "Every time we went away for a little break, it was to see more goats!"

When Suzie was made redundant from her job as a chartered surveyor in 2018, the couple decided to take the plunge, moving to the north of the country, to live alongside their herd of Golden Guernsey, and Golden Guernsey cross goats, chosen for their inquisitive and friendly temperament, and higher, fattier yields of milk.

The couple's first cheese, Rosedale, is named for the local village. "It's a Camembert-style cheese and it's not goaty in flavour," says Jonty. "It's very very creamy. Because it's made with raw goats' milk it has all the lovely bacteria that gives it a special flavour, and everybody seems to love it."

The other is Bell End Blue, named for an area of Rosedale. Similarly to Rosedale, it is Camembert in style, with blue veining. "It's a mild blue," Jonty explains. "The blue notes enhance the creaminess of the milk. It's not like a Roquefort – more like a Cambozola."

Both Rosedale Goats' Cheese products are finding their way into Yorkshire delis and farm shops, and are available by mail order from Abbey Farm Cottage, Rosedale.

Monger launches four new cheeses with leading artisan makers

Edward Hancock of Cheese Geek is celebrating having brought four exclusive new cheeses to market this year, with some availability to smaller fine food retailers and cheesemongers.

It is part of a plan, the cheese aficionado says, to build up a collection of around 15 to 20 unique varieties, covering every part of the market. "Being online we have a lot of data on ratings, and feedback," Edward says. "We gather that information, which gives us an idea of what styles of cheese the market is after in terms of artisan cheese."

The range includes blue, Brie-style, washed-rind and a new take on a classic from the Southwest.

Hendrix is described as a melt-in-the-mouth blue, with a saltiness and herbaceousness that takes eaters to its terroir in Wales. It has been designed as a 'step up' from some of the 'safer' blue cheeses developed in recent years. "We generally see a lot of new blue cheese coming to market aimed at more cautious cheese lovers," says Edward. "We wanted to make a cheese that was accessible, unique in its own right, and not dominated by blue veining."

One of Edward's favourites is Washington - based on a Golden Cenarth - made by Carwyn Adams at Caws Cenarth. Washed in cider, and scaled up from 250g to 1kg, the cheese is ripened for longer. "And at its best it's incredible, and very very different to other British washed rinds. It pushes boundaries, with a slightly chalky centre, while the edges start to get a bit meatier, along the lines of a Munster."

A lot have fun has been had on each of the projects. "We're really pleased with what we've ended up with, and looking forward to seeing how the cheeses evolve," he added.



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PETER'S YARD



HOW TO MAKE CHEESE 'SHINE' AT CHRISTMAS

Get ready to festoon the counter with decorations, creating a display your customers will be wowed by

Although it's enjoyed throughout the year, Christmas really is when artisan cheese comes into its own. With customers out to enjoy themselves, choosing to indulge in the finer things in life, comes the opportunity for savvy retailers to 'up the ante' in a bid to enhance sales in the countdown to December 25.

Now's the time to think about creating gift bundles and attractive hampers, to sample those special, seasonal cheeses you've stocked up on, and to devise ways to upsell cheese-adjacent products, such as chutneys, pickles, crackers, relishes and more.

Daring to be different

Mark Kacary of The Norfolk Deli, says independents have a lot of graft to put in throughout the year – particularly if they are 'in the sticks', but that Christmas really is a whole different ball game.

"It's the one time in the year when people who wouldn't give you the time of day through the rest of the year, suddenly remember that you sell cheese!" This, Mark adds, results in a dilemma for specialist retailers, who have had nothing other than gut instinct to go on when deciding what to stock and how much to buy.

"Supermarkets and their shareholders want total domination, which is why at Christmas it's possible to buy a Christmas cheeseboard from them. This usually comprises an insipid piece of Stilton, Cheddar, and on occasions I have spied a piece of Epoisses or something similar."

What speciality stores can and do do better than supermarkets, Mark says, is help customers create proper cheeseboards...and this begins with having an attractive display that invites discussion, leading to sampling and ultimately sales.

"To differentiate from supermarkets we try to create a display that, to start with, is a little awe-inspiring, but provides labels with some information."

Caroline Blaydon of Wildgoose Fine Foods uses black slate boards to display her cheeses, with a finishing flourish of silver calligraphy penned on mini black cards to reveal each product's name and details. This gives the counter a "sparkly touch" that's ideal for the festive season.

"Unlike our year-round display, where we group our cheeses roughly according to soft, blue and hard, we choose a strong centrepiece cheese, usually a whole, round Stilton, then surround it with smaller wedges, cubes, and rectangles of a variety of other cheeses, choosing seasonal, traditional favourites like Brie de Meaux and mature Cheddar, and interspersing these with some lesser-known artisan cheeses, which creates a very attractive display, and encourages customers to try something new."

Caroline places boxed cheeses in pyramids at the corner of her display counters to invite conversation, and give them more prominence.

She also likes to 'garnish' her display. "We contemplate which warm, seasonal colours will work with, not detract from, the cheese. Fresh cranberries offer a vibrant, festive touch, together with fresh cut figs, and little groups of walnuts, almonds and hazelnuts. Just remember to regularly check the fresh cranberries and figs for any signs of spoilage."

Upselling is key

"It's important in the lead-up to Christmas to provide tasters, and to choose cheese that you know people wouldn't normally buy or choose," says Mark. "Invite them [customers] to taste. Even if people are outside of their normal comfort zone, if it's an opportunity to sample something for free, nine times out of 10 they will. Tell them about the cheese, how good it will be on a Christmas cheeseboard, what would go really well with it."

If you have crackers that pair well with that cheese, now's the time to give them a mention. "Or if you have a sample jar of chutney, let them see for themselves how good a combination that would be."

"On the internal glass shelf immediately above the cheeses we display jars of membrillo paste, cranberry and Port jelly, truffle honey and other seasonal delights," says Caroline. "And we also place groups of boxes of biscuits and crackers on top of the counter to maximise the opportunity to upsell."

Taking stock

The landscape of your cheese counter should look and feel different in the festive season, with lots of products to pique the interest of regular customers.

Caroline says that despite being a smaller store, she sees this time of year as an opportunity to stock larger, whole rounds which might not necessarily sell easily in the spring or summer, such as 8kg wheels of the finest Stilton.

"Vacherin Mont D'or is always a popular choice for our customers, as are truffled cheeses, including the Swiss Kaltbach truffle wheel, and our lovely and local truffled Baron Bigod. We have found that crowd pleasers including Roquefort Papillon and vintage Lincolnshire Poacher always sell well, as do Snowdonia's range of waxed truckles."

Caroline also loves incorporating cheese hampers into her offering, which she says are popular for 'the person who has everything'. It's important to understand the gift recipient's likes and dislikes and dietary restrictions, bringing together some of their favourites, as well as a few cheeses that might take them out of their comfort zone, for the element of surprise and delight.

> "Unlike our year-round display, where we group cheeses roughly according to soft, blue and hard, we choose a strong centrepiece cheese, then surround it with smaller wedges"

Theming cheese hampers is a fun way to put a twist on Christmas gifting too. "So, if someone is known to love Italian cheeses, we might also include Italian biscuits and plump marinated olives. Or where a traditional gift of, say, Stilton or Cheddar is chosen, we may include black pepper crackers and a fig chutney. A small bottle of vintage Port is also a welcome inclusion."

Presentation, Caroline adds, is key. "When cutting the individual cheeses, do have in mind the shape of the cheeses and where best to position these in the gift box alongside the chosen accompaniments to create an aesthetically pleasing display.

We finish off with beautiful ribbons, and also offer our customers the opportunity to include a personalised gift card."



PETER'S YARD

AWARD-WINNING FIG & SPELT SOURDOUGH CRACKERS

GOOD THINGS TAKE TIME

FEELING THE BLUES

Whether at the centre of a cheese and wine occasion or a knockout recipe, the time has come to put blue cheese in the spotlight



COMMENTATORS



BILL MATHIESON
LONG CLAWSON DAIRY



VICKIE ROGERSON
HOMAGE2FROMAGE



JASON CHRISTIE
THE CROWN AT CHURCH ENSTONE



ROBERT POUGET
OXFORD CHEESE

With centuries of history, bucketloads of refined flavour, and legions of fans behind it, it's no wonder that blue cheese is a stalwart of the independent fine food retailer's arsenal. A must-buy for consumers across the UK at Christmas and beyond, delicious at the centre of a cheeseboard, paired with a quality tipple (more on that later), and a valuable stocking choice for indies, blue cheese has become one of the most iconic tastes of Britain across the world.

While food lovers of all persuasions appreciate a great blue, this pillar of British cuisine is still at risk due to a steady loss in volume sales. "If this trend continues, even at a slowed rate, we could be looking at a significant decline which is a huge challenge," says Bill Mathieson, managing director of Long Clawson Dairy. "The result could not only be a loss of a fabulous British cheese with so much history, but also the loss of some traditional Stilton dairies."

A delicious, versatile and punch-packing cheese counter classic in need of a sales boost? Sounds like a job for *Speciality Food* readers!

A flavourful feast

As with many speciality products, blue cheese can often divide opinion but turn heads with considered education. "Blue cheese is a journey, not a destination," states Vickie Rogerson, co-founder Homage2Fromage and MD of North PR, "so do all you can to guide customers along the path with a range of delicious options. It is a bit like Marmite. You either love it or you hate it. However, I think it's a much-misunderstood cheese type and just like dating, you need to try a few before you find your perfect partner."

Thankfully, there are plenty of options to choose from. "Blue cheese comes in many different forms, some like Roquefort are so spicy that the blue can make your teeth hum, but there are other milder creamier ones like Montagnolo Affine which are mild and voluptuous," she says. "Stilton is the classic British Christmas cheeseboard blue, and there are many excellent ones, but it's not for everyone.

I prefer softer, creamier, unctuous blues that have a suggestion of spice without the full-on blue that punches you in the mouth."

Blue cheese may pack a punch, but your customers shouldn't be afraid to experiment with it in their kitchens – nor should you in your café and deli counter menus. Vickie suggests keeping an eye on social media to stay up-to-date with what is whetting the appetite of shoppers. "TikTok is the birthplace of some rather unusual food trends but there are some real gems. There's currently a trend for #bringaboardnights which are themed grazing boards piled high with anything you like including chocolate, cheese, charcuterie, vegetables, pickles, condiments etc," she says. "It's a great way to

> "In terms of food trends, Stilton has always been known as the King of English Cheeses, but while Stilton is a much-loved cheese, it's not celebrated as much as it might be given that it really is the Champagne of English cheese"



present lots of chunks of cheese and blues really stand out. Waxed portions of cheese work really well for this, so try and have a balance of some waxed Stilton, some unusual enhanced cheeses and even a Grand Noir Wedge, which is a softer blue from Germany."

For Jason Christie, chef at The Crown at Church Enstone, blue cheese is a valuable ingredient in his culinary toolbox. "Blue cheese has a remarkable ability to add umami-packed richness to a dish." he begins. "The action of the enzymes from the milk, microbes and rennet on concentrated proteins and fat leads to many flavour compounds being developed. This translates into a full, rich savouriness on the palate.

"Blue cheese is not just blue cheese, you have buttery, fruity and almost sweet blues like Stilton, Bleu d'Auvergne and Gorgonzola that tend to be milder and can be used for certain applications, and Roquefort with more peppery notes can be used for others. Understanding the differences between them helps in creating a well-balanced full flavoured dish."

Roquefort and steak, Stilton or Bleu d'Auvergne with beetroot and fig... finding the perfect pairing makes a real difference to the final dish, says Jason, and there's no need to stick to the traditional – a left-field option can be surprisingly delicious. "One of my fondest food memories is the time I first had Gorgonzola ice cream. It came with a pear sorbet in a gelateria in Italy and it was simply a revelation. Although this might



sound disgusting, this is not one of those faddy things that sounds interesting but actually tastes awful - it's one of the most delicious things you will ever eat. Because of its rich umami flavours, it creates a savouriness that you must keep going back for.

The closest thing I can liken it to is salted caramel ice cream."

Whether you choose to keep it classic or go out on a limb with your blue cheese pairings throughout the year, blue cheese will be a favourite come Christmastime. "There is not much greater than sitting in front of a roaring fire, after the sun has set on all the present giving and roast turkey, with a salty and creamy blue cheese balanced by a sweet ruby Port," says Jason. "I can imagine whole truckles of blue soaking up the contents of a bottle of Port come Christmas Day evening."

Get your tills ringing

When it comes to selling blues, "sampling is absolutely key, and that's even more important at Christmas when everyone is looking for cheese," says Vickie. "We present all our cheeses at our Homage2Fromage cheese nights blind, so people aren't prejudiced before they've tried it. You'd be amazed what you actually like when you don't know what it is!

"Showing off a range of different types of blue from hard to soft and everything in between is a brilliant way to coax people into the world of blue cheese," she continues. "Showcasing classic British blues like Colston Basset Stilton is a must, but don't forget those slightly more unusual blues. I find Shepherd's Purse Bluemin White really intriguing. It presents like a little Brie but has flecks of blue shooting through it. Well worth having on your cheese counters. And don't get me started on Feltham's Farm Renegade Monk, which won Supreme Champion at the 2020 Virtual Cheese Awards! It's a crazy mash-up of soft white, rind-washed and blue cheese. Amazing!"

Modern must-stocks

A great cheese counter offers a curated range of excellent blues to tempt customers' taste buds, and – luckily for fine food indies – the UK is home to some of the very best. Oxford Cheese's two blues are modern additions to Britain's blue cheese portfolio. Created by Baron Pouget in 1995, Oxford Blue is a semi-soft and smooth English blue and a natural rival to Continental options such as Cambozola, Dolcelatte and Fourme d'Ambert whilst showcasing the savoury complexity of an English Stilton.

Oxford Blue's newer stablemate, Oxford Dolce, shares some similarities with Gorgonzola Dolce – creamy and slightly sweet, it is matured for a minimum of 14 weeks. "For some time we worked on developing a new blue cheese to sell alongside our Oxford Blue," says Robert Pouget.

"Oxford Blue has a very English flavour in the style of a soft Stilton, but I wanted something sweeter, more akin to Gorgonzola. We worked on creating our new cheese and when we thought we had it about right we called it Oxford Dolce."





When it comes to wine pairing it always comes down to personal choice. "Personally," Robert continues, "I would always choose a full bodied red, such as a good Burgundy or red Rioja. I'm a man whose long experience has taught me that with cheese you can't beat a good red!"

Meanwhile, a cheesemaker putting heritage front and centre of its portfolio is Long Clawson Dairy, originally set up by 12 neighbouring farmers as a farmer-owned co-operative in 1912 and now launching 1912 Artisan Blue Stilton – the latest release in its range of award-winning cheeses. "In terms of food trends, Stilton has always been known as the King of English Cheeses, but while Stilton is a much-loved cheese, it's not celebrated as much as it might be given that it really is the Champagne of English cheese," says Bill. This passion is now proudly shared by legendary chef Marco Pierre White, who is the ambassador for 1912 and will be featuring the cheese in his restaurants and pubs, as well as developing a range of recipes showcasing 1912 for food lovers to enjoy at home. This new cheese is certainly worthy of such a high-level spokesperson."We believe it to be a Stilton like no other," says Bill, "as it is made with the craft and care of our master cheesemakers, with over 200 years of collective experience, and goes through a triple check process with our affineurs to ensure only the highest quality cheese".

Another modern icon of blue cheese is Shepherds Purse, a family-run trailblazing cheesemaker from North Yorkshire which has a number of blues in its range.

From the award-winning cow's milk Yorkshire Blue, renowned for its mild creaminess, to the rich complexity of Buffalo Blue, a buffalo milk cheese; Bluemin White, a soft cheese with a velvety blue rind which ripens from the outside in; Harrogate Blue, an award-winner from two weeks post-launch; and Northern Blue, a robust cheese likened to a punchier Yorkshire Blue. Resolutely independent, and loved by consumers who appreciate a great blue cheese, this is a range well worth an investment of counter space.

TRY **SOMETHING NEW**



Svetlana Kukharchuk, AKA The Cheese Lady, shares her favourite off-the-beaten-track blue cheeses

These three unusual blue cheeses offer a captivating journey for your taste buds and are sure to elevate your customers' cheese-tasting experience. So, venture off the beaten path and savour the world of blue cheese in all its delightful diversity. Your cheeseboard will thank you for it!

1 BIGGAR BLUE - SCOTLAND'S HIDDEN GEM

Scotland may not be the first place that comes to mind when you think of blue cheese, but Biggar Blue is here to change that perception. Produced by Errington Cheese Ltd, one of Britain's top farmhouse cheesemakers, Biggar Blue is a raw goats' milk cheese made using the Roquefort recipe. What sets it apart is its moderate creaminess and a delightful bite that gives way to a symphony of flavours. Behind the initial salty notes, you will discover hints of nutty sweetness and a satisfying richness. This cheese pairs wonderfully with red wines or a robust stout, making it a unique addition to any cheeseboard.

2 LA PERAL - A SPANISH ARTISAN DELIGHT

From the remote region of Asturias in northern Spain comes La Peral, a creamy and artisan blue cheese with a moderate bite and exceptional complexity. Crafted at a family dairy using time-honoured methods, La Peral is matured for two to five months, allowing its flavours to develop into a rich, creamy and distinct profile. With age, it can even become delightfully wild in flavour. To complement the cheese's nuances, pair it with Port wine or similar sweet wines. La Peral is a true testament to the skill and tradition of Spanish cheesemakers.

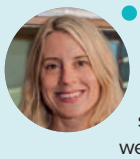
3 GORGONZOLA PICCANTE - THE ORIGINAL GORGONZOLA

Before the world fell in love with Gorgonzola Dolce, there was Gorgonzola Piccante. This cheese, also known as naturale, di monte, stagionato, or simply mountain Gorgonzola, is the older sibling that packs a punch. Firmer and much stronger in flavour than its sweeter counterpart, Gorgonzola Piccante boasts lingering nutty notes. What sets it apart is its unique cave-ageing process, where it is repeatedly washed with a brine for a year or more. This results in a pronounced aroma, a sticky rind, and a bold bite. For a perfect pairing, reach for full-bodied red wines, red-grape-based dessert wines, or more unusual sweet drinks, like our Melina Honey Wine.



PERFECT PARTNERS

Nicky Smith of Smith & Vine talks us through her ultimate cheese and wine pairings



Port and blue cheese go hand in hand. Its robust intensity and sweetness marries well with the bold flavours of blue cheese. Vintage Port, full-bodied and powerful, with well-integrated tannins, is a classic partner for Stilton and other strong blue cheeses, like Gorgonzola or Roquefort, bringing depth and sweetness to harmonise with the piquant tangy notes of the cheese, while more mellow aged Tawnies have subtle notes of nuts and wood which help bring out the blue cheese's complexity.

The rich fragrant aromas, mellow fruit and hints of honey (and sometimes oak) that you can find in a lightly chilled white Port would complement harder blue cheese. Cabrales, a Spanish cow's milk cheese, served with some nuts, and dried fruits would work well and bring out the mellow nutty notes in the cheese.

Sharper, salty and creamy blue cheeses such as Roquefort are also great paired with fortified sweet wines such as a Maury Vin Doux Naturel from the South of France. Gorgonzola is another good option. Its creamy texture and tangy, earthy flavours can provide a nice counterpoint to the sweetness of the wine. Milder options include Cashel Blue and Fourme d'Ambert. Buttery and delicate - these are both good choices for sweeter wines as opposed to Ports.

Don't overlook white wine! A dry white with good acidity can work well with creamy, soft-rind cheeses, the acidity cutting through the creaminess. Equally, bolder, creamier textured whites such as oaked Chardonnay or barrel-aged riper styles of white wines can be an awesome combination for dishes with blue cheese sauces. Try with Quinta da Pedra Alta Reserva Branco 2020 or Domaine Jones Jones Perle Rare Blanc NV.

> "Whether you choose to keep it classic or go out on a limb with your blue cheese pairings throughout the year, blue cheese will be a favourite come Christmastime"

2023 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE STOCK CHECK



OXFORD CHEESE COMPANY OXFORD BLUE

A semi-hard, smooth creamy English cow's milk blue with a good mellow depth of flavour.

oxfordcheese.co.uk



HIGH WEALD DAIRY BRIGHTON BLUE

A mellow, semi-soft blue with an attractive blue-grey coating. Winner of Super Gold twice in the World Cheese Awards.

highwealddairy.co.uk



MONTAGNOLO AFFINÉ

A multi-award-winning creamy soft blue cheese with a distinctive grey rind, made in Bavaria.

elite-imports-limited.co.uk



HONESTLY TASTY BLUE

An award-winning plant-based blue cheese made with real penicillium roqueforti and matured over several weeks for a smooth, creamy blue bite.

honestlytasty.co.uk





COMMENTATORS



HARRY WILSON
YEW TREE BARN



GEORGE HAMMOND
GEORGONZOLA



RUARIDH HESKETH
GALLOWAY LODGE



ASH SINFIELD
TEALS

TO DINE, OR NOT TO DINE?

Adding a restaurant, cafe or bar to a fine food store or farm shop is a huge investment. Is it worth the risk? *Speciality Food* speaks to retailers who've made the leap

Diversification is often key to small business survival, and artisan retail is no exception. For many, an obvious way to boost revenue and create something a bit different is by adding a dining option. A cafe or restaurant can make venues more attractive to customers, increase dwell time, and ultimately up a total spend. However, operating a restaurant or cafe alongside a shop isn't necessarily an easy task, bringing with it a whole array of considerations, and upping the workload of an already busy artisan retailer's life.

Making the most of what you've got

For Mat Grindal, owner of Manor Farm in Catthorpe, Warwickshire, it's worth it to help the business compete with bigger rivals. The Grindals have been farmers for generations. Their 200-acre farm produces rare breed meat, fruits, potatoes, asparagus, pumpkins and more, which is all sold in their farm shop. On top of that, the family has a thriving restaurant offering everything from breakfasts, lunches and afternoon teas, to special events - all showcasing their unique produce and homemade products.

"Food production is hard, and with the cost of production - electricity, ingredients etc - it is even harder to compete with anything mainstream," says Mat. "We are lucky as we grow and rear a lot of our own produce, which gives us huge benefits in quality and taste, but can mean we are at the mercy of the weather and production variables. We either have a glut or famine.

The best way to combat the glut is producing quality products in store, so we serve them in the restaurant, making pies, cakes, jams and whatever else we can think of.

The split between customers visiting the shop and those coming to the restaurant varies, he says. "I would guess 70% use both. We have some who eat in the restaurant regularly - at least once a week - and only buy a few bits, especially our produce like asparagus, strawberries, and homemade cakes, and others who do a full shop but only ever have a cup of tea in the restaurant.

They definitely work together, the shop and restaurant, but it's hard to pinpoint a pattern. Lots will only visit either the shop or restaurant one day and then the other one the next time they visit."

The combination of retail and dining can help promote sales, Mat suspects, though he admits it's better when people browse the retail side first, as they tend not to shop with a full stomach. "But yes, it certainly makes a difference long term," he adds. "Someone may come and have a full English one day, then come back another just to buy the sausages or bacon. Tastings are the best way to sell - a little of something to tease the taste buds, then they buy."

Upselling opportunities

Manor Farm isn't the only business to see its retail side augmented by a dining offering. In the Lake District, Yew Tree Barn combines a retail business that sells antiques,









salvage and homewares, with carefully selected wines, local beers, ciders and spirits and locally-made condiments offered through Harry's Cafe Bar. Most of the drinks stocked in the shop are available in the cafe, explains owner Harry Wilson, while many of the condiments feature in the dishes served there too. "This means that our customers can sample and experience a number of our retail offerings in a culinary context for themselves. This integration allows customers to discover new products."

Combining the café experience alongside homeware, kitchenware and food and drink offerings is a "multi-faceted experience" with customers able to enjoy a meal, explore retail products, and potentially buy items they've found and maybe tried during their visit, says Wilson. "Even selected tables and chairs in the café are for sale, which in effect allows customers to try before they buy, so combining the two aspects of the business in effect presents limitless possibilities."

At Somerset-based Teals, a new food store and service stop on the A303, the same concept applies - combining a shop stocking a range of artisan foods with a restaurant as well as a food-to-go offering using local seasonal produce. Founder Ash Sinfield says the decision to combine retail with a restaurant offering was about finding different ways of showcasing the products they offer. "It gives us more opportunities to celebrate these local products across different touchpoints," she tells *Speciality Food*. The same goes for Ruaridh Hesketh, who runs Galloway Lodge in Dumfries and Galloway. "We make preserves and condiments, and combine our coffee shop menu and retail space to maximise sales as best we can.

"It is a great way to showcase our products, and you can get immediate feedback from the end user on a product instead of putting it on a pallet and not knowing what is happening."

In with the new

Showcasing new products, in exactly the way they should be served, was part of the reason Georgonzola, a deli in the Ribble Valley, Lancashire, added a dine-in option to supplement retail. "When we opened our shop in Clitheroe just over two years ago, we wanted to make sure that we established the delicatessen and retail business first, but the option to dine in was always in the back of our mind," says owner George Hammond.

"The Ribble Valley has the most incredible food and drink scene, and as a result there's a lot of innovation, and businesses are constantly trying new things and seeing what works." After a year of trading, with clear appetite from the loyal customer base, they added a sit-in option, including bespoke cheeseboards accompanied by wine. "By putting out tables and chairs and giving people a chance to relax in good company, we realised that we could create a welcoming and informal atmosphere where our customers could try new products that are perfectly conditioned at a low entry cost, " says George.

> "Do your research, speak to your customers to get a feel of what things they want to see. And do not be afraid of failure, it just makes you stronger"

"This then helped them make informed decisions about the products they want to take home. Because of the shop's layout, there were spaces that initially felt a bit redundant, but have since been reimagined as cosy little spots. This also means that our space has a more consistent atmosphere and regular characters aside from myself."

Such a step allows the deli's customers to enjoy products at their "absolute best", explains George, as well as giving them the chance to sample items they may not have tried before. "I also think that it helps our customers imagine how they would use our products at home," he adds. "We're able to provide serving suggestions and create certain pairings. A good example is the Crooked Pickle Co's Korean Pickled Garlic, which pairs incredibly well with a mature Cheddar.

"Since giving customers the chance to try it with a glass of wine and some other distinct products, we're selling more of both together." For him, a growth in diners does appear to relate to a general growth in sales. "Now, this might be that after a nice glass of wine or a hearty stout, you're more likely to treat yourself. But I do think that it's because we can give our products a bit more of a showcase, which is difficult in a purely retail environment. I also think that people will want to recreate the Georgonzola experience at home."

Overcoming challenges

Santa Putnina and her sisters opened Deli by Dirty Crunch in Croydon in August 2022 after running a pop-up kitchen for two years. She refers to it as a 'social eatery' - somewhere people can buy artisan produce from all around the world, from Kim Kong Kimchi made in Harringay, and Dr Stings Hot Honey made in South-East London, to world-famous Ortiz sardines from Spain. But with uncertain economic times making artisan produce a 'treat' for many, surviving just by selling retail items is "close to impossible", she says. With that in mind, they now offer artisan coffee and a small plates menu, as well as running wine tastings in collaboration with a local wine school.

The advantages are clear, with the biggest being increased retail sales. "All dishes on the menu include at least one item they can purchase from our shelves. This also helps to build trust with our customers. For example, we use Isle of Wight confit tomatoes on our salad.

They are £7 retail, which might seem a lot to some, but then once you have tried them, you understand what you are paying for and that it is well worth it. The same goes for hot sauces, kimchi or even smoked salmon." But that doesn't mean such a move isn't without its challenges.

While adding artisan coffee to their offering has improved customer count, Santa advises others to think carefully before doing the same.

"It is a huge investment at the beginning, and with so much competition out there, you really have to be confident in your roastery. Think, why would people buy your coffee instead of going to the next-door neighbour? Also, how are you going to bring that message across to your customers?"

In addition, adding a seasonal menu to a deli offering can put a question mark over what the venue actually is.

"Our regular customers understand that this is an addition to our retail offers, however this is not necessarily the case for new customers – they tend to call us a café. Truthfully, it is very hard to bring that message across and we are still figuring out how best to market this balance."

Making sure you have the right buy-in and approvals from various authorities can also be a challenge, says George. "Before we even started letting people sit in, we did have to make sure that we fully engaged with the council and the licensing committee so that they understood exactly what the offer was, and this was something that took a little time. We did have to convince them that we weren't converting our shop into a wine bar, more that we just wanted to offer people the chance to have a glass of wine."

Like his fellow retailers, the added workload of welcoming diners is tough for a small team. "Georgonzola is quite a tight ship," he says, "with only myself in on most days or with one more member of the team in on Saturdays. As a result we do have to work hard to ensure that everyone gets the experience that we would like, particularly when we get a rush of diners in. There's a balance to be struck between keeping our retail customers happy and the people sitting in."

His advice is to keep things simple. "Extensive menus or wine lists that number into the hundreds of items don't help with the kind of experience we're providing. Aligned to that, we do make sure that people can have an entirely bespoke experience, with cheeseboards made up in front of them." This level of personal approach - including making notes on what customers enjoyed in-house so the team can recommend cheeses they might like to take home - is also something he tries to provide at Georgonzola.

For Mat, the best lesson he's learned at Manor Farm is to "stick to what you're best at". "Pies and cakes are what we are really good at, they sell in the shop and the restaurant." For him, 'story' is key to encouraging customers to buy, whether that's in the retail side of the business or the restaurant. "For us that story is straightforward - we are farmers that produce wholesome seasonal food, and want people to enjoy it at home or in our restaurant. The pies and cakes really fit into this. My advice to anyone is do what you love with food, tell the story of why you love it and people will connect with it."

Being creative in the current climate is key to survival, says Santa, who advises anyone who is thinking of providing additional offerings alongside retail to 'do it'. "But be smart about it," she says."Do your research, speak to your customers to get a feel of what things they want to see. Do not invest a huge amount of money if you are not certain, but most importantly – give yourself and your customers time to adjust to the new direction of the business. And do not be afraid of failure, it just makes you stronger and wiser."



FINAL CALL

Well, we're finally here – autumn has arrived at last in the UK, and now it's not only the well-organised retailers who are spending their days and nights thinking about all things merry and bright.

The Christmas countdown has begun, for customers as much as retailers. While preparations for most began many months ago, with the drawing up of stock lists and menus, the hunt for new suppliers and the creation of marketing plans, it's hard not to feel a tug of excitement as the big day nears – even if you still have countless boxes to tick on your Christmas checklist.

I know I can't help but to be charmed by the traditions of this season. From the first taste of mince pie, to the chocolate gift boxes, all the way to purchasing those last-minute fixings for the big day, visits to speciality retailers over the Christmas season are a ritual outing.

Don't forget that as much as they lean into tradition, your customers will be looking for guidance at this time of year, too. They might need suggestions for a Christmas pudding, a last-minute cheeseboard selection to impress their guests, or even advice about how to cook a perfect Christmas roast. Foodie products make excellent Christmas gifts, too, so make sure you're poised with plenty of suggestions.

By now, all your plans will likely be in motion – from mapping out your visual merchandising to plotting social media posts in the calendar. But if you're reading this in November, there's still a long way to go, so don't become complacent. Small retailers are at their best when they're agile, quickly responding to feedback, tailoring their promotional plans to subtle of changes in stock or consumer behaviour, and engaging with customers on a personal level.

We're proud to have stood by Britain's speciality food retailers through many exhilarating, challenging and altogether exhausting festive seasons, and as we hurtle towards Christmas 2023, we can only wish our readers the best of luck for another busy festive season!

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
CANDICE MASON OF MOTHER CUPPA

WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I trained as a tea sommelier so I hope that I would be using this skill in some way or another. Failing that, my family run a bus and coach firm, so I would work full time there instead of pursuing my passions.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
My first job was working in an egg packing factory! It was very smelly. We used to pickle eggs for the Queen.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
Other people. I am a real people's person and am always inspired by what others achieve.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
I love working. I've loved every job I've done. I'm motivated by it.



WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE THING ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS?
The wonderful people I am meeting. I love that what I am producing is helping others. This is something very important to me. I am loving watching the company grow, and enjoying the challenge of running an e-commerce business. Typically, I have always been in serviced-based businesses, so it makes an interesting change.

AND THE LEAST?
I can't say I enjoy writing blogs. I struggle with ideas. I'm not creative in this way and often my spelling is bad and requires lots of attention to detail. I'm not very patient!

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
The people in this industry are fab. So unbelievably passionate about their work. It's an incredibly supportive industry to work in.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
Roast dinner without question. Cheese and crackers after.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
If you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you've always got!

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
Frogs' legs.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE COOKBOOK?
My mum bought be a Mary Berry cookbook when I left home over 25 years ago. I still have it and will often refer to it. It's an encyclopaedia.



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Look out in our January Issue for the opportunity to sample new product ranges.

For more information contact:
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TRIED & TESTED

SALTED CARAMEL MOCHA CHOCOLATE TRUFFLE LOGLETS, BOOJA-BOOJA



Well these are blooming gorgeous! Not only do they taste amazing, but the loglets are vegan and contain no soya or palm oil. This seriously addictive new format, sees Booja-Booja's signature rich, smooth, darkly chocolate truffles transformed into elegant lengths. Each one has been kissed with a hint of coffee, and is infused with teensy nuggets of salted caramel, which give every single bite a moreish chew. We could not get enough of these.

boojabooja.com



SALTED CARAMEL HONEY, BEEHYPE

This is possibly one of the best jars of honey we've ever got our greedy paws on. It's 100% pure and unprocessed, made by combining ethically-sourced wildflower honey, with fine Alpine rock salt. The first salted caramel honey on the market (with no other additives) the product has been churned to create a gorgeously smooth, creamy, almost buttery texture, while the taste, with just the right hint of salt, is so good we've been eating it straight from the jar as a treat. It's a highly deserving winner of the multiple awards its been gifted since launching.

beehype.co.uk

HOLY GRASS VODKA, DUNNET BAY DISTILLERS

First off, this vodka comes in a dazzlingly beautiful cut glass bottle, with a cobalt blue base that catches in the light, transforming the appearance of its contents. Within, the vodka, crafted in Scotland, has been distilled with vapours of Highland apple juice, and infused with the quaint-sounding holy grass. Also known (more commonly) as bison grass or sweet grass. It's smooth and sweet, followed by aromatic vanilla-like notes of pandan leaf, and just a touch of ginger.

dunnetbaydistillers.co.uk



THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Andy Bowler, founder of Indulge Dining

Indulge Dining is a fine dining meal kit delivery service I established in lockdown, which has continued to grow and grow. I started the business as I was made redundant and had a lot of time on my hands. My friends all wanted me to deliver them dinners to their doorsteps as they missed restaurant food. One thing led to another, and before long I had set up a brand that was delivering three course fine dining meals all over London. We now deliver nationwide and have a number of different meals on offer.

Prior to Indulge I worked for Michelin Starred chefs for 10 years, starting my journey with Michel Roux Jr, training in modern French cuisine. I then spent time working as a sous chef for Simon Rogan in two of his London restaurants, and before the pandemic I was sous



chef at Gordan Ramsay's Petrus. I was also successful in making it to the semi finals of The Craft Guild of Chefs National Chef of the Year competition.

I'm excited to share my favourite local producers, as I love so many small independent brands and love to share them. There are so many great ones from my local area of Walthamstow.

Starting with wine, I like Forest Wines. This organic and natural wine shop is awesome. It has a great selection of low intervention, natural and biodynamic wines. It's a brilliant place to go if you're interested in trying something new.

Eat 17 is our local Spar!

It's the fanciest you will have ever come across and is a real treat to go shopping in.

They use Natoora as their fruit and veg supplier, so if I need some high-end, quality ingredients, it's the best place to go.

For baked goods Wood Street Bakery is insane – there is no other word. Their selection of pastries and cakes are to die for.

And for meat, HG Walter are one of my favourite butchers in London. They supply so many great restaurants, but also direct to consumer. They sell amazing British meat, from small farms. If you're trying to eat more sustainably, these guys are really good to buy from.

> "I started the business when I was made redundant and had a lot of time on my hands. My friends all wanted me to deliver them dinners on their doorsteps"

PARTNER CONTENT

Garofalo

WHAT DO YOUR SAUCES SAY?

Excellent quality ready-to-heat sauces are a fine food essential. But where to start when stocking?

As well as being a port of call for 'something a bit different' - outstanding products not commonly found on supermarket shelves – one of the great advantages for consumers shopping in fine food stores is convenience.

And that's probably not something most retailers shout about enough on a regular basis. As well as being sellers of artisan cheeses, boxes of chocolates for gifting, or interesting nibbles for parties, delis, food halls and farm shops are filled with easily prepared products that can have customers' dinner on the table in a jiffy.

With autumn in full flow, now is the time to point shoppers towards these time-saving gems. The jars of ready-cooked, plump beans and pulses. Pots of soup. And...sauces.

It's easy to be distracted in this environment by the feast under glass at the deli counter, or seasonal displays, but really excellent sauces are a cupboard staple, and making sure you 'hit the nail on the head' in this category could ensure customers come back time and time again when they need to feed friends and family.

While there are some exciting newfangled sauces from all over the world to offer, your base point should be the Italian classics. Hearty, delicious concoctions that can be tossed with pasta. The ultimate fast food. While you're in buying mode do make sure you check the ingredients list, ensuring your sauces contain no artificial additives. Those made with extra virgin olive oil will be superior in texture and flavour.



But what's in the jar?

Bolognese: A classic sauce, rich with ripe tomatoes, beef or pork (or a combination), extra virgin olive oil, finely chopped, slowly cooked vegetables, and a touch of Parmigiana. Best served with a pasta that will hold the heavier ingredients, such as tagliatelle or fettuccine.

Napoletana: Tomatoes are the star of the show here. The plumpest, juiciest Campanian fruits are simmered with slow-cooked vegetables and olive oil, finished with basil, and sometimes with the inclusion of red wine.

Serve with spaghetti.

Parmigiana/Norma: A Sicilian classic, combining tomatoes, basil, aubergines and olive oil, with a flourish of the island's famous ricotta salata. It's wonderful layered in a vegetable bake, or with a chunkier pasta.

Carbonara: Be wary of jars of carbonara sauce. It's really only at its best made a la minute, in the kitchen, with freshly-fried guanciale, egg yolks, plenty of black pepper, pasta cooking water and not a speck of cream.

Speak to your Italian wholesaler or stockist to find out more about the joys of speciality sauces.



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