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SPECIALITY FOOD

NEWS, COMMENT AND BUYING IDEAS FOR FINE FOOD RETAILERS



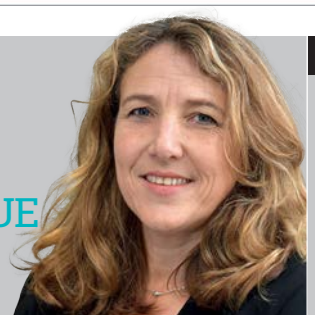
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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the April 2021 issue of *Speciality Food*, our first issue which has been produced with the end of lockdown in clear sight.

As I write, we are just a few weeks away from the reopening of non-essential shops and hospitality (albeit outdoors), and the excitement among consumers is palpable. While we are all keen to get back to some semblance of 'normality', the fact is that life will never look quite the same again.

I hope that *Speciality Food* readers see this as an opportunity to brush off, once and for all, elements of their business which weren't pulling their weight, and to focus on the parts which really do good for all. Tweaks will need to be made, of course – for example, the demand for online commerce may well drop, but it's still a valuable service to offer your customers. The bottom line is that we should all have learned and evolved as a result of the challenges of the past year. It's time to put those lessons into practice for the long term, whatever that looks like.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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Fine food sector prepares for brighter future out of lockdown

As shopper confidence rises, we look at how the industry is preparing for the gradual relaxing of Covid-19 restrictions in 2021

After a long two months in lockdown, the government revealed its pandemic exit strategy in February. The roadmap is a cautious plan for ending lockdown restrictions, and eventually all legal limits on social contact, by as soon as 21st June. While it isn't set in stone – Covid-19 has certainly upended the government's plans before – it is a positive sign that the country's leaders can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Confidence rises

The successful rollout of vaccines in the UK has also gone a long way towards instilling a sense of confidence in the public. IGD's Shopper Confidence Index revealed that in February, confidence rose to its highest level in more than a year, driven by the planned easing of lockdown restrictions and the vaccination programme.

"It's really reassuring to see another slight increase in confidence, following the January score; it brings a sense of optimism," said Simon Wainwright, director of global insight at IGD. He expects confidence to continue rising after further financial support was announced in the chancellor's Spring Budget.

Post-Covid retail

For Tom Newey, CEO of Cobbs Farm Co farm shops, seeing a potential end in sight to lockdown restrictions brings about "a huge amount of mixed feeling and emotion". First, there is the logistical and mental challenge of helping staff through the transition. "Like many, balancing the needs of staff who've worked in our shops throughout the pandemic and those less fortunate hospitality staff who have regrettably been furloughed and are soon to return is challenging, and we're putting lots of measures in place to support them all," he said.

With warmer temperatures and relaxed restrictions on their way, Tom expects to see confidence continuing to rise among customers – but that doesn't mean Covid is over for retailers. "We're confident in a strong demand for outdoor space come April but think customers will still have every expectation of being reassured through Covid-secure messaging and procedures."

However, thanks to the lockdown easing plans, Cobbs Farm Co has begun making plans for bigger outdoor events throughout the summer with "some confidence", and Tom is hopeful about what's on the horizon. "Predicting the future after the year we've just had is a brave move, but I can't help but feel positive about the sector and it's exciting growth opportunities. Lots of us saw plenty of new faces shopping with us during the pandemic, whether that be online or in-store and we're working very hard to ensure we retain them!"

The return of hospitality

Spending on home-cooked meals rocketed during lockdown. With restaurants and cafés largely closed, consumers have eaten an extra seven billion meals at home since spring 2020, according to Kantar. Overall, shoppers have spent £15.2 billion more on groceries during the pandemic, or around £4,800 per household, on average. And at the start of Lockdown 3.0, spending on groceries was still on the rise, and growing at its fastest rate since June 2020. These huge rates of growth are likely to slow down as hospitality returns over the coming months. As consumers spend more on meals out and less on home dining, Kantar expects to see the typical sales patterns of 2019 return to the fore. While this means sales will taper off from their pandemic highs for retailers, it's good news for producers that service the hospitality sector and retailers with on-site restaurants or cafés.

Rosie Collins, marketing manager at Macknade said the retailer is looking forward to opening up the dining spaces at its Faversham and Ashford food halls, and making the most of a new food village in Faversham and an expansion in Ashford. "We are looking forward to our community experiencing this new space," Rosie said.

There's a palpable excitement from foodservice brands, too. Ashley Chipchase, the owner of street food brand Mexican Seoul, said he's witnessed an "explosion of activity" from event organisers. "There finally seems to be some light at the end of this long, dark, winding tunnel, and the whole industry seems to be readying itself to get back to normality," Ashley said.

"The last year has taught us that anything can happen, and there's a good chance that the goalposts will move," Ashley added. "However, we are optimistic that we will have the opportunity to do what we love and share our food with the public."

> "Predicting the future after the year we've just had is a brave move, but I can't help but feel positive about the sector and it's exciting growth opportunities"



"There are reasons to be optimistic"



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

I was really hoping that by February Covid-19 would be fast retreating in the rear view mirror of the Partridges electric delivery bike along with Brexit, England's batting collapses and my painful hip problem. Sadly not so.

Our Covid travails worsened in the first six weeks of the year. We had a local outbreak that rendered eight of our senior team out of action for at least two weeks and a further number of staff self isolating. This was a lot worse than the experience of last year, both in terms of the intensity of the illness suffered and the larger amount of people that were involved.

We were, in fact, very lucky to keep the shop open during some difficult weeks – albeit with earlier closing hours. Sales were down in January by 8% and the customer count fell by 30%. Without the fine food market and the pulling power it brings to the Duke of York Square, our Saturday trading was particularly affected. February sales (as I write this on the 26th) are down by 3.2% and customer count down by nearly 25%. During this time we were also very lucky to have on our team someone who filled the void by becoming a Covid consultant or guiding light of health and safety for the shop. Through her work we have been able to set up and coordinate an enhanced cleaning regime, regular staff testing and effective communication to provide advice and support where needed. It was not planned in advance but has turned out to be an invaluable resource.

It is difficult to know what the long-term effects of this pandemic on the business will be. Hopefully a very painful memory, but nothing worse.

The short term effects have been more apparent however. On the negative side fewer products are on the shelves partly through supply issues and partly by not having the person power to fill them up. A decline in sales and customers as mentioned above and a close encounter with EORI are two others. I am sure EORI will reappear, like Banquo's Ghost, in future articles so I will not dwell on that topic now. Other negatives would include the absence of group thinking and forward planning, and also working from home is not an easy fit for retail.

The fog of dismay and uncertainty has been present too often in recent months.

A final negative worth mentioning has been that a tiny minority of customers have shown increased anti-social behaviour in the past few months. Shoplifting, refusal to wear masks and staff harassment have proved an extra burden to deal with at an already difficult time.

The police are sympathetic, but it is not easy to report such low level crimes on a regular basis. We have resorted to banning some of the worst offenders but they generally keep coming back. It is one of the most challenging aspects to deal with when running a shop. The sad thing is that it detracts from the positive effect provided by the vast majority of regular customers who have been so friendly and understanding towards the team during the recent lockdowns and shared the journey.

There have of course been other positives. We have been extremely fortunate to be selling food and providing essential services. We have been totally dependent on the goodwill and support of colleagues who at frequent times have gone above and beyond the call of duty to help us stay open.

The remodelling of the café has not done us any harm and refocussing on deliveries has proved successful. Christmas and special event sales remain positive and the business rates holiday has been a lifeline.

This year, sales have been down overall, but on certain spring-like days the shop has performed well and Pancake Day and Valentine's Day were real belters.

There has been some renewed export activity. So all things considered, and as we head through spring towards summer, and later in the year plan our 50th Christmas of trading, there are reasons to be optimistic. There is life in the Old Partridge yet.

> "We have been totally dependent on the goodwill and support of colleagues who at frequent times have gone above and beyond the call of duty to help us stay open"

Speciality Food and Woolcool unveil brand new initiative

The Great Stock Giveaway is a new project to bring the best products in the fine food industry directly to the shelves of indie retailers

After a challenging year for the food sector, *Speciality Food* and Woolcool are teaming up to offer a brand new opportunity for producers and retailers to break new ground in 2021.

Holly Shackleton, editor of *Speciality Food* said, "I'm delighted to be working with the team at Woolcool on The Great Stock Giveaway. Sustainability is one of the key trends shaping our industry today, and packaging plays a huge role in connecting producers with retailers and beyond, so I'm excited to be partnering with a pioneer of eco-friendly temperature controlled packaging on this new, innovative project."

Josie Morris, managing director of Woolcool, said, "Given the boom in mail order from both our producer and retail customers, we've seen unprecedented demand for our products.

"When we found out about this initiative to connect buyers and suppliers, naturally we were delighted to work with *Speciality Food* to bring the promotion to life and ensure all temperature-sensitive products arrive in perfect condition in our unique Woolcool insulated shipping boxes."

Retailers and producers can now sign up to take part in The Great Stock Giveaway.

To find out more about the initiative, including how to enter, head to **stock-giveaway.com**.

> "Sustainability is one of the key trends shaping our industry today, and packaging plays a huge role in connecting producers with retailers"





AMAZON

Amazon Fresh proves that the high street is "far from over"

The e-commerce giant has opened its first grocery stores in the UK. What can independents learn from the move that they can use in their own shops?

Just as independent food retailers were learning to master the world of e-commerce, digital retail giant Amazon threw the industry a curveball, opening its first physical store outside the US in Ealing, London. It soon followed this launch with a second store near Wembley.

But these are no ordinary food shops – Amazon Fresh sells prepared meals, fresh groceries and Amazon devices, and it has a counter for picking up and returning online orders. The shop is also till-free, with customers able to walk out without paying thanks to Amazon's Just Walk Out tech, which uses a system of cameras, sensors and algorithms to track the items a shopper picks up and bill them automatically.

PHYSICAL RETAIL ISN'T OVER

Despite the huge growth of e-commerce over the past year, the physical retail experience is still desirable for consumers. "Amazon's move to a physical store is a major signal that the high street is far from over," Michelle Ovens CBE, founder of Small Business Britain told *Speciality Food*.

"While the pandemic has accelerated changes to our towns and cities that have been coming for some time, the trend for people to support small businesses and shop locally is also reshaping things."

NOVEL EXPERIENCES CAN BOOST INTEREST

Amazon's Just Walk Out technology is the centrepiece of its Fresh format. Nick Carroll, associate director of retail at Mintel, said this makes the Ealing store a 'destination'. "This is a destination store and a technological show of force from Amazon, designed to give shoppers a glimpse into the future," he said.

Indeed, this is something that independents can look to replicate – albeit without the expensive tech. Some indies have already done this over the past year by installing on-site vending machines. The key is in finding something that not only generates interest and transforms a shop into a destination, but also serves a purpose.

ACCESSIBILITY AND CONVENIENCE MATTER

The convenience Amazon offers its customers through services like next-day delivery and Just Walk Out tech continues to be a key selling point for the e-commerce giant, especially for younger generations. While Mintel's research found that just 17% of Brits were drawn to the prospect of cashier-less technology, that number rose to 27% of 16-24 year olds.

Moreover, 44% of respondents cited the importance of a quick shopping experience thanks to Covid-19. "In the current climate, it is very practical as shoppers are cautious about spending too long in-store," Nick said of the till-free technology. Amazon's grip on e-commerce is significant, but retailers that take Amazon's strategies and apply them to their own business' USP may be able to discover the best of both worlds.



AMAZON



"Disquiets remain"



JIMMY NELSON
ESSENTIAL TRADING

The implications of the 2008/9 recession offered some 11th hour resilience from the Covid pandemic, but now there's another challenge for Essential Trading: Brexit. As Covid becomes somewhat normalised, Brexit reports are returning to broadcast networks, once again reminding us of government memorandums on a new trading climate. A considerable lack of clarity, last-minute agreements and apparent clumsiness from our government (and a rather unfazed EU), have meant that preparations for the new trading arrangements have been challenging.

Having recognised the potential limitations of Brexit early on, we have been readying ourselves for some considerable time, but disquiets remain.

As a business that is fundamentally based upon moving items, homeworking hasn't been fully possible during the Covid pandemic. To comply with social distancing guidelines, warehouse staff adopted a split-shift rota to meet customer orders. Gone are 6am and 8am start times, replaced by staggered shifts commencing at a bleary-eyed 5am.

The majority of orders have been satisfied and expectations surpassed, although it has had an impact on the workforce. Absenteeism increased as irregular working patterns sustained, but the resilience has been incomparable, with other departments helping to pick products during uncharacteristic hours.

The sales department processing customer orders were subject to reorganised rooms, while our drivers delivering throughout the UK were instructed not to enter customers' premises, instead arranging a designated drop-off point on the grounds. Thankfully, a compassionate customer base recognised this necessity and the change has been wholly embraced. One major income for the business is on hold, however. A collection service for a select few customers remains suspended until further notice, despite a recent safety audit declaring the entire location as 'Covid-safe'.

And then there's Brexit. There are shared concerns from many UK businesses akin to Essential. We import a substantial amount of produce from around the world, particularly from the EU. Due to the warmer climates that many of our neighbours' enjoy, we have a long-term affinity with many EU producers of organic foods, but some German and Polish hauliers are already hindered at ports. Recognising that shortages could become commonplace, we began stockpiling many own-branded products in preparation during the latter half of 2020, but it's not only the delays that are an apprehension. To clear customs and meet paperwork requirements, we are expecting to pay a further £250 per load on imports from some EU destinations plus a charge on fumigated pallets.

Essential prides itself on an impressive catalogue of organic produce and maintains some sought-after import and distribution monopolies. However, the trading agreement between the EU and the UK on organic food was not "oven ready" and we've currently suspended the export of any organic products to the EU due to a £150-a time health certificate requirement.

Labels and those of our suppliers need to be EU-compliant and include an EU trading address, and until 24th December 2020, there were uncertainties about which organic logos were viable for organic certification in EU and UK markets. Having now established an EU trading address with a valued Italian customer, our labels are now being redesigned. Quite a feat when considering our 4000+ product lines.

In addition, there are questions surrounding COIs (Certificate of Inspection) on organic goods. Export customers need to register for traces in order to import goods from the UK and are further required to complete an in-depth form detailing commodity codes, country of origin and such like. The cost of new paperwork, including customs declarations required on goods being traded, is another consideration and may result in extra duties for customers, dependent on what they buy.

The complications of buying from the UK and any corresponding increases in pricing may well make the UK a less attractive county to trade with and trepidations can't be ignored. The wholesale food industry is one that has managed to withstand the Covid-19 storm, but Brexit represents an entirely new challenge. Essential Trading's presence and experience has allowed buoyancy and this is thankfully expected to continue. However, the entire sector is yet to be tested.

> "Wholesale food managed to withstand the Covid-19 storm, but Brexit represents an entirely new challenge"

Summer staycations to boost local sales



2021 will be the year of the staycation, and retailers located in popular holiday spots are likely to benefit over the coming months.

"At The Cress Company, we experienced a significant spike in sales when lockdown restrictions were relaxed between June-August in 2020," said Joe Wall, managing director. "There was a peak in demand from 'holiday-orientated' areas, like the Lake District, Norfolk Coast and Scottish Highlands and Islands. We saw a phenomenal increase in sales from rural businesses – for instance in July, a four-fold increase in rural areas of the Highlands."

Over the summer, Joe said the Dunfermline-based fine food distributor saw a "huge uplift" in products from its premium grocery range for those choosing to stay in self-catering accommodation. There was also unexpected demand for chilled products, particularly in charcuterie, antipasti and British cheeses. "Typically in summer we would anticipate sales of soft drinks and snacks for pubs and cafés. However, retailers were buying from categories such as grab and go, biscuits, confectionery, sharing bags of crisps, assuming holiday makers were opting to treat themselves," Joe added.

The business, which has moved to a new depot double the size of its previous location due to continued growth, is preparing for another surge in sales this summer, when Covid-19 restrictions are eased. "We as a business have been quick to respond, ensuring we have the food and drink ranges available to meet with the increase in demand," said Nikki Castley, head buyer of The Cress Company. "We have seen a requirement for more convenience-led product ranges as shopping patterns shift from supermarkets to the independents, and we are continually sourcing and introducing new ranges that will fit the needs of our customers."

> "We saw a peak in demand from 'holiday-orientated' areas when lockdown restrictions were relaxed"

NEWS IN BRIEF

GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES £20M BREXIT SUPPORT FUND FOR SMES

A cash fund for small businesses struggling with new import and export rules post-Brexit has been launched by the government. Michael Gove, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, announced the £20m SME Brexit Support Fund to help businesses adjust to new customs, rules of origin and VAT rules when trading with the EU. The fund is open to SMEs that trade only with the EU, meaning they are new to the importing and exporting process. Businesses can apply for grants of up to £2,000 to pay for practical support, such as training and professional advice, to ensure they can continue trading effectively to and from Europe.

COVID-19 SPARKS DEMAND FOR FAIRTRADE PRODUCTS

Over 2020, demand for Fairtrade products such as bananas, cocoa, coffee and wine boomed as the pandemic shook up the shopping and eating habits of Brits, making ethical products more desirable. The Ethical Consumer's *Ethical Markets Report* revealed that Fairtrade purchases rose by 15% last year, while nearly 30% of consumers pledged to buy more Fairtrade goods in the future. Further research cited by the Fairtrade Foundation noted that the proportion of shoppers choosing Fairtrade products over an alternative was higher than ever before in Fairtrade's history.

14% OF RED MEAT **BUYERS** SAID THEY BOUGHT MORE **LOCAL** RED MEAT SINCE **COVID-19** HIT, AND **17%** OF **ADULTS** SAID THEY BOUGHT MORE LOCALLY **GROWN** AND **SOURCED** VEGETABLES

RESEARCH BY SCOTLAND FOOD & DRINK



4 ways to make home workers your new target customer

Fine food retailers face opportunities to cater to the growing ranks of scratch cookers, home baristas and premium snackers

1 Cater to convenience and cratch cooking

"With many people working from home, the convenience factor is still hugely important. They still want something quick and easy, but also delicious to make at lunch," Kabuto Noodles founder Crispin Busk told *Speciality Food*. But crucially, even convenience-minded cooks will now have access to kitchen appliances beyond the office microwave, meaning decadent soups, snacking platters or speedy hot meals are all on the menu..

2 Bulk up your hot drinks offering

No longer confined to a speedy brew before the morning commute, hot drinks are an experience that offers ample opportunities for upselling. As *Speciality Food* recently reported, the average consumer has spent £50 on recreating their favourite to-go hot drink order at home during the pandemic.

3 Balanced snacking

While indulgent treats have certainly proved popular, there are ever-growing numbers of health-conscious consumers, too. Identifying products that balance feel-good snacking with strong health credentials will be crucial..

4 Homemade luxury cocktails

"We learned very quickly that without the ability to visit bars and restaurants, people have put more emphasis on enjoying their home food and drink experiences, particularly during their down time," said Andy Seach, sales manager at Otterbeck Distillery.

Tribute paid to artisan food icon Nigel Cope



The entrepreneur behind award-winning food business Cottage Delight has died aged 72. Nigel Cope was renowned for his work in the fine food sector. "Nigel's enduring passion was food, with him never tiring of travelling and meeting people in search of unusual and quality food products," the family said in a statement. Nigel started Cottage Delight in 1974 with his first wife Zena, creating handmade fudge in their kitchen which they sold to local businesses. In 1987 Nigel hired a small booth at the International Food Exhibition in London, and the response was "incredible", with enquiries pouring in from Harrods, Fortnum & Mason and other establishments. Over the years, the range has grown to include jams, marmalades, curds, chutneys, table sauces and more, and the business "flourished", expanding to employ more than 100 staff. "His ethos was not to supply supermarkets, but to support independent traders only," the family said. In 2016, Nigel sold Cottage Delight to Vestey Holdings. "When it was time to sell the business the uppermost thing in his mind was protecting everyone's jobs, especially long-term employees. Despite higher offers, he chose a well established family company, who he thought would respect his wishes."

After selling Cottage Delight, Nigel moved into the foodservice sector. He bought a café and transformed it into Cottage Kitchen. "It soon became exceedingly popular with people travelling from miles away to enjoy home-cooked food using local fresh ingredients," the family said. The café won Tea Room and Coffee Shop of the Year in the 2018 Taste of Staffordshire Good Food Awards.

Nigel leaves behind his wife Diana; his children Lisa, Paul and Michael; his step-children James, Tom and Sam; five grandchildren and six step-grandchildren.

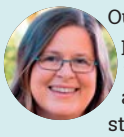


SPOTLIGHT ON: START-UPS

Recent research has revealed that more women and young people will be starting new businesses post-pandemic, and the food and drink industry is likely to be a major area of interest

Women will power the UK's post-Covid recovery

MICHELLE OVENS CBE, FOUNDER, SMALL BUSINESS BRITAIN



Our research shows promising signs that many women are thinking about starting a business. I've no doubt many new female entrepreneurs will enter the food and drink space; not least because it's a sector that stands to grow and be reshaped following the pandemic, but also because it's an area of passion for many. And our research indicates that starting businesses 'out of a passion' is a key motivation for many women.

There have been exciting small businesses springing up and growing across the food and drink sector throughout the pandemic, as they embrace digital and demand for deliveries. This has enabled many types of businesses to tap into new audiences and introduce new business models, whether it is the greengrocer dropping off essential fruit and veg boxes locally, independent bakers and distilleries mailing letterbox treats and gifts across the country, or restaurants and caterers offering food and meal boxes to different customers than those they would traditionally sell to.

Meet three female founders...



MOLLIE OBILEYE, CO-FOUNDER, JITTERBUG

"I was not prepared for how lonely it often feels for a woman stepping into a new industry and an uncharted space. I quickly realised that there were no mentors to run to, even though there were lots of pictures of achievers all around, access to them or their knowledge had always been surrounded by gates and glass walls. You see them, but you can't reach them, and to me this was my biggest challenge.

"Being a woman in business has not necessarily meant more challenges, the challenges are there for all genders, but I guess how I am able to carry my responsibilities as a woman, a mother and wife alongside the demand of a fast moving and tough industry is where the drama lies. But I'm loving the challenge and keeping my eyes on the goals, and so I press on hoping that one day I will become that mentor I wish I had to others coming behind and holding their hands."



KATE SAUNDERS, FOUNDER, BLACKBERRY COTTAGE

"I started out my working life as a sports masseur. Whilst having a private practice, I also worked for the Olympic and Paralympic teams, too. It was when I was working with them that my lightbulb moment came. I was creating cakes with vegetables as one of the largest ingredients for them to enjoy – by using vegetables I could reduce and sometimes omit refined sugars and fats.

"At that time using vegetables in cakes was very unusual, which was a bit of a challenge, I persevered as I knew I had a good product and people enjoyed it. I came up with the idea of chocolate brownies with spinach – spinach being super nutritional, plus really good quality dark chocolate. They took off, and Blackberry Cottage, cakes with secret ingredients, was born. What I like about being a 'female entrepreneur' in the food business is being able to encourage other female entrepreneurs, especially start-ups."



SARA ROBERTS, FOUNDER, HEALTHY NIBBLES

"At Healthy Nibbles we are committed to continuous improvement with sustainability being a key part of what we do. Last year we changed our packaging to be plastic free and it is now produced using 100% recycled materials, which are in turn recyclable. We only use water-based inks and biodegradable labelling and tape.

"Within our supply chain we work with many small producers and assess suppliers' impact and what they are doing in terms of the environment and sustainability. We are proud of our achievements as a small business. However, we are equally aware that it is only through collaboration, improvements at scale and encouraging others to join the Net Zero journey that true difference will be made."

3 WAYS START-UPS ARE TRANSFORMING THE FOOD SECTOR'S SHARED FUTURE

1 THEY'RE READY FOR THE 'NEW NORMAL'

"Covid-19 has fast-tracked the digital channel shift, and start-ups have been the quickest out of the starting blocks," says Jason Gibb, founder of Bread & Jam. E-commerce has boomed throughout the pandemic, and experts believe consumer habits won't bounce back post-Covid.

2 THEY GRAB OPPORTUNITIES

"Many have seen opportunity and taken it – such as the trend towards increased nutrition and health," said Emma Jones, founder of small business network and business support provider Enterprise Nation. Start-ups are wasting no time in getting stuck into these profitable ventures. "I'm seeing lots of immunity boosting, gut-health-type products coming onto the market, and the no and low alcohol trends are accelerating," Jason added.

3 THEY KNOW HOW TO PIVOT

Quick thinking has helped start-ups not just survive Covid, but thrive during the pandemic. "Ayesha Grover, founder of STRP'D was about to launch her range of tiger nut drinks via hipster cafés in March," Emma said. "When the pandemic struck, she quickly pivoted to producing gluten and allergen-free flour for baking. Lauren O'Donnell founded breakfast overnight-oats brand Oatsu just before the pandemic hit. She quickly pivoted her B2B sales strategy to B2C and partnered with a courier to work with on UK-wide delivery."

Gen Z is behind a boom in new food start-ups

Young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, but enterprising entrepreneurs have started up hundreds of new food businesses

ONS figures show that workers aged 24 and under accounted for nearly three-fifths of the UK's unemployment rate. Recent research from The Prince's Trust *Tesco Youth Index 2021* report also revealed that almost a quarter of young people (23%) do not feel confident about their future work.

It comes as no surprise then that Generation Z are taking matters into their own hands. Research from The Accountancy Partnership showed that during lockdown, Generation Z, or those aged between 16 and 20, have been behind a boom in business creation. The report, *The Age of Entrepreneurialism*, revealed that 2020 saw a 72% increase of 16-20 year olds registering as sole traders, while all other age groups experienced fewer new businesses than the previous year. Since 2017, there has been a 206% increase.

Thanks to the rise of e-commerce and social media, the barriers to entry for starting a business are lower than ever – especially for Gen Z, the first digitally native generation, the report notes. "Gen-Z are incredibly enterprising and are driving the age of entrepreneurialism down," said Lee Murphy, managing director at The Accountancy Partnership. Of the businesses that launched in 2020, the group found that 31.2% began on Facebook, and 30.9% started on Instagram. "For many of the young people we see on our Enterprise programme, opening a business seems like a viable option and something they can focus on and grow during a time of uncertainty," Alice Granger, Enterprise programme executive at the Prince's Trust, told *Speciality Food*.



PRODUCT NEWS

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Three new fruity fudges from Bristow's of Devon

Artisan confectionery specialists Bristow's of Devon are soon to release a three-strong range of fruit dessert-inspired fudges.

Available for selected stockists and artisan retailers from April, the new offering includes Strawberry & Cream, Lemon Posset and Orange Delight. All three options are suitable for both vegetarians and vegans.



Rachel Moverley, sales and marketing director at Bristow's of Devon, said, "We at Bristow's of Devon are delighted with our new fruity dessert inspired fudges, these will be ready to hit the retail sector when we emerge from lockdown three this April and are a perfect little treat for gifting or treating yourself.

"Tantalise your taste buds, choosing from Strawberry & Cream, Lemon Posset and Orange Delight... you won't be disappointed!"

bristowsofdevon.com

Cambrook Nuts unveils new gift sets

On 1st May, quality nut specialists Cambrook Nuts will launch their first gift set selection.

The gift sets include perfectly partnered jars of award-winning products – an attractive addition to their established offering of 140g sharing bags, 80g bags and the 'grab & go' 45g range – including Baked Truffle Nuts, Hickory Smoke Seasoned Almonds & Cashews, Baked Cashews and Peanuts with Chilli & Lime, Cocktail Mix №6, and Cocktail Mix №2.



Deborah Bradfield, sales and marketing manager at Cambrook Nuts, said, "We are delighted to be bringing our gift set vision to life with the launch of our first two gift sets this year. They will be a welcome addition to our successful and growing retail range. We hope customers will enjoy giving them as much as receiving them!"

cambrookfoods.co.uk

Munchy Seeds launches new seed mix range

A new range of plant-based seed mixes is being launched by Munchy Seeds to satisfy the consumer demand for convenient ways to add nutritional value to meals.

The six-strong 'Just Add...' range offers sweet and savoury seed blends to add crunch, flavour and nutrition to home-cooked meals at any time of day and are vegan-friendly, gluten and wheat-free.

The sweet Breakfast Boosters are available in Super Berry Goji Berry, Chia & Cranberry Seed Mix; Totally Tropical, Coconut, Mango & Banana Seed Mix; and Cacao & Apricot, Cacao, Apricot & Date Seed Mix. There are three options in the new Savoury Sprinkles range: Toasted Tamari Mega Omega 7 Seed Mix; Spicy Peri Peri Chilli, Sunflower & Pumpkin Seed Mix; and Warm Cumin & Fennel Sunflower, Pumpkin & Cumin Seed Mix, all of which are a convenient and flavour-filled way to add nutritional value to anything from soups to curries and pasta dishes.



Co-founder Lucinda Clay, said, "Everyone knows that seeds are good for you – they are packed with protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals – and yet they still need inspiration as to when and how to use them. Our new Savoury Sprinkles and Breakfast Boosters remove the guesswork and give people a clear use for our delicious, flavour-packed seed mixes.

"We're setting out to show the nation just how easy it is to add seeds to your daily meals."

munchyseeds.co.uk

Stokes Easy enters market

Suffolk-based premium condiment producer, Stokes Sauces, has launched a range of internationally inspired sauces with an aim to make cooking delicious meals at home easier than ever.

The newly launched range of 'meal-making' sauces offers flavours from Japan, France, Mexico and Italy, and each jar features an Easy three-step recipe on the label as well as a link to more recipes created by Stokes' resident chef, Andy.

Rick Sheepshanks, founder and MD of Stokes Sauces, said, "I am so very proud of everyone who has been involved in developing Stokes Easy and its initial range of Meal-Making Sauces. The authentic flavours use only the finest ingredients and are made with the same love and passion as is everything in The Old Stables here at Rendlesham. The world has changed, and the way we live our lives, work, relax, shop and dine is changing with it. With Stokes Easy in the store cupboards and a few fresh, healthy ingredients in the fridge, we can stay at home and enjoy restaurant-quality meals in minutes."

stokessauces.co.uk







Island Bakery launches savoury biscuit options

Organic biscuit-makers Island Bakery have made their first foray into savoury biscuits after two decades of producing exclusively sweet biscuits.

Like the rest of the Island Bakery range, the new biscuits are made on the Isle of Mull in an environmentally sustainable factory which is powered by local renewable energy.

The new oatcakes are uniquely light with an attractive rough edge, and are made using extra virgin olive oil to give lightness and depth of flavour. There are three options in the oatcake range: Original Organic Oatcakes, Black Pepper Organic Oatcakes, and Three Seed Organic Oatcakes, made with pumpkin, sunflower and linseed.

The new cheese biscuits are made with Isle of Mull Cheddar and all-butter for a melt-in-the-mouth texture, and they are available in three flavours: Isle of Mull Traditional Farmhouse Cheese Biscuits, Onion & Thyme and Harissa with Chilli & Cumin.

Dawn Reade, director of Island Bakery said, "Lockdown gives time for NPD at Island Bakery. Cheese Biscuits using Isle of Mull Cheese from the family's farm; and Oatcakes with extra virgin olive oil – perfect with cheese!"

islandbakery.scot





New organic sorbets from Luscious

Two new sorbets have been created by the organic ice cream maker Luscious.

The new products, available in Raspberry and Mango flavours, join the producer's recently launched Salted Caramel ice cream in making Luscious the purveyor of the UK's most extensive range of organic ice creams and sorbets.

The new sorbets are fat-free and dairy-free, making them suitable for vegans, and are available in both retail and foodservice sizes. Both the 500ml and 120ml tubs – which include wooden spoons in the lid – are biodegradable.

Kate Clark, co-founder of Luscious, said, "Following customer requests for sorbet, the addition of these products to our range meets consumer demands, as well as offering a delicious dairy-free and fat-free product to market.

"With increasing demand for organic and ethical products (a 12.6% rise in sales over the last year), the addition of Luscious sorbets extends our range to 12 flavours, giving independent fine food retailers an extensive choice to offer customers."

lusciousorganics.co.uk

Food-friendly ciders released by Sandford Orchards

Independent Devon-based cider maker Sandford Orchards has released three new products to independent retailers, all suitable for partnering with food.

As owners of the oldest working cider mill in the UK, Sandford Orchards takes a natural and low-impact approach to making cider which is showcased in the new additions to its range.

Apple & Oak, a fresh oak-finished cider, has an ABV of 6.7% and showcases ripe and bittersweet apples with notes of vanilla and toasty oak. It partners well with a cheese ploughmans and cured meats. Sandford Reserve, a finest cask-aged cider, stands at 7.4% ABV and drinks like a smooth and oaky Chardonnay with flavours of dried fruits, madeira and honey. It's a good accompaniment to spicy food.The General, a vat-aged cider with an ABV of 8.4%, has a bold and satisfying flavour with notes of Seville orange, plum and baked apple – making it a good fit for gamey meats.



Barny Butterfield, chief cidermaker at Sandford Orchards said, "Our vintage cider collection is very dear to us. We have invested a lot of time and care to create three distinctive ciders and we believe that it's not just the cider connoisseurs who will enjoy their unique characteristics."

sandfordorchards.co.uk

The Pakora Explorer bring fresh pakoras in-store

Scottish start-up The Pakora Explorer has launched fresh pakora packs to satisfy the demand for high quality, freshly made Indian food.

Inspired by the founder's Indian and Pakistani heritage, and made using a family recipe and secret blend of spices, the pakoras are available in three options: Vegetable, Chicken or mixed Vegetable & Chicken. They are presented with a pakora sauce within recyclable trays and cardboard wrap.

The pakoras are handmade in small batches and contain no additives, colourings or preservatives, as well as being gluten-free and suitable for vegans. Sheetal Revis, owner of The Pakora Explorer said, "The difference between our pakoras and other more commercial brands is that we offer what we produce and eat on our own kitchen table that's true to our roots – including the fact that there's no chilli in the pakora because I surprisingly don't like spicy food! This allows everyone of all ages and tastes to enjoy our products, which they can spice up if they prefer.

"With the desire for interesting and tasty food-to-go, given the fact that restaurants are closed, these especially appeal to lockdown foodies."

pakoraexplorer.co.uk





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The Life & Soul of the Pantry

BACKING BRITISH

From gin-and-orange chutney to Lincolnshire haslet, British food has never sounded and tasted more exciting, says Sally-Jayne Wright. We need to shout about it



The last two years have seen intriguing British winners in the Great Taste Awards' three stars category. Lamb faggots. Seeded flour. Poly-floral honey from, would you believe, south London – and a food that doesn't even sound British: black garlic miso paste.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE TREND TO BUY LOCAL AND BRITISH?

Conscious consumerism, education, discovery and Brexit are the key factors. Some artisan cheese producers lost 60-75% of their income when hospitality shut. A surge of save-British-cheese initiatives prompted us to vote with our credit cards to support jobs and livelihoods. Central to this campaign was education. For example, northern retailer Booths put recipes on its website showing shoppers they could use Dewlay's Garstang White cheese from Lancashire instead of Brie.

VIRTUAL TASTINGS INTRODUCED US TO NEW FOODS, DIDN'T THEY?

Yes, and many traded up. Young, digitally native consumers like to experience products in-store (Trendalytics) and while working from home, they explored their local independents and developed new shopping habits.

DO BRITISH ARTISAN PRODUCERS STILL NEED OUR SUPPORT?

Absolutely. In a recent newsletter from Neal's Yard Dairy, export team member Gemma blogs about the complexities of shipping animal products to the EU. Small producers of meat and dairy products in particular need our custom.

AM I RIGHT THAT CHARCUTIERS SUFFERED LESS FROM LOSS OF RESTAURANT TRADE?

Sarah Kennedy, co-owner of Marsh Pig, said, "'Chefs work on tight margins so we make very little. We've done much better from online sales direct to the public and through the delis who started delivery services." Look out for their new Black Olive Salami. Another thriving charcutier is Capreolus Fine Foods of Dorset who launched their New Forest Pannage ham made from rare-breed British lops at January's Delishops Discovers. Fans say it rivals the very best Spanish Jamon de Bellota and, ironically, Brexit has made British cured meats relatively more affordable.

WILL FOOD COSTS GO UP AFTER BREXIT?

A British Retail Consortium spokeswoman told us, "The only comprehensive analysis of the (trade deal) effects on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth so far has come from the European Commission. It estimates effect on UK GDP in 2021 and 2022 of -2.25% due to the effects of non-tariff barriers (paperwork) created on cross-border trade."

I FEEL A LARGE GIN COMING ON. WHERE CAN I FIND ONE?

A record number of new distilleries launched in 2020 including one situated over The Cornish Hen deli – Penzance Gin Ltd. We were impressed by Otterbeck Distillery's enjoyably herbaceous new Cotton Gin, from Yorkshire, which won gold in the London Dry section of The Gin Masters (*Spirits Business*) 2020. In recent years, there has also been a revival of British craft cidermaking that extends well beyond the Southwest. In an *Independent* newspaper sampling, tasters rated Orchards of Husthwaite Galtres Gold from north Yorkshire 'worth seeking out' for its 'superb balance of sweet and sharpness'.

WHAT ABOUT THE BEEFE OF YE OLDE ENGLANDE?

We like James Whelan's beef and ham and anything from Peter Hannan. A natural approach to rearing pork has seen Lincolnshire's Redhill Farm scoop numerous awards for everything from pork shoulder to Lincolnshire haslet.

GOT ANY BRITISH FUSION FOOD – WITH AN EXOTIC TWIST?

We couldn't get enough of Mandira's Kitchen Gin & Orange Chutney which goes a treat with fishcakes and kedgeree. The oranges are a waste product from the gin-makers, Silent Pool, next door who use only the peel and pith in their new citrus gin. Check out Mandira's site for quality frozen meals, too.

We also like Wasabi Mustard and Black Garlic Miso Paste – umami-rich fermented soybean paste seasoning for dressings and marinades – made in Northern Ireland by Craic Foods.

> "Conscious consumers love any product with a good story. So get storytelling"

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE MOST OF THE BRITISH AND LOCAL TREND?

- Keep talking to new customers from lockdown on social media.
- Keep solving the 'what's for dinner' dilemma. How about support-your-local-producer cold grazing platters, expertly curated by you?
- Celebrate the seasons. Suggest accompaniments for asparagus, watercress, gooseberries and so on throughout the year.
- Nostalgia is comforting. Consider eat-back-in-time promotions with recipes, everything from elderflower syllabub to Horlicks cookies. Horlicks now comes in a vegan version.
- Exploit the popularity of the pre-selected meal box and launch your own.

WILL THE BRITISH TREND CONTINUE?

We think it will. In the medium term, many will feel safer holidaying at home, which means they'll spend money in local farm shops and delis.

Britain's superior animal welfare standards are on trend for anyone trying to eat less but better meat. Conversely, we have been a world leader (2018, Mintel) at launching new vegan foods.

Are we typically British in being too modest about what we do well? "Shoppers would be willing to pay significantly higher prices for British artisan cheese if producers improved their marketing, branding and storytelling," says campaigner Francis Gimblett, author of *Gimblett's Guide to the Best of British Cheese*. This applies just as much to other products, from sashimi-grade smoked salmon to raspberry liqueur. Conscious consumers love any product with a good story. So get storytelling.



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POWER UP WITH SKYNAMO

Introducing the one-stop software and mobile sales app designed to boost efficiency, improve sales team performance and strengthen those all-important customer relationships

Within the food industry, relationships are vital. Whether it's ensuring that your customers keep ordering from you and not your competitor or that communication runs smoothly within your team, it's all too easy to let relationships sit on the back burner while you focus on the day-to-day operations of your business. However, thanks to Skynamo's efficiency-boosting software, you can manage each area of your business smoothly and efficiently.

Skynamo has been providing field sales technology to manufacturers, distributors and wholesalers since 2012 and now boasts nearly 1,000 customers – with 10,000 users in total – across a variety of industries in the UK, Europe, the US, South Africa and Australasia. Its proven track record in improving order accuracy and sales team performance has led to top ratings within the field; no wonder it's been described as "Easiest to Use" and "Best for Small Business" by international software review site g2.com.

This suitability for small business makes Skynamo a winning option for fine food businesses looking for a better way to sell products to an existing customer base. Its mobile sales and ordering app and sales team management software have already seen success in the UK food industry – check out the Rockcliffe case study for first-hand feedback – and no wonder; its easy-to-use digital catalogues and functionality offer businesses an efficient way to keep on top of their paperwork, paper-free.



A vital tool at your fingertips

By replacing paper forms and catalogues with digital information available at sales reps' fingertips, Skynamo's software makes it easier to access accurate customer, sales and product information via a mobile device – even offline. It also makes it easier to check on pricing and stock levels in the field, avoiding the inaccuracies that can come from from paper-based systems.

Plus, it offers a remote-ordering functionality that ensures quick and accurate order fulfilment – so no more hours-long delays while a sales rep is on the road.

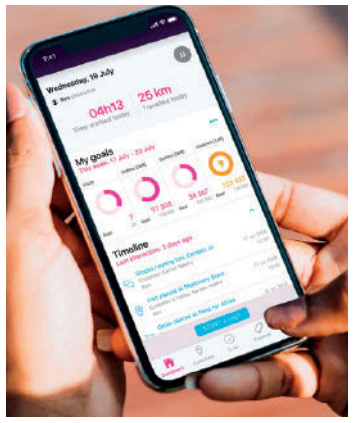
By having this data at their fingertips, managers are able to identify their most valuable customers and products – as well as those being neglected – and opportunities to coach their sales reps to be more effective. While some businesses may prefer to stick to their tried and true methods, you can't argue with the facts: according to Brian Howe, general manager of UK and Europe, field sales teams using Skynamo typically increase revenue by up to 20% in the first year.

The future of field sales

Skynamo's customers can rest confident in the knowledge that its developers work non-stop to make sure that its functionality meets the growing demands of businesses and their sales teams.

In March 2021, Skynamo acquired UK order management and product catalogue tech provider mSeller to enhance its functionality and grow its team in the UK. This comes after having secured $30 million investment from US based investment firm Five Elms Capital to accelerate growth of Skynamo globally. "mSeller and Skynamo share a common vision to help SMB's grow by achieving greater efficiency and more sales through innovative mobile technology," explains mSeller founder Stephen Langham. "We hope that our combined forces can play a part in helping especially the small business sector in the UK thrive and generate jobs during and post the pandemic."

With a proven track record of boosting relationships and efficiency across industries and continents, Skynamo is the smart choice for forward-thinking companies within food and drink.



> "Skynamo's customers can rest confident in the knowledge that its developers work non-stop to meet the growing demands of businesses and their sales teams"

> "Skynamo has given our sales reps the power and confidence to make a decision straight away – giving their customers confidence in our knowledge and ability – as well as saving them time and giving them space to be more productive and develop existing relationships"

CASE STUDY: ROCKCLIFFE GROUP



Nadeem Ayyub, director of Rockliffe Group – a manufacturer and importer of Halal frozen foods – has been using Skynamo to improve how his business operates and to strengthen his relationship with customers. Nadeem's team quickly saw the potential and benefits that came from using Skynamo's software. "Before we worked with Skynamo, our working practices weren't particularly efficient. Our sales reps used to visit customers to see what they needed, fill out an order form, then email either a scan or photograph of the page to the office. Before their visits they would call the office to collect all the information they would need for that customer, and afterwards the person in the office would need to add all of the day's sales and other updates to the order system – taking into account things like special offers – then we'd be back to square one the next day." This system meant that there always had to be someone manning the phones at the office, with all the information that the sales reps may need to hand, and that the process took a lot of time out of the team's day.

"We service many clients, and it used to be difficult for our reps to know which stores they had last visited, which orders had been taken and what conversations they'd had," explains Nadeem. "Potential orders were also missed, because we had no visibility of who else was in the area as reps did their daily visits. That's all now changed with Skynamo. We now know which customers have been visited and which have not been visited in a while, and sales reps have easy access to all the notes made during customer visits, so they can pick up where they left off the next time they meet. We have saved hours on admin and mistakes caused by unnecessary rekeying of orders – thanks to Skynamo's ordering functionality which integrates with our ERP system. All of this allows us to serve our customers better, by freeing up our reps' time to concentrate on building those relationships. We can open the app from anywhere and see all our customers in the area, which points out which stores are in the area. This really helps us to be very efficient and allows us to do more visits. More visits usually means more business, which is great."

The partnership between Rockcliffe and Skynamo has proven to have valuable long term impact. "Ultimately, working with Skynamo helps our team to perform better," says Nadeem. "By providing a means by which our employees have everything to hand, they have given our sales reps the power and confidence to make a decision straight away – giving their customers confidence in our knowledge and ability –– as well as saving them time and giving them space to be more productive and develop existing relationships." Skynamo has also helped the Rockcliffe team to side-step any potential issues with customers, including those due to human error. "Whereas in the past our sales reps might have come unstuck if a customer told them that they hadn't received an order, with the help of Skynamo we can now show them exactly what they ordered, when it arrived, and even how much they have left in stock!" says Nadeem.

The relationship with Skynamo was positive from the start. "Skynamo were very accommodating to our needs," says Nadeem. "They spent a lot of time getting to know us and our individual requirements, and I haven't hesitated to recommend them to anyone who is experiencing similar challenges to those we experienced in the past."

Having use of Skynamo's tools has proven beneficial in other areas of the business, too. From keeping track of what sales reps are doing to keeping distribution channels running smoothly and efficiently, the technology has allowed for increased transparency and trust, which has led to better relationships with sales reps and clients.

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THE NO/LOW REVOLUTION

Alcohol-free beverages are booming. We discover how retailers can refine their selection to offer something that every customer will love

Whether it's a symptom of living through a year in which the importance of personal health and wellbeing was thoroughly hammered home, or a case of the younger generations setting the trends, the conclusion is the same: no and low alcohol drinks are selling.

The popularity of zero-alcohol drinks is clear for brands of all shapes and sizes. Brewing giant Carlsberg noted that its no and low alcohol segment grew by 11% in 2020, making it one of the most successful areas of the business. Meanwhile, the fine food sector is seeing an eruption of new beverages marketed as alcohol-free options.

In the global drinks sector, no and low alcohol beverages account for just 3% of the market, but IWSR Drinks Market Analysis predicts that consumption will increase by 31% by 2024. The trend is sweeping through key global markets, including the UK, where a record 6.5 million people took part in Dry January 2021. Data and analytics company GlobalData even dubbed the 2020s the 'decade of no and low spirits'.

The health factor

Why the sudden interest in alcohol moderation? "The growing popularity of no/low spirits is intertwined with consumers becoming more mindful of the health benefits of moving away from traditional alcoholic drinks," says Andrew Stacey, co-founder of zero-alcohol spirit Herbarium Drinks. After a year like 2020, which took a toll on the mental and physical health of many, it's no surprise that these concerns are at the forefront of consumers' minds.

Mark Livings, who founded alcohol-free spirit brand Lyre's said the company's own research shows that a good proportion of its customers are still drinkers – they're just keen to take a balanced approach. "The vast majority of the people coming into the category are not abstainers, but rather moderators," he tells *Speciality Food*, "people looking to rebalance their lives around health, wellness or mindfulness."

It's a popular proposition. Despite Lockdown 3.0 cutting off the on-trade market in January, Lyre's sales volumes across retail channels exploded during Dry January, growing 1,300% in the UK.

As alcohol-free beverages shift from a little known category to one that millions are happy to explore – a process Mark describes as moving from 'hello' to FOMO – higher and higher quality non-alcoholic drinks are coming to the market. "This has driven the ever-increasing choice and quality in the no/low spirit options available, so a no/low drink is no longer viewed as second best; it's becoming a socially accepted first choice," Andrew says.

And this trend isn't restricted to Generation Z, although with a fifth of that cohort choosing to abstain from alcohol, they're often referred to as the 'sober generation'. Mark Wong, founder of Impossibrew Co and a member of Gen Z himself, explains: "For me and many others, health is the number one reason for moderation. Having a few drinks with friends or going out is great fun, but painstaking hangovers, headaches and feeling bloated the next day just isn't worth it."

> "A no/low drink is no longer viewed as second best; it's becoming a socially accepted first choice"

What consumers want

So why choose a non-alcoholic beverage imitating an alcoholic one when there are so many alternative drinks on the market? "Drinking alcohol is a social ritual that is deeply woven into our culture," Impossibrew's Mark explains. "For those who are moderating or are teetotal, suddenly breaking away from a thousand-year-old tradition without any alternatives or 'social prop' makes it very difficult. No/low alcoholic drinks serve as a much needed replacement that reminds us of the familiar, without any of the negative health implications that come with alcohol," he says.

Such a solution to this conundrum has only been achieved after many years of experimentation by drink makers. "As the number of no/low alcohol drinks increases, manufacturers have had to be more innovative and ensure that their drink offers something new and distinctive. Today's no/low drinks are seen as 'adult' drinks and a credible alternative to alcohol, rather than a soft drink," Andrew says. "There's now a greater variety of tastes and options available, so no matter what someone's preference, they're sure to be able to find a no/low drink to suit their taste and also importantly, the occasion." Indeed, for a category that only a few years ago was restricted to a handful of brands of low-alcohol beer, it is now buzzing with innovative alternatives to beer, wine, spirits and liqueurs. "Consumers are increasingly discerning about all aspects of their no/low drinks choices – they have expectations as to the use of natural ingredients, ethical production and sustainability, as well as health benefits," Andrew explains. "They are looking for a unique drink experience that doesn't feel like a compromise and can even be a talking point. Taste and flavour always has to be the priority though."

Alternatives to alcohol

While it's true that many consumers are keen to move frictionlessly between alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions of their favourite tipples – an alcohol-free botanical spirit for the gin and tonic fans, a low-alcohol beer for the craft beer lovers – there is another segment of the population that is keen to explore beverages that push the crucial health element even further.

Laurie Freeman founded his drinks business Zingi Bear after falling for the switchel, an all-natural apple cider vinegar and ginger beverage once drunk by farmers as a refreshing elixir to stay hydrated in the field. Also inspired by the digestive health benefits of apple cider vinegar is Mollie Obileye, who created Jitterbug apple cider vinegar seltzers after falling ill and looking for drinks to support a healthier lifestyle. The ever-trendy drink kombucha is also said to aid in digestion, wellness and immunity, and brands like Good Earth are jumping on the fast-growing £16m market to offer customers a healthier alternative to alcohol.

But what elevates a brand from an ordinary soft drink to a stand-in for a cocktail? Quality of ingredients, Laurie says. "Our food scene is one of the best in the world, likewise with our craft beer – people are happy to pay a little bit extra for better; however soft drinks have been left in the dust. Why not make a soft drink that stands up to the quality of the food on our plates? I guess that's why we've been a hit with some of the UK's top chefs and restaurants. We've even been on a Michelin Star tasting menu replacing a wine – how mad is that?"

Pev Manners, managing director of premium drinks brand Belvoir

STOCKING THE RIGHT MIX

For retailers, the current low and no alcohol market appears as a patchwork of possibility – but also a minefield of potential misses. What's a shop to stock to provide for all types of drinkers?

ANDREW STACEY
CO-FOUNDER,
HERBARIUM DRINKS

"It's important that retailers understand the subtle differences between their no/low alcohol products. Drinks can still have 0.5% ABV to classify as non-alcoholic, whereas alcohol-free is 0% ABV. For some customers this may not matter too much, but for others having a truly alcohol-free 0% drink is essential.

"It goes without saying that every customer will have different priorities and taste preferences, but with some specific product knowledge the fine food retailer can ensure that their customer has the best opportunity of getting the most enjoyment from their no/low alcohol drink experience."

MARK LIVINGS
FOUNDER, LYRE'S

"Retailers are over-indexing botanicals – gin, and gin-style products – and their shelves are not representative of how people are drinking the category. Gin consumption is 30% of the traditional spirits category in the UK. For the most part, there's 70% of the market left unaddressed by retailers because they're not stocking the bitters, liqueurs, vermouths or brown spirits to the ratios that people are looking for them.

"And the second big problem is if it's all gin, then there's none of that premium experience. You are pretty limited in terms of how you elevate that experience with either in-home mixology or how the trade can do it once it starts to reopen. We need a broad palette of colors to paint with."

Farm agrees that telling the stories behind your ingredients is key to catering to today's discerning, health-conscious consumers. "At Belvoir we are very proud of our carefully selected, simple ingredients with no artificial additives that allow the natural flavours to shine through, while being completely transparent with ingredients and labelling. Our hero line is Elderflower, but sparkling Ginger Beer, Lime & Soda, Raspberry Lemonade and new sparkling Ginger & Lime and sparkling Strawberry & Lime are also very popular."

Belvoir's drinks are increasingly seen as mocktail material. "There's a real movement for 'virgin' drinks and mocktails that still deliver great taste, and this has gathered pace during lockdown, with the nation's drinking habits and alcohol consumption put under the spotlight," Pev says. Belvoir's new launches reflect this no and low alcohol trend, he adds, "with naturally tasty drinks that can be enjoyed in a favourite tipple but, more importantly, as a delicious alcohol substitute.

"During lockdown, all 11 of our cordial flavours enjoyed good growth as consumers looked to hit their daily hydration targets without feeling like it was a chore, and we're now the UK's fastest-growing premium cordial brand."

For Laurie, appealing to consumers' tastes today comes down to one factor. "The world is full of different people wanting different things, however I feel more than ever that collectively we are all looking for better." Better ingredients, better for the environment, better tasting and better for you. By meeting this set of criteria, the fine food sector can ensure that every category of drinker is catered for.

FUNCTION AND FLAVOUR



Mark Wong, founder of Impossibrew Co, explains how functional ingredients can boost the no and low alcohol sector

"A good way to think about this is to recall what it was like having your first sip of alcohol. You were probably quite excited to try this drink you see all the adults having, but when you actually try it you must have been disappointed.

"That's because we never drank for flavour alone, but for the function that alcohol provides. The latter is what we are trying to capture here at Impossibrew Co. With a great team and some really talented brewers, not only did we make a great tasting low-alcohol beer, but it was also brewed with functional plants that are known for relaxation and anxiety relief.

"Functional ingredients are plants or compounds that are known for their positive mental effects. There's a whole world of functional plants out there with different properties and many are using them everyday in health supplements for different purposes.

"One day, while looking into my culture, I found an ancient text written by a Japanese monk, Eisai, in 1211 AD, The Kissa Yojoki. It was the first book that detailed with instructions how to use plants for their functional and medicinal effects – especially for relaxation, stress and anxiety-relief. Working with a biosciences professor at Durham University, we modernised Eisai's discovery and made it available for moderating drinkers who are looking for an alcohol alternative that didn't just stop at imitating flavour."

STOCK CHECK



PENTIRE ADRIFT
A botanical non-alcoholic spirit made from unique plants native to the North Cornwall coastline.
pentiredrinks.com



ZINGI BEAR GINGER SWITCHEL
A sparkling, crisp thirst-quencher. An adventurous non-alcoholic treat on its own or as an addition to spirits.
zingibear.com



LYRE'S DARK CANE NON-ALCOHOLIC SPIRIT
A full-flavoured non-alcoholic spirit with the essence of dark rum. Notes of caramel, fudge, fig, and toasted nuts with a maple and vanilla finish.
lyres.co.uk



SIGNATURE BREW LO-FI ALCOHOL-FREE PALE ALE
A hazy, non-alcoholic beer containing nothing but the highest quality simcoe hops for big pine aromas and tropical fruit flavours.
signaturebrew.co.uk



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FARM RETAIL ASSOCIATION



ROB TATE
APPETITE ME



THE RURAL POUND

With countryside-based businesses the backbone of the food and drink industry, it's time to shine the spotlight on the value of rural land

Rural businesses are integral to the food and drink industry – you'd be hard-pressed to find an organic meat farmer or producer of farm-to-fork fine cheese in the big smokes – but until now their value has been hidden behind the scenes. As shoppers reconnect with their local retailers and food creators, and the landscapes beyond city walls become ever more desirable (according to recent research, city-bound residents are flocking to the suburbs as a result of the pandemic), the team behind *Speciality Food* decided that the time has come to discover the true value of the rural industry.

Unsurprisingly, its tangible value is not to be sniffed at. According to Defra, overall output in predominantly rural areas is worth £261 billion, contributing around 16% of England's economy in 2018, and since then its full value has come to be recognised by all – an update which our sector would be smart to take advantage of. "The pandemic has changed the public's relationship with the countryside and connection to the rural landscape. And that's an opportunity for artisan food and drink businesses to build on," says Catherine Linch, founder and MD of Pinstone. This new opportunity is ripe to be exploited by food and drink businesses, she says. "With strong marketing, brands can evoke an emotional response and satisfy the growing public appetite for produce that's unique and that has a draw of the idyllic British countryside."

The evolving landscape

According to the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), agricultural land accounts for 73% of the land area of the UK – a total of 17.5 million hectares – with the majority of this used for food production in some form. In other words, the food industry and rural Britain go hand in hand.

As time goes on, the standards of British food produced in rural areas is improving as the consumer demand for transparency and provable quality takes hold. Thankfully, government departments and industry bodies see the value of boosted standards too, and to an extent are willing to put their money where their mouths are. "The growing recognition of the high standards that our farmers and producers adhere to continues to gather momentum – it's a real success story that deserves to be championed," says Pinstone's Catherine, while Defra told *Speciality Food* that their future agriculture policy has been designed to help farmers provide a healthy supply of produce made to high environmental and animal welfare standards. The department's National Food Strategy has been launched following its first major review in nearly 75 years – telling

> "The pandemic has changed the public's relationship with the countryside and connection to the rural landscape. And that's an opportunity for artisan food and drink businesses to build on"

CASE STUDY: RHUG ESTATE



Speciality Food spoke with Lord Newborough, owner of Rhug Estate in Denbighshire, Wales, about the importance of its rural location

HOW IMPORTANT IS RHUG'S RURAL LOCATION TO THE BUSINESS?

Rhug Estate's location is on the busy A5 (known as the golden two miles) which is vital to the success of the farm shop, café, takeaway and drive thru. When I started the business, I recognised the potential of our location. We are on a main route to Snowdonia and the Llyn Peninsula, and there are not many places to have a pit stop along this road. The average traffic flow is about 8,500 cars a day. I started with a burger van, then I added another van that sold our meat from the farm and it's progressed from there. By 2011 we had outgrown our temporary structures which were not coping with the 3,000 visitors a weekend and we built the farm shop, café, takeaway retail outlet you see today.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES HAS ITS RURAL STATUS PROVIDED?

Ultimately every aspect of the business stems from our rural organic farm. Our business story is all about the animals we rear and the ingredients we grow on our organic farm in north Wales. The high quality



of our award winning meat, which is produced in north Wales, has given us opportunities to work with top-class chefs around the world.

ARE THERE ANY MORE RURAL LOCATION-SPECIFIC PLANS IN THE PIPELINE? IS THE SKY THE LIMIT?

I'm always looking at what opportunities can be next. We have recruited a new member of staff who is dedicated to the task of looking at our carbon footprint. The purpose of this role is to enable us to measure our carbon and ultimately to trade our carbon values. We launched a luxury skincare collection Wild Beauty last summer, and we are now looking at what new products we can add to the range, using ingredients grown or found growing wild on the farm. With the news that lockdown restrictions may be coming to an end, we're looking at how best to re-open our café if we're allowed to have visitors back in. The absence of tourism has had a crippling effect on the business and has resulted in many staff being laid off on furlough.

DOES THIS AFFECT RHUG'S ROLE WITHIN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY?

We are one of the biggest employers in this area as it is so rural, so major setbacks like the pandemic have serious effects on the prospects for the future which affects any expansion plans and the creation of more employment.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH OTHER RURAL BUSINESSES?

In our farm shop we stock over 3,000 products. Many of these items are produced by rural artisan producers in Wales. As more customers shop online now we have also created collaboration boxes which include our organic meat and other products, such as Welsh cheeses, chutneys, gravy, beer, etc to complement it.

HOW VALUABLE IS THE RURAL ECONOMY TO THE FOOD AND DRINK MARKET?

Extremely valuable. Rural Wales has international recognition for producing high quality lamb and the Welsh Lamb brand is very important for the rural wellbeing of Wales. Wales is full of small, high-quality artisan producers of food, like chocolate, yogurt, cheese, salt, beer, whisky and many others. The support and assistance from the Welsh government in building the brand and helping smaller producers to reach out to markets in the UK and abroad is vital if the economy is to prosper. Quality is key to this. It is easy to destroy a brand by neglect, so artisan, organic, sustainable, environmentally sensitive, ethical, bespoke and award winning are all important ingredients to a successful future for Wales.



COMMENTATORS



MINETTE BATTERS
NFU



MIKE CHERRY
FSB



LORD NEWBOROUGH
RHUG ESTATE



KEVIN STOKES
FARNDON FIELDS

in itself – and it told us that it is "crucial" that the UK's food system is equipped for the challenges of the future.

Says Susan Twining, chief land use policy adviser at Country Land and Business Association (CLA), "The changes in agricultural policy, in particular the removal of direct payments over the next seven years in England, will have a profound impact on farming and food production." She advises that only 25% of farming enterprises are currently profitable without these payments, with beef and sheep, and cereal farming, the most at risk." It's not only government policy and industry powers affecting the livelihoods of rural-based businesses; shoppers shape the future of the sector too. Add to that [the evolution of government policy], the changes in consumer patterns, with reductions in meat consumption and increase in plant-based diets, there will be changes in farming and food production.

> "With the increase in demand – there will also be an increase in job opportunities in the rural sector"

The future of rural food production

In an era of dramatic societal and systematic change, it's only natural that the way the UK farms its land will evolve too. Susan believes that technology holds the key to the future of British farming. "Food production will still be a key output from rural land in the UK, although both what is produced and how it is produced will change," she begins. "There will be changes in farm structure and probably in who is farming the land, with a new generation of farmers who are more tech savvy and consumer conscious, and willing to adapt quickly to meet future demands."

In terms of the tech required to power this evolution, she notes that





"Rural Britain has a bright future ahead"



MINETTE BATTERS
PRESIDENT OF NFU

Rural Britain is a huge part of our national heritage and culture. Farmers are a key part of this, delivering quality, affordable, sustainable food for all and forming the backbone of the UK's £120 billion food and drink sector and providing jobs for around 4 million people.

But just like the rest of the country, rural Britain has had a tough year. The pandemic closed the foodservice sector overnight, leaving many farmers without a market and facing continued disruption as it reopened and closed again. Panic buying put the supply chain under pressure as shoppers experienced empty supermarket shelves.

However, these issues shone a light on food security and people have come to value home-grown food much more. A recent survey showed that public support for British farming has reached an all-time high and we're consistently hearing that more people are buying locally from butchers, farm shops and direct from farmers.

Farming as an industry is incredibly resilient. It is always evolving to remain productive and profitable, and to deliver British food that embodies our moral values. In times of difficulty we pull together, adapt, innovate and deliver for the nation's needs.

And there is so much more we have to offer, whether it's providing climate-friendly food for all, delivering green economic growth, creating jobs, increasing exports or improving the wellbeing of a nation in recovery.

To truly maximise our potential we need to level up urban and rural areas. If our government can enable equal opportunities for all businesses, regardless of where they are based, then rural Britain has a bright future ahead.



> We are one of the biggest employers in this area as it is so rural, so major setbacks like the pandemic have serious effects on the prospects for the future

CASE STUDY: FARNDON FIELDS





Kevin Stokes, founder of Farndon Fields, tells *Speciality Food* what the business's 'in-between' location brings to the table

We are located on the edge of Market Harborough, so not completely rural or isolated. This has helped us have the best of both worlds; we have our farm and farmland nearby but we also have customers nearby too. We are a mixture of countryside and convenience.

Customers can easily walk to us from nearby houses and villages. We also are a great spot to stop on your daily exercise walk or bike ride. We offer takeaway food and drinks for passing trade and shoppers to enjoy on their way home.

During the pandemic, the footfall in the farm shop has been steady and well managed with social distancing, sanitising and limiting customer numbers at peak times. This has created a more enjoyable shopping experience and we have seen an increase in new customers visiting us for the first time.

The future is bright as more people appreciate experiences and are enjoying the great British countryside. We are in the prime spot to take advantage of increased domestic tourism and day trippers.

> The future is bright as more people appreciate experiences and are enjoying the great British countryside

digital technology will be the key tool to drive the change, "in particular the use of digital technology for more precision farming, data from drones and satellites to support farm management decisions in smart farming platforms, and use of robotic and automation for many tasks." Scientists pushing biological advancement forward will play a vital role, too – although the move away from traditional farming practices might not prove to be popular with all. "Advances in plant and livestock breeding could also have a positive impact on farming and the environment with new varieties that are more resistant to pests and diseases reducing the needs for chemicals. But new technological developments could also challenge traditional production if, for example, lab-grown meat takes off."

The British public are more than ready to support positive development in the food and drink produced by UK farmers. "Increasingly we are seeing consumers placing greater value on food integrity, higher welfare standards and the impact their purchases are having on the environment, and as a result we've seen sales of organic food and drink grow by over 12% last year," says Roger Kerr, chief executive of Organic Farmers & Growers. Farmers have been proactively taking advantage of this. "OF&G recorded an 85% increase in enquiries about the environmental schemes we certify including organic. Producers and growers are recognising there is a significant market opportunity. If these trends continue the rural economy and the environment will undoubtedly benefit."

Rural retail

Diversification is the name of the game when it comes to taking advantage of increased consumer interest. "Many farm businesses are capitalising on consumer's growing interest in UK grown food and products," says Roger, continuing, "the farming community has

"Local produce is key"



MIKE CHERRY
NATIONAL CHAIRMAN, FEDERATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES

Before Covid-19 hit, the UK's food and drink sector had a turnover of around £30 billion. Pubs, restaurants and cafés are a bedrock of the economy, providing jobs and attracting tourists from all over. Local produce is key – with examples ranging from local chocolatiers to microbreweries.

Struggling under the weight of lockdowns, our resilient small business community has had no choice but to rapidly and radically transform business models. Across the UK, we saw 16 percent of small businesses increase their online presence or develop a new one, including delivering their offering online. Meanwhile, 10 percent diversified into producing new services during the lockdown.

But while rural food and drinks businesses contribute to the rich landscape of a community, challenges include parking, rents, the closures of bank branches, business rates, potholes and out-of-town competition. A lack of public transport can particularly impact the hospitality sector, too.

However, despite the challenges, there are a wealth of opportunities available to small firms. Sustainable food and farming could revive rural areas, while a hybrid working model may encourage more people to move out of cities.

The pandemic has encouraged people to stay at home and shop local and climate change may further fuel this trend, with more people looking for sustainable, local produce.

But our rural food and drink businesses took a battering during the lockdowns, and this time last year, the future looked bleak to them. But now there's a chink of light at the end of a very long tunnel, with news of grants offering firms some much-needed reassurance ahead of England's reopening in June.

> I'm always struck by the commitment and energy that exists within businesses with strong rural alliances

recognised the commercial benefits of diversification, be that producing cheese, making English wine, milling flour, opening a farm shop or introducing veg and meat box deliveries." This creative passion and innovation has long been present at the grass roots of the food and drink industry. "I'm always struck by the commitment and energy that exists within businesses with strong rural alliances," says Catherine. "There is constant innovation particularly in how businesses market themselves and it has become much more sophisticated. Covid has really impacted this, as we all sought to overcome this particular challenge."

Speciality Food has been full of independent retailers' successful innovation stories for years, but the Covid-19 pandemic – with its new demands on resources and business models – has brought 'pivots' front and centre. "The innovation and swift diversification demonstrated by independent retailers over the past year has been incredible," says Jenny Rose, manager of the Farm Retail Association. "Many farm retailers, from farm shops to farmers markets, have acted quickly and pragmatically in order to adapt to their customer's wishes. From drive through markets to low-contact vending solutions, the benefits of being an indie retailer have shone in recent times, with businesses able to act swiftly and switch up their offering to move with the times – an absolute necessity during the many changes the pandemic has thrown at us."

"This last year has been hard on everyone. However, the local farm shop has seen a huge increase in demand and, subsequently, sales due to customers wanting to shop locally and support small businesses while keeping to current government guidelines," Rob Tate, managing director of Appetite Me, a rural diversification company based in Suffolk, told *Speciality Food*,. "Therefore, the demand for locally sourced, fresh food has never been higher and the trend looks set to continue long after the pandemic is under control. As a result, we have never been busier! We have been inundated with calls from estate owners wanting to develop and build new farm shops as well as current, established shops needing our help to expand their business." Of course Covid-19 isn't the only force shaping the industry in 2021. "Brexit, for people who continue and support local farmers and businesses is a great thing," he continues. "We only see this trend rising as customers want fresh, quality produce from locally sourced suppliers. With the increase in demand – there will also be an increase in job opportunities in the rural sector."

Within an ever-changing Britain, the value of our rural land, businesses and people unfailingly rings through.

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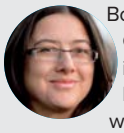
maple FROM CANADA



DELIFONSECA

Since its 2006 launch, Delifonseca has become a fine food retail icon. Here's the story behind its success

CANDICE FONSECA: OWNER OF DELIFONSECA



Born in Hong Kong, Candice grew up in Bury, Greater Manchester. Food was central to her family, and they were lucky enough to have access to Bury's historic 'traditional food market'. Candice's career began in the TV and film industry and as a consequence she lived and worked in a range of cities across the UK. It was during her travels that she realised that her way of shopping was vastly different to most people's buying habits. After moving to Liverpool and noticing a gap in the market, the idea of opening a deli was sparked and Delifonseca was established. Following the success of the original Stanley Street venue, Delifonseca Dockside opened in 2010 situated in Brunswick Quay a mile south of the city centre.

WHAT SETS DELIFONSECA APART FROM OTHER DELIS?

"An award-winning restaurant and food hall, Delifonseca is a decade old establishment of Liverpool's vibrant independent food and drink scene," says owner Candice.

"It's centred around all things foodie, renowned for an array of local produce and unusual titbits from speciality cheeses, coffee, wines and spirits, chocolate and much more. Whether customers are coming in for a treat or their weekly shop, they will find everything they need under one roof.

"With the addition of our in-house butchers' concession, Edge & Son, the food hall offers an all-round service complemented perfectly by the expertise of the entire team. The shopping experience is unlike anything available at a supermarket or large retailer, with tried and tested quality products at an accessible price point, meaning that customers can enjoy a little bit of luxury on a regular basis."

MEET THE TEAM

The team behind Delifonseca are like a family, with many of them having been with the venue for years. "Lavinia Cooke has been our Delifonseca Dockside GM since 2010, starting as a part-time Saturday girl in 2006," says Candice. "Clare Jones is our Delifonseca Food Hall manager and has been since July 2020, while Tom Ford is our Delifonseca Dockside restaurant manager. Starting as a hamper delivery elf in December 2007, he quickly became a full-time waiter and manager in 2010."

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED, AND HOW HAVE YOU OVERCOME THEM?

"Having been open as an essential retailer throughout the pandemic, we've had to evolve, and a number of changes have been put in place, from health and safety through to accessibility with a new and improved website for online ordering and a collection and delivery service," explains Candice. "Throughout it all, we've championed independent businesses."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DELIFONSECA?

"As our regional and national following has increased, we've had to reinvent ourselves and look at new services to remain one step ahead of the game. This has involved reviewing the stock that we sell to fall in line with latest trends, reimagining the shopping experience with the layout of the food hall, investing into staff and developing the team and expanding services beyond just the shop itself. All of these things require financial investment and as an independent business, these decisions are never without risk. Fortunately, they have paid off.

"Having come out of the pandemic with a new outlook, we are now looking ahead to further expansion in 2021."

CANDICE'S PROUDEST MOMENTS AT DELIFONSECA

- In 2019, Delifonseca underwent its biggest change to date with a six-figure sum extension to provide additional restaurant seating and kitchen space.
- That expansion also gave us a much bigger kitchen so that we could build up our outside catering division which previously operated out of our old Stanley Street site.
- Our main market was corporate lunches and events, although we also do private parties and weddings.
- Over the years, we've picked up notable awards such as Liverpool City Region Tourism Awards' Restaurant of the Year (five times), *The Guardian* Independent Food Retailer of the Year, runner-up in the Visit England 'Taste of England', and Farm Shop & Deli's Retailer of the Year.
- We've managed to remain open throughout the pandemic and help spread some community spirit among customers old and new, bringing a little bit of positivity in the most difficult of times.

> "We've managed to remain open throughout the pandemic and help spread some community spirit among customers old and new"

DELIFONSECA THROUGH THE YEARS

2006 Candice established her deli and restaurant, the original Delifonseca's, in the heart of Liverpool city centre.

2010 After a great reception, the brand opened its second restaurant with an on-site food hall. Delifonseca Dockside was born and the Stanley Street site was refurbished – the deli was removed, a bar added and it was renamed Fonseca's to avoid confusion.

2011 The outside catering arm of the business was actively expanded following requests from customers.

2019 Delifonseca underwent an impressive extension, doubling the seated capacity in the restaurant with brand new state-of-the-art kitchen facilities.

2020 A new website and online ordering system was launched, allowing customers to make the most of Delifonseca's delivery and local collection services.

2021 The other half of the new restaurant extension is being fitted out. This is necessary as the social distancing requirements had reduced the restaurant capacity to pre-lockdown levels.



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1 WILLY'S ACV APPLE CIDER VINEGAR

Willy's Apple Cider Vinegar is an incredibly versatile pantry product. Raw, unpasteurised, and naturally fermented using 'the mother', it is produced using apples from a 300-year old orchard. Used as a health tonic or a cooking ingredient, Willy's ACV adds a sophisticated depth of flavour to just about any dish! A kitchen cupboard essential for every home.
willysacv.com

2 BALLANCOURT PÂTÉS

Ballancourt Fine Foods specialises in a wide range of quality French Foods. All products can be provided with bespoke labelling at no extra charge and have the added benefit of long shelf life. The extensive range of ambient pâtés, terrines and rillettes is second to none with a variety of jar sizes to suit all needs.
ballancourt.co.uk

3 HAWKSHEAD RELISH SAVOURY SAUCES

Hawkshead Relish are a small, family run artisan producer based in the heart of the Lake District. A selection of savoury sauces all handmade in traditional open pans. Perfect for cooking with, using as a marinade, or simply as a dip! The sauces are suitable for vegetarians, and free from nuts and gluten.
hawksheadrelish.com

4 GAROFALO PREMIUM ITALIAN PASTA

The strength of Garofalo is the ability of preserving the artisan knowledge on an industrial scale. Under the Garofalo brand umbrella there is traditional wheat, organic wheat, organic whole wheat and gluten-free pasta. All made with only the best ingredients, all high in protein and all vegan.
pastagarofalo.it/uk_en/



5 BAY'S KITCHEN
VEGAN SAUCES

Bay's Kitchen produces low FODMAP, gluten and dairy-free, great-tasting foods. The range now includes sauces, concentrated stocks, soups and gravies. Their award-winning vegan stir-in sauces – including best sellers Tomato & Basil, Mild Korma, and Katsu Curry – allow you to create a delicious and quick meal for the whole family to enjoy.

bayskitchen.com

6 CARR'S FLOUR
FLOUR SELECTON

Carr's flours are ideal for artisan and trade bakers right through to home cooks. Carr's stock a huge selection of different flours, from the essential plain and self-raising through to specialist bread flours. Carr's also blend flour and yeast together to create bread mixes for breadmaking in the home. Simple to use and convenient they create the perfect bake.

carrsflour.co.uk

7 FARMHOUSE BISCUITS
INDULGENT LUXURY RANGE

The Indulgent Luxury range has been developed to tempt all tastebuds, and offers a range of indulgent flavours including three chocolate enrobed lines for added luxury: Milk Chocolate Millionaires, Milk Chocolate Coated Lemon & Orange Whirls, and Dark Coated and Drizzled Salted Praline Biscuits.

farmhouse-biscuits.co.uk

8 TAYLORS OF HARROGATE
YORKSHIRE GOLD

Thanks to spending more time at home drinking tea, consumers have been expanding their repertoire into the likes of Yorkshire Gold, Yorkshire Tea's finest blend. Teas are chosen from their three favourite origins – Assam, Kenya and Rwanda – bought from the top ten tea gardens in the world to make a rich, smooth and incredibly satisfying brew.

yorkshiretea.co.uk

HOW TO PROFIT FROM FOOD BOXES

The food box craze is sweeping across the UK. By making the most of their USP, independents can make this trend their own

COMMENTATORS



ROB HAWARD
RIVERFORD ORGANIC FARMERS



JULIAN WILKINSON
YUMMY



ANNA ELLIOT
EVERSFIELD ORGANIC



KATE RATHBONE
BOOTHS



BEN HOLLINS
FORDHALL ORGANIC FARM



DAN TWISELTON
MY LOCAL FARM BOX

The proposition of the food box is simple: fresh food delivered straight to your door. With an array of possibilities available – veg, meat, meal kits and all sorts of local produce – this simple concept has come into its own during the pandemic.

Riverford Organic Farmers, one of the brands driving this trend, was already experiencing strong growth pre-Covid, due to consumers' desire for more plant-based eating and organic options. Then the pandemic hit, and the surge in demand was so great that the business was forced to reduce its range back to only veg boxes and halt new sign-ups to meet its existing customers' needs.

"Even with these measures in place, our sales increased by more than 40% compared to the prior year," Riverford managing director Rob Haward tells *Speciality Food*. "The huge uplift in sales since the pandemic took hold has been driven by people seeing organic veg boxes as a solution both to home delivery of food, as well as looking to eat more healthy, fresh vegetables."

Julian Wilkinson, managing director of Yummy, a business that allows customers to build their own food boxes from local suppliers, agrees. "Supermarket delivery slots were either difficult to book or unavailable. There's still a sort of dystopian feel to shopping in person even now; queueing to get in, wearing masks and using hand sanitisers. Delivery to your door feels safer and more convenient."

Plus, food boxes can offer a simpler way to shop. "Pre-selected food boxes, like our meat, fish, fruit and vegetable boxes, are popular due to their ease of purchase – you don't have to spend a lot of time scrolling through a website to find what you want," Anna Elliot, sales and marketing director of Eversfield Organic, which has been selling food boxes for nearly two decades, tells *Speciality Food*.

Find your USP

As Riverford's spike in sales shows, there is money to be made in food boxes. And while there are plenty of big players in the space, independents are beginning to challenge the status quo with a more bespoke offering, prioritising greater flexibility and higher-quality food.

Booths recently joined the meal kit space with its Let's Cook recipe boxes, designed for customers who are looking to learn new skills in the kitchen. Each kit is made for two and includes fresh ingredients in made-to-measure sizes, as well as a recipe card with simple, step-by-step instructions.

Kate Rathbone, brand development manager at Booths, says the store's ability to tailor its menu to suit local tastes by using unique and local ingredients as well as regional flavours makes it stand out against the sea of competition. "We've been able to work with our customers directly on what recipes they would like to cook and we're very excited to bring a range of seasonal recipes throughout the year."

Ben Hollins of Fordhall Organic Farm, which runs a meat box scheme, agrees that identifying your unique selling point is key. "Focus in on that, because a lot of people go out and advertise on Facebook and on Google, and you can waste a lot of money with online advertising if it's not very, very focused," he warns. "Our key point of difference is that our cattle and sheep are pasture-fed. We get a lot of customers all over the country looking for us specifically for those reasons," Ben says.



Eversfield, meanwhile, caters to its conscious customers by telling the story of their products from field to fork. "It's important for capturing an audience," Anna says. "Organic certified status, PFLA certification, and awards are also things small businesses need to shout about to gain a wider consumer base."

Riverford has taken this another step forward with its recent launch of home compostable packaging. "We know that plastic is one of the top concerns of our customers. We've already removed as much packaging from our fruit and veg as possible (in 2020, our veg boxes used 82% less plastic than supermarket organic veg)," says Rob.

"An impressive 82.5% of our customers compost their food or garden waste (based on a survey of 10,240 current Riverford customers – July 2018). This, combined with our well-honed system of collecting packaging to bring back to the farm for reuse, composting or recycling, convinced us that home compostable packaging is the right solution for us."

> "The huge uplift in sales since the pandemic took hold has been driven by people seeing organic veg boxes as a solution both to home delivery of food, as well as looking to eat more healthy, fresh vegetables"





Indie retailers join forces

Creating and managing a food box scheme is resource-intensive, but retailers that want to get involved have another option: coming together with local producers to join a new wave of local food box schemes.

One of the start-ups in this space is Yummy. The Lincolnshire-based service was created to support local butchers, bakers, greengrocers and fishmongers. Rather than having a set menu of ingredients or a single category of products, customers can create their own boxes on the platform, giving them more choice than via a typical food box scheme. "Instead of providing food from just one supplier or food producer, we can act as a hub – a partner – for many local independent businesses and national suppliers of speciality food," Julian says.

"That means instead of selling a single product category and supporting a single farm or business we can provide fresh produce and quality food whilst supporting many local businesses. We can also provide the consumer with the convenience of a single doorstep delivery."

Dan Twiselton, CEO of My Local Farm Box, has a similar aim with his business, launching in May. "The idea came about last year. I was eating some strawberries, and people were moaning about them not being very sweet. Then somebody looked at the packet and they were from Spain – and I thought why on earth are people eating strawberries from Spain in the middle of summer?"

My Local Farm Box will rely on local foodie experts to source, pack and deliver boxes of local British produce each week. "The local element is really there because you've got someone on the ground in each area who is hell bent on finding you the best local produce they can offer," Dan says.

So far, he has seen considerable interest in the concept. "There seems to be a real buzz about it. We're getting a lot of traction. I'm getting people contacting us every week asking if we would be interested in stocking their produce." Marketplaces like these could be a boon to independents that don't have the resources to create their own food box scheme.

A post-Covid future

As sales of food boxes have been increasing due to Covid-19, it's important to consider what their future will be after the virus fades from society. Riverford's Rob says this year's growth has predominantly been driven by existing customers buying more frequently – something he expects to see fall somewhat after lockdown pressures ease. "I then expect the health, ethics and environment drivers that were strong before the pandemic to return even stronger and fuel future growth," he adds.

> "There's still a sort of dystopian feel to shopping in person even now; queueing to get in, wearing masks and using hand sanitisers. Delivery to your door feels safer and more convenient"

With Eversfield's customer numbers increasing, Anna also believes that food boxes have a bright future. "There is so much variety within such boxes as we change our box content every one to four weeks – our fruit and veg boxes are switched up on a weekly basis and our meat boxes monthly. We want customers to always get something new to avoid repetitive meals and food boredom!"

Julian is also positive about the future of food boxes. "It's a change in behaviour that's been boosted by lockdown. Now that the consumer has been gently nudged towards online shopping – some trying it for the first time – and have experienced the convenience for themselves, this change in the way we choose and buy food will remain popular even when we find ourselves free to venture out and about." For retailers looking to capture a part of the food box market, providing their customers with both convenience and quality, along with your USP, is a recipe for success.



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RETAIL INSIGHT: TIPS FOR SELLING FOOD BOXES



Ben Hollins of Fordhall Organic Farm sells set meat boxes and allows customers to choose their own products for boxes via an online shop

We launched our online shop in 2006. It's been ticking along with busy stages and not-so-busy stages – we tended to focus it on Christmas. When Covid happened last year, at one point, we were doing five times our normal orders on the online shop. That has slackened off now, but we're still running on about double what we were doing previously. It's been a good tool because there's been a lot more interest recently in online shopping and local food.

The biggest challenge for us was staffing, because all of a sudden the farm shop was selling massive amounts more than we'd ever done before. Another challenge was managing to mature the meat and maintain standards. We were lucky we already had a system in place for boxing and processing orders. I know a lot of other shops struggled with putting systems in place to take orders, to process them, to get the payments, and to arrange the deliveries.

We learned not to try to offer too much. When lockdown first happened, we tried to do local deliveries every day and quickly realised that even though there was demand for it, it was an absolute nightmare for the staff and the team to manage. Now we just do one day a week. It makes that one day a bit busier, but it's very manageable.

What makes this really work for us is the software, and using the features within it. We use software called FoodCommerce, which has basically been developed purely with farm shops and butchers in mind, down to little features like you can select a lead time for each product. So if somebody places an order for a box that has a sirloin steak in it, and you know sirloin steak takes you two days to prepare, you can put a two day lead time on that product.

Cheese Talk

The joy of cheese grading:

"Seize the opportunity; it'll amply repay your time"



JUSTIN TUNSTALL
CHEESE CONSULTANT

Unsurprisingly, last year's diary became a mess. At first there were postponements, then ultimately cancellations of the events and gatherings that have become hardy annuals in my 'deli life'. A normal year sees me spending up to 20 days participating in food competitions, as organiser, presenter or as a judge. Last year? Two days, I think.

Last summer I was one of a number of judges who received couriered chill boxes of cheese to evaluate for a competition. Remaining within government guidelines, I was able to assemble a group of judges who enjoyed a summer's day on our garden furniture conjuring up comments on the attributes of 30 or so cheeses. A lockdown memory to treasure.

I got involved in competition judging as a benefit of joining the Guild of Fine Food trade organisation and also through winning the retailer class of the British Cheese Awards. As a newcomer to the deli business, I had a thirst for knowledge – and a huge case of imposter syndrome as I donned a judge's white coat for the first time. I was encouraged to approach the role with two things in mind: to trust my own sense of taste, and to listen and learn.

I've been fortunate to judge alongside specialist cheesemakers, buyers for formidable retail chains, chefs and food writers, as well as deli owners like me. Hearing other people explain why they like or dislike a product was really helpful, and I've used a lot of those insights in my descriptions of the cheeses that I sold. My palate developed; I learned to spot the nuances between the different makers of the famous Continental classics as well as the British Territorials. I was always encouraged to proffer my own opinion, and I learned not to apologise when I believed that Emperor's new clothes were on display.

Along the way I built a network of colleagues and contacts, of great use when I needed information or advice. I sampled more cheeses than I would normally have been able. I found some that became real winners in my shop, even though they may not have won a medal in the competition. I observed the development of a cheese, from an inconsistent 'newcomer' to becoming an assured classic, as the cheesemaker's skill and recipe matured – perhaps on the basis of feedback received from a competition.

I get bound up in the excitement of the results of competitions – eager to discover this year's Supreme Champion and the winners in each class, particularly if they come from my home area in the South West. I would always promote medal winners in the shop, with point-of-sale stickers, results boards and verbal promotion. I believe that judging helped grow my stock as a reliable and informed cheesemonger, as shoppers thought my taste must be good if I was invited to judge awards.

This year, the diary is filling up nicely with 'Save The Date' entries. There are some changes – The International Cheese and Dairy Awards ("Nantwich", in short) will move to Stafford and take place in late October rather than high summer. The British Cheese Awards are now slated for early October. Challenges for this year may include social distancing for judges – although not for the innovative Virtual Cheese Awards which sprang up last year to fill the void of competitions and which may well become a staple in the calendar.

I dearly hope that cheesemakers will find money in the marketing budget to enter competitions this year, and that sponsors will continue to underwrite them. I trust that we'll be able to feel confident to mingle at such events, and above all, that none of my peers have succumbed to the virus or are suffering from a frightening symptom of long Covid, whereby 'nice' tastes 'nasty' and vice versa. That could make for very confusing debate.

As a deli owner, if you are invited to judge at a competition, seize the opportunity; it'll amply repay your time. The Academy of Cheese now runs training in Cheese Judging, which would have made me better qualified when I started out. Stay safe, have fun!

Hearing other people explain why they like or dislike a product was really helpful, and I've used a lot of those insights in my descriptions of the cheeses that I sold. My palate developed; I learned to spot the nuances between the different makers of the Continental classics as well as the British Territorials. I was always encouraged to proffer my own opinion, and I learned not to apologise when I believed that Emperor's new clothes



EMMA YOUNG
THE CHEESE EXPLORER

As a child, I had many career ambitions. I wanted to be a gardener, a vet, a perfume maker (a strange moment of confusion) and many other choice phases. Later, I became highly interested in languages and food, two career paths which I pursued in later life. My family would go on holiday to France several times a year from before I was even thought about. Also whilst I was being thought about, it turns out. At the request of my 'joker' of a father, I told my school teacher that I was "fabriqué en France". Years later I was mortified when I realised what that meant. Now I think it is completely brilliant and EXACTLY the type of thing I would do to my children. I digress.

Going to France a lot meant that I was surrounded by a lot of cheese. Thank you Francophile family. I ate cheese from a young age and there was no easing in for me, I went immediately into the realms of Roquefort and Epoisses. 'Cheese Grader' sounds like a job that I would have made up as a child. The opportunity to taste and eat lots of different styles of cheese and holding up a score like a judge at the Olympics.

I assure you that it is a real profession. This is not a drill. Cheese grading really is a job. Perhaps it was made up by a child. Perhaps it wasn't. It wasn't.

As you can expect, cheese grading is a little more complicated than this. Grading involves a lot of skill and is performed by many different people.

Grading cheese can be done by professional graders within large companies, external graders who visit dairies, buyers sourcing their cheese and cheese judges at competitions. It is a quality check and beyond as it can determine whether the cheese has any faults, whether it will be suitable for longer aging and to have a check on flavour profiles.

Awards give an assurance to the shy customer who does not want to engage in nerdy conversations about cheese for 75 hours like we do

Note here that grading and judging are not interchangeable terms. Graders have trained superpowers in tasting – some are even 'supertasters' (real term) who can detect trace amounts of bitter – and their job is to taste through batches of the same cheeses, be that in a large scale dairy where they are employed, or a freelance visit to a smaller dairy who outsource them. They are tasting predominantly for faults. Grading happens according to the dairy's schedules. Judging happens at competitions when the cheesemakers or their affiliates have entered them to try for an award.

So – do you just eat the cheese and say whether you like it or not? No, although ultimately that is a part of it in competitions, especially when the finalists are too close to decide.

Competitions such as the International Cheese Awards and Virtual Cheese Awards take judges from varying parts of the Cheese World to make sure that all entries are judged fairly and from a broad range of backgrounds including professional graders. Judging encompasses the tasting of cheeses across several different categories and styles. Competition judging panels taste and give feedback on all elements from the technical, sensorial, and even in some competitions, the general public's palate. I have judged with graders, cheesemakers, chefs, journalists, celebrity cheese lovers, distributors, mongers... the list goes on.

Cheese graders, however, are used at a couple of stages in the cheese's life (early on before it's ready for sale and then later in its aging) which make sure that the finished product is fault-free and ready to head to your counters.

There are several benefits for these. As buyers and counter staff you know that the cheese you are selling has had a seal of approval through one form of grading. When buying through your approved suppliers, this assurance means that you do not have to taste through every batch for faults as they come to you. I would still recommend tasting through every cheese that comes into your counter with a different motive of finding their flavours and to use those descriptors as strong selling techniques for your customers. The more you are excited about a cheese, the more your customers will want to join you in said excitement. You are also the important final stage between the cheese and its customer to make sure that you are matching the correct cheese to the correct person. Like a cheesy Cilla Black.

Awards and badges give an assurance to the shy customer who perhaps does not want to engage in nerdy conversations about cheese for 75 hours like we do.

Grading, an essential yet often overlooked or even unknown stage of a cheese's lifecycle is of paramount importance to make sure that all of your glorious counters are graced with beautiful, fault-free cheeses. I hope your inner child will forever capture the image of a cheese grader as a child with swinging legs far from the ground on a judging panel holding up a score paddle. Which is how cheese grading was created.*

*This is not true.

A SECRET TO SUCCESS: CHEESE HAMPERS

A popular gifting option, the cheese box offers ample opportunities for creative cheesemongers



Debbie Priestley, who runs The West Country Cheese Co with husband Nick, never planned for cheese hampers to become a major part of her offering, but after Covid-19 hit, she began looking for ways to shift the events-focused business to customers looking for selection boxes to enjoy at home or send as gifts to loved ones. "Our wedding cheese cakes and cheese and pork pie cakes were our core business until Covid hit last year," she tells *Speciality Food*. "We diversified very quickly, put a whole new deli section up online as well as a new batch of cheese selection boxes and our new 'boozy boxes' – they were almost an instant hit and now are a massive part of our business."

Getting started

The West Country Cheese Co's story goes to show just how important cheese boxes and hampers have become to many cheesemongers and delis during the pandemic. Designed to provide a thoughtfully chosen selection of artisan cheeses to suit a variety of occasions, hampers are a fantastic option for attracting new customers who arrive at your shop or website looking for something unique.

More is more when it comes to your offering. While an independent retailer can easily get by with just a few core boxes – local selections always sell well, as do boxes focused on holidays or events – they're also free to flex their creative muscles and experiment with new ideas. "I try to choose products I love and that I know work together," says Debbie. "We have a range of price points and different size gifts, so we have a good overall offering, from quirky stacked cakes to beautiful boxes tied with ribbon." When brainstorming new box and hamper ideas, put yourself in the position of your customer and consider what they will be looking for. Themed cheeseboard or ploughman selections, birthday or mother's and father's day gift boxes, Christmas classics, award-winners, thinking-of-you boxes – the options are endless. "To be honest, I don't follow any rules," Debbie says, "I just get an idea and run with it – it seems to have always worked well for us, so we continue to do that to this day."

At the start, focus on a small range and make sure you can do that well. "Don't try and do too much," Debbie warns. Once you have the processes down, you can build on your core range with trial and error by seeing which cheeses your customers are particularly drawn to.

A hamper for every occasion

The West Country Cheese Co's range of boxes, hampers and wrapped gifts provides customers with a wide array of options. From a Delicious Weekend Sharing Box, which contains cheeses and chutney as well as olives, salami and flatbreads, to ready-made evening-in selection boxes and hampers filled with local produce that are ideal for gifting.

"Our mini cheese cakes, which we stack and wrap in cellophane and tie with ribbon, are definitely one of our bestsellers," Debbie says. "I think because they are quirky and unique, something different to the normal offering." These ready-to-gift cheeses also offered a way for the business to continue selling its popular celebration cheese cakes to home-bound customers. "We like to try and stand out with different ideas," Debbie adds.

The shop's 'boozy boxes' have also proved to be a hit with customers – especially the port and Stilton box. "You can't beat the classics!" Debbie says. Once you discover your bestsellers, you can experiment with more variations on these themes.

> "Don't try and do too much. Focus on a select range and do it well, then build on that"

E-commerce solutions

Another reason that cheese boxes and hampers are selling particularly well today, when many shops have boosted their online offering, is that they're perfectly suited to e-commerce. The majority of customers are keen not to spend hours scrolling through every cheese your shop offers, but instead find a pre-selected box with perfectly suited flavours that can be delivered straight to their door.

What do cheesemongers need to know about selling boxes and hampers online? Debbie recommends focusing on strong photography as well as simple, yet descriptive blurbs. "Make your website easy to use with clear and concise information. This is something we continue to work on – it's not easy!"

Cheesemongers who are not yet offering hampers or boxes may find the logistics to be challenging at the start, but once these hurdles are overcome and a system is in place, they have the potential to become a lucrative new area of business – and one, crucially that customers will truly appreciate. As Debbie says, "It's hard work, but it's worth the lovely comments from your customers if you get it right."

> "Our mini cheese cakes, which we stack and wrap in cellophane and tie with ribbon, are definitely one of our bestsellers. I think because they are quirky and unique, something different to the normal offering"



New launch pays tribute to 'ultimate cheesemaker'

Martin Gott, the maker of St James and Crookwheel cheeses with his partner Nicola Robinson, has added a new variety to the portfolio to celebrate cheesemaking mentor Mary Holbrook.

Holbrook, the new cheese, is made with goat's milk from the couple's own herd of goats. Martin Gott described it as a "savoury seasonal goat's cheese which delivers heaps of flavour with a super creamy texture, saline notes and a fruity, earthy, mushroom tang to the rind". He told *Speciality Food*, "The richness in flavour is developed from the goats only being milked once a day, with the warm milk going straight into the cheese vat, which helps retain the intensity of flavour."

The cheese pays tribute to Mary Holbrook, the maker of Tymsboro cheese, who died in February 2019. Mary had 40 years of cheesemaking experience from her farm in Somerset and was renowned for her ability to make cheese by taste, touch and smell alone.

Martin and Nicola worked alongside Mary in Somerset, where they picked up enough knowledge to create their own fledgling business, St James, before moving back to Cumbria to start their own dairy.

"We spent two amazing years working alongside Mary; when you worked with her you saw what farming should and could be," Martin said. "She set the standard for us and there's absolutely no doubt in my mind that we wouldn't be where we are today without the knowledge she shared with us. We owe her a lot and because of that we wanted to create something that hopefully she would've been proud of. Hopefully, Holbrook will prove to be a fitting tribute to a wonderful woman who made such a difference to us and to British cheesemaking."



NEWS IN BRIEF

WYKE FARMS REPORTS RECORD-BREAKING SALES

British cheesemaker Wyke Farms posted the highest sales in the company's history as turnover soared to £107m for the year ending March 2020. The company said it had seen substantial growth in export sales both to the EU and the rest of the world, up nearly 20%. The group's diverse customer base – covering food service, retail and different geographical areas – also contributed to the rise in sales.

FIRST MILK UNVEILS £12.5M INVESTMENT

Farmer-owned dairy cooperative First Milk has announced a significant investment in its cheese and whey processing facilities, including £9m to go towards its Lake District Creamery in Cumbria and £3.4m for its Haverfordwest Creamery. Overall, a £30m investment over the last three years will boost the processing capacity of both sites up by more than 20%.



Millbrook Dairy debuts Scottish Cheddar brand 1057

A premium, extra-mature Scottish Cheddar brand has been launched by Millbrook Dairy Company. Made from Scottish milk and held to a stringent and consistent profile, the cheese is described as "deliciously Scottish" and offers a rugged, crumbly texture.

Named for the date when one of the last of the Celtic kings, King MacBeth, lost his head upon a cold stone near the Peel Lumphanan, 1057 is made from rich Scottish milk taken from dairy herds that graze on the banks of the lochs and in the glens of Scotland. 1057 Cheddar is hand-selected by Millbrook Dairy's expert cheese graders who have sourced the very best Cheddar that Scotland has to offer.

Kevin Beer, director of Millbrook Dairy Company, said there is an "increasing demand" for Scottish Cheddar. "1057 is a challenger brand that we believe will go far in the market. It is authentically Scottish in every sense, and we know from talking to our wholesale and retail partners that demand is there and looks set to grow," he said.

There is also demand overseas for Scottish Cheddar, especially in the US, so Millbrook anticipates that export will be a growing market for the brand.

"There is no compromise as to the flavour profile of 1057. It's packed with character, rich in flavour due to where it's come from and how it's made. It's a commanding Cheddar that stands out – you could say that it's 'fit for a King' which would be very apt bearing in mind its name," Kevin added. The cheese was launched under exclusivity agreements at retailers, including independents, from March.



Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses launches slices ahead of summer BBQs

Anticipating a boom in barbecues and outdoor dining this summer, Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses has launched a product perfect for the occasion. The new Blacksticks Blue Mega Burger Slices was inspired by data from AHDB that found 100 million barbecues took place between April and August last year, up 44% year-on-year – and the trend is set to continue this year as Covid-19 restrictions remain in place for the spring and into the summer.



Matthew Hall, fourth-generation owner of Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses, said, "As we come out of lockdown and socialise with friends and family again, dining in the fresh air has a whole new level of relevance and appeal.

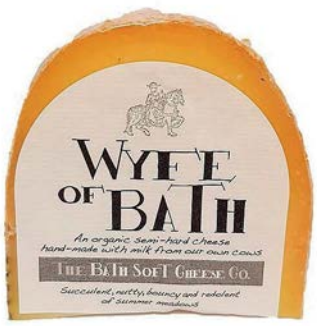
"There's a new wave of shoppers looking for something more than processed cheese – they want gourmet burgers that deliver those Instagram pictures while adding a quality cheese hit at home," he continued. In fact, Butlers cited a 76% increase in people choosing burgers, and a 142% surge in those adding cheese to their barbecue.

"So for us it was simple – combine our love of handmade, farmhouse cheese with our appetite for innovation to create something special with Blacksticks Blue," he said. The Mega Burger Slices offer a smooth, creamy texture of Blacksticks Blue with the distinctive blue bite. Cut from a whole cheese, each pack contains four rounds at 80mm in diameter.

CHEESE FACT FILE...

BATH SOFT CHEESE CO'S WYFE OF BATH

- **Country of origin:** UK
- **Milk:** Organic cow's
- **Region:** Somerset
- **Description:** Inspired by Gouda, Wyfe of Bath is a semi-hard cheese with a soft, light caramel colour
- **Tasting notes:** Succulent, nutty and creamy



CHEESE VOLUME **SALES** WERE UP **15.4%** YEAR-ON-YEAR IN **JANUARY**

SOURCE: KANTAR DATA FOR THE FOUR WEEKS ENDING 24TH JAN 2021

> "Shoppers are exploring different varieties of cheese as we are seeing a lot of growth coming from British regional cheeses as well as speciality and Continental. This is partially driven by consumers cooking more meals from scratch at home and using cheese as a main component"
>
> **AHDB'S RETAIL INSIGHT ANALYST GRACE RANDALL**

> *"It is our duty to promote small, passionate makers"*



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

As a cheesemonger of old, I have often mused about the lack of knowledge in our industry. Today I am excited to see great shops popping up throughout the UK including inspirational emporiums of cheese that use conveyor belts to deliver delicious and perfect morsels.

As we all know, thanks to Oscar Wilde, it is important to be earnest. When we sell our produce, why do we sometimes find ourselves having to fabricate? In my not too distant past I am guilty of doing just this. Don't get me wrong, I knew about the product, but may have embellished and coloured the cheese stories with a few of my own choice filters. Did it help close a sale? Yes. But the truth in all honesty is generally a heck of a lot better and doesn't bite back.

A few months before the first lockdown, I decided to spend more time on the road. The time I set aside for this was principally to meet my cheesemaking friends across the UK. What a fascinating world opened up for me and, importantly, my team.

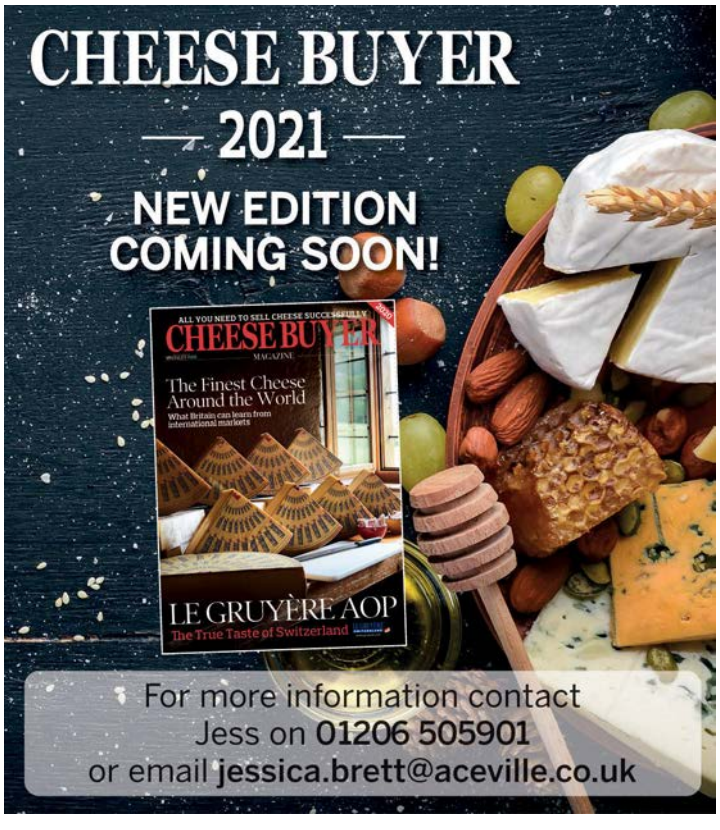
When you rock up in rural Lancashire at one of arguably the greatest producers of Lancashire cheese, Mrs Kirkham's, and your nose fills with the sweet, brothy, meaty notes of a freshly made hot pot and you hear raucous laughter from where the aroma is floating from, you know you have arrived.

On this visit to grade and buy my cheese, I was taken into the cheese cave and caught up with all of the local cheese gossip. But most importantly, I learnt more about the cheese, its background and the lovely people that make it. By taking valuable time and using it wisely, the benefits of meeting the real people face to face is priceless. My team of mongers have joined me and have come back to the shop reeling about what they have learnt. When I am covering shifts my customers can't sing my team's praises enough about how knowledgeable and passionate they are. Yes, of course there are books – great books – but why not write your own story through visiting these amazing and passionate people? You too are passionate and exceptionally important – you are the coal face of service and what you tell your audience must represent the products truthfully.

Of course we all want to be able to help increase the bottom line, and initiatives like this are a good investment. Not only are they great for increased knowledge, they are also important for staff morale. Your team and produce are your most important assets, and you only want to get the best products and performance.

Inspirational visits to good cheesemakers and producers needs to be part of what we all do in the artisan world. It is our duty to promote those small and passionate makers. Some of the cheese recipes used go back hundreds of years and need to be fully reinstated. I believe that now is the time to really shout about small producers, what with Brexit and Covid-19. We all need to champion what is great and make all aware of what is on our own doorsteps.





THE ART OF THE CHEESEBOARD

As shoppers become increasingly eager to explore new foodie options, here's how independent retailers can cash in



COMMENTATORS



CANDICE FONSECA
DELIFONSECA



SAM WILKIN
THE CHEESE BAR



PATRICIA MICHELSON
LA FROMAGERIE



SAM SOHN-RETHEL
MEVALCO

While perfect pairings are ripe for subjectivity, the role of the cheesemonger is vital when it comes to educating customers about the options available and guiding them through their exploratory experience. With consumer excitement to try new things at an all time high, and hospitality providers still a way away from fully fledged hosting, *Speciality Food* spoke to cheese industry insiders to uncover their personal favourite cheese pairings, the accompaniments bound to sell, and how they bring the restaurant experience to their cheese counters.

If the pressure to provide your customers with the ultimate cheeseboard experience makes you break a sweat, don't panic; according to self-confessed cheese fanatic Candice Fonseca, proprietor of Delifonseca, "Classic cheeseboards are actually much easier to achieve than you'd think." So long as you get the foundations right, and offer your customers a step above what they'd be able to find elsewhere – in supermarkets especially – you'll be on solid footing. "For your basic cheeseboard I'd advise sticking with the staples: soft (e.g. Brie), a classic blue (e.g. Stilton), hard mature (e.g. traditional Cheddar) and a sheep or goat's cheese. I'd recommend choosing the best artisan examples of each kind, and you can't go wrong."

If keeping it simple doesn't get your taste buds tingling, there's another option which has proven to be a successful cheeseboard-building technique at Delifonseca. "Another approach that often works is choosing a singular, knock-out cheese that is hard to come by as your centrepiece, and then to build the remainder of the cheeseboard around it to add balance," Candice explains. "Don't worry too much about geography, just try to achieve a balance of flavours on the board so there's something to appeal to everyone."

For a cheese lover like Candice, full on indulgence is the name of the game. "My favourite method [for cheeseboard creation] is to go all out! Rather than using a cheeseboard as a final course, do the amazing cheeses justice and have an extended cheeseboard as the only course. By doing this, you can really open up the experience to include a semi-firm, a bloomy rind, a firm/aged, a fresh/young and a washed rind cheese."

How to sell

Sam Wilkin, head cheesemonger at The Cheese Bar has encouraged his team to get up close and personal with the products they stock in order to be able to enthuse about them. "In general our team members spend much of their free time tasting the stock, finding pairings and forming their own opinions on what works well together," he says. "This allows them to speak honestly and engagingly about how to make a customer's home cheeseboard the best it can be." With an honest, food-loving connection between staff and customer a vital aspect of the independent fine food retailer's selling arsenal, this is a worthy investment of time. Indeed, "I would encourage any speciality food retailer to do the same," says Sam.

"We try to keep our shelves looking well stocked and fulsome but without spreading our offer too thinly," says Sam of The Cheese Bar's range. Having full confidence – and understanding – of the cheese partners you're offering is key. "We work directly with cheesemakers we know and respect and the same goes for our crackers and condiments," he says. "We work with Rosebud Preserves who supply all our chutneys; I don't think you can beat them for balance of flavour. We also stock a delicious dill pickle from Good Morning Neighbour and fresh Kimchi from Kim'n'chi – both are local East London makers."

For Candice, it's important to keep things generous when stocking for the perfect cheeseboard. "When it comes to accompaniments, make sure there's plenty of fruit and nuts on the board along with different types of crackers to pair with each cheese." Good options are worth paying a good price for: "The Fine Cheese Company and Millers Damsels have an amazing range of biscuits, and I feel it's worth spending a little extra on having an amazing range of crackers," while a little luxury goes a long way: "If you wish, you can even get carried away with extras like truffle honey."

"If you're really looking to up-the-ante, it's worth taking time to consider the tastes of you and your guests or the theme of the menu

> "Pairing fish and cheese is usually a big no, but there are a few combinations that really do work"

MUST-DOS AND DON'TS...

DOS

- "Ahead of serving, make sure the soft cheese is ripe and ready to eat, and remove all cheeses from the fridge in time to get them to room temperature before tucking in – it's guaranteed to be delicious!" says Candice.
- "In terms of service it is critical is to help the customer choose their cheeses in the order they would go on a board," Sam explains. "You always want to start light and fresh and work through to bold and blue, let your palate warm up."
- "Always think of the season and how it works around the board," says Patricia. "During winter and the colder months you want more comforting cheeses with a deeper and more earthy appeal." Next, spring's warmer temperatures call upon "new goat cheeses and great crisp vegetables like celery and radishes," while summer's outdoor focus sees sales rise of "cheeses to go on top of barbecued food, and salad cheeses like Feta, Mozzarella, Burrata and lighter Gruyere styles. Autumn sees the start of Vacherin and the rich unctuous soft cheeses with washed rinds which taste so good with nuts and seasonal fruit."

DON'TS

- "Accompaniments to cheese should not overwhelm and certainly not interfere with the flavours of cheese. Remember, it is all about the cheese and how the accompaniment can provide a balance," Patricia advises.





already consumed," she continues. "You could choose a region or country and build your board around options from there – it could be the North West of England or it could be Italy. I'd recommend trying to source the four staples using cheeses from that region – this method is perfect for a menu that already has a culinary theme to it. Consider the existing theme when choosing accompaniments – for example, for a Spanish themed cheeseboard I'd select quince and rosemary crackers." Spending time to really get to know your customers' needs, including the preferences of who they're creating the cheeseboard for, is the difference between a good retail experience and a great one. "Remember to know your audience – if you have guests that prefer a milder cheese or have a penchant for fruity flavours, increase the number of cheeses to allow for their tastes to be catered for without compromising the enjoyment of yourselves or other guests," suggests Candice.

Top tipples

You've perfected your cheese counter selection and your chutney section is on point. Now for drinks, a big part of The Cheese Bar's offer. "Our team at Funk is brilliant at recommending that perfect natural wine, cider or beer to really make that cheese sing," says Sam.

Your drinks selection is important, says Sam. "Make sure your team is well versed in what pairs well; that full bodied Malbec will smash most cheeses but a nice round, perfumed Chardonnay will work well with many varieties." A UK-made approach won't go amiss in today's Buy British culture. "Don't ignore our native drinks," he says, "cider and beer make for great matches, you can't go wrong with a tannic West Country Cider with a Farmhouse Cheddar!"

"When you have a group of people, it can also be very enjoyable to try to pair the cheeses with drinks," explains Candice. "Try picking three different wines (e.g. white, red, dessert) and then select a couple of cheeses to go with each, but try them with all wines – this can really highlight why some cheeses work with particular wines but can clash horribly with others!"

In the absence of full-blown dinner parties – arguably the indulgent cheeseboard's natural habitat – there are still ways to level-up a cheeseboard selection with the perfect, high-quality beverage. "In lockdown when you're planning for a solo person or a couple and you can't justify a truly sumptuous cheeseboard, there's an opportunity to do something like focus on a particular cheese with a paired drink," Candice says.

Think beyond food and drink

If you're inspiring your customers to experiment with creating a restaurant-quality cheeseboard at home, it makes sense to stock the kit that will help them do just that. First on the list for Patricia Michelson of La Fromagerie? "Always have a good knife collection! Everyone likes a decent knife and one that is specially for cheese." With the average customer most likely not an aficionado of cheese knives, it would be helpful to provide advice on which knife to use for certain cheeses, as well as how to cut small whole cheeses; Patricia suggests using newsletters or in-store posters to do just that.

A beautiful, potentially locally-made wooden board would make for a great foundation for those new to cheeseboard-curating, as well as a special gift or upgrade for established cheese lovers. Boards, knives and bottle openers could well form a key part of your stock, but, says Sam, "don't forget that increasingly popular category, 'merch'. For us it all began with a heavy duty 'bag for life', great for the environment and gaining brand visibility. We also sell t-shirts, prints and sweaters; all carry our logo and are great for getting the word out."

With a myriad of options to help boost your cheese sales – from the classic to the innovative and left-field – the time is ripe to reconsider your cheese's perfect partners.

SUPPLIER TALK



We caught up with Sam Sohn-Rethel, sales executive at Mevalco, to discover his ideal cheese pairings with a Spanish spin

At Mevalco, the more unusual the cheese pairings the more excited we get. There's the Quesos y Besos cheeses which can be paired beautifully with our Valencia almonds, fried and salted nuts and our organic orange blossom honey, but let's look at the more unusual pairings.

SALTY AND SWEET

Another truly winning combination. Why not try our salty Savel cheese from Galicia with Pedro Ximenez soaked raisins? Made from milk from Jersey cows, Savel is a really salty, creamy blue cheese – it's simply stunning and it really ramps up a classic salty and sweet combination to the executive level!

SMOKED AND PICKLED

We really like smoked and pickled flavours together, and an incredible example of this would be a Carpaccio of pickled artichokes with a few curls of lovely sweet caramelised peppers, some shavings of our Smoked Idiazábal, and a drizzle of some of our new harvest picual olive oil as the pièce de résistance. Our Smoked Idiazábal is rich and savoury with a firm texture; its traditional characteristic smoky flavour is a result of being stored near the fireplaces in mountain shepherd huts.

FISH AND CHEESE

Usually this is a big no but there are a few combinations that really do work. One that is definitely worth trying is our spider crab, caught using sustainable fishing methods in the Bay of Biscay then cooked in the crystal clear Cantabrian sea water, giving a taste of the sea which is unrivalled, with Gamba Roja Bomba rice and our semi cured Manchego. This has a well-balanced and complex flavour profile that includes nutty notes and a woody aroma. It also pairs well with walnuts and our organic chestnut honey.



2021 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE STOCK CHECK



HAWKSHEAD RELISH BLACK GARLIC PICKLE
Made with whole black garlic cloves cooked for 45 days, this is a tangy, slightly spicy pickle.
hawksheadrelish.com



ROSEBUD PRESERVES GREAT YORKSHIRE PICKLE
A dark, rich British pantry classic, prepared with garden vegetables and Black Sheep Ale.
rosebudpreserves.co.uk



BONA MEL ORANGE BLOSSOM HONEY
A clear honey which has an intense floral aroma and a marked acid edge.
mevalco.com



SANDFORD ORCHARDS APPLE & OAK CIDER
Bittersweet apple flavours with hints of vanilla and toasty oak.
sandfordorchards.co.uk



STAG BAKERIES STORNAWAY WATER BISCUITS ROSEMARY
Award-winning water biscuits delicately infused with rosemary.
stagbakeries.co.uk



PETER'S YARD SEEDED FLATBREADS
Crafted with sourdough starter, poppy, sunflower, pumpkin and nigella seeds.
petersyard.com

REVIVING THE CHEESE EXPERIENCE

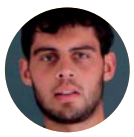
In the current climate, cheesemongers' go-to options for getting customers excited about artisan cheese are out. But with clever storytelling, they can rekindle the passion



COMMENTATORS



DANIEL WILLIAMS
GODFREY C WILLIAMS & SON



RORY MELLIS
I.J MELLIS



MATHEW MARCH SMITH
PONG CHEESE

Before 2020, getting a customer excited about artisan cheese typically started the same way – slicing off a piece and letting them taste it for themselves. Tasting has historically done a lot of heavy lifting in showing consumers what makes artisan cheese so special. But Covid-19 has done away with sampling and in-person tastings for the time being, leaving cheesemongers to find new ways to bring cheeses to life for their customers.

Educating the nation

For Daniel Williams, project manager at Godfrey C Williams & Son, the forced end to sampling has been one of the hardest parts of the last 12 months. "Our last shop sampling was a cheese and wine pairing on 14th March 2020, which now feels like a lifetime ago. There's no easy way of getting around this, and I don't expect that we'll likely start sampling again until at least June or July," he says.

Tastings and samples are one of the joys of independent retail. "An integral aspect of being part of the small and independent business industry is creating and maintaining positive and loyal customer relationships. Consequently, sampling the farmhouse cheeses we sell has always been an important experience we were able to offer our customers," says Rory Mellis, director of I.J. Mellis. But sampling is not only a way to build relationships with customers – it is also a practical tool for a sector where the product isn't mass-produced.

"We strongly believe in the ethos 'try before you buy' as it is common with farmhouse cheese that the flavours produced can vary slightly week on week," Rory says. I.J. Mellis has been offering samples since the shop first opened in 1993, "so not only has this been an adjustment for our teams at I.J. Mellis but for our customers as well," he says. "Although it was a little tricky at the start, like most businesses we have learned to adapt throughout the pandemic."

How does one adapt to losing a key sales tool? There's more to it than promising customers to take your word for it. Part of the answer is education. Teaching new customers a bit about the farmhouse cheesemaking process will help them understand the price differentials between an artisan shop and the supermarket, while educating shoppers about flavour profiles and pairings will give them everything they need to complete a purchase.

"All our cheesemongers continually taste the batches of cheese as they come in weekly, so now instead of our customers tasting the cheese our cheesemongers describe the flavours and textures that they can expect," Rory says. "Like in most things, education and language can only be improved by practice. Therefore, tasting as many farmhouse cheeses as you can and being able to express your own opinion is probably the best advice I could give."

The art of storytelling

With language having become an important tool for cheesemongers, conversations with customers will naturally lend retailers the opportunity to tell a story about the cheese they're selling.

For that reason, getting to know your suppliers is critical. "All small-scale cheesemakers have different backgrounds, from ex-bankers to ex-retail assistants," Rory says. "The life experience and stories of each cheesemaker are diverse and what makes the industry all the more interesting. Sometimes the best way to learn is to pick up the phone and have a chat, or next time you are visiting one of our stores ask our cheesemongers and they'll happily share a few fun facts."

Daniel agrees, advising cheesemongers to research the stories behind the cheeses they sell. "Start by studying their website and social media. See what they're about, find out what makes them tick," he says. When possible, organise a farm visit or meet your supplier at a cheese show. "If they're a local cheesemaker, you might even find them at a farmer's market just down the road."

Championing local cheesemakers is another surefire way to ignite the imagination of your customers. "I always like to think of Tobler's First Law of Geography: 'Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things'. A cheesemaker just down the road from you is more likely to be relatable to your average customer," Daniel says.

"Their farm is likely to be set in the same or similar landscape, the cows they have the milk from might be in a field that the customer drives past every day to work, the producer might even shop in the same shops as them! When the human element of the farmer's story can be told in an approachable and relatable way, the link is closer, and therefore easier to make." Even going beyond the boundaries of your local region, promoting the best of British can help sales fly, with customers keen to swap their far-flung favourites for local varieties. "For us, recent events like Covid and Brexit have changed both the supply and demand of British cheeses and the way our customers think about where their cheese comes from," Daniel explains.

"They're actively searching for great British cheeses, ones that match up to (or exceed) their Continental cousins. By recommending something similar to French, Italian, or Swiss cheese that they've tried before, they have something to relate to, which makes your job a lot easier! Swap the Gorgonzola for Beauvale, Camembert

> "I believe that Covid has brought the cheese community closer together as we continue to support and buy from as many local and small producers as possible"







> The life experience and stories of each cheesemaker are diverse and what makes the industry all the more interesting. Sometimes the best way to learn is to pick up the phone and have a chat

for Tunworth, and Roquefort for Mrs. Bell's Blue," he recommends.

Help customers explore

At I.J. Mellis, the Covid-19 pandemic hasn't stunted customers' appetites for new and exciting cheeses. In fact, if anything, Rory says Covid has encouraged customers to try new cheeses more regularly.

"With the hospitality sector being closed, a lot of people have turned to dining at home and creating their own personal cheese experiences," he says. "This has allowed the cheese sector the perfect opportunity to present new and existing customers with a range of cheeses they might not have tried before. "I think if you provide good service and quality cheese, the experience will be positive regardless of where you choose to eat it."

Daniel agrees, saying that cheese should, in effect, sell itself. If customers aren't biting, take a look at your cheese counter during a quiet period in the shop and take an inventory of what could be changed or updated. "Could your counter labels be more descriptive? Has the cheese won any recent awards (within the past three years) that could be noted? Sure, you won't be able to replicate the full 'storytelling experience' on a label, but it goes some way to helping," he says.

Creating an experience for customers to enjoy at your cheese shop will go a long way towards driving loyalty and repeat visits. "I believe that Covid has brought the cheese community closer together as we continue to support and buy from as many local and small producers as possible," Rory says.

> Like in most things, education and language can only be improved by practice

There is no reason not to extend that community to your customers, too, by bringing them into the cheese story.



CREATING AN ONLINE EXPERIENCE



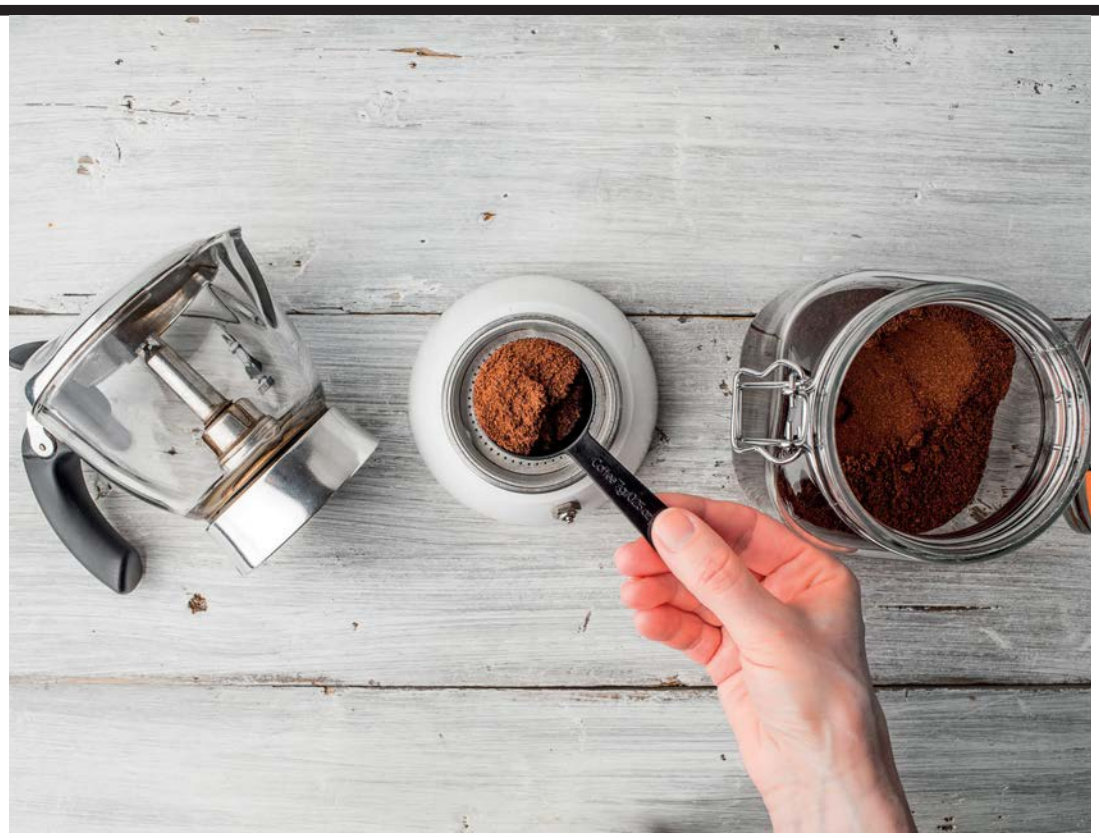
Mathew March Smith, the owner of online cheesemonger Pong Cheese, has perfected the art of selling cheese online – with no help from tastes or smells

If a food product is being sold online, in the absence of other sensory stimulation, the retailer must get two things perfectly right: imagery and copy.

Most importantly, the customer's journey does not begin on the product page. It starts maybe offline or from a search or display advertising on an affiliate site, or more often than not on social media. The images and copy of each product then need to convey how great the cheese is from the beginning of that journey, but they also need to create an excitement and an interest that draws the customer to the point of conversion.

Our company name and brand were created from my recollections of the strong aroma that enveloped me as a small boy when we visited the Oxfordshire shop of British cheese legend Patrick Rance. If ever there was a real-world example of how to sell cheese in a bricks and mortar, offline shop it was there. However, the smell and the sites of the glorious cheeses that were laid out on trestle tables cannot be transferred to a website, so we must create a context for each cheese as close to that visceral reality as possible. Every cheese we sell has a story behind it: whether it is the history of the multiple generations of the family that make it (as with Cashel Blue) or the pear used in the wash on the rind (Stinking Bishop) or the fact that the producer used to be a biochemist before experimenting with cheese (Anne Wigmore at Village Maid). These stories are all exciting and fascinating and indeed, in the same way terroir gives a context to great wines, the stories and certain environmental factors, give a context to a great cheese and it is this context that we are selling online in the absence of smell and taste.

Members of the Pong Cheese Club receive a monthly box that contains four to five cheeses, but we ensure every single one has either an interesting look, flavour, origin or story behind its production. The tasting notes in each box mean the customer whose journey may have began with a post on social media and followed their virtual nose all the way to subscription gets the ultimate fulfilment when they read the full story and eventually get to smell and taste it.



BRINGING THE **CAFÉ HOME**

With shoppers longing for café-style coffee but staying at home, how can retailers satisfy demand?

COMMENTATORS



JAMES GRAY
BARISTA & CO



CANDICE FONSECA
DELIFONSECA



AMY PRICE
MINTEL

After over a year of challenges and uncertainty, we are starting to see light at the end of the lockdown tunnel. No doubt some lifestyle changes brought about by the pandemic will fade as swiftly as they arrived, but some trends – including the consumer demand for café quality coffee at home – could well be here to stay. Cafés will always have their place in the fine food world, and *Speciality Food* readers with cafés and foodservice operations in their portfolio would be smart to make the most of their out-of-home offering, but there's certainly no harm in boosting your retail coffee selection whether you offer a take-home hot drinks service or not.

Throughout the past year, UK shoppers have considered the luxury of great coffee in their chosen guise – cappuccino, filter or iced – one which they couldn't live without. According to a Volcano Coffee Works panel, the average consumer has invested £50 of their hard earned money into recreating their favourite out-of-home drink order in the comfort of their own homes. Milk frothers and coffee makers have seen an increase in sales, but it's not only familiar coffee servings that have proven popular in the past 12 months. In line with foodies' desire to explore new cuisines and scratch-cooking – in the absence of eat-in restaurants – coffee lovers have been taken in by new and exciting ways to enjoy their coffee; for example, Instagram-approved dalgona coffee: a photogenic foam-topped concoction which was a favourite of experimental Millenials in mid-2020.

Long-term trend

According to Mintel's *UK Coffee Market Report 2020*, the pandemic's transformation of coffee consumption from largely out-of-home to at-home isn't going to stay at its current levels forever, but things may never go fully back to the way they were pre-Covid. Amy Price, senior food and drink analyst at Mintel, explains, "Covid-19 has provided the coffee market with a temporary boost, as the nationwide lockdown brought out-of-home coffee to the home overnight. As the lockdown continues to be eased, however, more coffee occasions are expected to shift back out of home, albeit to a lesser extent than previously."

According to James Gray, co-founder and sales director of Barista & Co, the home café trend is one worth investing in even after lockdown is lifted. "We have seen a 300% increase in demand for a coffee and coffee making kit since the first lockdown, and although this is expected to slow down it is clear more people will be working from home in the future." Having the right equipment on shelves, so that customers are stocked up on everything they need to make a café-worthy product at home, is important – as is spending the time, either through customer service or clear signage, making sure that shoppers are purchasing the correct coffee to go with the kit they're buying. For example, an Italian-style stovetop coffee maker requires finely ground coffee, while a cafétiere needs it to be coarser to avoid grounds seeping through and resulting in a grainy cup of coffee. According to James, 51% of customers choose the wrong coffee maker (source: 2020 Barista & Co survey of 381 customers), which offers "a great opportunity for retailers to match coffee with brewing kit and help their customers enjoy a much better product at home. Of course, it also often leads to repeat purchase as customers come back for the coffee they love."

The shopper seeking to buy quality coffee from an independent retailer rather than a supermarket standard option during their weekly shop is likely to be open to trying new things, and may even have a requirement beyond the usual morning jolt. "Many of our regulars purchase more than one type of bean and at home, they enjoy a morning coffee, an afternoon brew and even a post-dinner bean with different flavour profiles for different times of the day," says Candice Fonseca, proprietor of Delifonseca. "We've found that over time, people's interest in coffee has evolved. Just a few years ago it was all about the espresso shot and the pod systems that dominated the market, however we've noticed that tastes are moving on and nowadays there's a greater recognition of the flavours delivered by single-origin coffees and the skills of the roasters."

It's not only the provenance and taste of the coffee shoppers buy that's an important consideration these days. "Not only has there been an increased interest in regional varieties, but there's now also a higher proportion of customers buying whole bean and grinding to order at home," says Candice.

Tools of the trade

On the shop floor, Candice has found that there's a desire to experiment with coffee making equipment; consumers are allowing themselves to spend a few minutes carefully brewing a coffee as opposed to quickly pouring boiling water over some instant coffee powder in the pre-commute rush. "Anecdotally, people have recently gone back to using filter coffee machines, cafétieres and percolators – even Chemex if they're super on-trend!" she says.

When it comes to providing your customers with the tools needed to recreate a café-style coffee at home, it's worth being genned up on the options and the different styles of coffee they produce. A cafétiere creates a very different style of coffee to a stovetop moka, so it's important to provide your customers with options which will allow them to brew their own coffee just how they like it. "If your customer likes a heavy velvety coffee, go with a cafétiere. If they prefer something clean and lighter, try pour over," James suggests.

If you're new to stocking coffee making kit, James has some sage advice: "The key is to understand your customer and where the value proposition is that resonates with them," he explains. "At Barista & Co we focus on coffee lovers and not coffee geeks. If you add in a complex and expensive piece of brewing kit it is very unlikely to sell, so start with the obvious or simple items like cafétieres or something like our One Brew or Brew It Stick." He also suggests positioning coffee and its related kit together in your displays for ease of understanding and potential upsell opportunities, as well as "opening a bag of coffee; the smell alone brings people in."

2021 STOCK CHECK SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



NORLO
COMPOSTABLE COFFEE PODS
Very lightly roasted to preserve the beans' raw nutrients, antioxidants and natural minerals.
norlo.co.uk



TAYLORS
ESPECIALLY FOR LATTE
A smooth roast with hints of chocolate and caramel. Available from April.
hiderfoods.com





HOW CONSUMERS **SHOP NOW**

From the big shop to buying local, indies have been tasked with responding to erratic consumer behaviour throughout the pandemic. Once the restrictions lift, what's next?

COMMENTATORS



MORGAINE GAYE
FOOD FUTUROLOGIST



MICHAEL FREEDMAN
IGD



KEVIN FLYNN
THOUGHTWORKS

Without a doubt, the word of the past year was 'unprecedented'. It filled headlines and TV screens as experts scrambled to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it was changing our lives. But even as the virus appears to be loosening its grip on the UK, the food sector is left with questions: are Covid's influences here to stay or will things go back to normal after the restrictions are lifted?

According to Morgaine Gaye, food futurologist, we should give up the idea of a return to 'normal'. "I don't think anything will go back to what it was," she tells *Speciality Food*. "You often hear people say 'I can't wait for things to get back to normal.' That's not going to ever happen again. This is normal."

Online vs in-store

In some cases, Covid has simply solidified trends that were already taking shape. Online food shopping was making marginal gains, but since the pandemic hit it has soared to record highs. As Covid-19 fades, online shopping will continue – though not to as great an extent.

"The pandemic accelerated the growth of online shopping, and whilst we expect to see some slowing of the trend, we don't expect it to return to pre-Covid levels," explains Michael Freedman, senior shopper insight manager at IGD. Independents have found success with click and collect, delivery and even drive-through models, creating new ways to cater to customers locally and nationally as demand for their products grew.

While the online trend will continue, Kevin Flynn, director of retail strategy at ThoughtWorks, believes real-world experiences are "far from dead". A recent survey by Gekko corroborates this, with 70% of respondents planning to visit stores as much or more than pre-pandemic once non-essential retail reopens. "As we emerge from the pandemic there will be a surge in people wanting to get outside and engage with eating and shopping once again," Kevin says.

One trend that may vanish in the post-Covid world, however, is the big weekly shop. Once consumers feel safe enough to visit the shops more often, this will bring a return of the 'top-up' shop. But Michael believes this will create new opportunities for indies. "This return to top-up shopping and a growth in confidence to shop around is an opportunity for specialist retailers, especially as provenance and supporting local businesses is a shopper priority, which once again, has been driven by the pandemic."

As retailers approach the end of lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions, they should focus on building loyalty with existing customers and attracting new ones by positioning themselves as a new shopping destination. "We see opportunities to attract people to shop in-person at specialist retailers to hand-pick items to supplement their regular online grocery shopping. This is particularly appealing to those shoppers who are looking to focus more on quality when purchasing food and groceries. For some shoppers, there is an emphasis on food shopping becoming an experience to enjoy, given the current restrictions relating to social life."

The health trend

Speciality Food has documented the rise of the health shopper over the course of the pandemic, but it is important to note that this trend will stay relevant in a post-Covid world.

"Nearly nine in 10 shoppers are actively trying to improve their diet in some way, whether this is through eating more fruit and vegetables, reducing sugar or drinking more fluids," Michael says.

The immunity trend will also be of particular interest to the everyday consumer. "Everything will be immunity – 'with added immunity', 'this helps with your immunity'. That'll be the newest marketing watch word," Morgaine says.

Functional foods, which offer benefits in addition to their basic nutritional value, will also play into consumers' desire for food experiences. "We've already seen the beginning of this trend of people wanting food that does something – it makes you calm, it makes you sleepy, it makes you feel something, not just 'oh that's delicious'," Morgaine continues.

New consumer research carried out by taste and nutrition company Kerry found that the functional beverage category will gain traction as new products target holistic attitudes towards health, diet and lifestyle. Its survey of consumers in the UK and elsewhere in Europe revealed that when asked about health concerns that have become more important since Covid-19, 59% said immunity, and half said mental health. "Consumers are willing to pay a premium for beverages with a functional benefit and will repurchase if that benefit is proven to work," says Breda Kelly, Kerry's nutritional beverage lead for Europe and Russia. "This means that manufacturers need to use ingredients that are backed by science and trusted by consumers."

A SURVEY BY GEKKO FOUND THAT **70%** OF **CONSUMERS** PLAN TO **VISIT** STORES AS **MUCH** OR **MORE** THAN **PRE-PANDEMIC** WHEN **LOCKDOWN** ENDS

Back to basics

As the popularity of functional foods shows, consumers expect more from their food today. But beyond this, they also want it to tell the story of where it comes from or how it was produced – and this desire is only going to grow.

"We are moving into a golden era of food," ThoughtWorks' Kevin says. "The quality of food is being reframed by the consumer to incorporate broader perspectives about topics such as importance to local economies, the environment, climate change and animal welfare. I believe fine food is well placed to be at the forefront of this debate."

Morgaine and Michael agree that food awareness is growing. "We're just caring a little bit more about our food," Morgaine says, "and that will definitely continue. What consumers want is meaning. People want to be involved, they want to feel connected. They want to find ways to connect with people." For a retailer, this means continuing to focus on what they do best – connecting with customers, telling the stories of local products and showing shoppers why they should care about the food they eat.

> "The quality of food is being reframed by the consumer to incorporate broader perspectives about topics such as importance to local economies, the environment, climate change and animal welfare. Fine food is well placed to be at the forefront of this debate"



5 WAYS TO CASH IN ON SMALL LUXURIES

The Lipstick Effect, the 'self-treating' movement, the premiumisation trend – whatever you call it, demand is growing for small luxuries, and the fine food sector is well placed to capitalise on the trend

You would be hard-pressed to find a trend that the fine food sector is better suited to cater to than the premiumisation of food and drink. Our retailers have long sung the praises of speciality and artisan products to any shopper who would stop and listen, and since Covid-19 hit, the revival of high-end food has proved to be a boon to the independent retailer.

Forced to eat at home, shoppers have been keen to stock up on higher-quality storecupboard ingredients, top cuts of meat and the finest artisan cheeses to spice up mealtimes. Luxurious foods have also made for indulgent treats, bringing a smile during what's been a very challenging year.

Elsewhere, the edible gifting trend, which kicked off over the holidays, hasn't shown any sign of stopping. Consumers have been marking family milestones and other important events by sending their loved ones hampers packed with local treats, surprise boxes of chocolate and confectionery, or small-batch boozy bottles to be enjoyed over a video catch-up. It's the Lipstick Effect – the swapping of large, expensive purchases for more affordable 'treats' – in action. For retailers, the convergence of all of these trends means one thing: demand for small luxuries is high, and it's likely to keep growing. We look into five ways that retailers can maximise their opportunities with premium food and drink.

1 Rethink the in-store experience

As essential retailers, food shops have been lucky enough to keep their doors open throughout the lockdown, making them the ideal venue for consumers to indulge in a small treat for themselves, a gift for a loved one or just a simple bit of retail therapy.

For this reason, shops will benefit from a fresh makeover that places premium products front and centre.

Demand for high-end food and drink gifting has been so great at iconic London retailer Partridges, that John Shepherd, managing director, has reworked his store layout to make the most of the trend. "Where our in-store café used to be, we have now put in a gift section full of small luxuries like chocolate, panettone, candles, household products and home decorations and bespoke small hampers. Because it has worked so well, we are thinking of not bringing our indoor café back," he tells *Speciality Food*.

Reevaluate the layout of your shop floor to determine the value of existing spaces and what a new section focused on luxury food gifting could bring to the table. Retailers don't have to go as far as replacing whole segments of their stores, however – these treats could make up the basis of a visual merchandising revamp, or even a small display by the tills. However you choose to incorporate premium gifts, John recommends going big on the display, especially for holidays or occasions. "In-store decorations and signage highlighting the special products are very important. If you've got it, flaunt it during special events. The desire for luxury food items is alive and well."

2 Open the door to online gifting

As Partridges' sales prove, gifting offers fine food retailers a significant opportunity to cash in on the growing desire for premium food and drink, especially during a year when many have been unable to celebrate occasions with their friends and family. "Since the start of this year, we have noticed a real rise in customers using our website to send small luxury gifts to loved ones," says a spokesperson for Daylesford. "From biscuits and boxes of chocolates to homeware, gardening items and bodycare, there has been an increase in sales for small luxuries as presents."

And gifting is not just restricted to the big holidays anymore – consumers want to mark an array of life events with edible mementos. "Whilst Mother's Day and Valentine's Day were both key gifting dates, we can see that get-well-soon and thinking-of-you messages have risen in popularity throughout the last few months," Daylesford's spokesperson explains.

Retailers can capitalise on this trend by rethinking their online offering and considering how to provide a simple and straightforward digital shopping experience. "When it comes to e-commerce, make sure you have the ability for customers to send something as a gift along with a personal note," the spokesperson adds. "Plus, if you have the capacity to offer a gift-wrapping service, this is a simple and thoughtful way to upsell a service."

Hampers and themed boxes are always beloved gifting options, and this year they're proving incredibly popular by providing consumers with exactly what they want – a bundle of high-end foodie gifts in one convenient package. Demand has been so high that luxury retailer Fortnum & Mason warned ahead of last Christmas that it was almost completely sold out of its range of hampers.

"It's fair to say that demand this year has been unlike any other," outgoing chief executive Ewan Venters told *The Telegraph* at the time. But while he added that it was not surprising to see this rise in demand for gifts during the pandemic, he was shocked to find that more consumers were buying luxury hampers for themselves. "We have also seen more demand for hampers for self-consumption this year as they seek to make the most of their own festive period," he said.

Having clocked on to the growing gifting trend early, Daylesford introduced smaller boxes and bundles in a range of prices to allow customers to treat their nearest and dearest whatever the occasion. By hitting a number of different price points, retailers will ensure that their range appeals to the widest possible audience. To drive sales even further, the shop's spokesperson recommends taking a considered approach to your e-commerce offering. "In the same way that you might visually merchandise groups

> "Find new products that either symbolise the special event or tell an interesting story. Innovation added to tradition is a powerful asset"



> In-store decorations and signage highlighting the special products are very important. If you've got it, flaunt it. The desire for luxury food items is alive and well

of items in-store, apply the same approach to your website. Create a category specifically for gifting so it is easy for website users to search the range. Similarly, if certain items such as candles and chocolates are often bought as gifts, you could include the option to add a bottle of wine to cross-sell."

3 Think outside the box

Traditional, high-end food and drink gifts have certainly proved popular during the pandemic. "Own label products always sell well for us, including wines, champagne and gin, chocolates and gift baskets," John says. "As summer starts, our Chelsea Flower Show-related products do well – tea, fudge, jams, etc – and items with the Royal Warrant have been selling well." But with gifting and self-treating occasions expanding, retailers should think about how they can push the limits of the category.

For instance, luxury hot cross buns make a low-key Easter spent at home that much more special. "Find new products that either symbolise the special event or tell an interesting story. Innovation added to tradition is a powerful asset," John advises. "It is time for the luxury brands to come to the fore." The message is similar at Daylesford: classics, such as the shop's Tea, Jams & Biscuits, Daylesford Prosecco and Thinking of You boxes have sold out since their launch in January, and wines, spirits, confectionery and cookbooks have seen strong demand, too. But customers are also looking for premium options that stray from the beaten path. "In addition to the traditional gifting options, we have seen customers sending grocery orders and fresh broth bundles as luxurious yet nourishing alternatives," Daylesford's spokesperson says.

4 Consider comfort and health

Gifting aside, the self-treating trend is the other major driver of demand for small luxuries. Al Overton, buying director at Planet Organic, noticed that despite customers shifting to healthier habits at the start of the year, which drove demand for plant-based products and no and low alcohol drinks, within those categories sales were rising for comforting and premium foods – from high-end vegan truffles to dairy-free cheeses to artisan no-alcohol spirits.

With the health trend still going strong, retailers must walk the line between indulgent treats and products with strong health and ethical credentials. According to research from GlobalData, stress often causes consumers to have one of two distinct reactions: either they will restrict their diets or indulge more in confectionery and comforting foods. With one in four global consumers currently feeling anxious, Amira Freyer-Elgendy, consumer analyst at GlobalData, says it's important to seek out "guilt-free indulgences and highlight health or ethical credentials" to target both types of consumers.

"As consumers do not want to compromise on the taste of their comforting indulgences, one way to target both the diet restrictors who may be looking for healthy alternatives and the indulgers who are keen on familiar comfort foods is by developing and marketing the 'guilt-free indulgence'," Amira adds.

5 Prepare for the future

As demand for small luxuries was impacted by the pandemic, a post-Covid world may look different. But retailers are hopeful that after living with high-quality food products over the past year, and seeing the delight that luxury food gifts bring, consumers will continue to treat themselves and their friends and family with premium products.

Planet Organic's Al believes that consumers have begun to link high-end food products into their daily rituals. "I think we are looking for rituals to enliven things – how to mark the end of the working day when it just means leaving the spare bedroom, whether it be a non-alcoholic cocktail at 6 o'clock, or vegan truffles for after dinner. That ritual may even just be extra time spent preparing a meal, and in fact one of our biggest sales increases through lockdown has been in our only-organic fruit and veg." The key for independents will be ensuring that these rituals are here to stay in the months and years ahead and retaining the customers who have ventured to their local shops to try something new for the very first time during the pandemic.

Partridges' John is also hopeful that after witnessing strong demand for luxury food gifts – as well as cross-selling products such as wrapping paper, ribbons and greeting cards – retailers can hang on to these customers – Covid or not. "If we can get it right, I think this trend will outlast lockdown, as we can offer lots of items not available elsewhere. By capturing the imaginations of shoppers and inspiring them with the quality and flavour that only artisan products can bring to the table, independents will ensure that the desire for small luxuries does not fade. "The last year has made us all rediscover the joy that small luxuries can bring," Daylesford's spokesperson says, "so we think this trend may well be here to stay."



DAYLESFORD

> When it comes to e-commerce, make sure you have the ability for customers to send something as a gift along with a personal note

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THE NATURE OF TRENDMAKING

Fine food providers are striving to stay ahead of changing trends and consumer demands while managing the ongoing ambiguity over the mid-to-long-term future. Here, Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe explores how to predict and manage trends in a pandemic

COMMENTATORS



SASKIA NUIJTEN
EIT FOOD



ANNE JORUN AAS
FARMFORCE



COLINE LAURENT
CONNECTING FOOD



CYRILL FILLOTT
RABORESEARCH

A fine balancing act

As we navigate through the Covid-19 pandemic, our shopping and consumer habits are transforming at a rapid rate. For independent food and drink businesses, the challenge is how to balance these evolving consumer demands with maintaining their core shoppers and delivering what consumers expect from the fine food sector: service and quality.

Keeping a finger on the pulse of the changing shifts taking place is an ongoing obstacle. But it is one that the sector can overcome, and it is one that will create opportunities. We explore how fine food brands can achieve the current balancing act between present demands and future predictions.

Sizeable shift

"The fragility of our food system has been brought into sharp focus over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic," emphasises Saskia Nuijten, director of communication and public engagement at food innovation initiative, EIT Food. The pandemic has had an impact on the whole food industry process from the field to the consumer.

In Europe, consumers have had to change their shopping and consumption habits, Nuijten reveals, "almost overnight, with many of these trends likely to continue into this year as we expect lockdown measures to slowly lift." As the continent experiences extensive nationwide lockdowns, this shift in consumer habits and demands creates a ripple effect across global food value chains.

While the impacts of Covid-19 are still unfolding, Anne Jorun Aas, CEO of Farmforce, highlights how: "Experience so far shows the importance of an open and predictable international trade environment to ensure food can move to where it is needed."

Ever since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, food actors have been strongly hit by disruptions to supply chains. However, although food shortages became the reality in retail stores following the initial aftermath of the pandemic's arrival and subsequent lockdowns, the food system as a whole has shown its strength.

"The overall food system has proven quite resilient in most European countries," indicates Coline Laurent, marketing and communication manager at French blockchain and digital solutions company Connecting Food.

Optimism prevails. "There's definitely room for a new opportunity to differentiate from mainstream retailing," shares Cyrille Fillott, global strategist, consumer foods at RaboResearch.

Staying on top of leading trends

The art of trends in fine food is just that – it is an art. Retailers, wholesalers, producers and farmers are now facing considerable challenges and notable uncertainties that consume the future of the fine food sector.

Yet, with these leading trends come opportunities for the sector to explore and grow. Here, we take a look at the key trends dominating the space in 2021.

1. PRODUCT VARIETY

The number of products available will undergo a transformation in the UK food retail market, with SKU (stock keeping unit) reduction a key emerging trend. Limiting the number of products available on the shelf is partly related to the supply chain and partly because "traffic will come through the door anyway because the services are closed," shares RaboResearch's Fillott.

"It is a European phenomenon, and the UK may be leading the charge here on the SKU reduction," shares Fillott.

With restaurants currently being closed and supermarkets not stocking these items, there is the opportunity for more speciality, niche suppliers and products to emerge to appeal to consumers.

2. AFFORDABILITY AND VALUE

An increased focus on food affordability and value are the most pronounced changes recorded throughout the pandemic, the EIT Food's recent report on the impact of Covid-19 on consumer food behaviours in Europe shows.

Instead of restricting fine food, however, here lies an opportunity for brands and retailers to differentiate themselves through a premium product base.

Commenting on the perception of value and price, EIT Food's Nuijten says, "A focus on value does not mean that consumers will automatically buy the cheapest product."

3. REDESIGNING HOME EATING

Meal preparation is a key trend to emerge amid the pandemic, particularly as remote working has become the new reality. "Many consumers have rediscovered the pleasure of spending more time cooking at home and having meals with their family," says Nuijten.

Eating occasions at-home dominate the food scene at present, leading the way for fine food brands to carve a point of differentiation and competitive position.

Home cooking and dining is proving formidable in the fine food space. No longer reserved for high-end restaurants, fine food options have been brought to consumers' kitchens as we seek out new, premium and more indulgent at-home choices.

Removing the commute entirely, or even for one day, post-pandemic means that 20% of consumers' lunches will be up for grabs. "So if

> "The move towards transparency, traceability and building trust with consumers is here to stay, regardless of how fine food trends evolve"



you are selling into the business area, suddenly 20% of your volume has gone and it may pop up somewhere else," says Fillott. Post-pandemic, we can expect this. The question is: Does this impact your business and its revenue streams?

For independent fine food retailers, this offers the opportunity to provide consumers with an elevated home dining experience. The fine foods sector can also access the opportunity as some shoppers may want a more exclusive or elaborate lunch or go out to eat at a local food hall.

4. HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE AND LOCAL OPTIONS

With consumers becoming more health-conscious and spending more time at home, there has been a growing demand for fresh, healthy food with traceable origins.

When viewed in the light of the other consumer changes during the pandemic towards more focus on health and sustainability, "the challenge for food retailers is to offer products that are seen as good value while living up to demand for healthy and environmentally friendly food," Nuijten continues.

Shopping small and locally, engaging with trusted providers like grocers and retailers, minimising waste and conscious consumerism are leading the food sector. Consumers want to shop locally for their produce and buy locally-grown products. Familiarity, confidence, friendliness, trust and sustainability drive the popularity of local purchases, with fine foods a captive market for these consumers who want to access farm shops, local delis, and food halls. While the environmental and social impact of food production has always been an issue, Aas emphasises, "Covid-19 has increased the attention and urgency here, with a strong need to collaborate and innovate to fix the food system and make food production more sustainable."





> If producers, storage operators, manufacturers and retailers don't collaborate, the transparency that consumers are craving will not be met

A unique opportunity is now here for the food industry to engage with consumers and build on these growing sustainability and health trends. Increasingly, responsible production and minimising food waste are important decision-making factors.

Build transparency, traceability and trust

Discovering trends and ascertaining how these apply to your specific consumer base is only one piece of the pie, though. Once these trends are researched and identified, the question then becomes: how can you capture the underlying influences of these trends, which represent the genuine and evolving needs of your consumers?

The key is to create transparency, implement traceability, develop trust and use technology to strengthen your ability to provide and communicate these.

Transparency

In 2021, one of the most notable trends impacting the fine food industry is transparency. Emerging as a clear winner in the trends that will captivate consumer decision-making, three in five global consumers say they are interested in learning more about where their food comes from and how it is made, Innova Market Insights data reveals. Transparency should be present throughout the supply chain to communicate information from farm to fork.

With transparency a significant market trend, Connecting Food's Laurent highlights: "If producers, storage operators, manufacturers and retailers don't collaborate, the transparency that consumers are craving for will not be met."

Traceability

Food shoppers increasingly demand to know where their food comes from and how it is produced, which can only be achieved by having traceability of the individual farmer and field.

The advent of farm-to-fork traceability solutions such as blockchain is now available to enable agricultural players, storage operators, and food manufacturers to access and provide traceability information on a shared ledger.

Insight and traceability into the production level is a "must", Aas shares, "as it lies the foundation for product quality from the start". Measuring and reporting quality at this stage is key for high-end retailers to deliver premium, traceable food options to fine food shoppers.

It is a crucial consideration for the entire industry but is especially prominent for independent fine food retailers, which are at the very end of the food chain. Traceability and transparency are crucial and a prerequisite to deal with the many sustainability challenges associated with food production.

Trust

By spending more time with ingredients, consumers are increasingly conscious about their quality and sustainable origin. Shoppers want to see the products having certifications to support these claims.

The recent EIT Food Trust Report shows that consumer trust levels have increased in all parts of the agrifood sector in the past year. Alongside the hike in trust comes the rise in consumer confidence in food products, with overall increases of between 3% and 8%.

However, there are stark and notable differences in trust levels throughout the supply chain. Of all players within the European food sector, farmers are the most trusted, with two-thirds (67%) of the public reporting they trust farmers compared to just 13% that do not.

Retailers are the next most trusted group, with 53% of consumers expressing their trust. Drawing on why this may be the case, EIT Food's Nuijten reveals it is, "potentially associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and gratitude towards food retailers for maintaining food supplies during a difficult time."

Trust in food manufacturers lags, with less than half of consumers (46%) across all countries stating they trust manufacturers.

Utilise technology

"Technology is essential to address the trends that we are seeing amidst the pandemic," says Aas. The number of agtech companies is on the up. With this rise comes greater opportunities to use digital technologies to improve productivity, increase transparency and traceability, and reduce costs.

E-commerce is set to remain impactful. Data collection and analysis also enables consumers to turn data into actionable information and make data-driven decisions.

67% OF THE **PUBLIC** REPORT THEY **TRUST** FARMERS COMPARED TO JUST **13%** THAT DO **NOT**

Fine food brands can, and are, listening and taking action by providing in-depth product information to shoppers using QR codes, for example. By scanning them, shoppers can immediately discover precisely where the product comes from, who the farmers that grew and harvested the crops are, and follow the product along its transformation journey.

The challenge of a changing consumer base

The opportunities for the fine food sector do come with a caveat, which is linked to the sector's expectation of a K-shaped recovery—whereby there will be disparity in the economy between individuals with stronger financial and disposable incomes leading to increased spending and those who have suffered economically as a result of the pandemic.

"There will be a true distinction within that", says Fillott. Subsequently, fine food markets may see their previous consumer base dwindle, and they will have to find ways to appeal and attract the remaining shoppers to their fine food selections.

The focus now is "not necessarily on innovation", says Fillott. While innovative new product development has reduced, which is expected amid the global crisis, it is still sought after.

"There are quite a few changes in the market, but innovation is needed," says Fillott.

What's next for fine food?

"The economic reality of Covid will come later, but it is very unpredictable what it will look like," adds Fillott. With the uncertainties continuing, calls for collaboration throughout the fine food sector are loudening.

"Collective action is required to address some of the trends we are seeing because of Covid," shares Farmforce's Aas. The global food system is highly complex, with many stakeholders. Subsequently, industry collaborations provide the necessary means for brands to make meaningful change.

For individual brands looking for opportunities, it is vital to consider their channels and positioning.

It is also key to delve into how they can utilise trend forecasting and the application of these in relation to consumer demands. Importantly, though, fine food brands need to consider these, while prioritising transparency, traceability and building trust with consumers —as these are here to stay, regardless of how fine food trends evolve.



FINAL CALL

After a tough winter, longer and brighter days have finally arrived in the UK alongside daffodils and birdsong, giving us all a much-needed reason to be cheerful. With the Covid-19 vaccinations progressing and lockdown exit plans set in motion, it's looking like this summer could really be one to celebrate.

But before we run full speed ahead into this shiny new future, I'd recommend taking some time to reflect. This winter was likely a hard one for yourself, your staff and your customers, too. Despite growing support from local communities and an impressive boom in spending on food and drink, the dark days of lockdown took a toll on everyone's mental health, whether they were on the shop floor or on furlough.

First, check in on yourself. Many of us have started new ventures over the last year in a bid to keep business competitive and respond to the changing circumstances and shopping behaviours of consumers, adding extra pressure on ourselves to adapt, learn and grow in an already challenging environment. Consider what you've learned about yourself over the last year – which are the projects you really enjoy, and which have you just been powering through? Can you delegate some of these tasks to other team members? If furloughed members of staff are returning soon, how can they play a new role? Reprioritise and turn your focus to the things that really matter.

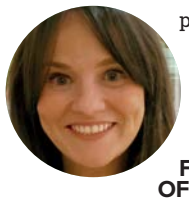
As we begin to come out the other side of the pandemic, now is also a good time to check in on any employees. While there are new reasons to be hopeful about the future, many are also experiencing a creeping anxiety about the return to 'normal' life. Can you provide any resources or retraining that will help your staff members feel more prepared for the road ahead?

Take some time to reflect on your business, too. You've likely implemented some new ideas or projects during the past year. Are these viable in the coming months or years? Spend some time thinking about what the post-Covid future will look like for your business, and consider how these new areas of the shop might fit into this – or not. It may be that you're due a back-to-basics approach, with bricks and mortar, foodservice and events staging a comeback.

It's never too early to start planning for what the future holds, and the springtime offers us a natural bit of breathing space to do this. Even a few moments spent reflecting on what 2021 has brought so far, and how you might need to adjust your plans for the remainder of the year, can make a world of difference.

Have a story to share? Get in touch: courtney.goldsmith@aceville.co.uk.

5 MINUTES WITH...
RACHEL KETTLEWELL, FOUNDER OF FEARNE AND ROSIE



WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I'm a primary school teacher, so you would find me in a classroom laughing with 30+ little ones. My favourite class to teach is Y6, closely followed by Y4.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
I worked in a health food shop after school. My job was to weigh the larger bags into smaller quantities for customers.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
My children. Fearne, Rosie and George.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
I think I've loved all my jobs actually. But generally, it's probably any time that I've had to sound really professional... I'm more about the fun!

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?
Hearing customer feedback. When people send me messages or photos of their little ones enjoying our products, that's what it's all about.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
The most challenging part is balancing my time as a mum whilst also building a business I am passionate about. That's also one of the things that makes Fearne and Rosie so special.

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I think moving forward in the food industry, I'd love to see the celebration of local produce. The growth of ethical supply chains and businesses working together to make the world a better place. That's what we're trying to do here at Fearne and Rosie.

TEA OR COFFEE?
I have three children, so coffee please!

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
It would have to be Fearne and Rosie Reduced Sugar Strawberry Jam on toast.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
Yes you can!

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
I'd say peanut butter and jam, but that's quite cool these days isn't it?

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?
I like really easy reads. Nothing scary, I can't cope. Books like *PS I Love You*, *The Notebook* and anything by Giovanna Fletcher.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Always sweet!





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FIRELLI HOT SAUCE

Chilli sauces have taken the UK by storm recently, and they're a delicious way to add some international punch to your dishes. Asian sriracha, Chinese crispy chilli oil and aromatically spiced Indian options have long been stalwarts of my cupboard, but the recent discovery of Firelli's Italian Hot Sauce has introduced some European flair to my food. It brings rich and classically Italian flavours like balsamic vinegar, red pepper and porcini mushrooms to the table, together with a satisfying heat, making it the perfect partner for pizzas, pasta, eggs... the list goes on!

firelli.com

LONG SHOT STRAWBERRY & RHUBARB HARD SELTZER

The hard seltzer craze has thoroughly swept the States, and in recent years has jumped across the pond to the UK market. But like any imported trend, the best versions are those that introduce local flair. Long Shot succeeds in this with its delicately flavoured Strawberry & Rhubarb seltzer (or fruit-infused sparkling water to the uninitiated). The neutral grain spirit lets the all-natural fruit juices sing, but unlike some mixed drinks the gentle flavour means it never slips into sickly sweet territory. Bring on the summer sun.



longshotdrinks.co.uk

THE CHERRY TREE BLOODY MARY CHUTNEY

Continuing the boozy theme is one of the newest launches from The Cherry Tree, and this one brings a tangy flavour to the taste-buds. Tomatoes, fresh celery, garlic and pepper are infused with vodka to create a brilliant Bloody Mary-inspired flavour with a kick of spice and a crunch. Who says you can't have a stocked up cheeseboard for brunch? The bold flavours pair exceptionally well with creamy cheeses, or you can stir it straight into tomato-based sauces to add some flair to any meal.



cherrytreepreserves.co.uk

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Amy Elles, chef patron of The Harbour Café



My husband and I spent quite a few years travelling for work before eventually putting our roots down in Elie, Scotland. Walking along the pier, I saw The Harbour Café and knew that it was a sort of destiny. My daughter Isabella was only four months old when we went for it, and then six months when we opened. I wanted our own place where there would be no compromise on the food, no matter what it was going to be. Somewhere where you would want to go on your precious day off. It is located on Elie Harbour, right on a small beach overlooking the sea, with fabulous views over the Firth of Forth incorporating the famous Elie Lighthouse and the Bass Rock.

We live in the most incredible part of Scotland with its abundance of fish, organic pastures and hardworking, creative food suppliers and producers. We are nothing without them. In normal times our menu is small and based around what we get from the boats which includes the likes of half a pint of prawns, lobster and crab cakes. During the past year we have had to close and launched an online Harbour Café at Home delivery service, utilising local lobster, langoustine and organic vegetables from a few minutes down the road, meaning we could continue to order from our local suppliers. Support for our hampers has been amazing. We have adapted our normal menu and created themed hampers. I would probably say we have quite a strong Mediterranean influence as we have spent time working and traveling abroad. We use simple garnishes to enhance the flavour of our fresh produce and really help it sing.

We have a fabulous relationship with our local suppliers and try our very hardest to only use produce from within a few miles radius of the café. Our neighbours Balcaskie Estate have a food hub called Bowhouse which is home for a selection of independent producers.

We buy our organic beef from Sophie Cumber, from The Butchery at Bowhouse, who sources heritage breed Lincoln Red from the Balcaskie farm. Our Harbour Café at Home boxes also come with organic side salad, vegetables and garnishes, which are grown by East Neuk Market Garden which is also at Bowhouse. The couple who run the garden, Tom and Connie are magicians, and produce the most delicious seasonal vegetables.

Our fish is landed in the East Neuk, and we buy direct from both the boats through the fisherman's mutual in Pittenweem and through our merchant David Lowrie in St Monans. We are very lucky to source all our ingredients so locally and it is central to what we are trying to achieve at the café: organic, local, seasonal, delicious.

> "We live in the most incredible part of Scotland with its abundance of fish, organic pastures and hardworking, creative food suppliers and producers. We are nothing without them"

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Garofalo

AN ITALIAN ROMANCE

Inspiring the nation

In a recent report by the British food manufacturing giant Premier Foods, the nation's cooking habits took centre stage. The report confirmed something that has been simmering under the surface of the pandemic since Lockdown 1: Brits are having a love affair with cooking, and their number one choice when whipping up a meal at home is Italian cuisine.

Pasta and risotto were found to be the most popular meal choices, and this should come as no surprise. Italian cuisine's influence on the typical Brit's home cooking repertoire is massive. Partly, this is due to the incredible versatility of Italian cuisine and its approachability for any level of home chef.

But the key piece of information uncovered in the report was the vast number of people who said they had rekindled their passion for cooking at home. Nearly three-quarters of Brits said they enjoyed home cooking over the past year. Rather than seeing it as a necessary obligation at mealtimes, consumers are having fun, taking ownership of the food they eat, and spicing up meals by spending a bit more than they used to on higher-quality ingredients.

We can expect to see some change on the horizon here. As the hospitality industry reopens and consumers fall back into dining out for occasions and special weeknight meals, we're certain to see a slight shift away from home cooking. But the joy that was unearthed over the last year in lockdown won't disappear – especially for those consumers who have connected with the fantastic quality Italian ingredients found at their local shop or deli, and the shop owners who helped them discover new delights in their kitchens.



Covid-19 has brought so much difficult news for the food and drink industry – but it has also provided consumers an opportunity to reconnect with food, experiment with new flavours, try their hand at healthy dishes, and perfect classic favourites. Turning this love affair into a long-lasting romance will take continued effort from the fine food sector – by championing the best products and sharing the inspiration that heritage ingredients bring to the home, success is all but guaranteed.

Are you passionate about Italian food and drink? If so we would love to hear from you – get in touch via courtney.goldsmith@aceville.co.uk.




New trade deals are opening doors for British food and drink in markets like Canada
The UK Government can help businesses like yours unlock new opportunities around the world. Whether you're a new or current exporter, get free export advice for your business.
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