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SPECIALITY FOOD

NEWS, COMMENT AND BUYING IDEAS FOR FINE FOOD RETAILERS

If the coffee bag's missing, blame your happiest-looking colleague.



What a year it's been. After all your hard work, take a break & enjoy a decent mug of coffee.

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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the June issue of *Speciality Food*, the first in over a year where the mood of the nation is generally positive and forward-looking.

While lockdown rules across the UK vary, we are all seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Non-essential retail has reopened, pubs, bars and restaurants are able to serve customers indoors, and we're all enjoying a little bit of the 'normality' that we've been missing for so long. Dangers still remain and we must all continue to follow the rules and be cautious, but there is a tangible optimism in the air – not least a result of being able to gather with friends and family once more (and that summery days are nearly upon us).

The *Speciality Food* team has followed suit with this issue; we're looking at summer cheeses to share on p.28, celebrating the return of food-to-go on p.32, and sharing with you the 2021 edition of our annual beverage special, *Drinks Buyer*.

Cheers!

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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Food standards back in the spotlight

Speciality Food looks into whether the Australian free trade deal is a sign of things to come for post-Brexit Britain

Since it emerged that the UK was seeking to sign a free trade agreement with Australia that would not include protections for UK farmers, questions have been raised about the future of the UK's trade policy.

Without safeguards in free trade deals, it is feared that British producers will be undercut by cheaper imports. NFU president Minette Batters said the Australia deal "would have serious implications for British farming".

The future of Britain's food standards has been fiercely debated across the food and farming sectors since Brexit and the introduction of the Agriculture Bill. More than two million people signed a petition calling for food standards to be protected in law in the bill, but the Government instead opted to create an independent Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) to scrutinise the impact of trade deals. The Agriculture Bill was signed into law in November 2020, and since the UK officially left the EU on 31st December 2020, it has begun trade negotiations with a number of countries, including the US, Australia and New Zealand.

Now, there are worries that a deal with Australia will open the door to more deals with large trading nations that have lower standards than the UK, such as the US and Brazil. "The Prime Minister and his Government have pledged to level up the country," Minette said. "Agreeing to a tariff-free trade deal with a major agricultural exporter, with no safeguards or review mechanisms, would do exactly the opposite of that commitment and set swathes of rural Britain backwards." In a letter to Boris Johnson, the Green Alliance, a group of 10 leading green groups, added that the deal with Australia would set "a very dangerous precedent for future trade deals".

A Government spokesperson has said that any deal signed will "include protections for the agriculture industry and will not undercut UK farmers or compromise our high standards". The spokesperson continued, "Hormone-fed beef is banned in the UK and will not be allowed to enter the UK market – this won't change under any FTA."

However, according to Mark Lynch, partner at corporate finance house Oghma Partners, nations with larger herds, such as Australia, will still benefit from the economies of scale. "Economics dictates that UK farmers are at a scale disadvantage and already marginal producers, such as upland sheep farmers, will logically inevitably suffer. The question for farmers is do they trust the Government to subsidise their livelihoods via direct payments if the Government goes full bore at liberalisation and cheaper chops for UK consumers?"

Demand for standards remains strong

Despite the allure of cheaper meat, recent research from Proagrica shows that more and more consumers are concerned about the standards of their food. The group found that nearly half of consumers, 46%, want their meat or fish to be ethically farmed and more than a third are now eating more organic food. What's more, a recent survey by the Soil Association found that eight in 10 respondents were concerned about US-style industrial farming increasing in the UK, showing there is little appetite for lower food and farming standards in Britain. Three quarters of respondents said they would be willing to eat less chicken, and pay more for it, if it meant that the chicken had a better life.

"Many were making considered food choices to minimise their carbon footprints before the pandemic," said Graeme McCracken, managing director of Proagrica. "However, our research shows Covid-19 has pushed more people to think about the types of food they are eating and how this is produced. With more shoppers actively looking for certification kitemarks when shopping, the pressure is growing across the food supply chain to prove ethical standards are being upheld."

NFU's Minette agreed that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of the food and farming sector. "It is vital that we have a thriving food production industry. We all saw the importance of this during the height of the pandemic; when the Government itself described farmers as key workers playing a vital role in delivering the nation's food," she said. "We remain of the view that it is wholly irresponsible for the Government to sign a trade deal with no tariffs or quotas on sensitive products and which therefore undermines our own domestic economy and food production industry."

The NFU has outlined five questions that it wants urgent answers to from the UK government regarding its future trade policy, including what meaningful safeguards for domestic agriculture will be included in free trade agreements, and what is the government's plan to continually review the impact of free trade agreements as they are implemented.

The NFU has also asked why the new statutory Trade and Agriculture Commission, which will scrutinise trade deals before they are signed, has not yet been set up.

While questions remain around how the Australian deal may impact future free trade agreements, it is clear that following the Covid-19 pandemic, trust has been built between consumers, farmers and food retailers. Trade deals pose an opportunity to increase transparency and continue to build upon this trust, but only if Britain's high standards are maintained.

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William Reed
INFORMING BUSINESS GROWTH

"What's up, DOCG?"



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

DOCG or Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita is the most stringent quality category of Italian wine – as is widely known. There are currently about 70 wines that have achieved this standard and include such illustrious names as Barolo, Amarone della Valpolicella and Prosecco Superiore. It is these types of wines along with their eminent counterparts from France, Spain, New Zealand and all other quality wine producing countries that have seen a renaissance in sales in Partridges.

During the past year our fine wine sales increased by about 10%. Overall sales in the shop have increased by about 1%. Not only that, but compared to the panic buying first quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 they are up by considerably more than 10%. In fact, the contribution the wine department has made overall has grown from 9.7% of the shop's turnover to 14%. This may be scarcely surprising due to the effects of lockdowns and the closing of pubs and hospitality outlets, and Dry January seemed somewhat beside the point this year. The biggest increase in sales has been notably among the more expensive wines that we sell. Top sellers currently include Cloudy Bay, La Crema Monterey, Whispering Angel and Planeta Chardonnay.

This increase in wine sales is also played out against the background that our café and wine bar were closed and there has been a complete lack of wine tastings and other promotional activities.

It will be interesting to see how long the lockdown effect lasts once, and I am typing this with crossed fingers, lockdowns are a thing of the past.

Average spending per customer in our wine department increased by about 18% alone, and this trend seems to be confirmed by a recently published article reporting that one in five people in the UK were spending £66 more a month on alcohol.

This trend on 'upspending' has continued around the shop with organic meats and fresh fish doing well and a resurgence on the deli counter, especially smoked salmon, caviar, bottarga, Prosciutto di Parma and expensive cheese – especially with truffles. In place of the café we have introduced a food gift section which has had a resounding start to its life and has reflected this reorientation in sales with bespoke hampers enjoying their best festive periods on record and with an encouraging season of household gifts to follow.

It is reassuring to note that when times are difficult, expensive speciality foods and quality wines seem to be particularly sought after. Running a business in an affluent area naturally helps, but our delivery reach and online orders have indicated that SW3 is by no means alone in this aspect.

However, while smaller local delicatessen in some cases are experiencing a resurgence of interest, Sainsbury's announced at the end of last year that they are closing all of their in-store deli counters. This will hopefully bring opportunities, and I have heard of at least four new delicatessen or speciality food shops opening in Central London in the past few months. For this trend to continue there needs to be a real focus on controlling overheads and in particular business rates and rental rates. As I have mentioned in the past, our business rate bill is currently around £1,000 per day. Just four years ago it was 50% less.

Once the pandemic is behind us a new method of calculating business rates and the interaction with rental values must be worked out if food shops are to survive and flourish.

The last 18 months have taught us retailers many things, and one of them is understanding the vital role that small food shops can play in local communities.

Nearly 50 years ago one of the most influential books on economics was published by Professor E. F. Shumacher entitled Small is Beautiful. Perhaps the theory is even more relevant today for speciality foods. Small, idiosyncratic, unique, character-driven food shops are beautiful for local communities – long may they survive and flourish.

> "I have heard of at least four new delicatessen or speciality food shops opening in Central London in the past few months. For this trend to continue there needs to be a real focus on controlling overheads and in particular business rates and rental rates"

7 characteristics of the 2021 shopper

Covid-19 shook up consumer behaviours and shifted priorities among shoppers. We've detailed seven key qualities of the modern customer that will help retailers succeed through the remainder of this year and beyond

1 THEY'RE OPTIMISTIC DESPITE COVID

There's no doubt that the last year of Covid-19 has resulted in unemployment and stretched finances for many. The latest unemployment data put the number of jobs lost since the onset of the pandemic at 813,000. However, recent research from Kantar revealed that six in 10 Britons now say their personal income is not affected by the pandemic.

2 THEY'RE WORKING FROM HOME

As the pandemic continues, many are still working from home. Even as more consumers return to their normal workplace, experts expect flexible working to be a legacy of Covid-19. One survey of 2,000 UK companies by CIPD found two-thirds of workplaces were developing a hybrid model so that workers would only spend part of their time in the office.

3 THEY'RE (STILL) SHOPPING ONLINE

Thought online shopping would be a flash in the pan after lockdown restrictions were eased? Experts believe that although many consumers will want to return to the shops, a number of Brits will still be keen to order food and drink online. Research from Barclaycard found that almost six in 10 Brits would continue to buy at least some of their groceries online even after all Covid-19 restrictions end.

4 THEY CARE ABOUT THE PLANET

There are a number of ways in which fine food independents can boost their shop's sustainability message – from leading the charge in sustainable packaging to flying the eco flag on social media. With more consumers shopping according to their values, it's never been more important to shout about the work your shop is doing, whether that's supporting a cause or stocking local products with low travel miles.

5 THEY'RE CASHLESS

Covid, Euromonitor says, was a catalyst for sanitation concerns that have driven society towards cashless payments. Contactless limits were increased to £45, and then again to £100 to support consumers and merchants during the pandemic.

6 THEY'RE HAPPY TO GO AL FRESCO

Although indoor dining has resumed in most areas of the UK, outdoor activities and events will continue to be encouraged. "Consumers still desire socialisation and human connection despite health hazards associated with large gatherings," Euromonitor explains.

7 THEY'RE SPENDING MORE ON FOOD

Fresh research from Piper Sandler found that food was Generation Z's top spending priority this spring. The survey, conducted between February and March, found almost a quarter of the spending of Gen Z shoppers in the US was on food. It's not only a trend among young Americans, however – Brits spent £15.2bn more on groceries during the pandemic, or around £4,800 per household on average.

FOODSERVICE WILL GROW BY **54%** THIS YEAR **VERSUS 2020**, BUT **HOME WORKING**, AT-HOME SOCIAL GATHERINGS AND FINANCIALLY STRETCHED SHOPPERS WILL **BOOST** THE VALUE OF **RETAIL**, WHICH IS UP **£1.8BN** ON 2020 AND **£14.5BN** ON 2019

IGD'S EATING IN VS DINING OUT REPORT



Winners of The Great Stock Giveaway revealed

Speciality Food and Woolcool's initiative has awarded seven retailers a free pallet of stock worth thousands of pounds

Seven retailers have won thousands of pounds worth of stock as The Great Stock Giveaway, an initiative from *Speciality Food* and Woolcool, concluded. The giveaway brought some of the best new products in the fine food industry to the shelves of independent retailers across the UK.

Beth McMurray of Three Trees Farm in Swindon, said her team was "so excited" to be announced as one of the winners. "As the owner of a small shop with a lot of demands on your time, it can be easy to fall into the trap of stocking the same products from the same suppliers," she said. "Winning The Great Stock Giveaway handed us the opportunity to see what is out there, without even leaving the building."

Dezi Dalton of Rye Deli in Rye, East Sussex, agreed, saying that the "broad and wonderful range of products" received have made their offering "that little more exciting".

"The dozens of parcels that arrived were full of unusual, top-quality products from ambient to chilled to frozen," Dezi said. "It has given us an invaluable opportunity to try products that we perhaps wouldn't have considered, such as WaxWrap or new vegan offerings, chilled drinks, sauces and confectionery." The new stock has not only refreshed the deli's shelves, but it has also helped Dezi identify new food and drink that customers are interested in, with some of the new products "flying off the shelves". She continued, "We are now more informed of more things that our customers will buy, and going forward we will continue to stock them! Winning this competition gave us a great relaunch opportunity following the recent restrictions," she added.

Karen Hennessy of The Udder Farm Shop in Dorset agreed that the new stock allowed the business to try products that they normally wouldn't have. "It is a brilliant way of introducing us to new suppliers. Due to the pandemic we have not been able to meet suppliers or go out and about and discover new ranges for ourselves," Karen said. "But winning The Great Stock Giveaway has allowed us to offer new lines to our customers we probably would not have selected for whatever reason, be it, price, space or 'not for our customers'. Very interesting, and an eye opener to be a bit more adventurous with our buying!"

Candice Fonseca of Delifonseca Dockside in Liverpool, said that around 80% of the items received were from producers that the team had not come across. "In the absence of trade shows, the competition was a great idea to introduce retailers to new brands and products," she said. "The sample range also really showcased the current trends, such as low/no alcohol beers and spirits or kombucha."

As a relatively new shop, Lucy Ponsonby of Yarnton Home Garden in Oxon said the prize is a "huge opportunity for Yarnton to look at and try a whole range of products we otherwise would not have considered". Lucy continued, "We love so many of the products in the prize and are still making our way through them. It's been a great opportunity for us to show and share with staff the foods that we are planning to list and we will certainly be listing lots of the delights in our farm shop."

After a challenging year, The Great Stock Giveaway aimed to foster connections between fine food retailers and producers. All chilled products were delivered in Woolcool's sustainable packaging.

Winners also included Manor Farm Shop & Farmhouse Kitchen in Lutterworth and Black Horse Fulmer in Buckinghamshire.



"Building a strong retailer-supplier



STUART GATES
THE SEASONED GROCER

A successful relationship between suppliers, buyers and shop managers is, in my opinion, simply about understanding and anticipating each other's needs and acting accordingly.

During my retail life there have been some buyers I know, and have worked with, that have enjoyed the "power" a buyer has over selecting suppliers. They like to be the winner in all negotiations, but by looking to develop a retailer-supplier relationship where both parties can win tends to be more productive and successful overall.

In my experience, artisan producers can often be in awe of meeting with a buyer and, as a result, agree to anything. The skill of the buyer is to handle these suppliers carefully and assess what is really possible. These days, as The Seasoned Grocer, a business mentoring service to artisan producers, I teach new producers that they need to understand who it is they are selling to. I encourage them to do research on the retailers they are interested in supplying. If producers understand the store buyer's needs then this starts the relationship along the right path. While it is not the role of a buyer or retailer to be a mentor, helping new suppliers to understand your shop's requirements and customers all goes to building up good relationships.

During my years of buying or managing a buying team, I have had the pleasure of nurturing and developing producers both in the UK and further afield, not by pressuring them, but giving them longer-term security with commitments – especially when developing new products. This meant I could bring exciting new products to my customers first. All good retailers want to be the first to find a great product.

Of course, this works both ways. I have known producers that decided to supply a multiple after the independent sector had put in the hard work developing the brand, but did not have the good manners and respect to let me know directly. No retailer likes to find out from a customer!

Before Covid, food service was a key growth area for some retailers. It was an area where suppliers that gave some thought to how they supply their products – i.e. larger packs, no glass, pre-sliced, etc – could endear themselves to store buyers. And, again, was a win-win for both parties as that helped with minimum orders.

When the Covid pandemic struck and lockdown occurred, takeaway, delivery and menu boxes became the order of the day. Many retailers who had food service in place had a standing start and producers offering solutions started to win accolades and, more importantly, orders.

In the past year retailers have had to review the traditional way they research products. Vital trade shows were cancelled. There were no easy options to interact with producers and, more importantly, hold and taste products. Often producers' websites were not up-to-date. It became important for producers to get their websites in order, making them easy-to-use and with easy to find contact information. For retailers, producers who had their stockists listed were useful as this helped build a picture of competition and demand.

Looking ahead, delivery, internet orders and the return of food service will be key areas to balance for everybody. What worked in the past may not be right for the future. Tastes change. What people want to buy, how it's presented, how it will be sold or delivered – all is open to change. One thing you can be sure of, though, is that there will always be new products. Having the reputation of being a retailer that is open to new relationships will stand you in good stead.

The point of building good relationships with your suppliers is to allow you to consistently offer great produce to your customers. Encourage your suppliers to come forward with any new product ideas they may have. Furthermore, good retail-supplier relationships can mean a smoother work experience for you. If your suppliers know exactly what is required and expected, then when issues arise (and we all know they will at some point) your suppliers will have the confidence to alert you before any blip becomes a headache. And that can only help you with your ultimate relationship... with your customers.

> "What people want to buy, how it's presented, how it will be sold or delivered – all is open to change"

Sustainable Packaging

From refill concepts to compostable containers, we look into the ways the food and drink sector is driving innovation in eco-friendly packaging



Consumers prioritise sustainable packaging despite Covid

In the early days of the pandemic, there were fears across the food and drink industry that a growing concern over health and hygiene would eclipse consumers' desires to cut down on single-use plastics. But despite the changes in consumer behaviour, fewer than one in three consumers de-prioritised sustainable packaging due to Covid-19, according to Trivium Packaging's 2021 Global Buying Green Report.

Two-thirds of consumers still believe it is important to buy products in recyclable packaging, Trivium found. Meanwhile, 83% of consumers among younger generations showed a willingness to pay more for sustainable packaging. At the same time, products marketed as sustainable were found to grow more than seven times faster than products that were not.

This data paints a clear picture: consumers want packaging that's good for the earth, and brands and retailers that help them reach these goals will succeed. "There is a huge demand for sustainable food and drink packaging," said Danny Leach of packaging firm Dpack. "When 89% of shoppers stay loyal to brands that share their values, it makes sense the companies would want to meet this demand with packaging that is better for the environment. We will likely see this trend increasing too, with a plastic tax due to begin in 2022, sustainable packaging might not just become the sensible option, but the cost-effective option, too," he told *Speciality Food*.

"We hope we can lead by example"



Charlie Hodson of Hodson & Co Deli

"When we opened Hodson & Co, our vision was to offer a fabulous, fresh product with service from days past. Days when we knew our customers' names, knew what they liked and what

> "Independent retailers will always be able to offer a different, more personalised offer due to the nature of their businesses, so there is plenty of opportunity for everyone to offer refills to their customers"
>
> CATHERINE CONWAY, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF UNPACKAGED

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they required from us as a cheese room. It was not long before we were asked to source and find herbs and spices. From Kaffir lime leaves to beetroot powder, curry leaves to ground mango... sourcing was the easy part. But we then spent what felt like an eternity working out how to bring the product to the consumer with the least packaging and in the freshest possible way. Now we offer more than 100 herbs and spices in tamper-proof plastic air fresh pots, and to reduce plastic waste, we encourage our customers to come back with the original pot, which we then refill at a 20% discount, which by all accounts is going very well. The feedback has been amazing, but most importantly for us, it's about the generations to follow. We know we cannot change everyone's thinking when it comes to plastic waste, but we hope we can lead by example, just a little, and play our small part."

"Shoppers would gladly pay a little extra"



Sean Mason, co-founder of Two Farmers

"There is a clear shift in shopping priorities of today's consumer. Shoppers are now acutely aware of the negative impact caused by unsustainable packaging and are consciously taking steps to reduce their carbon footprint. They are actively seeking out independent brands and supporting local products as part of their shopping experience, and would gladly pay a little extra to ensure their purchases are sustainably packaged. This demand will only continue to rise as people look for new ways to move towards a sustainable future."

75% OF CONSUMERS ARE OPEN TO BUYING REFILLABLE PRODUCTS, BUT ONLY A THIRD HAVE SEEN THEM ON SALE. THREE IN 10 SAID DIFFICULTY FINDING REFILLABLE PRODUCTS WAS THE MAIN REASON THEY HAD NOT PURCHASED ANY IN THE LAST YEAR

SOURCE: WHICH

"Consumer response has been incredible"



Tom Amery, MD of The Watercress Company

"Consumer response for our [biodegradable paper packaging] has been incredible since we launched. The natural, biodegradable and British-made packaging really fits with the message of provenance and sustainability with our watercress production, and our customers have been really impressed. The return to a traditional product delivered in modern and natural packaging has filled a niche and market demand out there. It's been a long time in development and completely customer driven and focused."

"We need to rethink packaging for food to go"



Sohrab Kazemahvazi, senior vice president of formed fiber at Stora Enso

"Switching to renewably sourced packaging alternatives is just one small change for businesses but a substantial change to our plastic waste contribution. It may seem like one small piece of a very large puzzle, but its impact should not be underestimated. Every change we make toward a cleaner, greener, and more sustainable future is a step in the right direction in the fight against climate change. Fine food retailers hold the power to drive that change."

HAVE YOU USED A ZERO WASTE REFILL STATION?

We worked with our sister publication *Great British Food* to understand consumer sentiment towards refill concepts. Here's what their Twitter followers had to say.

Yes, love it!	36%
Yes, wouldn't again	4%
No, but I'd like to	36%
No, I don't plan to	24%

NEWS IN BRIEF

10P CARRIER BAG CHARGE TAKES EFFECT IN ENGLAND

The single-use plastic carrier bag charge was increased from 5p to 10p and extended to all businesses in England from 21st May. The charge has seen a 95% reduction in plastic bag sales in major supermarkets since it was first introduced in 2015. Before the charge was introduced, the average household used around 140 single-use bags per year. Now, the average household only uses four. It is estimated that the use of carrier bags will decrease by between 70% and 80% in small and medium-sized businesses.

NEW REFILL LABELS INTRODUCED BY OPRL

'Refill or return' labels are being introduced by OPRL, the On-Pack Recycling Label, with the backing of major supermarkets and suppliers to help customers understand which products can be refilled. The labels include versions which say: refill at home, refill in store, or return to refill. "The growth of refillable packaging is an exciting development," said Jane Bevis, chair of OPRL. "The major shift in consumer behaviour needed to make refill systems successful has to be underpinned by clear and consistent labelling, which consumers can put their trust in."

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New Chocolate Hall opens in Harrods

Iconic luxury department store Harrods has opened a new 'theatre of chocolate' on its ground floor as part of a four-year makeover of its food halls. The revamped Chocolate Hall builds on Harrods' 150-year history of selling the finest in confectionery treats.

Maison Pierre Marcolini, first established in Brussels in 1995 by renowned chocolatier Pierre Marcolini, has unveiled a new counter in the space, which has been restored and preserved to reflect the original Edwardian architecture. Maison Pierre Marcolini has created a special, exclusive Crème Brûlée macaron to celebrate the opening.

"Harrods is, for me, a magical location for gastronomy. When I go there, I want to buy everything because of the quality of their products," Pierre Marcolini told *Speciality Food*. "Harrods food department defines English excellence. For Maison Pierre Marcolini, Harrods is of course an international window, and we are very proud and honoured to be there."



Pandemic start-up food businesses set to drive jobs boom

Covid-19 threw many industries into upheaval over 2020 and 2021, but the food and drink sector has shown a canny ability to adapt when crisis strikes. Start-ups have inspired innovation in the sector, and young entrepreneurs kick-started hundreds of new food businesses.

In fact, a record number of new businesses were started in the food and drink sector in 2020, according to The Accountancy Partnership, and new research from the group predicts that these businesses will help drive the Covid recovery in the coming years by creating thousands of new jobs. A quarter of out of home food entrepreneurs who started a business during the pandemic – more than 2,200 – said they will be hiring one or more employees as their business grows in the coming months and years, creating an influx in new employment opportunities, the report, *Boom or Bust: Beginning a Business in a Pandemic*, found.

> "The majority of start-ups that have begun operating in this area during the pandemic have ambitious growth and hiring plans which will be critical to the wider sector's post-Covid recovery. After a year of furlough and closures, it is exciting to know that a wave of new opportunities is on the horizon"
>
> **LEE MURPHY, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE ACCOUNTANCY PARTNERSHIP**



What's next for e-commerce?

After a year of growing online sales, *Speciality Food* discovers whether the digital trend is here to stay

COMMENTATORS



WILL DOCKER
BALGOVE LARDER



CIARAN BOLLARD
KOOOMO



ROSIE JACK
BOWHOUSE



Since Covid-19 first hit the UK, e-commerce has broken one record high after another. In February, online retail sales rose by nearly 70% year-on-year, the IMRG Capgemini Online Retail Index found. What's more, the proportion spent online has increased to more than 36% – the highest on record – according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The food sector has seen particularly high growth – a whopping 141% year-on-year in February, the ONS said. With the economy slowly but surely reopening and footfall to physical retailers returning, what's in store for e-commerce in the 'new normal'?

A lifeline

While many fine food retailers only made the move to online sales during the pandemic, for Will Docker of St Andrews-based Balgove Larder, e-commerce wasn't entirely new. "Our online shop had been running for six years, with the majority of our sales coming from national and domestic tourists returning home having visited Balgove Larder in person." However, during the pandemic, online orders became a "vital lifeline for our business", Will says. "Part of the success came from our adaptability. We were able to convert the café space into a packing area with same day local deliveries and next day national delivery."

With Balgove able to guarantee delivery during a time when larger supermarkets couldn't, putting resources behind its e-commerce operations was a no brainer. But now that the multiples have rebounded from their supply issues and customers are increasingly feeling confident about returning to physical shops, there are question marks around what will happen next.

Ciaran Bollard, CEO of e-commerce platform Kooomo, believes that there will indeed be a "dip" in online sales, but he continues, "e-commerce is undoubtedly here to stay". Home delivery expert ParcelHero agrees that there is no going back for e-commerce, with nearly 50% of shoppers having no intention to return to their pre-Covid high street shopping habits. And despite queues forming outside bricks and mortar shops on 12th April when restrictions were eased, ParcelHero said there was no noticeable falling back in online retail bookings.

Data from Mintel also backs up this trend, with the market research group finding that 90% of Brits plan to keep shopping for their groceries online once the peak of Covid-19 passes. Meanwhile, just 5% of shoppers said they would stop shopping online. The proportion of Brits who shop online has risen from 50% in 2019 to 59% today, representing the highest level of growth in the past decade.

As the market rebalances, Mintel predicts that Britons will spend £19.4bn on online grocery shopping this year, down 13% compared to 2020. However, e-commerce will benefit from a "legacy boost" from the pandemic, with Mintel forecasting that the online grocery market will be worth £22.4bn by 2025, up nearly £5bn over pre-pandemic forecasts.



"The past year has highlighted the undeniable importance of e-commerce," Ciaran said. "Retailers looking to remain competitive post-Covid must therefore continue to bolster their e-commerce offerings in line with current demand."

Balancing act

Establishing this careful balance between bricks and mortar and e-commerce will be an important step for every business. Ciaran's advice for independents is to take a step back to consider what's next for the digital side of their business. "Now is the time for independent food and drink retailers to ensure their e-commerce platform continues to remain competitive and promote a truly omnichannel offering. We have seen retailers overcome their lockdown struggles by implementing omnichannel features such as click and collect, in-store returns and so on," he says. "It therefore seems a perfect blend of the physical and online shopping experiences may be the trend to watch going forward."

Ciaran says consumers are now used to these "flexible shopping journeys, meaning retailers should seek to maintain this in order to build loyalty and boost sales. This will be particularly critical for independent retailers, who should focus on creating the optimum omnichannel experience to compete with the likes of e-commerce giants such as Amazon."

Like many fine food retailers, Will is prioritising his bricks and mortar shop post-lockdown – but he expects online business to continue to thrive. "Looking forward, our main hope is to be able to welcome people to Balgove once more to experience the destination and local food community, but the online store has become an integral facet of the business," he says. "We are expecting a slight drop in online trade as restrictions lift, but our online store will remain a key department and continue to provide for local and national customers."

Rosie Jack, manager of Bowhouse, a food hub in Fife, launched an e-commerce website, Bowhouse Link, for local traders during the Covid-19 pandemic. "As soon as we launched the website with local traders and businesses based at Bowhouse, we had support from local shoppers," she says. Rosie is also discovering ways to integrate online and physical experiences. "We are welcoming the return of our market weekends, which will run in tandem with Bowhouse Link, allowing shoppers to pre-order items before collecting at the markets or selecting contactless delivery," Rosie says.

"Ultimately," Ciaran concludes, "retailers should be wise to the fact that consumers have picked up new habits when it comes to online shopping. And with these habits here to stay, it is important for merchants to think innovatively about how they can enhance their services," he says.

3 TIPS FOR PERFECTING YOUR OMNICHANNEL OFFERING

Kooomo's Ciaran Bollard offers his advice for balancing online and offline sales

- Tools such as stock synchronisation, real-time inventory updates and online and offline loyalty point collection will be critical, as well as unified customer service channels. For example, merchants must ensure all content across their site is accurate and up to date in real time.
- Offering multi-channel options will also be key, including click and collect and purchase from mobile apps, marketplaces and social media – as many channels as possible.
- Make sure all communications are as accurate as possible to reinforce a positive customer experience. It is imperative to keep communications with customers timely and update them as the situation changes.

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Trio of new jams announced by Hawkshead Relish

Hawkshead Relish, the renowned producer of small-batch conserves, has added three new conserves to its lineup.

Each conserve is made without any artificial colourings, flavourings or preservatives, and all are gluten-free, nut-free and suitable for vegans.

The new Blackberry & Apple Jam is rich, dark and fruity with a soft set, making it perfect for use in baking. Rhubarb & Ginger Jam offers a delicious combination of tart rhubarb and gently spicy ginger and is ideal for serving atop yoghurt or over ice cream. Meanwhile, Strawberry & Rhubarb Jam is packed with strawberries, rhubarb and redcurrant for added depth of flavour and is delicious served as part of an afternoon tea.

Mark Whitehead MBE, managing director of Hawkshead Relish, said, "I wanted to create a selection of jams that would complement our existing range and provide home cooks with some interesting flavour combinations to experiment with in their baking and dessert creations, as well as providing a little lift to people's breakfast routine. Hopefully, we've achieved that with these three distinctively different flavour combinations, which firmly complement our existing collection of jams and conserves."

hawksheadrelish.com





Pasquale's Peppers set to add fragrant fire to storecupboards

A new range of olive oil-drenched chilli peppers designed to be cut directly into dishes according to the diner's preferences has been launched into the market by Pasquale's Peppers. The range has been released in an effort to demonstrate the spicy and fragrant qualities of Italian cuisine which are often overlooked.

Included in the range are Rosso Maturo, a blend of fragrant Extra Virgin Olive Oil and sun-ripened Lazzaretto peperoncini for a punchy heat and deep savouriness; Verde Giovane, for which the peperoncini are picked from the plant when still green for a gentle, aromatic heat and pronounced peppery flavour; and Scarlatto Dolce, a gently fiery spreadable 'extra jam' made using sweet red peppers and Lazzaretto chillies for a sticky and sweet condiment.

The three varieties are partnered in the range by a chilli jam.

Serena Mariani, founder of Pasquale's Peppers, says, "These preserved chillies and jams are truly an asset to any table or dish. They're quietly fiery, but also salty and flavourful and create that beautiful umami lift. When I was little, they were always on the family table, ready to perk up whatever simple Italian food we were eating. There's nothing quite like them on the market right now, so I am thrilled be able to bring them to the UK for the first time."

pasqualespeppers.com

Ground coffee, in bags. Why didn't we think of them before?



Available from your local wholesaler

Tracklements expands Special Edition options

Wiltshire-based condiment experts Tracklements have launched a vibrant new addition to its Special Edition range of products.

Lively Lemon Pickle is inspired by Indian cuisine and nineteenth century explorers, and is packed full of lemons, sultanas, ginger, garlic, whole mustard seeds and chillies.



It is a surprisingly versatile addition to store cupboards and will add a zesty punch to chicken, fish and vegetable dishes. Plus, it is both gluten-free and suitable for vegans.

Guy Tullberg, managing director of Tracklements, said, "This is my new go-to for a jaw droppingly good summer chook, just mix with butter and spread under the skin before roasting and you have yourself a light and sunshiny crowd pleaser."

tracklements.co.uk

Two new chutneys created by Stokes



Suffolk-based fine condiment producer, Stokes has added two new chutneys to its range of condiments: Spiced Green Tomato & Apple Chutney and Beer Chutney.

The producer's new Spiced Green Tomato & Apple Chutney is a dark and rich blend of chunky spiced tomato and Bramley apple, combined with a special blend of spices. The Stokes team suggests stirring it into cream cheese for a sandwich filling and using a spoonful to add an aromatic twist to homemade curries.

Beer Chutney is made using locally sourced beer, crunchy root vegetables, apples and a warming blend of spices. Its makers say it's delicious partnered with homemade sausage rolls or Camembert.

Rick Sheepshanks, founder of Stokes Sauces, said, "We are delighted with our new chutneys. The refined combination of quality ingredients and locally sourced beer; and the spiced acidity of green tomatoes and dark Muscovado sweetness, showcase the balanced complexity of fine chutneys."

stokessauces.co.uk



Retail-ready loaves from Bertinet Bakery

Respected artisan bakery Bertinet Bakery has launched a new-to-market artisan sliced sourdough recipe which offers a 'sandwich friendly' texture that stays fresher for longer without the use of additives or preservatives.

Available in Seeded, White and Malted Wheat sliced variants in 500g and 1kg sized packs, the new recipe brings the nutritional benefits of sourdough to the everyday bread consumer without compromising on quality or the business's natural credentials and is made using just flour, water and sea salt.

Dean Arbel, managing director or Bertinet Bakery, said, "We have listened to our customers and the recipe has been carefully evolved to meet their desire for a healthy, better-quality bread that works as well for sandwiches as it does for toast.

"Shoppers are turning away from artificial preservatives that give unnatural length of shelf life. At Bertinet Bakery, we are passionate about a clean, natural and more honest bread that offers real health benefits – but let's not forget – importantly delicious taste!"

bertinetbakery.com

Fentimans announce launch of Light range

Creators of botanically-brewed drinks since 1905, Fentimans have announced the launch of its new Light range – a selection of low-sugar, all-natural beverages containing few calories and boasting the same great taste the business is known for.

Available in three bestselling flavours – Rose Lemonade, Sparkling Elderflower and Sparkling Raspberry – the new Light variants offer health-conscious shoppers with a satisfying way to enjoy their favourite drinks without compromising on their health goals.

Neil Donachie, marketing manager at Fentimans, said, "Our award-winning artisanal beverages use the finest natural ingredients and are made using our time-honoured botanical brewing technique. It takes seven days to make our drinks and the process hasn't changed much in over one hundred years, with the knowledge and expertise being passed on from generation to generation of the Fentimans family."

fentimans.com



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COMMENTATORS



MATTHEW BLAKELY
BLAKE AND TATE



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NEEMA FOOD



SOLE NASI
THE FRESH PASTA COMPANY



SALLY ASSINDER
GAROFALO PASTA



MAUREEN SUAN NEO
NONYA SECRETS



PERI EAGLETON
SEGGIANO

TRAVEL THROUGH THE TASTE BUDS

Home cooking is poised to remain as a stand-in for far-flung travel this summer. Authentic storecupboard staples, such as pasta and cooking sauces, provide a convenient and versatile answer



The changes that Covid-19 inspired in consumer behaviour over the past year have brought opportunities as well as challenges for independent retailers. One of the most fruitful positive effects has been the discovery among more and more consumers of the joy of cooking.

The likelihood of British consumers making their own dinner increased by almost 10% after the pandemic hit, according to research from consultancy Bain & Company. Around 40% of consumers said they would be eating home cooked meals more often. "Since early last year when we were ordered to stay at home and cancel our much-loved holidays, we found our customers had more free time to experiment in the kitchen, which, for many, ignited a passion for cooking," says Matthew Blakely of the online fine food shop Blake and Tate. "As culinary skills improve, we naturally want to use the best ingredients from across the world, and businesses like us want to make them more accessible," he continues.

Consumers are looking to be more adventurous in the kitchen and try new flavours that transport them around the world. "People miss travelling and want to experience this through food," adds Rose Yombo-Djema, founder and CEO of Neema Food, the maker of authentic African chilli pastes.

"Taking a culinary journey to explore a holiday destination is a great way for consumers to discover new flavours and 'travel' whilst being at home," Rose continues. Quality storecupboard favourites, such as pastas and cooking sauces, can elevate meals in a matter of minutes, while products with a strong link to traditional cuisines around the world will help customers satisfy their curiosity around new flavours without ever stepping foot outside the kitchen.

The joy of Italian cuisine

Italy is a firm favourite destination for British travellers, and it is no secret why. "Italy scores high for food, heritage and traditional products when it comes to travel experiences," says Sole Nasi, brand guardian at The Fresh Pasta Company. "For decades, it has certainly been a destination spot for tourists who enjoy memorable and palatable escapades. Given the current Covid travel restrictions, we now all long more than ever to relive these experiences at home."

This is where fine food shops come in. "Although we cannot change the course of the British weather, we can enjoy the food and wine typical from the places where we love spending our holidays and replicate our favourite moments in our own way at home," Sole tells *Speciality Food*. Many delis and food halls are experts in sourcing the finest ingredients from small producers across the Mediterranean. "We feel blessed to live in a country where Italian and Continental food is widely available, and therefore can allow ourselves to travel throughout Italy led by our taste buds," Sole says.

"Italian produce is known as the best there is," adds Matthew, "and once they've been tasted, it's hard to go back to supermarket-standard quality." Indeed, for retailers, Italian pastas and cooking sauces can act as a gateway for shoppers into purchasing other quality ingredients. Thanks to the familiarity and versatility of pasta, it is something even the most hesitant of home cooks will feel comfortable preparing, and authentic ingredients will help them taste the difference.

Even as the taste for quality home cooked meals has grown, convenience will always be a winning recipe. As we progress into the 'new normal' the convenience factor will become ever more important as consumers venture out of their homes again. Blending transformational tastes with simplicity makes pasta an ideal choice for mealtime. "A dish of fresh pasta is easy and quick to prepare," Sole says. "It can be served with butter and grated Parmesan, as well as with a more elaborate vegetable, cream or meat-based sauce. It will delight both someone looking for a light supper or the one craving a heartier meal when pairing it up with a heavier sauce. It provides the perfect dish to eat al fresco or by candlelight. It is light, warming, filling and wonderfully tasty."

Pasta's winning qualities are numerous: convenient, versatile and full of flavour. It is a beloved dish in the UK for a reason. Yet as Sally Assinder, UK marketing manager for Garofalo Pasta states, "not all pasta is created equally".

"Quality Italian pasta with a high protein level can make all the difference to a simple pasta dish. Look for a protein content of 12% or above and you know the pasta will remain al dente and not overcook even if a minute or two is added to the cooking time," she explains. Authenticity is just as important for sauces. "Using a jar of pesto with ingredients that are the same as the authentic Italian recipe can make all the difference to a simple plate of pesto pasta. From a quick look at the ingredients on the side



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of some jars of Pesto Alla Genovese you find extra virgin olive oil subbed with sunflower oil or the addition of cashew flour in place of pine nuts – ingredients not found in the original recipe," Sally says. "Using pesto with ingredients that match the original Italian recipe always tastes better."

Inspire new tastes

Once consumers get a taste for creating travel-inspired dishes, they will no doubt want to go even further afield, and an array of authentic cooking sauces can help them do just that. According to Maureen Suan Neo, founder of Nonya Secrets southeast Asian sauces, consumers today have a greater awareness of what's out there in terms of cuisine. "An increased appetite for exotic, long-distance travel has to be a primary factor, as well as a whole array of food-related TV shows," she says. Brits will "want to relive their gastronomic experiences without that disappointing 'doesn't taste the same' factor – which is precisely where authentic, impeccably crafted sauces like Nonya Secrets come into their own," she explains.

> "Taking a culinary journey to explore a holiday destination is a great way for consumers to discover new flavours and 'travel' whilst being at home"

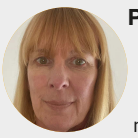
Like authentic Italian cooking sauces, Maureen says southeast Asian sauces are an important storecupboard staple. "They offer gourmet-standard meals at minimal cost and effort. A huge amount of work goes into each jar, as well as a vast array of ingredients – thereby saving the buyer not just time but money."

From entertaining unexpected guests post-pandemic to preparing a quick weeknight meal for the family, cooking sauces are essential ingredients for the busy consumer. Yet for many, the newfound passion for home cooking will drive experimentation in the kitchen, and once again authentic sauces offer inroads. "With restaurants being closed during the pandemic, people have rediscovered the joy of cooking at home and spent more time in the kitchen experimenting with new flavours," says Neema's Rose. "I see this trend continuing well after Covid-19 fades as health-conscious consumers will cook more to have control over the ingredients they put in their meals," she continues.

For Blake and Tate's Matthew, quality pastas and cooking sauces are all about offering consumers a chance to taste the passion, love and effort that has gone into creating traditional foods over the years. "You can quite literally taste the history with every bite."

ITALIAN INSIGHTS

Sally Assinder of Garofalo Pasta offers retailers her top stocking tips



PASTA

"Create interest and choice for your customers. With so many pasta shapes to choose from, my suggestion would be to build a range thinking like an Italian. Divide the shapes into short cuts, long cuts, soup cuts and special cuts. The task becomes more manageable and shapes can be chosen in each area to create the choice and interest."

SAUCES

"Search out the brands with products that use premium ingredients. Take a read of the ingredients list and question things like the variety and source of the tomatoes in a pasta sauce, or ask yourself what is the quality of a pesto that uses sunflower oil instead of olive oil and contains no Parmigiano Reggiano. Choose only the sauces with top quality ingredients in them."

SPOTLIGHT ON: GLUTEN-FREE PASTA

Peri Eagleton, co-founder of Seggiano



Unheard of outside specialist stores not long ago, gluten-free foods are now stocked in every high street supermarket.

Are more of us developing wheat intolerances, or are we simply becoming better at diagnosing an old problem? Mounting evidence points to the former and agro-industrial practices may be to blame...

Cross-bred, modified wheat strains, resistant to pests but harder to digest, dominate the fields of industrial nations. Commercial grain is exposed to chemical pesticides in cultivation and storage then high temperatures in processing. Glyphosate and cadmium have been found in leading pasta brands, perhaps a consequence of these common (mal)practices. A boon to the agro-industry, this focus on yield seems to come at a steep cost to consumer gut biomes.

Artisan pasta made at low temperature from organic durum wheat is slightly easier to digest and has better nutrition and taste than industrial pasta – but still contains gluten.

Pasta made from ancient grain is more digestible and offers an interesting alternative.

Spelt is an old favourite, and Kamut®, a grain rediscovered by a WWII airman in an Egyptian tomb, contains higher protein, vitamin, mineral, amino acid and lipid content than modern counterparts.

Recent experiments with gluten-free grain blends have yielded fantastic results. Our artisan gourmet range uses rice, teff, buckwheat, corn and quinoa flours in varying ratios and is made into long cuts without binding agents. These pastas are delicious and cook well, without losing form or becoming stodgy.

Lentil and pea gluten-free pastas have a particular taste profile distinct to wheat pasta, but are delicious in their own right, high in protein and popular for plant-based diets.

Our latest range, Seggiano Unbelievably Gluten-Free pasta, was developed for inconsolable Italian coeliacs, using only corn, rice and spring water. It's so light and tastes so unbelievably close to the real thing, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it was.

The gluten-free pasta market has come a long way. Coeliacs rejoice!



COMMENTATORS



INEKE NUGTEREN
NOURISH



MATT WHELAN
FIELDFARE



KAITLIN KAMP
MINTEL

A COMFORTING INDULGENCE

Home baking and self-treating has fuelled demand for puddings and desserts. *Speciality Food* looks at what's next for the sector

During the home baking explosion in 2020, flour, eggs and yeast flew off the shelves as Brits whipped up everything from banana bread to sourdough loaves to fill their time in lockdown. While a newfound love for homemade sweet treats blossomed, this year, as the economy reopens and consumers fill their schedules with activities and events once again, the scales will likely shift back towards prepared desserts, cakes, puddings and pastries. Thanks to the modern consumers' ever-evolving tastes, independent retailers should take a fresh look at their shelves to ensure they're providing for all their customers' sweet-tooth desires.

Balancing health...

It is no secret that health and wellness have been growing concerns among consumers during the Covid-19 pandemic. "I do think that a shift to healthier options has already taken place during lockdown, but certainly, as we exit this phase the momentum in this area will continue to grow," explains Ineke Nugteren, founder of Nourish, which creates healthy sweet snacks and desserts.

In a recent blog post for market researcher Mintel, Kaitlin Kamp, a consumer insights analyst, writes that shoppers will be "hoping to take a step back from indulgent foods post-pandemic to focus on their health". In order to keep sweet products on consumers' radars, retailers can expect to see brands beginning to focus on "[providing] permissibility through nutritional improvements, such as no added sugar formulations or added protein, or simple ingredient lists," Kaitlin says.

Ineke believes dietary trends will lead this area. "Both plant-based as well as low-carb are set to grow," she says. "Desserts that contain clean fats but low sugars will combine both paleo, low-carb, and keto trends. The area to watch is the combination of healthy options that taste and look indulgent and are sustainability sourced. This is an area where I believe we will see growth."

... with indulgence

Even as many Brits shake the dust from their trainers, a number of consumers are still buying puddings and desserts to feed their wellbeing, with comfort at the top of the agenda. "Indulgent foods are still seen as a luxury and something to treat yourself with," says Ineke. Research by Mintel found that more than two in five people purchasing ice cream and frozen novelty foods were doing so for comfort, while a third were buying for stress relief.





"Emotional functionality can also speak to wellness by showing consumers how frozen treats can aid in their mental and emotional wellbeing," Kaitlin says. Ineke agrees, explaining that products combining luxury desserts with functional ingredients offer customers something they can "eat and feel good about".

Frozen food specialist Fieldfare meets the twin demands for health and indulgence by creating a range with something to please everyone – from those looking for a simple treat of frozen fruit and a sweet pastry to larger desserts such as cheesecake or roulade, which are perfect for occasions. "We have a wide range of loose frozen fruits that are ideal for a variety of desserts, as well as some larger sharing desserts," says MD Matt Whelan. Plus, its innovative 'pick your own' format means portion control is a much simpler affair. "We have an extensive range of individually portioned pastries perfect for everyday treats, such as our Croissants, Pain Au Chocolat and our brand new Portuguese Tarts," Matt says. "At Fieldfare, we are big believers in people being able to take what they want but not more than they need so, you can have a treat (which we all deserve) but don't feel you have to finish a whole pack! This is something that we will continue to develop post-pandemic."

Frozen desserts and pastries also have the benefit of a longer shelf life, less waste and convenience – making them an ideal product for consumers who want to have a comforting treat at the ready. "All of this helps consumers enjoy fantastic quality products when they want them and helps people manage their food waste," Matt explains.

Going retro

As consumers seek comfort from desserts and puddings, nostalgic foods have made a stunning comeback, with everything from dried trifle to banoffee pie on the rise. Products that can cater to these reassuring flavours are worth a second look. "Our Summer Fruit Mix and California Fruit Salad are perfect for nostalgic desserts including Eton Mess and trifle, which are predicted to be the desserts for 2021," Matt says.

As the trend for nostalgic flavours goes on, Ineke believes brands will refresh classic recipes to create something that the modern consumer will appreciate. "I think we are seeing remakes of traditional desserts that have many fillers, added sugars, and long lists of ingredients, being reinvented to contain functional ingredients such as nuts, freeze-dried fruits, raw cacao." For retailers, walking the line between health and indulgence with familiar flavours that soothe the soul will be the key to cashing in on puddings and desserts this year.

> "Eton Mess and trifle are predicted to be the desserts for 2021"



COMMENTATORS



MATT HODGETTS
PETER'S YARD



DAWN READE
ISLAND BAKERY



DANIEL SMITH
STAG BAKERIES



STEPHEN HODGETTS
OLINA'S BAKEHOUSE



2021'S 6 TYPES OF BISCUIT EATER

Discover how to cater your sweet and savoury biscuit selection to six different consumer types – from home workers to health gurus, and everything in between

Britain has always been a nation of biscuit eaters – in fact, Lizzie Collingham's *The Biscuit: the History of a Very British Indulgence* revealed that here in the UK we spend £8 million on biscuits every single day. Throughout the pandemic, this trend has only accelerated with a growing desire for nostalgic products, indulgence and comforting snacks boosting demand for sweet biscuits, while savoury biscuits are riding the wave of the home working and health trends. Public Health England reported that the number of biscuits purchased rose by 12% in the year to June 2020.

New product development plus a firm focus on provenance among fine food brands ensures that tradition and innovation are always blending in this market, and by 2025, research by Industry ARC predicts that it will reach a value of $129 billion. While huge opportunities clearly exist, it is also a diverse sector fuelled by numerous and sometimes contradictory consumer demands. Here, we look at seven of the main consumer types for biscuits and how retailers can delight each through a tailored product offering.

1 The savoury snacker

The market for savoury biscuits is growing quickly, presenting opportunities for retailers to refresh their shelves with the latest launches. "Consumer buying trends are leaning increasingly towards savoury snacking," explains Matt Hodgetts, UK and export sales manager at Peter's Yard. With Peter's Yard having won the title of Best Biscuit Brand across both sweet and savoury categories for the last two years in a row, it's clear that retailers will not want to miss out on savoury snacking. "This is not only growing at a faster rate than sweet biscuits, but I believe is offering more innovation," Matt adds.

New product developments include launches from the likes of Island Bakery. While the business was known for its shortbreads and chocolate-dipped melts produced on the Isle of Mull, the brand has jumped on the savoury trend with products steeped in local flavours, from traditional Scottish oatcakes to cheese biscuits which are made using Isle of Mull Cheese's award-winning product. "We've been planning to make savoury biscuits for a long time," says co-founder Dawn Reade. "In 20 years of producing sweet, organic biscuits, we have occasionally met people who profess not to have a sweet tooth, and who prefer to indulge in more savoury treats." Cheese biscuits were an obvious choice as Joe Reade's brothers Brendan and Garth run Isle of Mull Cheese. "Our cheese biscuits will suit those people, and those who like to enjoy food with a great provenance, and no-holds-barred ingredients," she says. Matt believes that savoury biscuits will only continue to grow in demand as advertising regulations come into play for food or drink that is high in fat, salt or sugar, and the importance of healthier, nutritious and functional snacks grows. "I believe



that savoury snacks cater to these trends a lot more effectively."

2 The cheeseboard expert

Savoury biscuits are also perfectly suited to cater to customers with a desire to experiment with flavourful pairings and create winning combinations, whether for a quick snack, a sharing platter or a starter to an elaborate meal. Savoury biscuits' versatility is their strength, as they are well-suited to an array of flavours. Stag Bakeries have designed their biscuits to be the ideal partner for a wide range of products. "Our Water Biscuits have been designed with the cheeseboard in mind, and they pair well with any kind of cheese," says Daniel Smith of Stag Bakeries. "The biscuits are also excellent carriers for meat, fish, or pâté, making them a versatile option for canapés. We love trying to match up the different flavours we make with all kinds of toppings." His favourite combination? Seaweed Water Biscuits with cream cheese and smoked salmon.

Olina's Bakehouse offers a similar proposition – but while its new Black Pepper Wafer Crackers are ultra-thin in order to let accompanying cheeses sing, another firm favourite, its Seeded Toasts, offer something a bit different. "The products are double baked, giving them a crisp texture and flavour, and the unique recipes contain a high percentage of fruit and nuts blended with honey and Greek yogurt," says Stephen Hodgetts, UK sales manager at Olina's Bakehouse.

With exciting flavours of savoury biscuits hitting the market, retailers can get creative with pairings, making this segment a prime target of the upsell. "From a retail perspective, it's important to note that savoury snacks attract an increased basket spend as there are a wide range of accompanying products to sell alongside, like cheese, dips and spreads," Matt says. Indeed, by strategically displaying savoury biscuits with these products, shop owners can easily spark the imagination of their customers.



Daniel says the team at Stag has found this to be an effective sales strategy for savoury biscuits in order to provide inspiration to shoppers.

What's more, these displays can take on a position in the seasonal calendar, with some pairings suited to summer picnics, while others will be fit for the winter holidays. "We have found that different flavours come into their own in different seasons of the year. Cheeseboard selection boxes are a great option all year round, but we find they really shine during the festive season," Daniel explains.

3 The health guru

A growing focus on health is influencing trends across the food and drink sector, and biscuits are no exception. Sweet biscuits in particular are being held to a higher standard when it comes to their health credentials. Brands are responding to this by creating products that fit with the health and lifestyle goals of the modern consumer. Mintel found that product launches with 'no sugar added' claims are growing in Europe, with the UK leading the way. An analysis of the sector from Research and Markets says that new products are continually being introduced with stronger health credentials, including free-from options. In particular, gluten-free biscuit products have risen "considerably" across the global market. But consumers aren't only scouring packaging for gluten-free labels. They are also looking out for key nutrient-rich ingredients, such as oats and nuts, Research and Markets said. Island Bakery created its oatcakes as both a nod to Scottish tradition and also as a healthier option for the range, combining the nutritional benefits of both oats and extra virgin olive oil, Dawn says, adding, "Both are known to contribute to good heart and cholesterol control as part of a balanced diet."

According to Euromonitor, it's not only the domain for savoury – sweet biscuits also show strong potential for health positionings in the UK, including the use of immunity-boosting ingredients. But a product doesn't have to boast functional ingredients in order to take a slice of the healthy eating market. Peter's Yard created its new Sourdough Bites to cater to this growing segment of consumers. "Our first priority was to create a high-quality, indulgent and tasty snack. However, we couldn't ignore the growing trend for healthy snacks and we've ensured that our new Bites range are baked and not fried," Matt says. "A comforting treat doesn't need to be an unhealthy, guilty pleasure – comfort also comes from knowing you are enjoying a well-crafted product, made with quality ingredients and care."

> "Consumer buying trends are leaning increasingly towards savoury snacking"

4 The indulger

In stark contrast to the health trend, many consumers are happy to indulge in sweet treats and small luxuries from time to time. In fact, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, chocolate and confectionery sales have been buoyed by the fact that consumers were happy to give themselves snacks to lift their spirits during a challenging and unprecedented time. "The permissibility of eating small amounts of sweet biscuits each day is continuing to support sweet biscuit sales," said Richard Caines, senior food and drink analyst at Mintel.

While post-pandemic life will certainly shake up some of these habits once again, the desire to treat oneself will not disappear. In a recent survey, Synergy, an ingredient and flavour manufacturer, found that nearly half of respondents put 'great taste' at the top of their list when purchasing sweet products. Nearly a quarter said their topmost concern was that a product contained their favourite flavour.





> “The permissibility of eating small amounts of sweet biscuits each day is continuing to support sweet biscuit sales”

How can retailers cater to the indulger? Opt for the flavours that are resonating with consumers today. Kerry’s Global Taste Trends identifies key areas where producers are innovating with flavour. Globally, there has been a pronounced focus on comforting and nostalgic tastes, including flavours such as toffee caramel, lemon meringue and honeycomb in Europe. The group adds that consumers are looking for “excitement” and products that “disrupt the monotony of day-to-day-life”. In other words, they’re looking for quality products that offer a mix of tradition and innovation.

5 The home worker

Working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted consumer’s habits away from the traditional three meals a day and towards more fluid eating patterns. With these consumers on the hunt for snacks to treat themselves throughout the work day, they are becoming an increasingly important market for retailers to keep in mind – especially as hybrid working between the office and the home is expected to be a lasting impact of the pandemic. Sweet and savoury biscuits can both create inroads in snacks for home workers, paired with either a refreshing afternoon cup of tea or a wedge of cheese. With the addition of the home cooking trend, consumers who are working from their homes are getting more creative with their lunchtime meals. “People have added a bit of variety or luxury to their mid-week lunch hour – whether it’s replacing a sandwich with a smoked salmon and cream cheese crispbread or trying new snacks or drinks,” Matt says. Indeed, Stephen agrees that home workers are tending to favour more elaborate lunchtime meals, from a grazing platter to a homemade soup or salad with a savoury biscuit to accompany. Plus, with Peter’s Yard’s own research showing a significant increase in demand for meal boxes and grazing platters, Matt believes there may be even more innovation on the way to boost the biscuit sector. “I believe there’s certainly scope for retailers to expand on the ‘evening meal kit’ model and look at a similar solution for an everyday but special lunch-box kit.”

6 The conscious consumer

The wellbeing of the planet is increasingly important to the average consumer, meaning there is no excuse for fine food retailers not to consider the sustainability angle of the products they stock.

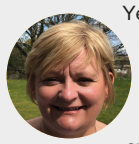
For instance, products which focus on locally sourced ingredients not only have a stronger sense of provenance, but they also have fewer food miles. At Island Bakery, for example, food miles are kept “as low as they could possibly be” thanks to their use of the Island of Mull’s unique products. Plus, Dawn adds, “All Island Bakery biscuits are made on Mull in an environmentally sustainable factory powered by local renewable energy.”

Stag Bakeries also recognises the importance of provenance to today’s consumer. “We try to use ingredients that are authentic to our location in the Outer Hebrides wherever possible,” says Daniel. “An example of this is our Seaweed Water Biscuits, which are made using a blend of three seaweeds. The seaweed gives the biscuits a unique flavour and character and the thinking behind the product was directly inspired by our island surroundings.”

Knowing the stories behind products can be the key to securing a sale with a customer who is concerned about their carbon footprint, so don’t be afraid to shout about sustainable products – especially the ones local to your own shop. Ethical shoppers are also increasingly drawn to organic products, with the Soil Association’s *Organic Market Report 2021* revealing that sales grew 12.6% in 2020, outperforming growth in the non-organic sector. “Choosing organic reduces your carbon footprint; combines excellent environmental practices, including high biodiversity, preservation of natural resources, and high animal welfare standards; means there is less polluting artificial pesticide or fertiliser residue in your food; means you avoid most common food additives, which are banned from organic food; can help fight climate change by sequestering carbon in soils; and means you are choosing food you can trust,” says Dawn. For retailers, sweet and savoury biscuits offer a wide variety of opportunities, and exciting developments around health, flavours and sustainability mean that no matter who your target audience is, you will have something to please everyone’s taste buds.

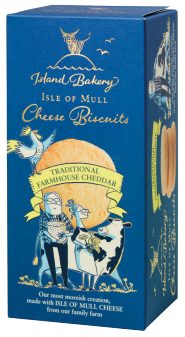
DISPLAY TIPS

Dawn Reade, Island Bakery



Years ago, an expert in retail psychology told me that ‘pile it high’ displays create a sense of abundance that suggests to customers that a product is in high demand, leading to people thinking they need to know what the fuss is about and encouraging a product pick up.

STOCK CHECK



ISLAND BAKERY TRADITIONAL FARMHOUSE CHEDDAR
All-butter biscuits with a melt-in-the-mouth texture.
islandbakery.scot



BORDER BISCUITS VIENNESE WHIRLS
A golden, buttery swirl with a smooth creamy vanilla flavour.
borderbiscuits.co.uk



ELEGANT & ENGLISH BAKED APPLE & CUSTARD BISCUITS
Comforting baked apple flavour with a smooth custard taste. Pairs well with Earl Grey.
finecheese.co.uk



PETER’S YARD SUFFOLK CYDER VINEGAR & SEA SALT SOURDOUGH BITES
Made using a signature sourdough starter that’s slowly fermented for 16 hours.
petersyard.com



STAG BAKERIES SEAWEED WATER BISCUITS
Hebridean seaweed and sea salt add a unique taste.
stagbakeries.co.uk



WHOLEY MOLY PISTACHIO AND LEMON COOKIE
Indulgent and made with real lemon, with a rich pistachio taste.
wholeymoly.co.uk



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POSH SALT

Sprinkle on the profits with a well-chosen array of seasonings, says Sally-Jayne Wright

So great was the uplift in sales of gourmet seasonings during lockdown that online retailer, Seasoned Pioneers, developed a new product – their Worldwide Salt Gift Collection. For £20.95 customers get 10 pouches allowing them to salt their way round the globe, tasting French Fleur de Sel one day, and Hawaiian Red Salt the next.

There's even a specialist online retailer called gourmetsalts.co.uk selling salt accessories and over 40 different kinds, from Black Truffle, to Korean Bamboo. The supermarkets are on board and last year, Tesco saw demand for sea salt crystals rise by nearly 2,600% and sales of Himalayan Pink Salt and rock salt by more than 2,000% (*The Times*).

WHAT'S BEHIND THE SALTY TREND?

We're cooking more and we're more adventurous. When Jamie, Rick and Nigella 'finish' their creations with a sprinkling of the white stuff, we copy. The appetite for sweet-savoury including salted caramel continues as does our enthusiasm for home-pickling and fermenting. For the latter, it's essential to use a pure salt as additives inhibit fermentation. So says Charlotte Pike, author of *Fermented: a Beginner's Guide to Making Your Own Sourdough, Yogurt, Sauerkraut, Kefir, Kimchi and More.*

ISN'T PURE SEA SALT BETTER FOR YOU THAN CHEAP TABLE SALT?

People with high blood pressure or heart disease should be aware that both ordinary table salt and designer salt are nearly 100% sodium chloride.

BUT ISN'T EXPENSIVE SALT RICH IN MAGNESIUM AND POTASSIUM?

Minerals are present in such tiny quantities they carry no worthwhile health benefits. Himalayan Rock Salt is pink because of iron oxide in the area where it's mined. The issue is rather what posh salt doesn't contain – anti-caking agents, which many food-lovers think give it a weird taste. Table salt is highly processed, rock salt somewhere in the middle and sea salt least processed.

ARE WE PAYING OVER THE ODDS?

Pike, who is a cookery teacher and private chef, reckons it's worth paying more for good sea salt. Her favourite – and she's not alone – is Maldon which she employs as an all-purpose salt. "When I use something else, the food doesn't taste as delicious." Many food-lovers we spoke to praised Maldon and Cornish Sea Salt, because the crystals crush so well.

BY CRUMBLING SALT DIRECTLY ONTO FOOD, AREN'T I OVERDOING IT? HEALTH ADVICE IS ONE TEASPOON (6G) A DAY.

Journalist Joanna Blythman explored this challenge in *BBC Good Food*. She unearthed a large Canadian study from 2016 which found that, in people with high blood pressure, low sodium intake, compared with average, led to more, not fewer strokes. After she learnt that 75% of the salt Britons eat is in processed food, she relaxed about her salt habit. Conclusion: if you cook from scratch, you should be okay.

EVEN THE MULTIPLES SELL POSH SALT NOW, SO HOW DO I COMPETE?

Start local. If the supermarkets carry the original salt, say Natural Dorset Sea Salt Flakes, stock the variants – perhaps their Lemon and Thyme or Chilli Sea Salt. Award winners are safe bets. Last year, Craic Foods won the Great Taste Golden Fork award for their Black Garlic and Porcini Sea Salt. Smoked salts deliver a double whammy of flavour. Try Halen Mon Pure Sea Salt Smoked Over Oak which scooped three Great Taste Award stars.

MY CUSTOMERS ARE CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS. WHOSE SALT WOULD THEY LIKE?

Oryx Desert Salt from the Kalahari Desert, South Africa has a great story: a percentage of turnover is donated to local communities and the products are packed by women-owned social enterprises. Dorset-based Antipodes is the importer.

> "Salt is the most important ingredient in the kitchen. It helps food to sing by enhancing the natural flavours"

MORE AND MORE CUSTOMERS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT SALT INTAKE. CAN I TURN THIS INTO A SALES OPPORTUNITY?

Yes! Do what nutritionists do and suggest seasonings based on citrus, vinegar, herbs and seaweed. How about Clearspring's Organic Yuzu Ponzu, Burren Balsamics Blood Orange & Cardamom infused white vinegar or Mara Seaweed Shony Flakes. Herb and salt mixtures may help consumers to cut down. We like Crawford Rock's Seaweed Seasoning – a sprightly mix of seaweed (41%), smoked sea salt, rosemary (18%), garlic power (12%) and onion powder which won Gold in the Irish Food Awards.

HOW CAN INDIES MAKE THE MOST OF THE TREND?

- Sell a package – books on fermenting and pickling with pickling salt
- Look for products that make good barbecue rubs
- Luxurious salts make great gifts
- Launch your own seasoning in branded or refillable jars
- Sell salt paraphernalia. Perhaps commission a local potter to make ceramic spoons and salt pigs

WILL POSH SALT CONTINUE TO TREND?

Once you've tried good salt, there's no going back. As Pike says, "Salt is the most important ingredient in the kitchen. It helps food to sing by enhancing the natural flavours." Critic Jay Rayner compares good salt to the difference between eating in technicolour or black and white.

And the next big thing? Gourmet pepper, of course.



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SPOTLIGHT ON: THE ARTISAN OLIVE OIL COMPANY

Blending traditional flavours with modern tastes is the secret to this Mediterranean specialist's success

SPOKESPERSON



YACINE AMOR
DIRECTOR

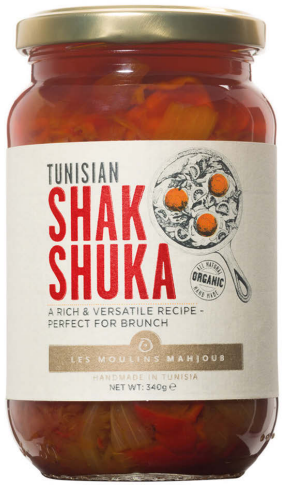
From olive oil sommeliers travelling around Italy, Spain and Tunisia to discover award-winning producers, to a leading importer, wholesaler and distributor of Mediterranean fine foods, The Artisan Olive Oil Company is an expert in quality and taste.

Established in London in 2016, the company has expanded its range progressively over the years beyond premium olive oils. Today, it includes more than 100 natural and organic Mediterranean ingredients and fine foods, including balsamic vinegar, pasta, olives, preserves, canned fish, spreads, dips, sauces, jams, marmalades and truffle specialities.

The company's products, which are sourced from Italy, Spain, France and Tunisia, are lauded with awards. Having built relationships with suppliers across the Mediterranean, The Artisan Olive Oil Company can source rare products from small artisan producers who share their passion for good food.

"We are passionate about authentic, natural food which is deeply rooted in its terroir," explains director Yacine Amor.

It is this laser focus on quality products which are perfectly suited to modern consumers' tastes that makes The Artisan Olive Oil Company such a success. "We focus our product selection on artisanal products made by family businesses, typically produced in small batches using ingredients from their region," says Yacine. "This approach can offer many advantages in terms of the taste and quality of the products. "For example," Yacine continues, "our organic Tunisian shakshuka uses vegetables produced through traditional farming methods on the Mahjoub farm, which are harvested at the peak of their taste. The ingredients are cooked in small batches, without any artificial preservatives. They use the farm's organic olive oil and have no added water. The result is a concentration of flavours which reminds one of home cooking."







A culinary journey

With shelves full of products that conjure up the comforting home-cooked appeal of Mediterranean cuisine, The Artisan Olive Oil Company has established a range that's ideally suited to the boom in home cooking. "With the shift in work patterns, British consumers are looking for high-quality ingredients to bring taste and variety to their home cooking," Yacine explains. "Our approach to sourcing fine foods takes them on a culinary journey and encourages them to be inspired about new ingredients to create their own cuisine." A large portion of The Artisan Olive Oil Company's catalogue is also organic, gluten-free and vegan-friendly, ensuring that every modern taste is catered to. Stocking everything from authentic canned tuna and sardines to spicy harissa pastes and the Tunisian grain m'hamsa, the company's products are also perfect for post-pandemic sharing among family and friends. "Artisan food can bring the taste of chefs' cuisine with the joy of preparing it yourself and sharing it with friends and family."

Sharing the love of artisan food

In recent years, the team at The Artisan Olive Oil Company has worked hard to expand their network of stockists across the UK. "We work primarily with independent retailers, delicatessens, organic stores and farm shops who share our love for artisan foods," says Yacine. Their natural products, which are made using local fruits and vegetables from the best Mediterranean terroirs, are not available in your typical supermarket. "The human scale of our suppliers means that they are best suited for independent retailers, looking to offer the customers a differentiation relative to the supermarkets," Yacine says. The relationship the group has built with retailers in the UK works as a two-way street: "They work with us as we give access to a differentiating product range, and we support them with tastings, samples, promotions and marketing materials to boost their sales. We frequently launch new lines, which helps our retailers to offer new discoveries to their customers." For The Artisan Olive Oil Company, blending tradition with innovation, ancient with modern and adventure with comfort is all part of the job.

> "Our approach to sourcing fine foods takes British consumers on a culinary journey and encourages them to be inspired about new ingredients to create their own cuisine"

4 BEST-SELLING PRODUCTS

Due Vittorie Oro Balsamic Vinegar of Modena: Naturally ultra-dense, this product contains a very high proportion of grape must to create a perfectly balanced taste. Highly versatile.

Franci Bio Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil: Produced on the hills of Val d'Orcia and the Maremma Toscana, this olive oil has a low acidity and medium fruitiness. It received a maximum score from Flos Olei 2021, the prestigious international olive oil guide.

Moulins Mahjoub Organic Tunisian Shakshuka: Made through traditional farming methods on the Mahjoub family farm in Tunisia, this product is produced with organic vegetables, Tunisian spices and extra virgin olive oil – with no additives or preservatives. Perfect for brunch.

El Manar Premium Solid (Mediterranean Bluefin) Tuna in Virgin Olive Oil: Rare bluefin tuna caught in early summer in the Mediterranean. A rich source of lean protein, omega-3 fatty acids and a variety of vitamins and minerals. Exceptional for taste and texture.

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THE ARTISAN OLIVE OIL COMPANY

THE FULL PACKAGE

From the sustainability of the materials its success at housing premium food and the swagger of the design, packaging is fundamental to every sale you make



COMMENTATORS



PETER MACQUEEN
SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY



MARTIN LEEMING
TRAKRAP

We ask a lot of the packaging that gently swaddles, cups and seals our finest produce. From the gratifying rustle of a branded wax cheese paper to the soft click of a zip-lock pouch, and the gentle sigh from a soft-fizzed kombucha to the crack of a Champagne cork, packaging is a fundamental part of your customers' sensory experience. Elevating the visuals, function and feel of packaging isn't just about projecting brand values, but helping a premium product jump off the shelf whatever its price tag. Fine food brands do a great job of harking back to the heritage of their origins, with Victorian-inspired moulded bottles, iconic retro graphics and luxury ribbons, foils and embossing helping punters spot the real McCoy among a marketplace full of imitations.

And yet packaging is a category at the very coal face of dynamic forces. Issues over sustainability (see below) have pitched the humble wrapper and box at the very heart of some serious challenges facing food and drink. It's no surprise then that innovation has really picked up pace over recent years, winning kudos for the brands willing to go the extra mile. This month Jimmy's Iced Coffee moved the last of its range out of TetraPaks and into aluminium, launching infinitely recyclable 'BottleCans' in a first for the UK market. Silent Pool Distillers' has served its latest special edition gin in a paperboard bottle. Meanwhile Conscious Chocolate has switched the inner film that wraps its bars to a compostable bioplastic made from eucalyptus pulp and Calvados bottles from Avellen are adorned with wrapped in labels made from apple pulp.

A craft aesthetic

Fine food so often stands head and shoulders above the competition thanks to the care, time and skill involved in its production. Small batch, handmade and slow-matured products deserve packaging that tells that story, but interestingly that hasn't always been the priority of small craft makers. "The change within the craft aesthetic can be exemplified through beer," says Peter Macqueen, course leader and senior lecturer on Sheffield Hallam's BSc Packaging Professional Apprenticeship, and self-confessed packaging anorak. "Throughout the 90s to the mid noughties, small brewers used foil blocking, big logos and traditional imagery to look and feel like the larger companies. Now the larger companies are pursuing quirky branding, illustrated solutions, and often obscuring their involvement in an attempt to appear artisanal." A short stroll down any supermarket beer aisle will showcase the eye-popping designs now firmly appropriated by Big Beer. So what can designers do to communicate their craft credentials?

Right now simple recipes and small-batch, handmade processes are increasingly flagged by striking naive prints. Witness Fieldfare's new roughly-hewn print logo, and woodcuts on Tiba Tempeh labelling and natural wines from Offbeat Wines. Materials also play a part in signalling 'craft' status, turning the traditional ideas of luxury vs low grade finishes on their head.

"The biggest swing in recent times has been around making more of a virtue of natural materials," says Peter. "Recycled papers, less glossy finishing, simpler print processes. Where high-end processes such as foil blocking remain popular, this is now commonly used with muted pallets, and on kraft papers or with non-metallic finishing." Peter cites Tom Dixon, a renowned British designer. "His name is a byword in luxury and yet the packaging Is moving entirely into natural craft materials. Using nice-quality papers, hand-signing it all to get that hand touch. If that's happening to a product manufacturer it's totally where the trend is going in retail."

Sustainability: where are we now?

Our industry's reliance on plastic packaging is front and centre in the consumer consciousness yet again after a damning investigation by Greenpeace made recent headlines. The environmental campaign group discovered British plastics exported for recycling to Turkey are routinely dumped or burnt on beaches and roadsides. Turkey has now banned British imports of plastic waste, but ugly images of plastic dumps in Malaysia and other destinations have reignited public concern over the impact of their shopping choices, and pushed plastic packaging back onto shoppers' radar.

An eye-watering 1.8 million kilos of plastic packaging are exported every day, according to Greenpeace's new Trashed report, and a recent poll found 85% of Brits want retailers to cut plastic packaging. It's now four years since BBC series Blue Planet II lit a bonfire under industry efforts to evolve new ways of working, but where are we now? "Shoppers are now more environmentally conscious than ever before and savvy manufacturers across the board are

> "The rise of restaurant meal kits through various hospitaelity shutdowns has really shifted the consumer's experience of high-end ingredients. Carefully designed menu cards, step-by-step instructions and even QR codes for playlists to enjoy while eating have raised the stakes in out-of-the-box food and drink"





looking for fresh ways to appeal to them whilst improving their own sustainability record," says Martin Leeming, CEO of disruptor packaging firm TrakRap. "Most commonly, in recent times, this has been done by cutting plastic but often this isn't an effective move. If businesses are serious about reducing the environmental impact of their packaging, they need to minimise its carbon footprint – the main cause of climate change – not the material used.

"When eliminating plastic, businesses often switch to cardboard which is heralded as more environmentally friendly because it is biodegradable," says Martin. "But what they overlook is that it has a huge carbon footprint because of the enormous amounts of energy required to create it. To produce corrugated cardboard, trees need to be harvested, shipped to pulp mills, pulped, formed, pressed, dried and rolled, before being sent to corrugating plants and made into cardboard. Then, when the cardboard decomposes, carbon is released back into the atmosphere, contributing to rising global temperatures. People are simply swapping packaging materials so they can claim they have reduced plastic, when the reality is that they are often doubling their environmental impact in doing so."

But, you might reasonably ask, if corrugated cardboard isn't green enough for punters, what is?! "If packaging decisions are to be truly sustainable, one method that could be effective is to make it compulsory to print CO2e [carbon dioxide equivalent] figures on both primary and secondary packs," suggests Martin. "On the primary pack it would allow consumers to make sustainable shopping choices, in much the same way they do with calories and fat content. On the secondary pack it would aid sustainable corporate decision making. This idea has been mooted before and after initial trials companies quickly moved away from it claiming the process was too time-consuming and costly. However corporate and social consciences have shifted greatly since then and consumers are far more educated. If we are to implement truly sustainable packaging and avoid dangerous climate change, the time to re-start this is now."

Unboxing: experiential retail's secret weapon

It's easy to assume the hype around unboxing began with YouTube, where entire channels are devoted to the breathy disrobing of consumer goods. Phones, watches and fragrances seem the obvious ground zero for packaging engineered to take the consumer on an enjoyable journey of its contents, but not so. "The proto opening experience in packaging is rooted in luxury food," says Peter. "Think Fortnum & Mason classic hampers, wax-sealed cheese, beautifully-corked and finished bottles... They're sumptuous and classic, and pre-date what we consider to be contemporary packaging, but they haven't gone away. This category has always been centred on provenance and artisanal processes, and we see other sectors try to harness that concept. In some way the iPhone unboxing experience is lifted from a Fortnum & Mason hamper."

You'll no doubt notice the extra care and attention that's been lavished on a rare boxed single malt, a superior loose leaf tea or raw honeycomb. Layers of packaging build a sense of anticipation as outer boxes are opened to reveal tissue paper, wood shavings, pouches or foam niches where the final product nestles. "Opening experience, or 'unboxing' is absolutely something that gets designed in and is often a highly-considered factor in the design process," says Peter. "From a design perspective it's rooted in what we call 'purchase confirmation', and the more expensive the product is the more important that is. So it's not just about hoping an influencer is going to open the packaging on social media and get lots of hits on a video. It's more authentic than that. When the customer has spent a lot of money you want to make sure you're giving them the best possible experience. The irony is that over the last year we've all had the opposite as we've got crappy Amazon boxes with something small rattling around inside."

If you've been in fine food for any period of time you will have witnessed regular rebrands as producers tweak their styling to capture the imagination and loyalty of a continually evolving set of public tastes. "Packaging is your brand ambassador," agrees Peter. "You might think that people don't see packaging when they walk in the shop, or they don't perceive it. But actually when you pick a product up in a deli, 80% of your interaction is with the packaging until you get it back home and open it up. We deal with packaging all the time. The weird thing is that now, when you shop online you're often shown the unboxed product – you see the coffee bean, you see the whole leg of ham... and then what arrives in the post is a pack. Normally you'd see the pack first and make that deduction for yourself. So there's a disconnect there. If we're not going to have so much physical shopping in future it's going to be really important for packaging to reintroduce that experience."

The rise of restaurant meal kits through various hospitality shutdowns has really shifted the consumer's experience of high-end ingredients. Carefully designed menu cards, step-by-step instructions and even QR codes for playlists to enjoy while eating have raised the stakes in out-of-the-box food and drink. "Subscription services or 'mystery boxes' bring all of the recent trends in packaging together," says Peter, "giving a sense of having your experience 'curated' – whether it's through tasting selections for chocolates, wines or even meal kits. Adding an intentional structure or ordered reveal process to unboxing transforms a pack from a simple logistic device and makes the packaging an inherent part of the consumer experience."

> "The proto opening experience in packaging is rooted in luxury food. Think Fortnum & Mason classic hampers, wax-sealed cheese, beautifully-corked and finished bottles... They're sumptuous and classic, and pre-date what we consider to be contemporary packaging, but they haven't gone away. This category has always been centred on provenance and artisanal processes, and we see other sectors try to harness that concept"

3 THINGS ABOUT... NATASHA'S LAW

Are you compliant? Time for a recap...

1 Taking effect from October this year, the UK Food Information Amendment requires all pre-packaged food for direct sale on the premises to be clearly labelled with a full list of ingredients with allergens highlighted.

2 The amendment, which will protect an estimated two million allergy sufferers in the UK, was prompted by lobbying from friends and family of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who suffered a fatal reaction to sesame seeds in an unlabelled filled baguette.

3 The law specifically targets delis, cafés and other food businesses that make fresh food on-site. You can find a month-by-month roadmap to help you to compliance, and other resources, at natashas-law.com.





VIEWPOINT: STUART REDDISH

For Stuart Reddish, national president of the Federation of Independent Retailers, his work is a matter of personal pride

You've got to be excited by retail to do it well. It's a challenging sector to be in, with or without Covid, so if you're not passionate about it it's not for you. Every day I wake up and really am excited about my role; I'm excited about the different aspects of it, the various challenges I'm faced with every day. I tend to work for the Federation Monday-Friday then at the weekends come back to work in my business; I love selling and upselling, chatting to customers and having conversations with different people throughout the day. Every day is different, which I appreciate.

I've been a retailer for 30-plus years, and started off in a very traditional newsagents and built that into a convenience store and added a post office. I'm based in Chesterfield and Sheffield in the North, and started attending branch meetings of the Federation of Independent Retailers – we're a members organisation and we're run by members for members. I gradually became more and more involved and have been fortunate to be able to spend time away from my business – this has enabled me to be increasingly involved with the Federation. I was given the privilege of being the vice president and moved up the ranks to become president. You'd normally be president for one year, but then Covid arrived which meant that I'm still serving president after two years. We have a conference in October, at which point I will hand over the reigns to my vice president.

I now run all the different departments and the senior line managers report to me. I'm the chair of the board, and chair the meeting of the National Council – 33 people from all over the country that sit and debate the future plans of the Federation. My role also involves making the Federation stronger and attracting more members to join.

The fact that I, as an independent retailer myself, head up the NFRN, makes us quite unique. Because I'm in retail myself, I'm making decisions based on what I've learned from my own experience – and that's very varied. Because I'm a small business owner I do or have done it all, from sourcing and selling products to banking and cleaning the toilets. It's the passion that has kept me going this whole time; I really do love it to death. It's a great industry to be in.

A growing role

Independent retailers are very much the backbone of the British retail industry, but all too often they're forgotten about in favour of multiples. This was the case before the pandemic, but since March 2020 shoppers have really come to appreciate the work that independents do and the role that we play in their lives. At the start, they were panic-shopping essential items at their local supermarkets and walking straight past the independents which weren't struggling with supply; then, someone somewhere realised that they didn't want to have to fight for their necessities and queue up for ages, that the independents could fulfil their needs. Communication and connection with other people has also played a huge part in the success of independent retailers during this challenging period. Some people like to stop and chat with the person serving them – you might be the only other person they're in contact with on that day – but that's not possible in a supermarket. You just stand in a queue, pay for your goods and out you go, whereas in an independent shop we appreciate their custom and make sure to connect with people. Even before the pandemic, some people wouldn't see anybody else for a week or more at a time, particularly in rural areas, so shopping at independents became a lifeline in terms of social interaction as well as purchasing products they needed to get them through.

In terms of statistics, the numbers we're looking at around the growth of the independent retail sector – the number of customers and transactions we're seeing, based on credit card transaction data – is an increase of 70%. This is dependent on where a store is located, because if you're in a town centre the footfall is much less than what you're used to, if you're in a rural area the growth was exceptional. In terms of lockdowns, the first lockdown was very lucrative for independent retailers, the second was less successful because supermarkets had got their act together around deliveries and stock availability. It depends where you are in the country, too. In terms of newspaper delivery, we're added around a quarter of a million home deliveries of newspapers – these are customers who previously would have gone into a store, likely a supermarket, to purchase their newspaper but were instead requesting delivery from their local independent. The good news is that these customers have stayed with their chosen independent throughout the period, and we hope that this trend continues but at this stage it's hard to make a clear-cut prediction. Overall, the majority of independent retailers have seen an increase in sales and customers, but this is very much dependent on where they are located – for example, I know of a member who has been closed since 31st December because of where his business is, and of course shops in train and tube stations have seen a huge drop in sales and in customers stepping through their doors.

Retail evolution

Many stores evolved what they were selling during the course of the pandemic; for example, card shops were closed and therefore a number of independents started selling cards. Fine food retailers evolved to sell essentials as well as artisan food and drink. But the main evolution that we've seen is around the way that these retailers are selling. If the pandemic hadn't have happened, maybe in five years' time we'd be where we are today. But as things are, things like delivery partners and apps are becoming commonplace where we wouldn't necessarily have considered them as a viable option pre-pandemic. Large-scale options like Deliveroo and Uber Eats have partnered with independent retailers to collect and deliver their products, but the margins they bring are so small that there's not much profit in that at all. Instead, a lot of us are working with alternative, smaller-scale delivery companies, finding local options, or delivering ourselves.

A lot of independent retailers sell products that have been produced locally, and that's increased to a great extent as a result of the pandemic. Suppliers who haven't been able to sell their products to their usual customers as a result of lockdowns have turned to independent retailers and we have welcomed them with open arms – as have our customers.

> "Most retailers will no doubt be tired and wanting a break, but the main thing we all need to maintain going forward in order to retain our new, enlarged customer base is keep our customer service exemplary"

Most retailers will no doubt be tired and wanting a break, but the main thing we all need to maintain going forward in order to retain our new, enlarged customer base is keep our customer service exemplary. That's why customers enjoy shopping with us; it's part of why they feel safer and better looked after when they shop with us rather than at multiples; and it's what really sets independent retailers apart from supermarkets. If you can give customers a great product and a brilliant service, no matter if the products you're selling are more expensive, then you will hold on to your customers. You have to offer something special, and often that's down to the character of the person that's serving the customer – if the customer walks away from an independent shop with a smile on their face, they're much more likely to return and be loyal. For a lot of independents, if they're able to retain even 50% of the extra customers they gained during lockdown, they'll be in a much stronger position than they were pre-pandemic.

What's next

The primary challenge that faces us all today is knowing where we will be in six months time and beyond. Where will we be when furlough ends, and when redundancies hit the job market? There have been a lot of delays around financial business considerations, such as VAT payments and professional loans. When these need to be paid back, how will the lay of the land look for the retail industry? How many businesses will survive? I'm proud to say that the NRFN has a string of benefits to support independent retailers who are facing an uncertain future. We have our own in-house charities and can support retailers who are facing financial difficulties in a number of ways. So far we've helped over a hundred independent retailers around the country with different amounts. We also have staff who will travel around the country to meet with our members one-on-one in order to see what their needs are, and have deals around the industry which benefit retailers – for example, we have a set-up with Barclays whereby they charge our members less for credit card transactions, meaning that they are saving around a hundred pounds on transaction fees per month, if not more.

Every day I am inspired by independent retailers up and down the country. They have been serving customers – some of whom have had Covid, I have no doubt – every day without fail, and have truly been at the frontline of this pandemic. They've strengthened the communities around them and provided a safe and positive environment for shoppers in this period of crisis, all while navigating their businesses through this hugely challenging period. I believe that customers value the role that independent retailers have come to play in their lives hugely, and will continue to do so as we progress out of this crisis.

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DAYLESFORD

Nick Fletcher, CEO of Daylesford Organic, welcomes you to its destination farm shop with organic credentials at its core



The seed that grew into Daylesford Organic was sown over forty years ago when Carole Bamford recognised the importance and benefits of organic farming. In the late 1970s, Carole Bamford was in the garden with her eldest daughter Alice. Carole went to look at the roses she had planted a few days earlier only to find they were wilting. She spoke to the neighbouring farmer who explained that the farms were being sprayed with a powerful herbicide that had caused her roses to wilt. Carole became concerned that these chemicals were harming the land, the soil and surrounding wildlife. Carole set out to seek alternatives that would be kinder to the planet and work in harmony with nature and spearheaded the conversion of her family's farmland to organic.

In 2002, Daylesford Organic farmshop opened three weeks before Christmas selling homemade soups, sandwiches and tea alongside meat, cheese, a few vegetables and bread. Today, Daylesford has four farmshops in Pimlico, Notting Hill, Marylebone and Brompton Cross areas of London.

The family's estates in Staffordshire and Daylesford in the Cotswolds are both fully certified organic by the Soil Association and are committed to sustainable farming. What began as a simple passion for real food and a desire to feed our children better has grown into Daylesford as we know it today, one of the most sustainable organic farms in the UK. Daylesford is dedicated to growing, producing and cooking real food, organically.

WHO'S IN THE FARM SHOP TEAM?

Daylesford Organic is made up of hugely passionate artisans and specialists. Our founder, Carole Bamford, is recognised as a visionary in organic farming and healthy food retailing. Richard Smith is the senior farms manager who believes strongly that organic methods have a huge role to play in feeding our ever-growing population in a sustainable and healthy way. Jez Taylor heads the Market Garden where we grow a wide range of organic herbs, salads, fruit and vegetables to stock the farmshops, cafes and our neighbouring pub, The Wild Rabbit. Peter Kindel is the head cheesemaker at our organic Creamery where he and his team produce our award-winning cheeses and Jason Christie runs our Fermentary.

The farmshop front of house team is headed by Freddie Packe and covers all areas including our meat and fish counters, cheese counter, home, garden and the plant nursery. We have a team member dedicated to the zero-waste pantry and we have resident sustainability champions in all our stores.

WHAT SETS DAYLESFORD APART FROM OTHER INDEPENDENT RETAILERS?

The farmshop in the Cotswolds is our flagship and we are proud to be one of the most sustainable farms in the UK. Just footsteps from clover-rich pastures, shoppers do not have to look far to see where our organic animals roam freely and where fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs are picked each morning. It is the only place to offer so many things under one roof: an organic farmshop, dining areas, bars, garden and homeware areas, floristry and craft workshops, a Cookery School, sustainable clothing, a newly refurbished spa and cottages.

Daylesford Organic is a pasture to plate farm where we own the entire process, making the food we produce entirely traceable. We have a dedicated sustainability team focused on targets such as zero food waste, sourcing responsibly and packaging lightly. When we cannot make something ourselves, we source from farmers and artisans who share our values. We package as lightly as possible and have never given out plastic carrier bags in our farmshops.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF AT DAYLESFORD?

At the beginning of this year, Daylesford Organic farm was awarded a Green Michelin Star by the world-renowned restaurant guide. We were thrilled and honoured to receive such a distinction that recognises our high ethical, sustainable and environmental standards.

There are many examples of innovation and progressive farming techniques at Daylesford Organic. The Wilderness Wetland uses grazing cattle and sheep to enhance a wildlife-rich flood meadow habitat. The agroforestry project applies the symbiosis of ranging laying chickens, trees and fertile soil for fruit and vegetables to stock enterprises and the food production of a 30-acre field, which in turn enhances habitats for pollinators and farmland birds. We also manage the whole story of our table chickens from the parent flock, hatchery, open field and tree-planted ranges into the poultry abattoir and then on to our shops and cafés: this is unique to Daylesford.

We are proud to say that we do not waste a scrap of food and opened our Fermentary at the farm, which makes delicious seasonal ferments using gluts and wonky veg from the Market Garden. We are confident we have reduced and recycled as much energy as feasible. The farm's carefully managed woodlands provide the fuel for our café's oven. We then capture heat above the oven and circulate it through the kitchen's hot water system. The biomass boiler burns locally sourced wood chips to produce all our heat requirements and our Black Barn production units also harness the wasted heat energy from the back of the refrigeration units (which are powered by solar), to be recycled into hot water.

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

Fortunately, our farmshops in the Cotswolds and London stayed open throughout the pandemic thanks to our incredible teams who made sure we were operating according to government guidelines. We had to close certain areas such as our cafés, cottages, Cookery School, floristry and craft workshops and spa – but Daylesford remained a source of nourishing organic food and essential supplies.

We had to split our focus between our bricks-and-mortar locations and look towards our online channels, which really took off in the first lockdown. From March 2020, we prioritised adding hundreds of new products to our website that at the time were in short supply in supermarkets. We added new ranges such as fresh organic fruit and vegetables, veg boxes, larder staples, cleaning products, gardening items and homeware.

We used our social media and newsletter platforms to connect with our customers, and expanded our Daylesford Delivered service to enable more home deliveries for vulnerable people in our community who live nearby to our farmshops both in London and the Cotswolds

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DAYLESFORD AND THE FARM SHOP?

There has been a big new launch at the farmshop recently with the opening of Daylesford Organic Garden, a brand new garden space dedicated to outdoor living. The 30,000 square foot retail space has been constructed with natural materials including timber from silver birch trees felled on the estate and featuring a soil wall built with roots from the Market Garden. Daylesford Organic Garden includes a plant nursery offering British-grown seasonal flowers, plants, perennials, bulbs, topiary and trees, alongside seeds and crops for kitchen gardens – plus new garden furniture, pots and planters, sustainable peat-free soil and garden tools.

Looking ahead, our teams are already busy getting everything ready for Christmas 2021 when we hope the country will really be able to celebrate together.



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Cheese Talk

In praise of British cheesemongers:

"Retailers should have no doubt that they have been at the front line of the Covid crisis"



CATHERINE MEAD
SPECIALIST CHEESE ASSOCIATION AND LYNHER DAIRIES

There is no doubt that there has been a real upside for cheese producers during the pandemic, with cheesemongers, delis and farm shops gaining real profile and gathering great momentum as consumers looked for ways to treat themselves. But this success didn't just happen – it has come about as a result of small retailers displaying intelligence, agility and an awful lot of courage. So how have our independents both harnessed and maintained this upsurge?

Customers, deprived of the opportunity to dine in restaurants, pubs and at friends' tables, looked for ways to enjoy food at home. They began experimenting by buying cheeses they had never tried before, and they searched for treats and novelties.

A lot of small shops happen to be in the community rather than in town centres or large shopping malls, so as people began working from home, they found they could walk to these places, and very pleasant that was too. A trip to the local deli became something to look forward to, life suddenly seemed a bit more colourful.

The clever retailers quickly recognised the impact of this and so they started experimenting. They came up with different formats for the weekly shop – click and collect, online, takeaway. As the pandemic wore on, they became more and more agile and responsive, coming up with a myriad of initiatives.

Artisan food subscriptions, regional tasting boxes, cheese platters by Zoom; all these new ideas understood one important thing: how to sell to their customers not just when they are in the shop but when they are at home on their sofas. This unlocked something really quite exciting in the cheesemongering world!

As a result, people became much more interested in the stories behind the products. A lot of the spike in sales came hand in hand with consumers attaching renewed importance to the values of product integrity, short supply chains, the feeling of knowing exactly what they had bought. This means they feel connected to the producer and the product, that they are discerning and they are thinking about where their food is coming from, and customers are rightly proud of that.

Online tastings are a good example of the kind of agility I am talking about. I spent a memorable Friday night not long ago talking online from my home in Falmouth, Cornwall, with a lovely group of cheesemongers and customers in Lima, Peru!

There is a really amazing cheese shop in Lima that stocks Lynher Dairies' Cornish Kern. They contacted me and asked for online tasting so we arranged for us all to have the same batch of Kern, they sent me a bottle of the same Italian wine that they were going to drink and so on a Friday – rather late in the evening my time and mid-afternoon for them – we settled down to chat. We spoke about our cows, the way we farm them and how we make Kern, the profile of the cheese, its qualities, what makes it taste as good as it does. It was a really engaged conversation, fun and easy to do and all in all a delight. Now, there are 35 people or more in Lima who understand much more about our values at Lynher Dairies, our cheesemaking and what matters to us. Being able to communicate like that is as important as standing behind the counter.

There have been some impressive collaborative online events too, many of which felt like true celebrations. The British Cheese Weekender first happened in the spring of 2020 and then again in 2021. It was a huge three-day effort, bringing together producers, journalists, retailers – experts from all corners of the UK. Many cheesemongers got involved, selling their produce online to customers to participate in online tastings, giving virtual farm tours, discussing the way forward for speciality British cheese.

I am, like everyone else, enormously proud of the innovation and energy that small cheese producers and retailers have shown over the last incredibly difficult 15 months, and there's a palpable confidence that it will continue with the same exciting momentum. Good news indeed!

"I am, like everyone else, enormously proud of the innovation and energy that small cheese producers and retailers have shows over the last incredibly difficult 15 months, and there's a palpable confidence that it will continue with the same exciting momentum"



JASON HINDS
NEALS YARD DAIRY

Independent retailers have played a huge part in helping cheesemakers keep their heads above water during this very difficult time. They all had to respond in their own way, which has also been very challenging, and cheese shops and speciality food retailers should be in no doubt that they were absolutely on the front line. It may sound strange to be using wartime terminology, but that's precisely how it looked and felt. In the early days, we were faced with two very frantic forces: the public who were uncertain whether contact should be had at all, and cheesemakers who were desperately trying to save their businesses at the same time as having to adapt to an entirely new way of operating.

Neal's Yard Dairy works very closely with a lot of mission-based businesses, and so the decision to do what we all could to support the struggling industry was made very quickly. We know a lot of the individuals, the families, the characters and the stories behind the cheeses that we sell, and these relationships galvanised us and the wider industry to do what needed to be done. The industry as a whole took on a mission: to look out for the preservation of cheesemakers. Proximity to the source played a big part in this, and the cheese industry is relatively unique in that farmers are so closely connected to cheesemakers, and cheesemakers to retailers. It thrives on personalities and relationships, and retailers were powered by an understanding of exactly what cheesemakers needed from them in order to survive.

A lot of cheese businesses and retailers started to think differently about how they could reach their customers, and during that process and with the mood of support and urgency that was around, a completely new demographic of consumers was reached. The response to the quality of the cheeses that we were supporting was universally appreciated, and that made me realise that there was a vast, previously unknown, array of people that would support what we did – and all we needed to do was put the cheeses in front of them. A lot of these people would usually purchase their cheese from a supermarket, but independent retailers found that by being smarter about how they sold and marketed their cheese, by evolving the language they used around the cheeses they sold to make it more approachable and less exclusive, they could expand their engagement and customer base by a huge margin. We were seeing bigger numbers than I had given the market credit for, and the only reason that this hitherto unknown customer base wasn't buying from us was because they didn't know about us.

I now have confidence that there is a strong market out there of people in the UK who really love good cheese, but just don't know it yet. This new audience has refreshed the way we run our business for the better. I now think differently about how we engage with our audience in terms of approach, presentation, language and price point, and I believe other retailers feel the same.

Thanks to the efforts of independent retailers across the UK, pretty much all of the cheesemakers that we work with are still here today. This has been the most difficult trading period since World War II, and thanks to retailers and in no small part thanks to the public, the Covid crisis has left the industry in a surprisingly strong position and with great swathes of new ground to cover.

Without cheesemakers, businesses like Neal's Yard Dairy – and indeed a lot of independent retailers – would be no more. One doesn't exist without the other, and it's this interdependence which has allowed the cheese industry to pull rank, to support each other, and to survive this hugely challenging period.

"The industry as a whole took on a mission: to look out for the preservation of cheesemakers. Proximity to the source played a big part in this, and the cheese industry is relatively unique in that farmers are so closely connected to cheesemakers, and cheesemakers to retailers. It thrives on personalities and relationships, and retailers were powered by an understanding of exactly what cheesemakers needed from them in order to survive"



HOW TO BE AN ECO-CHEESEMONGER

Boost your sustainability credentials by taking a fresh look at sourcing, materials and delivery options

The environmental impact of the cheese industry cannot be ignored. From dairy farming right through to the cheese counter, the industry is responsible for knock-on effects on carbon emissions, single-use plastics and food waste. While artisan cheesemakers and the cheesemongers that sell their products are already a large step ahead of industrial agriculture and large supermarkets, there is always more that can be done to be kinder to the planet.

Getting started

"Right from the set up and refurbishment of the shop, we've tried to consider sustainability in every element of the business," explains Chris Hallam, owner of Chorlton Cheesemongers, a shop that won the title of 'eco warrior' in *Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2021*. From using natural materials that are easier to maintain and last longer than 'traditional' shop fittings to opting for efficient coolers and refrigerators, he says sustainability is at the heart of the business. "It runs throughout, from our energy supplier, cleaning products and how we work in the shop, right through to the cheeses we source and how we serve the customer."

Taking a holistic approach to sustainability in your shop may sound daunting, but if you're not starting from scratch, Chris stresses that making environmentally friendly changes can start with simple steps forward. "It doesn't have to be big, difficult or costly. There could be a number of small, incremental changes you could easily make throughout all parts of your business," he explains. For example, changing to a green energy supplier, swapping out plastic bags for recycled paper versions and trying to reduce wastage of food and materials are all ways to begin making in-roads on in-store sustainability.

> "There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but a commitment to working with the environment ethically and sustainably is key"

Taking the next step

From here, retailers can go further by looking more closely at deliveries, suppliers and products used in their shop. For instance, Chorlton Cheesemongers implemented a zero-carbon home delivery service for locals by pairing up with Chorlton Bike Deliveries, and delis and cheesemongers in other areas of the country may find that they too can take advantage of local, low-carbon delivery options.

Another way that Chris has realised he can reduce transport emissions is by turning the shop into a 'hub' in its suppliers' delivery network. "Two cheesemakers deliver to us, and at the same time they drop off goods for others in our supply network, reducing fuel usage and the number of journeys taken," he explains.

There are also ways to go further with reducing waste in your shop – beyond swapping out bags and using products like vegetable-based food wraps or cornstarch compostable deli pots on the counter. Why not try offering a deposit and return scheme for products in glass jars? By doing this and encouraging shoppers to bring their own bags and containers, Chris says you will also open up conversations about sustainability with customers, which is a great way to win loyalty. Plus, speaking with locals can open doors to other reuse and recycling initiatives. "We offer as much of our surplus wooden, plastic and cardboard packaging to locals for reuse or upcycling," Chris says. "It's very popular with artists, crafters and allotmenteers!"

Sourcing sustainably

The dairy industry has a considerable impact on the environment, and not all cheeses are created equally. According to the WWF, dairy cows add "substantial" amounts of greenhouse gas to the atmosphere, and in some areas they contribute to water pollution and soil degradation. But here in the UK, there are many traditional dairy farmers who are pushing the boundaries of sustainability and regenerative agriculture. Working with those who make it their mission to be as eco-friendly as possible can have an outsized impact. Chris advises searching for small producers who use low-impact, non-industrial farming methods or small artisan dairies who hand make their cheeses.

"Wherever possible, we look for single-source milk, either from the cheesemaker's own herd or sourced from the smallest distance local to them. We consider how they maintain the grazing land, soil management, size of the herd and animal welfare," Chris says. "There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but a commitment to working with the environment ethically and sustainably is key."

> "We've found that customers are very happy to know that although things might cost them more, they're sourced sustainably and ethically"

Be open with customers

If sustainable changes start to add up, start a conversation with your customers about the measures you're implementing, the impact they have on the environment, and why this is reflected in your prices. "We've found that customers are very happy to know that although things might cost them more, they're sourced sustainably and ethically, selected with care and are of great quality," Chris says. "It's about bringing that honesty into the conversation and engaging with the customer. And occasionally, you might save money, too – offering out our packaging has dropped the weight and frequency of our commercial waste removal!"

While many sustainability-minded changes are usually not difficult to implement, deciding to go eco-friendly takes commitment. But for the sake of creating a better planet, it's worth it.



"Playing music to get the cheese dancing"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

Since venturing into the cheese world over a decade ago, I have always kept a careful eye on the way that our cheese is kept. For one, it is a product that can easily spoil if not looked after. Also, and importantly, to avoid the growth of any harmful bacteria the temperature of your cheese fridges has to be spot on and in line with your local EHO's recommendation.

When No2 Pound Street first opened, we had a 1.5 metre deli counter and a tiny walk-in fridge. Today we are lucky to have two further fridges. The second was installed roughly five years ago and the third has finally just been put into action. Our deli counter is now roughly 2.5 metres and took us two to three years to put in place after opening the doors in 2010. We had no idea what we were going to need.

One thing is for sure; a small business with limited funds only grows organically and only when there is a reasonable harvest (unless you have very deep pockets). We also would not have been able to afford our latest fridge had it not been for winning a Bucks Business Covid recovery grant. This I hope will make our working lives easier. Certainly our cheese stock takes are quicker now that we can actually see all the cheese.

So why three fridges, you may ask? As we are a small operation, in order to increase revenues we had to expand. There was no way that we could afford another property so we decided to take on several local farmers and artisan food markets (hard work but worth it). This has helped us bring in much needed funds for payroll and other operational costs, but importantly we are now able to spread the word on artisan cheese more freely. This for me personally is great, especially as I know that what I do helps support other SMEs that need our support – especially when compared to the industrial giants that are truly faceless and only offer inferior mass produced imitations. So having more fridge space means you can sell more cheese... simple really.

So my new fridge – what a breath of fresh and gently cool air it has been. This will allow us to further develop our skills as we now venture in to the world of affinage. As I type we have a 25 kilogram truckle of a very young Quicke's Cheddar about to embark on a journey of time. Ageing cheese is an art, it is kind of like being a great DJ playing the right music for the crowd to dance to. I must offer my thanks to heroes like Alan Hayes for his advice from Capital Refrigeration and Tag Refrigeration's amazing install with project manager Michael Bradley. Without these exceptional companies' wisdom and experience I could not have achieved this.

Importantly, being able to buy cheese to age on directly from the cheesemakers can open a world of opportunity. If you can help free space from the cheesemaker's own cheese ageing rooms you are potentially helping to increase the production of artisan cheese. There is a chance that the cheesemaker will offer a sharper price point as well, which is nice.

Do consider how you keep your cheese and if you can in time learn the art of affinage – I believe there is a big future right here a nd right now (as Moby mixed) in the British artisan cheese world. Now that is music to my ears. Let's dance.

> "Importantly, being able to buy cheese to age on directly from the cheesemakers can open a world of opportunity. If you can help free space from the cheesemaker's own cheese ageing rooms you are potentially helping to increase the production of artisan cheese. There is a chance that the cheesemaker will offer a sharper price point as well"

Feltham's Farm wins big at Virtual Cheese Awards

Feltham's Farm scooped the title of Best British Cheese for the second year running at the 2021 Virtual Cheese Awards. Held live on 7th May, the virtual event was hosted by BBC broadcaster and local food and drink champion Nigel Barden, and watched by thousands.

The Somerset cheesemaker's Spanish-inspired fresh young cow's milk cheese, La Fresca Margarita, beat hundreds of entrants from across the UK. In 2020, Feltham's Farm won the top accolade with Renegade Monk, a soft blue cow's milk cheese.

"We are completely blown away by this win," said Marcus Fergusson, cheesemaker and owner of Feltham's Farm. "La Fresca Margarita is a lovely queso fresco we developed over lockdown as a counterbalance to our pungent washed rind cheeses. We loved how it engaged the judges in a different conversation about what to expect from a fresh cheese."

Feltham's Farm's prize includes £4,000 worth of coverage in *Speciality Food* and its sister consumer title, *Great British Food*, as headline media partners of the event.

Joint silver was awarded to Harvey & Brockless by Cellar Dairy for its goat's cheese Blanche and Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses for its oak-fired Red Leicester Smouldering Ember. Wyke Farms took bronze for its Ivy's Reserve Vintage Cheddar.

The Virtual Cheese Awards was created by Sarah de Wit in 2020 to



celebrate and support Britain's cheese industry amid the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the success of the second edition, Sarah said, "We're so grateful to everyone who took part in and supported the awards this year. It was a real celebration of all that is brilliant about British cheese. Feltham's Farm winning for a Spanish-inspired fresh cheese just shows how innovative our dairy industry is. They take inspiration from cheeses from around the world and give them a bit of British spice.

"It's vitally important that we continue to support our Great British cheese industry by seeking out and buying new and exciting cheeses, which is now so simple with the growth of online cheese shops," Sarah continued. "We will be donating money from the event to a Specialist Cheesemakers Association bursary fund which will support British cheesemakers of the future."

THE WINNERS OF BEST OF BRITISH CHEESE ACROSS THE FINAL SEVEN CATEGORIES WERE:

- **Best Cheddar Cheese**
  Wyke Farms for Ivy's Reserve Vintage Cheddar
- **Best Territorial Cheese**
  South Caernarfon Creameries for Double Gloucester
- **Best Blue Cheese**
  Jones Cheese for Tysul Blue
- **Best Enhanced Cheese**
  Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses for Smouldering Ember
- **Best Speciality Cheese**
  Feltham's Farm for La Fresca Margarita
- **Best Artisan Hard Cheese**
  Fred W Read & Sons for Lincolnshire Poacher
- **Best Artisan Soft Cheese** –
  Harvey & Brockless and Cheese Cellar for Blanche

ADDITIONAL ACCOLADES WERE AWARDED TO:

- **Isle of Mull Cheese** won a trophy for sustainability thanks to its commitment to farming responsibly
- **Ryan Gee** from Hartington Creamery won young cheesemaker of the year
- **Shepherds Purse** was awarded the title of Cheese Hero for the launch of its Fettle cheese, which gave a lifeline to sheep milk producers during Covid-19



NEWS IN BRIEF

DAIRY EXPORTS HIT BY BREXIT

HMRC figures for February showed that exports fell for the second month in a row, with milk and cream showing the largest losses post-Brexit. The Food and Drink Federation's analysis of the figures found that cheese exports for February fell by 65%; however, this was up from January's export figures showing that a recovery may be on the cards. Amid the drop in exports, the UK has ensured that raw milk exports cannot be made to the EU after refusing to license storage premises, according to a report. Richard Hampton, MD of organic dairy co-op Omsco told *The Grocer* that the UK was effectively "banning itself" from exporting.

FIRST CARBON-NEUTRAL CHEDDAR FOR UK SUPERMARKETS

Lidl has partnered with Somerset-based Wyke Farms to create what it claims will be the first carbon-neutral Cheddar to be sold in UK supermarkets. The pair will work with The Carbon Trust to "ensure our approach is robust and stands up to scientific principles". Lidl said, "Our pledge is to be the first supermarket to produce carbon neutral Cheddar cheese, delivered in a credible and responsible way through an ongoing programme with our dairy farmers and supply chain partners."

Europe allows plant-based dairy to use 'buttery' and 'creamy'

The European Commission has withdrawn a ban on descriptive terms for plant-based dairy substitutes. The commission dropped Amendment 171, which proposed to outlaw words such as 'buttery' and 'creamy' to describe dairy-free products.

Initially, the commission had voted in favour of the controversial amendment, which experts said would have had significant consequences for plant-based alternatives to dairy. The European Union has already banned the use of dairy product names in plant-based foods, such as 'vegan cheese' or 'oat milk', but Amendment 171 would have gone even further, potentially even banning packaging for plant-based foods that resembled their dairy alternatives.

ProVeg International had collected more than 457,000 signatures on a public petition against the amendment, which was backed by the likes of Oatly, Willicroft and other major plant-based producers. ProVeg said it was a "huge victory for the planet and the plant-based sector alike".

CHEESE FACT FILE...

BRIE DE MEAUX DONGÉ

- **Country of origin:** France
- **Milk:** Raw cow's
- **Region:** Lorraine
- **Description:** Camembert-like fruity and rich flavours with a smooth, velvety texture



"What is the future for online sales?"



CLARE JACKSON
SLATE CHEESE

During the pandemic consumers have become increasingly comfortable with the courier delivery of fresh food items. We have developed a core group of loyal online customers who trust that our ice-packed cheeses travel well and enjoy the ease of shopping from their own home.

However, what is the future for these sales? Once people are able to access local shops freely and confident of their safety, will we still see these orders arriving in our inbox? To properly service orders at the current level we could do with additional space set up for the storage of packaging purchased in bulk and the efficient cutting and packing of daily orders. A short-term hire over the Christmas period made a world of difference to our capacity and efficiency, but would permanent investment in this area of the business prove a wise choice? We are pushing forward to expand our online offering, recently acquiring an alcohol licence to introduce a line of English cheese and wine hampers in collaboration with fellow-Suffolk based Heritage Wines, but in months to come will the lure of the high street tempt shoppers away from Slate online? Oh for a crystal ball to see where the balance of online versus shop sales will reach equilibrium! Likely only time and a good dose of hindsight will tell.

TOTAL GLOBAL **MILK** SUPPLIES ARE **EXPECTED** TO **INCREASE** BY JUST OVER **1%** IN **2021**, COMPARED TO THE **1.4%** GROWTH RECORDED IN **2020**

SOURCE: AHDB



SUMMER CHEESE
FOR SHARING & PAIRING

Entertaining is back on the menu this summer. *Speciality Food* discovers the best seasonal cheeses for customers looking to impress their guests



COMMENTATORS



PAUL HEASMAN
ANTHONY ROWCLIFFE & SON



JEN GRIMSTONE-JONES
CHEESE ETC, THE PANGBOURNE CHEESE SHOP



TOM BADCOCK
HARVEY & BROCKLESS

Strict lockdown restrictions and rules on social contact are finally easing, meaning that retailers can bet on a summer defined by happy reunions between friends and family and long hours of al fresco dining under the sun. With Covid-safe gatherings given the go-ahead, customers will no doubt be stocking up on food and drink to wow their guests this season.

What could be better for these warmer months than a sharing platter full of chunky wedges of soft, summer cheese, fresh fruit and crisp crackers all served with a glass of chilled wine? "Cheesemakers have become experts at making great cheese all year round, but nothing beats those made using milk as animals move onto lush new summer pastures," says Paul Heasman, purchasing coordinator at Anthony Rowcliffe & Son.

The average consumer may not yet understand the differences between summer and winter cheeses, offering retailers a prime opportunity to share their expertise. "Generally, cheeses made in the summer are created using milk from animals that are grazing outdoors, whereas winter cheeses are made using milk from animals which are being fed on winter feed," explains Jen Grimstone-Jones, cheesemonger at Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop. "This means that summer cheeses are often more herbaceous."

"Winter cheeses didn't exist historically and are a miracle of hay, silage and winter fodder," adds Tom Badcock, a cheese specialist at Harvey & Brockless. "The spring cheeses are green, and they often ripen differently. There are a number of reasons why, and amongst them is the inclusion of enzymically rich Colostrum," a form of milk produced by mammals just prior to and after giving birth, "as well as the switch from rich silage to young pasture. As we go into summer, the cheeses become more predictable," Tom continues. But predictable by no means equates to boring. As Paul explains, "Hard cows' cheeses become more golden due to Beta-carotene in the grass, and flavours become more complex. Young cheeses just feel and look fresher, taking on more floral and grassy notes; goat and sheep cheeses exhibit more character from the milk, making the animal origin more pronounced – spring and summer is their optimum time."

For fine food independents, understanding these differences is crucial to selling summer cheeses and translating their flavours through recommendations, choice pairings and cheeseboard inspiration.

Seasonal pairings

To optimise your range for maximum sales in the summer, Paul advises carrying cheeses that will "create theatre and flavour. Have in mind some combinations so you are prepared to do the hard work for customers and give them an exciting experience," he says.

From traditional clothbound Cheddar to soft blues and versatile goat's cheese, there are many options to choose from. Some cheeses, such as Montgomery's Cheddar, will be aged for 12-14 months, meaning they were made when cows were out in their pastures enjoying the fresh air over the previous summer. Fresh goat and sheep's milk cheeses on the other hand are more available in the summer because that is when the animals reproduce, thus their milk is more available for cheesemaking.

Jen's preferred summer selection includes cheeses guaranteed to bring the wow-factor to a sharing platter: Single Gloucester PDO (a fresh, sometimes nutty cheese that is lighter and younger than a Double Gloucester), Oxford Dolce (a creamy, slightly sweet blue cheese), Bix Cheese (a soft cheese made with an extra helping of cream) and Sinodun Hill (a goat's cheese with a slightly crumbly core in a creamy rind). "They are all fairly unusual, so it is likely that your guests might not have tried them before." When it comes to accompaniments, Paul says to keep your options fresh and light in the summer. "Chutneys made from summer fruits and berries and vegetables will work well, along with jams and honey. Fresh fruits are a perfect partner to all cheeses, including with some you might not expect, such as blues." As for drinks, "Fresh cordials, crisp white wines, rosés or light beers all work exceptionally well," he says.



For goat's cheese in particular, Jen recommends pairing with seasonal fruits, such as fresh figs, rhubarb and her favourite, fresh cherries. Although she adds, "For me, nothing beats freshly baked bread with cheese. I think it's the aroma that gets me every time." Speak to your customers to find out if they are buying cheeses for a particular occasion or activity. For instance, Tom suggests that a summer picnic in the park would not be complete without a young goat's cheese served with bitter orange conserve, Miller's Damsel Buttermilk Wafers and a dry white wine. By personalising your recommendations, you can provide a service that customers will come back to time and time again.

> "Chutneys made from summer fruits and berries and vegetables will work well, along with jams and honey"





Looking the part

When selling summer cheeses, you will also have to pay particular attention to their care. "Keep as little stock as possible," Tom advises. "Keep the cheese consistently cold, and avoid over-trimming or cutting into pieces that will dry and lose their fresh vibrancy."

"The softer cheeses are perfect for eating," Jen adds, so advise customers to buy them as near to when they want to eat them as possible. In the shop, "keep them wrapped up well and in the fridge. If it's particularly warm they don't take as long to come up to room temperature for eating," Jen explains, so let customers know they can take them out of the fridge half an hour before serving. As well as keeping cheeses fresh and flavourful, in-store displays should be eye-catching and informative. Tom suggests piling cheeses high for a visually impressive display. "Stack multiple cheeses, pre-cut a basket of cheese and sell it on top of your serveover counter," he says. "Make everything simple and grabbable with lots of free samples." Of course, samples have not always been a safe serving option during the Covid-19 pandemic. While some retailers have resumed offering in-store samples, it's safe to bet that not all customers will be comfortable enough to try a bite, so ensure any signs and boards are also up to scratch to entice shoppers who are putting safety first. For Jen, displaying summer cheeses is an altogether simple affair – though still perfectly effective. "We don't tend to move cheeses around our counter in different seasons, as it makes it confusing for our customers. Instead we have a 'cheese of the moment' board. It's amazing how many people will start with the cheese from the board when making their choices," she says.

With exciting variations to be expected as standard alongside ever-present quality, artisan cheese comes into its own in the summer months. By offering a special selection for the season, retailers can help customers create a summer to remember.

CREATING A **SUMMER CHEESEBOARD**

Our experts share their hard-won cheeseboard tips to help you seal the deal with customers this season

PAUL HEASMAN, ANTHONY ROWCLIFFE & SON



"As with all cheeseboards yours needs to reflect something of every milk type, cheeses in keeping with the season and, importantly, the occasion. Contrast colours and textures and be creative with cutting and shapes. Fresh goat, semi-aged sheep, mature farmhouse Cheddar and a blue are good cornerstones, then build around this with cheeses that are more pungent and funkier, sweet, or flavoured with additives such as fruit, and a salty Feta, ideally in oil to drizzle on bread and other cheeses. This should provide a catch-all for all grazers of the board, and do not forget that hot eating is not just for winter. If you have the BBQ fired up, remember to bake a Camembert or melt a nice big wedge of Brie."

Paul's winning combination:

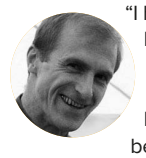
- Rosary goat's cheese
- Rachel sheep's cheese
- Westcombe Farmhouse Cheddar
- Graceburn Feta-style cheese marinated in oil
- Epoisses
- Colston Bassett Stilton

JEN GRIMSTONE-JONES, CHEESE ETC, THE PANGBOURNE CHEESE SHOP



"I always think that four cheeses make a great cheeseboard. There's enough variety to keep everyone happy and your palate can appreciate the different flavours without going over the top. It also means you can have good size pieces; too many cheeses and you end up with lots of little bits and often people aren't able to try everything."

TOM BADCOCK, HARVEY & BROCKLESS



"I have always liked patterns – ie, the cheeses on a board should be related. I refer to these as vertical selections. This could be where all the cheeses are made by female cheesemakers or where all the cheeses come from a local area, such as Sussex, etc. The nature of cheese boards having to be a bit of everything is like serving a rainbow when there is lots of pleasure in, perhaps, just the greens."

> "Cheesemakers have become experts at making great cheese all year round, but nothing beats those made using milk as animals move onto lush new summer pastures"



"We very much see ourselves as artisan cheesemakers"

For the second year running, Feltham's Farm has been crowned winner of the Virtual Cheese Awards



Last summer, new cheesemakers Feltham's Farm were awarded the title of Best British Cheese at the inaugural Virtual Cheese Awards for their punchy rind-washed creation, Renegade Monk, and the 2021 event – held in May – played host to their second crowning. This time the winning cheese was a new fresh cheese, La Fresca Margarita, which wowed judges with its taste, texture and appearance.

Judged blindly by cheese experts with decades of experience between them, the entirely transparent judging sessions of the Virtual Cheese Awards were recorded live for the industry and cheese-loving consumers to enjoy – and it's the no-holds-barred format of the awards which make this second concurrent win even more impressive.

Speciality Food caught up with Marcus Fergusson and Penelope Nagle, founders of Feltham's Farm and creators of La Fresca Margarita, to discover the story behind their latest winning cheese.

Penny: "During lockdown, it became apparent that we weren't going to be able to drive to France or Spain with our family. And we wondered, how can we feel as if we're on holiday, at home? It feels like people are yearning for taste adventures from other places, and this is our homage to Spain.

Marcus: "Like Renegade Monk, La Fresca Margarita is a lockdown cheese made using milk from Bruton Organic Dairy, which is local to us. During the first lockdown we threw away a lot of cheese as we got stuck with a lot of product – because Renegade Monk takes four weeks to mature, it was hard to predict how the market would be when it was ready to sell. But the Fresca Margarita takes four days to make, meaning we can effectively make it to order.

Penny: "Our new cheese facility is powered entirely by solar panels and ground source heat, and everything local is delivered using our electric van (also solar powered). Whey is a waste product of cheesemaking, and when we first started people told us we needed big diesel lorries to transport it offsite, and we thought there must be a better way. We now have pigs which eat the whey – they make the sweetest, tastiest Parma ham, which we're thinking of doing a sideline in."

Marcus: "We're currently in talks with wholesalers, but the issue with this cheese is its short shelf life. Wholesalers can be reluctant with the idea of getting it out to customers quickly enough, but after the win we can start having those conversations. We currently supply the farm shops and delis close to us, and it's also available on our website. We offer a number of different options with two or three different cheeses in it, branded t-shirts and biscuits, because it's not really viable to send just one cheese, since you need packaging and ice packs."

Penny: "A lot of wholesalers were watching the virtual cheese awards and they were very quick off the mark to place an order. I think they realised how much of a limited edition cheese it is!"

Marcus: "At the moment, we make the Fresca Margarita in batches of 40, so that obviously has to be hugely scaled up. Making more in each batch. With some cheeses I think that would be problematic, in terms of how long it takes to mould up, but this one will be pretty resilient. Once it's ready to mould up, it's in a fairly reliable consistent state.

WHAT'S NEXT

Penny: Marcus has been asked to teach the beginner's cheesemaking course at River Cottage where he first learned how to make cheese. It's such a nice story: "you can go from passionate amateur to multi-award winning cheesemaker in three years." We're also going to be running cheese experiences in the summer. We've had people ask to come and visit, and they're so passionate about it they'll want to talk to us for 45 minutes about what we're doing, so we decided to formalise it. We're going to do proper tastings; trying all four cheeses we make with different wines, and juices, and toppings.

SERVING SUGGESTIONS

Marcus: Fresca Margarita is available in two versions, salted and unsalted. The unsalted version is a breakfast cheese, and it's fantastic with honey drizzled on it, or granola.

The salted one is great by itself, or you can sprinkle fresh herbs on it, like rosemary, thyme or oregano. It enhances the flavour of whatever you add to it, such as chilli flakes and olive oil.



It's also great to cook with. I saw a great recipe for Mexican black bean soup the other day, which asked for a queso fresco. It doesn't quite melt; it goes very unctuous and velvety. I also know of some people who have made cheesecake with it.

At the start of the year we took on our first full time employee, Tom Humphris. That's a big evolution for us. He joined us from the Ludlow Farmshop, and it was him that made the award winning cheese!

We don't want to be enormous, though. We very much see ourselves as artisan cheesemakers, and if you scale up too much you lose quality and passion.

Marcus: I have recently brought in a couple of new cultures and I plan on doing some experiments. Another soft cheese, similar to a Camembert. That's part of our USP, to do cheeses with a twist: we aren't making British cheeses, or doing territorials; we're surrounded by the country's best Cheddar makers, and we want to be different.



HOW TO RUN YOUR BUSINESS IN 2021

Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe explores how partnerships and a fresh mindset are key parts of ensuring business success







At times of great challenge often come times of great questioning, exploration and innovation. Together, players in the fine food retail space, including producers, restaurants, local shops and farmers are examining how they can work together to lift the success of their individual businesses and the entire sector. The answer lies in collaboration.

After a year that has arguably pushed the fine food industry to its limits, independent fine food retailers are leveraging the evolving landscape and the opportunities it brings to improve and future-proof their businesses.

Far from an individual pursuit though, the entire industry is collaborating to explore how this is possible while striving for a better future for food – both in the short-term amid Covid-19 and the longer term to reflect our global sustainability goals.

Disrupted supply chains, limited innovation, changing consumer attitudes and financial loss have dominated much of 2020, and 2021 to date. Independent fine food retailers have had to respond to these shifts in behaviour, despite knowing their shoppers may have lower (or non-existent) disposable incomes. While foodservice outlets have spent the past year shuttered into lockdown, indie retailers have been the mainstay brick-and-mortar outlets we have come to depend on – more so than ever before.

With this heightened reliance comes appreciation and loyalty. But it also reveals what more needs to be done to secure fine food businesses and the future of our food systems so that both remain robust and consistent for consumers, especially during times of instability and uncertainty.

Collaborate to create change

Throughout the fine food industry, retailers and the wider supply chain are uniting to solve the big issues facing our food system. Collaboration is vital to grow and shape the success of individual businesses, other fine food retailers and do good for the planet.

"Due to the looming pressures of both climate change and resource shortages, there really is no other way to think about running a business," Catherine Conway, founder of Unpackaged, relays.

"Doing good means making your business resilient for a changing marketplace so everyone should be thinking about sustainability in the same way they think about sales or operations," adds Conway.

Collaboration plays a vital role in meeting consumer demand, too. By teaming up throughout the landscape, individual retailers are best prepared to respond to collective consumer needs. In 2021, consumer demands revolve around generating transparency and traceability, utilising technology to provide accurate and complete datasets, and building trust and confidence among fine food shoppers.

Research findings highlight how consumer interest in transparency and responsible production appears to have risen amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Innova Market Insights reveals. And its ongoing importance is set to persist moving forward, too. Creating a consistent flow of information, an open forum for discussion and setting shared goals fosters a strong collaborative environment.

> "Collaboration is vital to grow and shape the success of individual businesses, other fine food retailers and do good for the planet"

How can indie retailers achieve success?

Generating trust, creating transparency and encouraging the better use of technology is essential. It is what fine food consumers want. It is increasingly what they expect from their indie retailers of choice. And they will actively search for those that provide this transparency and trust, with the support, reliability and reassurance that comes from technology.

"UK business leaders are increasingly turning their backs on suppliers who fail to align with their social values," says Maria Castroviejo, consumer foods analyst, Rabobank at the FoodBytes! forum. "Events of last year have made it more important to consider environmental and diversity policies when selecting suppliers," Castroviejo adds.

Transparency is a leading trend in food and drink in 2021, food trends specialist Innova Market Intelligence reveals. From sustainable sourcing, clean living strategies and meaningful storytelling, the industry is leveraging these opportunities to meet evolving consumers' demands. For independent fine food retailers, selecting suppliers, understanding the supply chain and showcasing transparency is crucial.

Describing transparency, traceability and trust as going "hand in hand", Castroviejo emphasises that this relationship has grown during Covid-19."Without transparency, without traceability, it is impossible to ensure these are actual facts and not just nice words," Castroviejo adds.

In the Innova Nutrition & Health Survey 2020, 85% of European consumers agreed with the statement: "To me, product information is of major importance".

A further 35% of European consumers say they are interested in learning more about where their food comes from and how it is made, the Innova Lifestyle & Attitude Survey 2020 revealed. Indie fine food retailers need to align themselves with suppliers that provide information that they can then communicate directly to shoppers in-store.

"Without information, consumers cannot be empowered to make decisions in the way they want," says Ben Fishman, managing director, CGC Ventures, at a recent forum by innovation platform, FoodBytes! By Rabobank. "I do believe this is a consumer-driven trend and the consumers are demanding transparency," adds Fishman.

Strengthening collaboration with technology

Digital solutions are helping to provide transparency in an efficient and flexible way. Technology supports transparency by making it easier for players to contribute and collaborate throughout the supply chain. Data and the better understanding it creates gives retail customers confidence, control and trust over their fine food brand and product choices.

"The onus is on being smarter, better, quicker and more agile," *An Appetite for Change: Food Trends On the Menu* report by Ayming found.

Today, 50% of consumers say they are at least somewhat likely to scan a QR code if it appears on pack, which is encouraging more suppliers to deliver farm-to-fork traceability via technology, Innova Market Insights reveals.

"Innovation in the food sector is rapid, and digital technology is accelerating the pace of change and increasing its scale," the food trends report shares. "The onus is on the food and beverage industry to innovate furiously and provide this new breed of customer with the products they are looking for," it adds.

"We're finding that the new way of working post-Covid allows for much greater collaboration as we can use digital tools for sharing information and getting together," notes Conway.

Securing success in fine food through collaboration

Sharing the biggest opportunities for fine food retailers when it comes to collaboration, Conway emphasises: "Most fine food retailers are not in competition with each other which leads to a collaborative atmosphere across the sector—whether it is sharing best practice or promoting great new producers which fine food retailers are brilliant at."

"The fine food sector is different to the mass retail market. It is a lot more experimental and experiential," says Valia Christidou, founder of The Food Launchpad. "The answer really lies with the consumer. What are consumers that shop the fine food sector looking for? The answer is to treat themselves to something different and new, to impress someone, to show they care or that they know their stuff," Christidou adds.

Indie retailers can create transparency with the support of technology to enhance trust. It is a formula that can help businesses bounce back in the current tough climate and ultimately prepare them for growth and success by answering consumers' needs more swiftly and accurately. But, only if as an industry we collaborate, learn from each other and lean in for support.



THE RETURN OF FOOD TO GO

The food to go sector was thrown off course by the pandemic. As it begins its recovery, new consumer trends are dominating the industry

COMMENTATORS



KATIE PROWSE
LUMINA INTELLIGENCE



SHANE GODWIN
MACKNADE



SIMON WAINWRIGHT
IGD

Driven by consumers' busy and on-the-go lifestyles, food to go was booming pre-Covid-19, with its growth outpacing that of the rest of the eating out sector. But over 2020, as the coronavirus kept most consumers confined to their homes for the majority of the year, the UK's food to go market declined by a whopping 45.5%, according to research by Lumina Intelligence.

While the home cooking trend took off, purchases of prepared food slumped and many fine food retailers were forced to shut their cafés. However, today, with the vaccine rollout programme well underway and restrictions easing, Lumina is expecting a swift revival for the sector, predicting it will reach a value of £22.6bn by 2024. Waitrose's recent sales figures certainly back up this trend, with the retailer having recorded a 213% rise in sales of picnic and food to go products in March compared to the same time last year.

> "In the medium to longer term, operators will need to leverage the habits created during the pandemic period to turn coffee purchasing into long-lasting habits"

Catering to Covid-safe socialising

While the industry welcomes the return of the food to go market, there are still certain customer behaviour changes that shops must look out for. For example, one of the biggest opportunities for food to go operators to capitalise on at the moment is the 'picnic in the park' trend. According to Katie Prowse, senior insight manager at Lumina Intelligence, 21% of shoppers plan to purchase food to go to consume in a park in the future.

Delis and food halls can jump on this trend by creating new ranges that are targeted at consumers who are looking to socialise outdoors with their friends or family. For example, Katie says, "Restaurant and fast food brands including Megan's and German Doner Kebab have developed takeaway-focused boxed offerings that are ideal for outdoor consumption. Retailers including Morrisons have also launched picnic-specific lines; however, more can be done to target this occasion including special messaging on-site and in-store and through offers."



Shane Godwin, managing director at Macknade, knew that outdoor spaces posed an opportunity long before Covid-19 made them mandatory. "Here at Macknade Faversham, we saw an opportunity before the pandemic to make good use of our outdoor space and really make it into a hub for enjoying food with friends in an informal and relaxed space," he explains. "So over the last year we have developed this area of the business and formed good relationships with some hand-picked vendors who have set up home here and done a fantastic job providing takeaway delights during lockdown," Shane says. However, the importance of this space is even more pronounced post-lockdown. "As restrictions begin to lift, this area is already proving to be a great place to hang out, and being outdoors it is one of the safest places to socialise as we all start to venture out again."

The revival of food to go will also see the return of essential community spaces like these, giving retailers an opportunity to help their area flourish. Shane continues, "Macknade creates spaces and experiences that bring communities together around a shared love of food and drink, and we have been thrilled to see friends and families once again enjoying outdoor dining with us and look forward to a summer where we can provide the space and good food for reunions, celebrations, long-awaited catch ups or just coffee with a friend."



> We source quality foods and form personal relationships with the producers and farmers, ensuring that we offer our customers the best quality, but also a meaningful connection with the food

Coffee becomes a Covid winner

Another area that's ripe for opportunities is coffee to go, which Lumina Intelligence's report says "dominated" food to go drinks occasions, making up 50% of the total drinks consumed between January and April 2021. Younger customers in particular have changed their behaviour in this area in response to the pandemic, with almost a quarter having picked up the habit of purchasing a hot drink to go when on a walk with a friend since March 2020.

"A strong coffee offering has been an important factor of success in the food to go channel for some time now," Katie says. But with restrictions on indoor socialising easing, should retailers look at coffee from a 2019 mindset? Katie believes that contrary to what the current rules allow, Covid-19-related habits will stick around for the time being. "As restrictions around indoor socialising ease, it is expected that consumers will retain some of the behaviours around outdoor socialising. Short term, operators can continue to win with risk-averse consumers who are preferring to socialise in the open air," Katie says. "In the medium to longer term, operators will need to leverage the habits created during the pandemic period to turn coffee purchasing into long-lasting habits."

Thankfully, a strong coffee culture already exists in the UK, but cafés can take this a step further. "Subscription-based models can emphasise an operator's value for money credentials," Katie says.

Chains such as Pret A Manger and Leon launched new monthly subscription coffee models last year, and independents could take a leaf out of their book to try this tactic for their own regulars.

Food to 'go home' vs office workers

Looking towards the future, food to go products may split into two categories: those made for home workers and those made for commuters. With 34% of consumers saying they will work from home in the future, and with over half of those planning to spend most work days at home, it is well worth considering ways to cater to this growing segment. Home workers may be targeted by a new category that emerged over the pandemic: food to 'go home', also known as the 'makeaway'.

Many restaurant brands launched boxes which allowed consumers to recreate restaurant dishes at home during Covid-19, and with home workers having access to their kitchen full of appliances during the workday, the options for 'heat at home' lunchtime meals are practically endless. "Makeaway boxes have bridged the gap for consumers between eating out occasions whilst dine-in restrictions have endured, and they have offered operators a desperately needed revenue stream," Katie says. "In January 2021, one in five consumers had already purchased a kit, whilst over a third (35%) expressed a future intention to do so." Once again, despite the fact that the UK continues to move towards a post-Covid future, Katie says that Lumina Intelligence expects the makeaway offering to continue to expand and develop as operators reopen sites across the next few months.

Operators such as D'Ambrosi Fine Foods in the Cotswolds, which sells premium heat-at-home meals, have built their entire business model around this trend. Owner chef Andrew D'Ambrosi recently told *Speciality Food* that his food to go model "thrived" during the pandemic. "Our food is restaurant quality but specifically created to maintain consistency and taste on the reheat without compromise," he explains.

IGD's ShopperVista recently published the report *Food-to-go: What's next for Shoppers*, in which it identified three trends shaping the food to go market. One of these trends was rising demand for hot food to go options.

Hot food to go options are becoming more popular, it said, as consumers are opting for a broader range of choices that are less portable as they work from home.

On the other hand, as lockdown restrictions relax, more and more office workers will restart their commutes – at least a few times a week. "For those returning to workplaces, operators can look forward to a boost in treat-led to-go [products] with consumers developing lunch fatigue on days spent at home," Katie explains.

Simon Wainwright, director of global insight at IGD, said shoppers that crave convenience will boost sales for ready-to-eat snacks, meal deals and meal kits. "Our latest shopper trends research reveals that the majority of existing users of meal concepts will continue to use them within their meal repertories, with 83% saying they will continue using meal deals from retailers," he said.

However, consumers will be looking for options that go beyond the ordinary. "Office lunch occasions are expected to foster higher spends going forward, with 25% missing food to go, and consumers are most likely to trade up on food to go consumed at work," Katie says. "Fine food retailers can capitalise on this opportunity by developing products that align with consumer trends in food to go around customisable, fresh and healthy options."

The food to go fare offered by fine food retailers puts quality and provenance first. For example, Shane says Macknade's food to go range "encompasses our love for local as well as our Italian influence, like our famous Breakfast Butty; sausage, bacon, tomato and egg encased in a Panuozzo bap (a Neapolitan pizza dough style bread roll)." Thanks to their personal relationships formed with producers and farmers, speciality food retailers' food to go is a cut above the ordinary supermarket or convenience store meal deal. With the sector offering a £1 billion sales opportunity between 2022 and 2024, it's time for independents to welcome food to go back into their shops.

IN JANUARY **2021**, 1 IN 5 **CONSUMERS** PURCHASED A **MEAL KIT**, AND OVER A **THIRD (35%)** EXPRESSED A FUTURE **INTENTION** TO DO SO







REUNITING THE UK FOOD & DRINK INDUSTRY

Next month the UK Food & Drink Shows return to the NEC 5th-7th July, with over 800 exhibitors set to revitalise the speciality retail and hospitality industries

Food & Drink Expo and Farm Shop & Deli Show join The Ingredients Show, Foodex, National Convenience Show and The Forecourt Show to create an unmissable proposition for progressive food and drink professionals across the industry.

Following a 16-month hiatus due to Covid-19, stringent safety and hygiene measures have been put in place and the shows will be the first opportunity for suppliers, buyers, experts and decision makers to come together as an industry once again and focus on the future whilst also celebrating the resilience, spirit and innovation that prevailed during the pandemic.

The flagship event for retail, wholesale and foodservice audiences – Food & Drink Expo – centres itself around ground-breaking new products and technologies that are set to help businesses thrive in 2021 and beyond.



Food & Drink Expo

Visitors looking for inspiration will get the inside track on this year's latest, greatest launches, alongside the chance to see, sample and secure a fast track to profitability. Lunchmate, Belvoir Farm, Dorset Sea Salt Co, Hancocks, Bonds, Bobby's and Il Gelato di Ariela are just a handful of the innovative exhibitors preparing for the show alongside many others, including:

Known for deliciously authentic Jamaican patties, Quick Food Products (Stand X121) will have 7 different flavours on show including Salt Fish, Jerk Chicken, Vegetable and Chicken & Sweetcorn. Baked with the freshest ingredients and made to an original secret family recipe, the patties offer something for everyone, whether customers are after authentic world flavours or a meat-free option.



Porky Whites (Stand V130) knows sausages. For decades, the family-run business has passionately produced the tastiest, award-winning sausages, formed meat and poultry products. As part of its foodservice range, it will be showcasing its meatballs, burgers, kebabs and other skewered products. Offering recyclable packaging and flexible pack sizes from 100g to 5kg in any portion size required, its products are also available in both fresh and frozen formats.

In a bid to cater for the demand for plant-based products, Norac Foods UK (Stand Z118) will be unveiling its vegan croissants and vegan pains au chocolat to the UK market under brand La Boulangère. The pastries have been developed as an ideal alternative for vegans who are on the go or don't want to miss out on the simple pleasures of enjoying breakfast with their loved ones.

With products covering both the fresh and frozen category, Meatless Farm (Stand X129) will be exhibiting three of its newest plant-based products including its Thai Porkless Fried Wontons in response to the ever-growing demand for vegan and vegetarian options.

Two Days Drinks (Stand T151) is showcasing its two-flavour range of Vodka Sodas – Vodka Raspberry Soda and Vodka Lime Soda. Gluten-free, vegan and keto-friendly, the drinks also have zero sugars or sweeteners and are inspired by an ethos of today and tomorrow: with a sessionable ABV you can enjoy them today and still make the most of tomorrow.

The Jersey Oyster Company (Stand Z98) is the first ASC accredited oyster farm worldwide and a 3rd generation oyster and mussel farm on the island of Jersey (Channel Islands). The company maintains a 55-hectare beach concession for the production of oysters and mussels a short distance from the farm's shore based production facility, growing steadily in recent years it is now the largest oyster producer in the British Isles.

Farm Shop & Deli Show

Meanwhile visitors to Farm Shop & Deli Show – the leading event for the speciality food market – will leave thoroughly inspired with a refreshed view of the sector's incredible range of produce and suppliers.

Just some of the exciting suppliers and NPD to put on any visitors' must-see list include Clonakilty, Cawston Press, Brindisa Spanish Foods, Martin Frobisher's, Bag It Don't Bin It and SHORE – The Scottish Seaweed Company who will be exhibiting alongside:

Made with quality, award-winning wines from South Africa, Rebel Wine Ltd. (Stand P121) is infused with Hemp, which contains a small amount of naturally occurring CBD. The 200ml cans are fully recyclable and perfect for picnics, parties and festivals. Available in three variants – Red Merlot, White Sauvignon Blanc and Rose – all wines are also vegan.

Healthy snacking brand, 5th Season Fruit (Stand S95) whose modern freeze-drying process allows fruit to retain its size, shape, smell, taste and nutritional value. Making fruit more convenient and practical to eat on-the-go, flavours are currently available in Strawberry, Pineapple and Fruit Salad with a further three in the pipeline for 2021/2022.

> "The UK Food & Drink Shows are united by four overarching themes: Health & Nutrition, Sustainability, Technology and Consumer Insight; issues faced unilaterally that will filter down into every part of the show discourse"

@specialityfood

Vegan, dairy-free, plant-based, soya-free, gluten-free, nut-free and GMO-free, Blue Skies Ice Cream (Stand Q120) uses fresh coconut milk from Ghana to make the creamiest non-dairy ice creams. Available flavours include Simply Coconut, Mango & Passion Fruit, Chocolate & Orange, Caffe Latte, Salted Caramel, Vanilla Bean.

Oakdale Bees (Stand F99) is an apiary of British Buckfast bees and will be showcasing its eco hive range of products including reusable bees wax food wraps, eco gifts and its new Beevitalise range of sustainable, all-natural polishes made from British beeswax and plant oils, launched and available at wholesale prices.

> “Across the six shows there are countless more opportunities for insight, innovation and networking meaning valuable time spent out of the office can have even more of an impact for visitors whose interests go beyond any individual show”

Invaluable live events

A series of live events will also take place across the three days providing visitors with the latest insight, offering advice and recommendations and celebrating the great and the good of the industry.

Showcase events include the return of the Farm Shop & Deli Retailer Awards, the finals of which, held during the show, recognise and rightly laud speciality retailers leading the sector in customer service, innovation and community involvement.

New for 2021 is an awards scheme tipped to become the gold standard in UK butchery produce and an indication of all-round excellence. The Meat Poduct Awards scheme will showcase the quality and calibre of produce supplied by the industry. Entries will be scrutinised by an esteemed panel of judges who will consider taste, sustainability and provenance before awarding category winners. Live judging takes place on 6th July, with the category winners announced later that same day.







What’s more, *The Grocer Magazine*’s Talking Shop Live will hold a series of events to discuss and debate the key challenges affecting retail, wholesale and foodservice. Head along for sessions such as “Trend forecasting: lifting the veil” (Monday 5th July, 2pm), where forecasting experts discuss the top tools and products retailers can use to find their next shelf superstars, or “Reality Bytes: food industry automation” (Tuesday 6th July, 11am), an in-depth look into the potential of everything from grocery-delivering drones to factory-working robots with Timandra Harkness, host of Radio 4’s *FutureProofing*.

For those with sustainability front of mind, Dr Gabrielle Walker fronts “A reuse revolution: is reusable packaging the future of grocery?” (Monday 5th July, 11am). Single-use plastic may have made a comeback during Covid-19 – but recent research shows the public still care deeply about the scandal of plastic waste. With the market moving to reusable solutions, and our expert panel will outline what this means for the sector, with best practice and tips on investing in the circular economy.

Meanwhile broadcaster Louise Minchin will be exploring what matters most to the food and drink industry right now in “Industry Heads Panel: Where are we now?” (Monday 5th July, 12pm). Join her along with Kate Nicholls, CEO of UK Hospitality, Ian Wright, Chief Executive of the Food and Drink Federation and Juliane Caillouiette Novel, Interim MD of the Sustainable Restaurant Association for all the latest insight on pressing issues and key trends across the hospitality landscape.

On day three of the show, This is Cumbria host “Walking in their shoes: what customers really want” (Wednesday 7th July, 12pm), an interactive session which will focus on customers’ needs with live insights into pain points and preferences around speciality food and drink. Plus, there’ll be delicious food from Cumbria that every customer will love.

Over at the Dragon’s Pantry, brave entrepreneurs will experience the ultimate retail test. Game-changing start-ups will have 15 minutes to pitch their ideas to a team of fearsomely-experienced industry ‘dragons’ and impress with their ideas, strategy and understanding.

The show’s stellar line-up of live events promises to be a real highlight of the exhibition as some of the biggest names in the industry examine state-of-the-nation issues.

The UK Food & Drink Shows have been awarded the ‘Visit Britain’ ‘We’re Good to Go’ accreditation verifying that the event meets Government and public health guidance on Covid-19 with all required health and safety processes in place to open safely in July.

Register for your free ticket to Farm Shop & Deli Show and gain access to all six shows via **farmshopanddelishow.co.uk**

WHAT ESLE TO LOOK OUT FOR

Across the six shows there are countless more opportunities for insight, innovation and networking meaning valuable time spent out of the office can have even more of an impact. Don’t miss:

- The National Convenience Show’s ‘Retailer Hub’ which will be bringing together a selection of leading suppliers, retailers and industry experts to share cutting edge shopper insight and business advice, alongside practical demonstrations.
- At Foodex, experts come together on the Centre Stage to discuss wide-ranging topics such as “Packaging as a solution, not a problem” and “Beyond Brexit: Lessons from the first six months” as well as celebrating the best of the best with the Food Manufacture Excellence Awards.
- The Education Lab is a must-visit at The Ingredients Show. Everything from the game changing ingredients in sports nutrition to the ways in which we can reduce food waste is on the agenda in various cutting-edge panel discussions.
- On 6th July the Retailer Hub will also play host to The Forecourt Show’s “On the road with Forecourt Trader”. Forecourt Trader editor Merril Boulton and a panel of experts will dissect everything from the growth of forecourt convenience to how to stay relevant on the Road to Zero.

The UK Food & Drink Shows are united by four overarching themes: Health & Nutrition, Sustainability, Technology and Consumer Insight; issues faced unilaterally that will filter down into every part of the show discourse.



COMMENTATORS



CHRIS BAVIN
TELEVISION PRESENTER AND FRESH FOOD IMPORTER



CHARLIE WELLS
THE FARM STRATFORD



STEPH JOHNSTONE
THE CRESS COMPANY



MIKE EDWARDS
BAKKAVOR

CATERING FOR THE NEW SCRATCH COOKERS

Scratch cooking is one of lockdown's most valuable legacies for indies. Ellen Manning explores how to maintain its momentum

While the Covid pandemic brought loss in so many ways, there were some silver linings – many of which surrounded the way we eat and cook. From the banana bread craze to the sourdough phase, lockdowns brought a renewed love for our kitchens, and a rediscovery for many of the joys of cooking and eating together. From families sitting down together to couples creating restaurant food in their own homes, a slower pace of life and enforced time away from restaurants saw us embrace not just the joy of food but the process of cooking from scratch.

According to a study by Tesco in 2020, lockdown saw more than a fifth of Britons cook every meal from scratch, compared to one in eight before lockdown. The study of 2,000 adults found more than half experimented and used extra ingredients in their cooking more often after being told to stay at home, with two-fifths saying they enjoyed cooking more than before and 89 per cent vowing to continue making food from scratch once the restrictions were lifted.

Discovering the joy of quality ingredients

For keen cooks and food lovers, the chance to experiment with ingredients, recreate their favourite restaurant dishes at home and get adventurous in the kitchen has been a much-needed positive, while some people have found the joy of quality ingredients and what they can do with them after discovering local delis, farm shops and independent producers in the early days of lockdown due to necessity. Produce expert and former market trader Chris Bavin, who presents TV programmes including Britain's Best Home Cook, said lockdown had seen people rediscover their local butchers, greengrocers and delis as they embraced cooking at home more. "In the beginning of lockdown we saw people re-engaging with cooking at home, maybe discovering it for the first time or falling back in love with cooking and baking. It was brilliant – people had a bit more time, we all became sourdough experts or baked banana bread. People also realised they had to be a bit more resourceful. Ingredients and food were a bit more scarce so people got back to that 'make do' attitude – using leftovers, batch cooking for the freezer and cooking from scratch. I think that's continued to grow. We've realised how important food is, whether that's sharing it with friends or going out to your favourite place to eat."

Bavin admits there's an irony that while many of us have realised how much we love going out to eat, we've simultaneously learned to enjoy cooking our own meals from scratch at home. "We've realised how much we have enjoyed cooking and how achievable cooking some of your favourite restaurant meals and some of your favourite takeaway meals actually is." That change in cooking habits combined with the limits of lockdown forced a change in the way we shop – with many of us turning our backs on supermarkets and buying from independents either because of shortages in the big chains, or a more appealing environment in terms of safety, not to mention the ability of specialist shops to cater for a newfound interest in scratch cooking and the range of ingredients required to whip up adventurous meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A new opportunity for independent retailers

"There's a whole new generation who have found their local greengrocers, butchers and delis and these sort of places," says Bavin. "They want the quality, freshness and the reduced amounts of plastic and packaging. People are falling back in love with their small stores which did an amazing job during lockdown. When supermarkets were closed or had long queues, these independents were working throughout and looking after their communities. The small independents showed how resilient and adaptable they are."

The appreciation of independent, specialist shops to cater for our love of scratch cooking is something Charlie Wells, owner of The Farm in Snitterfield, has witnessed first hand. When the first lockdown was introduced, The Farm – which offers concessions including a butcher, fishmonger, bakery and deli counter as well as a café, shifted from attracting customers to its restaurant with the odd edible treat to take home to a place where they shopped for ingredients to create their own edible treats. "When the first lockdown started we closed for five days while we built a website and got the shop Covid safe, then reopened. We didn't really have a clue what it was going to be like. We didn't know if people would see us as an exclusive shop that you treat yourself to or an essential. We are lucky that we became an essential. I think that was helped by the fact we were pushing it as safe, as well as the quality, the environment."

They also built on people's renewed enthusiasm for cooking, says Wells, sharing inspiration from ingredients sourced locally with minimal food miles to capture people's imagination in what they could recreate at home using produce from the shop. "Price didn't seem to be too much of an issue. You would have things like a £75 Chateaubriand being the top seller each week. People weren't going out, they were staying in and expanding their knowledge of cooking and spending money on cooking. Our produce sales pretty much quadrupled during that time. People were using raw ingredients. It was the kind of shopping we used to see on Saturdays – the day before roast dinner day – but this time around people were cooking every single day and buying each ingredient."

Steph Johnstone, ambient and seasonal buyer at fine food distributor The Cress Company, said they too saw a growth in demand for store cupboard and grocery-led products as consumers chose to support local farm shops and independent traders rather than go to supermarkets. "Consumers have potentially saved a lot of money during the period of lockdown so are perhaps looking to spend this disposable income on high-quality ingredients that they can enjoy at home, albeit I am sure we will see a shift in this pattern again as people begin to move around with more and more business trading again."

> "People weren't going out, they were staying in and expanding their knowledge of cooking and spending money on cooking"



As lockdown ends, will scratch cooking fade?

That shift in our attitude to scratch cooking as life changes yet again is unsurprising. Research from Bakkavor recently revealed that as the UK emerges from lockdown, a third of us are looking forward to hanging up our kitchen utensils after a year of doing our own cooking. On top of that, growing pressures on our time as things get back to 'normal' means a fifth (21%) of people now have less than 20 minutes to plan and buy their food each week, according to the research. Bakkavor's chief operating officer UK Mike Edwards said, "UK consumers are starting to return to normal habits – reducing the time spent preparing meals from scratch to maximise time catching up with family and friends. People are returning to convenient, quick-to-prepare meals which satisfy whatever they feel like that evening – even if it's a completely different cuisine to what other family members or friends are eating at the same meal occasion."

Does that mean an end to our scratch cooking obsession? And where does it leave the independent shops, delis and producers who have been buoyed by a year of people hunting for quality ingredients to cook up a storm at home. "It's impossible to predict the long term," says Johnstone. "I suspect we will see a mix of people who may still enjoy to cook up a feast at home using high-quality food, as they have adapted to doing so over the last year, so we will continue to ensure we are in a position to supply an extensive range of home cooking essentials and ingredients to ensure this newfound focus can continue to be enjoyed! Although hospitality is returning, some people may choose to opt for summer picnics and BBQs with friends and family, enjoying the newfound speciality products they may have discovered during the pandemic, so retailers will likely continue to see the demand for these products, as well as luxurious snacks and treats."

For Wells, 12th April and the reopening of hospitality – albeit outdoors only initially – brought an immediate change to people's shopping and cooking habits. "Everything dropped off from April 12th, literally to the date," she said. But she's still optimistic and has noticed that while people are enjoying being back out again, there are plenty of elements that affect their enthusiasm for cooking at home, including the weather.

"After it initially dropped off we had good weather for a week so it stayed quiet. Then the rain started and all of a sudden the shop picked up again and produce [sales] started to increase. It almost wasn't seasonal eating, but eating based around the weather." For Bavin, longer-term issues that could see us stick to scratch cooking include economic drivers. "Money could well be tight for lots of people going forward. Cooking from scratch is a great way to save money so we could well see people continuing, especially now they've discovered how easy it is."

Maintaining the momentum

Johnstone, too, is positive about the future when it comes to independent retailers benefiting from people's love of cooking "People will likely continue to support smaller independent businesses even after restrictions have eased so as long as the retailers continue to ensure they are in a position to meet the demands of the consumers they should continue to see growth," she said. "Retailers should continue to ensure that the shopping experience offered to their consumer remains at a high standard as well as the emphasis on shopping local to

> “It was the kind of shopping we used to see on Saturdays – the day before roast dinner day – but this time around people were cooking every single day and buying each ingredient”

ensure their loyalty remains.” For Wells, it’s a case of being dynamic and continuing to capture people’s enthusiasm and imagination. “I think the rest of the year we will see peaks and troughs and we as a business have to be open to it and gear our offering accordingly.

Normally, you can plan ahead for the seasons, but it’s difficult to know what’s going to happen, so we try to plan as normal but also have a plan B in place. We’re looking at month-by-month trends, then when we do the marketing we go to town on pushing something quickly.” That includes social media, which Wells says has been invaluable for The Farm over the past year, and which they have used to encourage collaboration as well as to inspire customers. “We do things like push ingredients we use in dishes in the restaurant. So if someone eats something in our restaurant they can then go and buy the ingredients and recreate it at home. I’m positive. I think we have just got to be really open minded. If we start to be negative that only comes across to the customers.”

Bavin shares Wells’ positivity. “I think this is here to stay. Obviously there’s a proportion of people who might go back to the old habits of convenience, but I think there’s a real appetite for continuing to support smaller businesses and continuing to cook from scratch.” Regardless of how ravenous that appetite for scratch cooking is, the ingredients have to come from somewhere. And that’s where speciality retailers take centre stage.

GROWING **PRESSURES** ON OUR **TIME** AS THINGS GET BACK TO **‘NORMAL’** MEANS A **FIFTH (21%)** OF **PEOPLE** NOW HAVE **LESS** THAN **20** MINUTES TO **PLAN** AND **BUY** THEIR **FOOD** EACH **WEEK**, ACCORDING TO RESEARCH BY BAKKAVOR



FINAL CALL

As I write this, indoor hospitality, including cafés, restaurants and pubs, has reopened in most areas across the UK. We can officially, by Government order, hug loved ones, and leisure venues such as cinemas and museums are clear to open as well, with limited numbers allowed inside.

Even while potential Covid threats still remain on the horizon, and though the Government is careful not to make any promises around further lockdown easing measures, the optimism across the food and drink industry and beyond is infectious. 2020 was a tough year, even for those retailers who welcomed new customers into their shops and saw a revival of interest in local shopping. Many plans were put on hold, staff members were furloughed and restaurants and cafés shuttered for long stretches of time. We took to queueing to get into shops, avoiding small talk and of course nixing the free samples.

Yet, while there are undeniable reasons for optimism now, even during the worst of the pandemic – those strange early days of panic buying and empty streets, and the dark and dreary winter – it was rare that I heard a retailer falter in their belief that things would soon get better. Many in this industry build their careers out of passion: their excitement about an underappreciated ingredient, their love for a product, or their bone-deep appreciation for the finest foods made in this country and around the world. There also exists a desire to share this love of food with every person they encounter.

That passion is what makes this industry such a great one to be a part of. While optimism and confidence are strong now, they may falter again in the future. But the passion radiating from other retailers and producers in the food and drink sector is what keeps us all going through the hard times, and what lifts us even higher during the good times, too.

We love hearing from our readers. Do you have a story to share or expertise to pass on? Please get in touch with us via courtney.goldsmith@aceville.co.uk

5 MINUTES WITH
MILLY BAGOT, CO-FOUNDER OF BYRUBY



WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
If it had to be anything, I think it would be working for a start-up or something outside of the city.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
I was a headhunter for a start-up firm. Ruby has been cooking and working in restaurants from as soon as it was legal to do so.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
Family is big for both of us, (including Ruby's mini dachshund Rolo!). They are both our biggest supporters as well as our biggest critics.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?
We love coming up with new recipes and testing it on the family – we always know that we will get an honest answer! We also love hearing feedback from happy customers.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
Things going wrong that are outside of your control. It's part of every job, but it is always a shame when people end up unhappy or disappointed.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
We've both done our fair share of pot washing and waitressing to earn a bit of pocket money back in the day, which wasn't exactly inspiring work!

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
You can never please everybody, and that is just something that you have to accept early on. Having said that, it is also part of what we love about the food industry – it would be boring if we all liked the same thing.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
Something classic like a chicken pie with really good quality meat – it is just really comforting and moreish, like a big hug in a meal.

TEA OR COFFEE?
Coffee at work, tea and biscuits at home with friends and the family!

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
As cheesy as it sounds, something we both really believe is that life is too short to diet! Eat well, listen to your body, and don't beat yourself up if you have that glass of wine too many or that extra chocolate brownie.

WEIRDEST THING I'VE EVER EATEN
I will eat anything within reason. I think the worst and weirdest thing was a andouillette sausage on a French exchange.

FAVOURITE BOOK:
A Modern Way To Eat by Anna Jones is my favourite cookbook at the moment. Fiction is very tricky but I will have to go for a classic: *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Funnily enough we both love sweet things, but if it came down to it, savoury would always come out on top.



BE CONNECTED

> I want to turn the high street back into a proper independent hub, with a cheesemonger, fishmonger and greengrocer
>
> JAMES GRANT, NO. 2 POUND STREET

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TRIED & TESTED



CECILY'S ORGANIC CREAMY COCONUT

Ice cream is one of those make-or-break products for the plant-based and non-dairy eaters among us. We've all had the spoon-bending, hard-as-rocks versions that are anything but creamy. That's where Cecily's comes in. Made with coconut cream and unrefined coconut sugar, these organic, non-dairy ice creams are velvety soft. There are an array of flavours to choose, from Chocolate Orange Swirl to Mint Chocolate, but Creamy Coconut is a great introduction. Perfect for those sunny summer days with friends and family.
cecilys.co

BELAZU LUXURY TRUFFLE & PECORINO NUT MIX

Combining white truffle and Pecorino Romano cheese, this is a nut mix that you'll want to keep all to yourself. The blend of hand-roasted cashews, pecans and macadamia nuts are packed with rich, satisfying flavours. Other varieties in the range include Rose Harissa and Smoked Chilli for those that enjoy a bit of heat, but the umami taste of the Truffle and Pecorino mix packs a delicious punch.
belazu.com



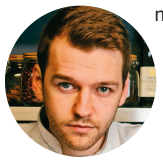
STEEPS ONE SHOT



For those who are paying attention to the health trend, wellness 'shots' are one to watch. They come in a wide variety of sweet and savoury flavours. Steeps One Shot blends seven raw, natural, sustainably sourced organic ingredients – turmeric, ginger, chilli, garlic, onion and horseradish – which are infused for 12 weeks in apple cider vinegar. Fiery and wildly refreshing, the brand suggests taking a shot a day for a gut-friendly boost, but it can also be added to cocktails or mocktails like Bloody Mary or even mixed with sauces, dressings and marinades.
steepsoneshot.com

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Daniel Farrow, owner of The Gatherers



Locality and seasonality aren't just about ingredients for me. It's the very fibre of everything we do at The Gatherers Bar & Restaurant. The Gatherers is a plant-centric restaurant, meaning that fresh, seasonal and, where possible, local vegetables and fruits take centre stage in every dish we cook.

We are located a short walk away from the local market in Norwich city centre; that means I can walk into town with my chefs and actually have a conversation with those running a stall like CJ'S Fruit & Veg about what is in season and what comes from our home county. There's something so gratifying about doing this and walking back to the restaurant knowing that we're cooking with local produce sold by a local and independent trader. Buying this way means we know that there's a minimal carbon footprint associated with the produce we buy, and it means that local people have been involved from seed to sale. You can't help but feel a kind of pride when championing such ingredients. This year, we're looking at purchasing land so that we can take this one step further, growing much of our own produce and sourcing everything else from other local growers and suppliers. This will mean that the entire supply chain for our produce will be born and grown in Norfolk, with one or two exceptions. For example, when we put English truffles on the menu, we go to Wiltshire Truffles. Though not local to us, they are a British supplier and source fantastic truffles local to them, and knowing that they share the same kind of ethos when it comes to produce makes them a go-to for us. I'm even in the process of finding a supplier of Norfolk pearl barley so that we can use it in our risottos instead of the traditional rice used, something that unfortunately isn't produced locally! When buying large quantities of particular fruits and vegetables, we like to know that our wholesale suppliers can deliver using local produce and supporting local growers. Luckily for us, Norfolk is famous for its agriculture and, to my knowledge, all of the local wholesalers buy lots from local producers. Because of the ethos behind The Gatherers, Norfolk was the perfect place for us to open up – a county with a bounty of farmland, surrounded by thousands of acres of natural habitat for wildlife to thrive. I am so proud to cook with ingredients that I can trace, that are sustainable, seasonal and local. All of this is a sign of the times, an age where people are growing ever more conscious of what they eat, of the environment and the impact agriculture has. People increasingly want to know where their food comes from. The ethos behind locality grows ever more important, not just for us here at The Gatherers in Norfolk, but for people everywhere.

We know that what we put on our plates has a profound impact on our environment, so now more than ever we're moving towards a more local, conscientious, sustainable and ethical way of eating. For progress to be made it's important that all suppliers, wholesalers, farmers and growers focus more and more on produce from their local area. I will always champion this with every new restaurant I open, in every dish I cook and in every dish we serve our customers! Be proud of the food you make, take pride in your local agriculture and champion your local independent suppliers.

> "I am so proud to cook with ingredients that I can trace, that are sustainable, seasonal and local"

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Garofalo

EXPLORING ITALIAN TRENDS

What products are flying off the shelves for Italian specialists?



The world for Italian cooking at home is opening up. Already a favourite option among Britons, authentic food products from the Continent are increasingly becoming available to the average shopper. Matthew Blakeley, of online retailer Blake and Tate, says some of Italy's largest produce manufacturers are becoming aware of increased demand from home users, and are quickly introducing smaller versions of their products that could previously only be bought in bulk by restaurants.

A whole new appreciation for Italian cuisine is budding among home cooks. "Due to the rise in demand for affordable, high-temperature ovens such as Ooni and Gozney over the last 12 months, consumers have discovered an entirely new way to cook foods they never would have achieved previously, bridging the gap between new and experienced cooks," Matthew says.

One of the best-sellers at Blake and Tate is DOP San Marzano tomatoes from producers in Rega and Strianese. "They're unique as they're grown in a controlled area of Mount Vesuvius volcano that has a unique soil structure, exposure to the sun, and temperature differences due to the altitude making these tomatoes low in seeds, bright red in colour and incredibly tasty.

When it comes to pasta, whichever brand you ask, the answer will likely be the same: fusilli, spaghetti and penne are the tried and tested favourites. But independents can find success by going beyond the ordinary. "We find variations of these popular shapes sell well with fine food retailers as there is not always a direct shape match in the supermarkets," says Sally Assinder of Garofalo. "An example is Garofalo Spaghetti Lunghi. This is our traditional hand wrapped long spaghetti."

Elsewhere, it's all about spicy sausage and truffle sauce. "One of this year's rising stars is our Calabrian Spicy Nduja, which is hugely popular due to it's instantly recognisable flavour and smell," Matthew says. "Salsa Truffina Mushroom & Truffle Sauce is a unique combination and can easily be stirred into pasta to give that instant rich restaurant flavour found at some of the best restaurants in the UK." Scratch cooking is alive and well – retailers, take note.

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.

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