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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the latest issue of *Speciality Food* – the very first of a new year! We all have grand plans for the months ahead, but it's important also to slow down, take stock and celebrate our achievements from the last 12 months. If there are any lessons that can be learned and aspects that can be built upon, all the better.

This issue is full of inspiration to get your new year off to a flying start, from a look at the key trends set to shape the food and drink sector this coming year to an inspiring look at the delicious cornucopias of food and drink available from Northern Ireland and the EU.

Plus, we speak to the pros to find out how they turn the act of cheese pairing into an artform, and learn how the British consumer's taste for chocolate is evolving – the good news is, it suits the philosophies of *Speciality Food* readers perfectly.

We also dive into the world of temperature controlled packaging to find out how the sector is embracing sustainability in its future, and preview the upcoming, must-visit Scotland's Speciality Food & Drink Show 2026.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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"Success in 2026 means embracing change"

Key industry players share their hopes for the new year

MARK KACARY, OWNER OF THE NORFOLK DELI

It's been fascinating to see big names like M&S and Waitrose pouring serious investment into glamorous food halls. It proves what many of us have known for years: there is a real appetite for better food experiences something beyond the fluorescent aisles and conveyor belts.

But my hope is that this renewed appetite leads people not just to admire the big players, but to rediscover what independents offer. In shops like ours, food isn't simply bought – it's experienced. You talk to someone who truly knows their cheese; you can have a slice cut fresh for you, taste it, discuss it, learn something. It's slower, more human, more joyful. And frankly, far more memorable than scanning a barcode under artificial lighting.

I'd also love to see a government that genuinely understands what small businesses bring to this country. Napoleon once called Britain "a nation of shopkeepers" and I'd argue that's something to be proud of. Independent shops bring identity to a town; they foster pride, community, and a sense of belonging you simply don't get from faceless national chains.

When local shops disappear and empty units get filled with corporate lookalikes, something important is lost. Pride slips. Care slips. That connection between the person behind the counter and the community they serve starts to vanish. Family-run businesses and owner-operators have skin in the game; they care deeply because this is their home too.

More than anything, I hope 2026 is kinder to those wanting to start something small and meaningful. It shouldn't feel like climbing Everest just to open a shop. We need more encouragement, more support, and far fewer barriers for people prepared to take the leap.

Every part of the UK has its own soul. Norfolk is not Cornwall, Cornwall is not Yorkshire, and Yorkshire isn't the West Midlands. Those differences are what make travelling through this country so fascinating. But when every high street becomes a carbon copy of the next Costa, McDonald's, Greggs, repeat, that richness is lost.

It's ironic, really. Some people voted for Brexit to protect sovereignty and identity, yet we quietly hand over the character of our towns to multinational chains chasing shareholder returns. The result? High streets that could be anywhere and therefore feel like nowhere.

My hope for 2026 is simple: let's cherish the things that make our towns and our food culture truly ours. Let's support the small businesses that bring life, flavour, and identity to our communities.

CAROLINE KEOHANE, HEAD OF INDUSTRY GROWTH AT THE FOOD & DRINK FEDERATION

There are over 12,000 dynamic and innovative food and drink businesses of all sizes here in the UK which underpin our food security, support healthier diets, drive a more sustainable future and provide long term careers in every corner of the country.

But 2025 has been a challenging year, with businesses in our sector facing very high productions costs, alongside regulatory pressures, including the new EPR packaging tax and changes to National Insurance Contributions, alongside low consumer spending. As a result, we've seen food prices rise.

The antidote to build resilience in our sector is productivity growth. In every part of the country, food and drink manufacturing could be an engine for economic growth and we want to see that potential realised over the next 10 years.

We have all the ambition and all the potential, and with strong partnership between industry and government there's the opportunity for our country to be the most competitive place in the world to start, grow and invest in a food and drink business.

ANDREW GOODACRE, CEO OF BRITISH INDEPENDENT RETAILERS ASSOCIATION

Speciality food shops along with the rest of independent retail, hospitality and leisure, are the heartbeat of our high streets, bringing individuality and community spirit that no online platform can replicate. As we look to 2026, the government has a unique opportunity to champion these businesses and secure their future.

Our hope is clear: create an environment where independents thrive. That starts with reforming business rates – a system that has long held back growth.

Sadly, the so-called transformation of business rates announced in the November budget is not good for the smaller independents, with most business rates rising. However, we asked for more support to deal with large increases and this will be available in the form of the small business support scheme.

But rates reform alone isn't enough. We need vibrant high streets: better infrastructure, accessible parking, and safer spaces for shoppers and staff. Policies that encourage innovation, investment, and reward sustainability will help independents lead the way in supporting their local communities and independent supply chains.

Retailers also have a role to play. Success in 2026 means embracing change: investing in digital tools to reach customers online, creating memorable in-store experiences, and collaborating locally to strengthen community ties.

Consumer value delivered by a combination of quality products and quality service should be central, with staff development and education the priorities to deliver truly exceptional service. By innovating and adapting, independents can show why they remain the beating heart of Britain's economy.

2026 must be the year government turns aspiration into action and the year independents seize every opportunity to shine, the year to #loveyourhighstreet.



International cuisines overtaking traditional British food on UK plates

Research conducted by HelloFresh has highlighted that over half (55%) of British consumers only eat British cuisine once a month at most, and only 22% consider traditional British food their favourite.

The Plate of Nations report stated that cooking as a form of exploration is an increasingly important trend, with 40% of respondents saying that recreating dishes they enjoyed abroad has inspired them to be more adventurous in their own kitchen, and 64% of British families use cooking specifically to experience new cultures. This reflects a global trend, with 70% of families worldwide doing the same.

79% of Gen Z and 81% of Millennials are curious about bolder flavours compared to 58% of Baby Boomers, but every age group is increasingly experimental when it comes to trying foods from overseas.

Over 40% of British consumers cook internationally-inspired meals at least once a week, and 43% stated in the research that Indian cuisine is their first choice.

45% of shoppers surveyed named foods from Japan, Thailand, Korea and Malaysia as their top choice.



Alix McCaffrey, senior director of product at HelloFresh UK, said, "Brits are embracing a new kind of food tourism, one that starts in their own kitchens. As traditional favourites fall out of rotation, we're seeing a clear shift toward global flavours, particularly Asian-inspired dishes. With families cooking more internationally than ever before, HelloFresh is proud to help households travel the world through flavour, all from the comfort of their homes."

How to cash in on food to go in 2026

Market researcher IGD has shared its predictions for the away from home and food to go markets for 2026. The four key trends highlighted are:

• Affordable and accessible
As economic pressures persist, value remains a top priority. Consumers will continue to seek the best value for money, but this doesn't always mean the lowest price.

Retailers and operators will be challenged to keep improving their value proposition, improving range and quality while still being affordable.

Convenience and accessibility for consumers will also play a key role as the expectation for instant gratification grows.

• Elevated experiences
While food to go missions are primarily quick and convenient, the experience encompasses all touchpoints the consumer has with the brand.

Price still matters but in a world of choice, experience is increasingly a differentiator. People will be drawn to brands and eating out establishments that offer something memorable, whether through service, environment, or digital engagement, creating opportunities to build deeper emotional connections.

• Health as a lifestyle driver
Health is evolving from a goal to a way of life. Consumers are increasingly integrating wellness into everyday choices, prompting retailers and operators to rethink how they support holistic health across menus, formats, and communications.

• Sustainability simplified
Consumers expect the government, operators and manufacturers to lead on sustainability, not only in packaging. Back-end investment remains vital as legislation evolves, but making sustainable choices visible and their benefits clear is key to driving engagement.

Consumers want help choosing healthier options therefore, transparency will be essential to help them make informed choices.

Shannon Goldsmith, senior insight analyst at IGD, said, "The trends shaping the UK food to go and away from home market will demand agility, innovation and deep consumer understanding for growth. While they are the key trends for 2026, their longer-term impact on business operations and consumers must be considered."

Heritage businesses must work hard to retain their position following latest Budget, advises expert

Veena Giridhar Gopal, an experienced FMCG leader investor and operator, shares her thoughts

"Heritage brands retain an advantage in recognition and repeat purchase, which continues to matter in a cautious market. However, the Budget maintains the fiscal pressure created by frozen tax thresholds, which affects a significant part of their customer base. Higher income buyers remain resilient, but the broad middle will continue to watch discretionary spending closely. Rising wage and property costs will also weigh on heritage brands with smaller scale or larger physical footprints.

"In this environment, focus becomes more important. Heritage brands will need to concentrate on their strongest lines, protect margin on core products, and deepen direct engagement with loyal customers. Storytelling and consistency remain strengths, but operational efficiency will be just as important. Some founder led or family-owned heritage brands may also reassess succession plans, since the fiscal environment offers no new incentives to hold ownership longer."

Study states three fifths of retail jobs could be affected AI by 2035

According to the Retail Workforce Reimagined study, conducted by research agency Retail Economics and law firm Eversheds Sutherland, up to three fifths of retail jobs could be augmented or automated by AI by 2035.

250 retail businesses with revenues over £10 million were surveyed for the study.

It is thought that AI will take over tasks covering stock management, website content and supply, with management roles being less affected – by one third – as tasks are less suited to AI.

According to the research, UK retailers have assigned 30% of their annual digital budget to AI and this is set to increase in the next few years, as 94% of retailers believe that AI adds value to their operations.



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THE UK FOOD & DRINK SHOWS

William Reed.

WWF advises that supermarkets are playing with fire

According to the WWF's latest report, What's in Store for the Planet 2025, supermarkets are key drivers of the destruction of a positive future for the food industry.

The report advises that the stagnating progress of retailers to reduce their environmental risks is threatening future commercial viability, which alongside the growing scale of climate change and nature loss will prove to be highly damaging for food security.

90% of the UK grocery market from 10 major retailers – Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Lidl GB, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Ocado, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose – provided data for the report.

Key areas of concern include:

• **Deforestation and land conversion:** retailers are set to miss 2025 targets on removing deforestation and conversion. Missing these targets will severely impact their ability to hit broader climate targets.

• **Climate:** retailers are far from reducing indirect emissions, which accounts for 90% of their total emissions.

• **Diet:** retailers are not being proactive enough when it comes to diversifying protein diversification, and are selling twice the target proportion of meat for health and sustainable diets.

• **Agriculture:** Livestock production standards must be increased to improve to hit sustainability targets; retailers must upscale their sustainable sourcing efforts.

Tanya Steele, chief executive at WWF, said, "The way we currently produce food is contributing to climate change and devastating our natural world. It is only by protecting our environment that we can maintain our ability to grow healthy and affordable food for everyone. By not meeting their commitments supermarkets are playing with fire.

"The impacts of climate change are being felt in every area assessed in this WWF report. And this raises questions about whether supermarkets will, in the years and decades to come, be able to provide the wide range of produce we currently take for granted and at an affordable price.

"Drought, floods and other severe weather events are already creating food price inflation which every consumer is feeling in their pocket.



"For the good of their customers, and for their own commercial viability, retailers must act now to embed sustainability at every stage of their decision-making. The clock is ticking."

Dr Mike Barrett, chief scientific advisor at WWF, said, "While this report outlines actions the retail sector should take to meet 2030 commitments, the UK Government has a crucial role in helping shift the food system by enabling and incentivising retailers and supply chain actors to collectively reach this goal.

"Deforestation is a prime example – retailers have made a coordinated effort to remove it from supply chains, but without regulation it's very difficult. The Environment Act 2021 provides for a duty of due diligence on importers to ensure produce was not grown on deforested land – when will the government bring it into force?"



Joseph Heler announces rebrand to reflect ambition and growth

Cheese business Joseph Heler Cheese has marked the next chapter in the company's move from single farmhouse cheesemaker to multi-site food group by rebranding to Heler Foods.

The new name is a reflection of the business's ambition across its expanding portfolio. At present, this portfolio spans cheesemaking, cutting and packing, branding and innovation, ecommerce, international export and health-led categories, and brings together sites in Cheshire, North Wales and Lincolnshire.

The business now has over 500 colleagues and supplies customers in more than 50 international markets.

Joseph Heler will be retained as a product brand in reference to the business's heritage, which began in 1957 and remains family-owned.

George Heler, CEO, said, "Heler Foods brings everything we do under one family-driven identity. While our name has evolved, our ownership, values, and commitment to quality remain exactly the same. This change recognises how far we've come - and the opportunities ahead."

Sarah Griffith, people director, said, "This rebrand celebrates both our proud past and ambitious future. It reflects the culture and purpose that unite our people across every site - to give others the confidence to change and shape the future. We're not just a family of cheesemakers anymore; we're a family of changemakers."




ANOTHER DAY
AT THE
Office
Norton & Yarrow and The Fine Cheese Co.
Working Together
The Fine Cheese Co.
Artisan Cheese Selectors and Maturers

10 ways to prepare for the year ahead in artisan food retail

Take 2026 by storm by starting off the on the right food

CLEAR THE DECKS

Take time with your team to sweep out the old to make way for the new. Tidy away seasonal decorations, assess seasonal stock to see what needs to be sold immediately based on use by dates, and have a big old cleaning session to make your store glow in what's traditionally a quiet period. Buff out scuffs on flooring caused by large festive crowds. Dust the shelves and skirting boards. See if there are any minor repairs or patches of paintwork that need addressing. Now is your moment to take a broader view of how the shop looks.

INVEST IN YOUR STAFF

Spending time and money on training staff is good for business. The more knowledge your team has, the more confidence they'll have when talking to customers, which in turn builds on the authenticity and reputation on your brand, which is so important in independent retail.

Ensure they have all the tools they need to succeed. Doing team tastings, or even (if you can spare the time) day trips to visit suppliers, really can make a world of difference.

IS IT TIME TO REFURB?

On the subject of looks – it it time to renovate or refurb? If you're in the lucky position to have some capital available, or have seen huge growth in 2025, maybe you're considering extending, or changing the layout of your store.

From adding a catering operation, to boosting your family footfall with a play area or play barn, to reconfiguring shelf space and arrangement, January is the right moment to go over the numbers, do your research, and make forward plans.

THINK ABOUT STOCK

Look through your systems to analyse what sold well and what didn't in the previous 12 months. Did those fiery hot sauces strike a chord? How about that 'quirky' flavour of jam you bought on a whim after trying it at a trade show? Succeeding in fine food and drink retail often relies on taking chances and experimenting to be different, and now is a great time to see which of your investments paid off, and which ones tanked. Sit down to discuss failing SKUs, and to think about areas of growth for 2026 identified by what struck a chord with customers in 2025.

GET TO KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

It might seem 'old school', but focus groups are an excellent way to gauge what customers want, how much they're willing to pay, and what they expect from their shopping experience.

If you have a newsletter or loyalty database, putting out a survey (with some kind of prize attached) to learn from the people who shop with you can be insightful.

Or invite a group in for a bite to eat and an informal chat. You might be surprised by what they tell you.

GET SHOPPERS OUT OF THE HOUSE

It's cold, dark and dank outside. And we know traditionally the weather and light (or lack of) has an impact on people leaving their houses to go shopping.

You don't need to follow the big box stores and discount heavily to draw shoppers in. Instead, gentle prompts that solve their problems can work wonders.

For the light of pocket, 'winter warmers' and coffee/tea and cake deals in your cafe or restaurant setting could show consumers you're considering their purchasing power in the leaner months of the year.

For those customers who are tired of cooking after what seems like endless entertaining over the Christmas break, put stock in premium ready meals and ready prepared foods, and promote these heavily. There's huge growing demand for these products, and customers are increasingly looking to farm shops, delis and food halls for high-quality alternatives to what's available in the supermarkets. Think soups, better noodle pots, frozen curries, stews and pies, excellent, authentic pizzas and more.

BE PREPARED FOR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

OK, so they might drop them come February, but there's no denying lots of your customers will take on some form of challenge or lifestyle change this month.

Many general trends in food and drink will align with these – the move away from UPFs and towards cleaner labels and wholefoods; the search for 'cleaner' ingredients decks on vegan and vegetarian products, and choosing premium soft drinks and functional drinks over alcohol, or reaching instead for low or no ABV options.

Build your January merchandising around one or more of these themes, with eye-catching signposting and tastings.

CHECK IN ON YOUR SUSTAINABILITY CREDENTIALS

Shoppers broadly (especially Gen Z and Millennials) are being more thoughtful about the sustainability behind what they buy.

January is a nice time of year to give this a more in-depth look. Which products do you already stock that fit in with their motivations? How can you promote these better?

Are there any products you could switch out for alternatives in recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging? How many B Corp businesses do you support? Is there room for you to offer refills on some essentials like oils, vinegars or cleaning products? Could you work more closely with wholesalers and suppliers that offer a closed loop, circular supply system?

There are lots of things to consider. Taking a few baby steps can make big difference, particularly where you communicate the changes you've made effectively, demonstrating your environmental commitment to customers.

CREATE A BUZZ ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A really effective way to build long-lasting engagement is by creating 'invitation to view' moments on social media. Laura, Laura's Larder in Orpington, for example, posts her special sandwich of the day on Instagram stories each morning, at roughly the same time. Customers look out for it, and if it's not there when they expect, they're soon sending messages!

What could your touchpoints be? Showing off the 'cake of the week' in the cafe or 'sausage flavour of the week' at the butchery counter? Hosting a social 'Tuesday Cheese Day' where someone on the cheese counter talks about their pick of the day in 60 seconds? Or maybe a 'Foodie Friday' where staff members showcase the products they love?

The Veganuary opportunity: in numbers

Nationwide research conducted by Redefine Meat of 2,000 consumers has demonstrated that Veganuary provides a valuable opportunity for retailers to tap into the demand for plant-based alternatives to meat products.

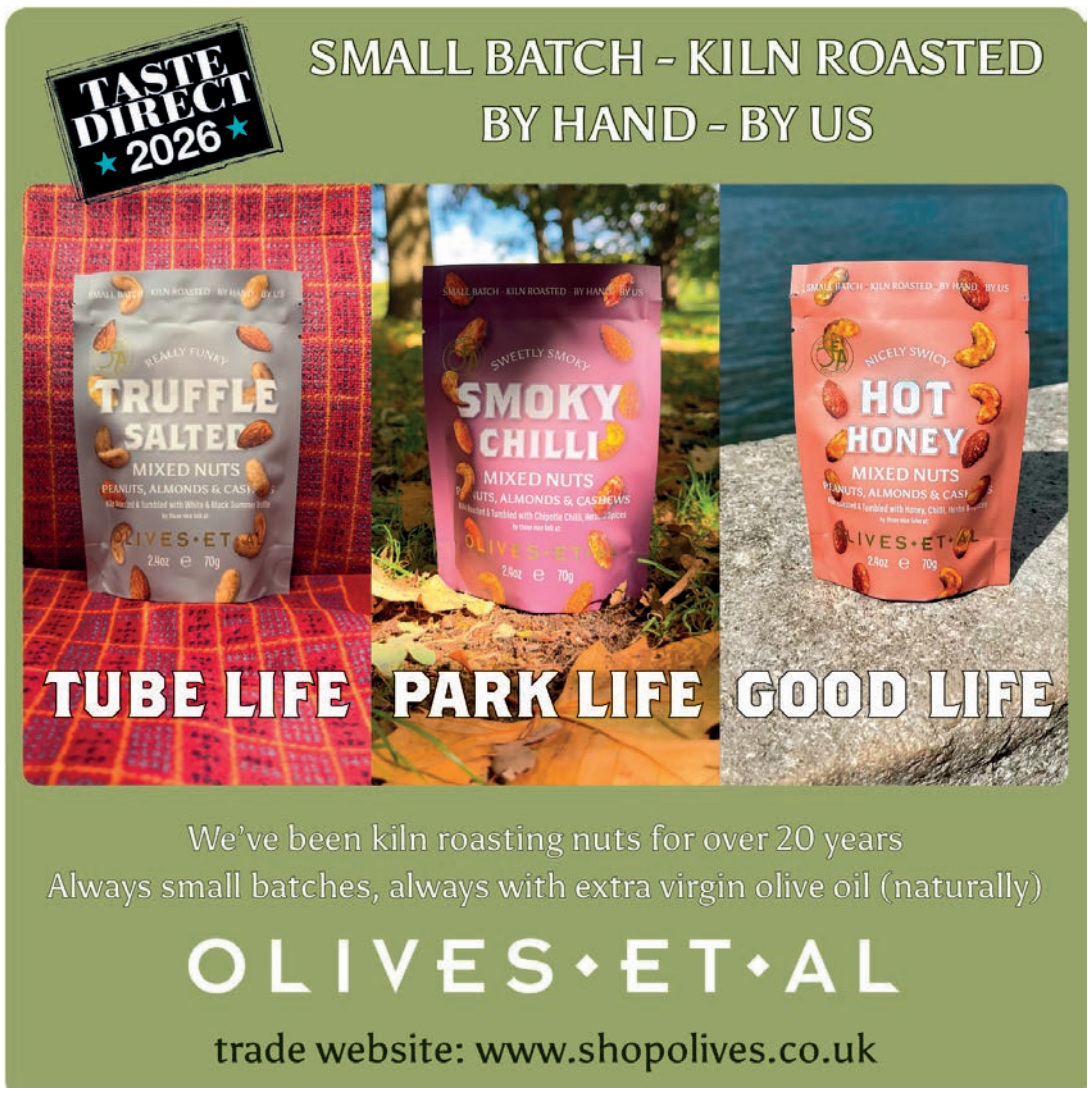
The study showed that over a third (37%) of meat eaters are actively trying to reduce their meat consumption.

It also highlighted that younger generations are particularly keen to limit their meat intake, with a third of consumers aged 18-29 (Gen Z) wanting to eat less meat but not sure how to do so.

23% of Gen Z and 24% of Millennials would appreciate more variety of plant-based options, a jump from Gen X (18%) and Baby Boomers (12%).

19% of Gen Z and Millennials advised that they would eat more plant-based meals if they tasted like real meat.





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OLIVER LLOYD
CONSULTANT

If you spend enough time in the kitchens of curious chefs, you start to notice a pattern: the quiet return of ingredients we once took for granted. Lately, it's butter that keeps stealing the spotlight. Not just any butter — butters that are cultured, churned, smoked, aged, or whipped with seaweed, fermented honey or roasted garlic; butter presented in miniature tastings before a meal as a new course. At home, too, the fascination is spreading. TikTok is filled with people proudly churning their own at the weekend, pressing silky pats studded with chilli crisp or wild garlic when in season. For a category that once lived somewhere at the back of the fridge, butter has become a canvas for creativity. And now, brands are accelerating the shift.

New names are emerging in this space like Trewithen Dairy, Abernethy and The Estate Dairy. They are quietly stoking a quiet revolution. Trewithen leans into nostalgic creaminess and their Cornish provenance. The Estate Dairy, with its standout glass bottles, are tackling both milk and butter. Abernethy, the hand-churned Northern Irish producer, offers varieties including cep miso, truffle, and black garlic.

And then there is All Things Butter, the most modern disruptor in the category. They've embraced flavour as a point of difference, launching butters that feel both chef-led and consumer-friendly, including a chocolate butter that sits somewhere between indulgence and innovation. They've already started expanding into cottage cheese with the same ambition — to reimagine the basics, to turn functional categories once again joyful.

Butter isn't alone in this awakening. Some categories have slept for decades, dismissed as too ordinary to care about, until a wave of new producers arrives and transforms them from commodities into experiences. Eggs might be the purest example. People often say the best way to judge a chef is to ask them to cook an egg — simplicity reveals everything. But quality reveals even more. Clarence Court helped consumers see that eggs could be savoured, not just cracked open. Duck eggs, with their richer yolks and creamier texture, have added another layer of indulgence. Truly great scrambled eggs — the kind chefs quietly obsess over — depend on two things: good butter and good eggs. When the raw ingredients are extraordinary, the simplest dishes become special Tonic water followed a similar trajectory. It was once a dusty necessity — a mixer rather than a drink — until Fever-Tree reframed the entire category. Suddenly, tonic became premium, provenance-driven, crisp, varied. Today we're in a second wave. Match Tonic Water, for instance, sits at nearly £9 a litre, compared with around £4.55 for Fever-Tree. On paper, that sounds absurd, but taste it and the logic becomes clear: people will pay when they can genuinely taste the difference. It's the same story as butter, just in a highball glass.

Olive oil has undergone its own quiet transformation. What was once a pantry staple is now a dinner-party gift — a shift driven by producers who focus on freshness, single estates, regenerative farming, and expressive flavour. Citizens of Soil has helped push that movement forward, reminding people that olive oil isn't just a cooking medium but a finishing touch, a point of pride, a story to tell. The act of drizzling has become almost performative — a signal that quality matters.

Vinegar, too, is emerging from the shadows. Willy's ACV has turned apple cider vinegar into a wellness essential, while Japanese producers like Mizkan and heritage French names like Maille are showing how deep, expressive, and culinary vinegar can be. Barrel-aged vinegars, infused vinegars, drinking vinegars — acidity is having its moment. It's a reminder that once a category develops flavour variation, provenance and ritual, it has the potential to take on new life.

But there's an important truth running through all of this: premiumisation only works when the difference is real. Butter works because it transforms toast. Eggs work because they transform breakfast. Olive oil works because it transforms anything it touches. Vinegar works because it changes the balance of a dish. If the experience doesn't noticeably improve, consumers won't trade up — no matter how beautiful the branding might be. The product has to earn the price.

What's exciting is how these revived categories change the way people cook and shop. When butter becomes a treat, when olive oil becomes a gift, when vinegar becomes a flavour exploration, everything feels a little more intentional. Consumers become willing to lean in — to taste, to compare, to experiment.

And that's where the opportunity lies, not in pushing premium for the sake of it, but in shining a light on producers who genuinely elevate the everyday. When the story is strong, the difference is tangible, and the usage is clear, even the most familiar categories can come back to life. The next breakout product isn't always the newest invention. Sometimes it's the thing we almost forgot — waiting for someone to remind us how extraordinary it can be.

Government urged to back £50 billion food manufacturing growth plan

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) is calling on the government to partner with "the backbone of the UK economy".

The organisation has a plan for growth and competitiveness it believes could double annual investment, grow exports to £35 billion, and position Britain as a global hub for food and drink innovation.

From the bakers and cereal makers of the Midlands, to the soft drink producers of the South-West, to Scotland's oat millers, and soup makers in the South-East, the UK's 12,000 food and drink manufacturers are part and parcel of our economy.

However, says the FDF, with rising costs, regulatory pressures and uncertainty, and increasing competition from abroad, business confidence in the sector fell to -60% in Q3 2025.

Nonetheless, the sector is determined to seize untapped growth, it adds.

Backed by many of the nation's most well-known and loved food brands, food and drink manufacturers' have laid out their five Growth Ambitions to support the resilience and long-term success of the sector.

They are:

1. Doubling annual business investment from £5.8 billion to £12 billion.

2. Growing exports to £35 billion.

3. Generating over £50 billion in gross value-added (GVA) for the UK economy by unlocking a £14 billion opportunity in technology adoption.

4. Make the UK the global hub for healthier product innovation and food and drink R&D.

5. Contribute to a 50% reduction in emissions across the agrifood supply chain and drive investment in the circular economy.

With the sector tasked with finding solutions to some of society's biggest challenges, from healthier diets and sustainability, to harnessing new technology and increasing trade, the common thread to unlocking growth in all of these areas is renewed investment.

In setting out a clear, actionable plan, the FDF is highlighted at its recent annual Investment summit how a strong government-industry partnership can unlock growth and investment in the UK's largest manufacturing sector.

From promoting British exports and strengthening supply chain resilience, to supporting investment in healthier products and innovative ingredients, there's a big opportunity for UK food and drink to lead on the global stage.

Kate Dearden, minister for consumer goods, said the sector is key to economic growth. "Not only does it support key facilities and supply chains, but also hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country.

"Through our Trade Strategy we are removing barriers and creating exciting new export opportunities for the sector, helping to boost productivity, investment and jobs as part of our Plan for Change."





PULSES ARE DRIVING 41% OF NEW LAUNCHES IN THE PLANT-BASED SECTOR

Synergy

'BEST-TASTING' AND 'BEST QUALITY'

ARE THE TWO MAIN DRIVERS OF PURCHASING IN THE CONDIMENTS CATEGORY AND THE TWO AREAS WHERE TRACKLEMENTS OVER-INDEX

Blue Marble Research



22 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE UK ARE TAKING A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO THEIR DIET

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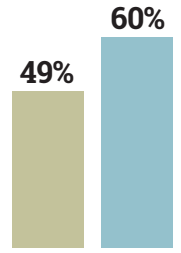


A NEW ERA FOR PLANT-BASED

The priorities of vegan and flexitarian shoppers have shifted, with retailers having to be even more thoughtful about what they stock

77%

OF THE TRACKLEMENTS RANGE IS NATURALLY VEGAN-FRIENDLY



ALMOST HALF (49%) OF BRITISH CONSUMERS SAY THEY'RE TRYING TO BUY CONDIMENTS WITH FEWER INGREDIENTS, AND MORE THAN HALF (60%) ARE CUTTING DOWN ON ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

Ocado Food Report/ Grocery Gazette



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE PLANT-BASED SECTOR?

There has been an undeniable shift in the way many consumers are shopping today.

They're no longer content with simply knowing the calorie, sugar, fat or salt content of what they pop into their baskets. They want to understand, at a glance, how much fibre or protein they're getting, how sustainable the packaging is, and, increasingly, how 'clean' the ingredients are.

Good Food Studio founder, Amir Mousavi (the man behind Joe Wicks' satirical Killer protein bar, featured in an eye-opening documentary last year), tells *Speciality Food* the plant-based category is going through a significant reset. "The side of the industry that has been focused on mimicking meat, from flavour and colour to texture, and even the idea of a convincing bleed, is now under the most pressure," he explains. "Consumers are increasingly questioning whether these products bring them any closer to eating well or simply recreate the processed systems they were trying to avoid."

ARE VEGANS CHECKING LABELS MORE OFTEN?

"Many are choosing products with shorter ingredient lists and less processing," says Sophie Zeigler-Jones at Suma, adding, "Naturally consumers have broader concerns about environmental impact these days. When customers choose simpler, more recognisable foods, they often end up choosing products that naturally come with fewer stages of processing and typically the knock-on effect is lower environmental impact. But let's not lose sight of the fact that a plant-based diet is already better for the environment in so many ways. Let's not demonise processed alternatives."

WHICH PRODUCTS ARE SHOWING GROWTH?

Those brands with their finger (quite literally) on the pulse, are investing in stand-alone food products that boost fibre and protein naturally, leaning heavily into beans, vegetables and tofu, with beans driving innovation in the sector, responsible for 41% of new launches.

We're seeing this heavily reflected in NPD. Merchant Gourmet, for example, has broadened its range of meal solution pouches where pulses and grains are the star players, and Bold Bean Co has made the leap from plain beans and pulses, to include flavoured varieties.

WHAT SHOULD I BE PUTTING ON MY SHELVES?

While nutrition is high in their priorities, taste still drives consumers say multiple experts. Shoppers are, "Driven by an increased appetite for bolder flavours across the plant-based category, sweet, smoky and spicy profiles are on the rise," says Synergy's Natalie Sheil.

"As plant-based foods move into a mature phase, consumers are now seeking exciting flavours that tap into global cuisines, and made these products stand out in their own right, not just as an alternative to meat."

Leading flavours within the vegan market, proven to turn heads, are curry, smoked chilli, paprika and cheese. Synergy's data also shows there's been 49% growth in sweet and spicy flavours.

> "When customers choose simpler, more recognisable foods, they often end up choosing products that naturally come with fewer stages of processing and typically the knock-on effect is lower environmental impact"
>
> **SOPHIE ZIEGLER-JONES, SUMA**

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Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Black Bee Honey creates Winter variant

The speciality honey producer has released British Winter Ivy Honey, which boasts a fudge-like texture and cool menthol notes.

Sourced from apiaries in Hampshire where bees forage on ivy during early winter, creating a fresh herbal flavour, the honey has a light colour, sweet ripe finish and crumbly set texture.

As per the rest of the Black Bee Honey range, British Winter Ivy Honey is fully traceable and not blended, and the name of the beekeeper is printed on each label.

Paul Webb, co-founder of Black Bee Honey, said, "Our Winter Ivy honey sets in the jar and has a wonderful crumbly texture, a fresh herbal taste, and a sweet, ripe finish. What's more, it's fully traceable."

blackbeehoney.com



Sheldrake & Sheldrake launch planet-friendly hot sauce



Launched by two Scottish brothers, Sheldrake & Sheldrake is inspired by fermentation and a desire to make the world's most delicious hot sauce and be as respectful to the environment as possible.

The resulting Fermented Hot Sauce is brewed in ex maple syrup casks inherited from a local distillery, and packaged in a protective mould made from mushrooms grown on hemp stalks which means that consumers can compost and/or recycle the entire product.

Rich with umami, it can be used with eggs and within sandwiches, soups, pasta sauces and stocks.

Merlin Sheldrake, co-founder at Sheldrake & Sheldrake, said, "Our S&S hot sauce is the culmination of years of obsessing over fermentation and brewing, and the magic that happens when you let microbes do their thing. Producing a live hot sauce was central to our plan from the beginning, and we're excited to be challenging the hot sauce norms with our debut product."

sheldrakeandsheldrake.com

Belazu creates ultimate fusion ingredient

Belazu has combined North African rose harissa with Japanese red miso paste to create Miso Harissa to cater to the growing consumer demand for complex flavour profiles.

The blend brings together peppery spices and deep umami notes, and are balanced with a balsamic glaze and a touch of honey to create a versatile ready-to-use ingredient.

Rory Goulcher, senior development chef at Belazu, said, "We're so excited to be part of a flavour revolution where home-cooks have access to global ingredients but are now becoming more adventurous and looking for unique ways to elevate their dishes. Our Miso Harissa is perfectly balanced – it's bold, aromatic and has an almost chocolatey texture to help home-cooks elevate every dish and create restaurant quality meals in their own homes."

belazu.com



First Groovy Food launch in four years

Award-winning producer The Groovy Food Company has released three new products – their first new launches in four years: Organic Matcha Agave, Organic Coconut Syrup and Hot Honey.

The Organic Matcha Agave is a unique blend of premium matcha and the brand's award-winning natural agave syrup, and offers a clean energy boost and subtly green tea flavour. It can be added to iced coffees or hot drinks, drizzled over porridge or blended into smoothies.

The new Organic Coconut Syrup is made using the sap of the coconut palm tree – a by-product that often goes to waste – and provides a rich, caramel-like sweetness to pancakes and baked goods.

Hot Honey is a new take on the company's signature honey with a spicy kick from chilli extract, and is delicious drizzled onto pizzas and roasted vegetables or mixed into rich marinades.

All three new launches are ethically sourced and free from additives and preservatives.

Ying Man, senior national account manager at The Groovy Food Company, said, "These new products arrive at a time when shoppers are increasingly seeking bold, on-trend flavours alongside ingredients that offer more than just sweetness. With hot honey emerging as one of the biggest flavour movements of the year and matcha continuing its rapid rise, The Groovy Food Company's latest launches speak directly to what consumers are reaching for right now. At the same time, there is growing appetite for products that offer the balance of indulgence and flavour with better-for-you credentials. By combining trending flavour profiles with organic, minimally processed ingredients, this trio not only reflects how people are cooking and snacking today, but also supports the shift toward more mindful, nutritious choices without compromising taste or creativity in the kitchen."

groovyfood.co.uk





Oat Miso ferment revamps category

Scottish brand Slow Sauce has experimented with the traditional Japanese method of koji fermentation to showcase the ingredients local to its Aberdeenshire HQ.

The brand has aged organic and gluten-free Scottish oats in oak barrels to create Oat Miso, which is gluten and soy-free and suitable for vegans, and boasts a unique balance of sweet and savoury punch.

This is joined by Oat Shoyu, a fermented blend of organic gluten-free Scottish oats with Carlin fox peas for an umami-packed drizzle for stir fries and dressings.

Jonathan Hope, co-founder of Slow Sauce, said "The most common thing I hear myself saying is that it's just fancy salt – I think of it as an everyday seasoning. We have all had the experience of slaving away in the kitchen for an hour and when we finally come to taste what we have made, find it lacking or simply bland. The answer I reach for is invariably the jar of miso or the bottle of shoyu. They have an uncanny ability to knit flavours together and make something taste balanced, finished and altogether tasty."

slowsauce.co.uk





Cambrook extends range with crunchy Corn

Premium nut brand Cambrook has added to its range with the launch of Giant Corn snacks.

Available in Truffle & Pecorino, Sriracha Chilli & Lime and Hickory Smoke Seasoned options, the new launches combine impressive crunch with moreish flavour and pair beautifully with drinks.

Deborah Bradfield, sales and marketing manager at Cambrook Foods, said, "We are delighted with the Cambrook twist on this classic Spanish bar snack: giant corn from the Peruvian Andes seasoned in our roastery to give the golden corn its premium Cambrook crunch."".

cambrookfoods.co.uk



Flavoured nut butters enter market

Independent small-batch nut butter brand Jungle Butter has added to its award-winning range with Almond Vanilla.

The new launch combines almonds with Madagascan vanilla, coconut sugar and coconut oil for a well-balanced flavour and indulgent consistency.

Like the other products in the range, including the Great Taste Award-winning Almond Ginger Nut Crunch, the new launch is naturally made without additives or palm oil.

Martine Sternbach, founder of Jungle Butter, said, "This new Almond Vanilla combines creamy almonds with 100% Madagscan vanilla powder, gently sweetened using coconut sugar and enriched with coconut oil for smooth, balanced flavour and delicious consistency."

jungle-butter.com

Healthy new spread for fine food retailers

Start-up producer Messyface has launched into the UK's fine food market with a two-ingredient spread that ticks both indulgence and health boxes.



A combination of smooth sesame tahini and grape molasses, the product is versatile and can be spread on toast or served with porridge and pancakes.

Each jar contains no additional ingredients, making it a great choice for health-conscious shoppers and customers of all ages.

Alex Epstein, founder of Messyface, said, "Messyface is a fresh take on Tahin Pekmez (smoother, more spoonable) made from two hero ingredients – grape molasses and tahini – and no added sugars. Spreads may well have a new hero!"

messy-face.com





Invest Northern Ireland

A TASTE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Speciality Food met dozens of producers at the 2025 Invest NI supplier showcase. Here is just a small window into some of the brands you can connect with.

POCO PICANTE



Jerome Lunney founded this fledging sauce company in 2024. After travelling extensively across South and Central America, he says he was inspired by the wealth of plant-based, healthy, natural foods the locals were eating. "I thought I could bring that inspiration home and replicate it here." All of Poco Picante's sauces have a 12-month shelf life and are plant-based, and free from gluten and added sugar. "We fire roast all the ingredients, and that gives us a burst of natural sweetness," Jerome explains. They can be used as dips, marinades, sauces or dressings, and Jerome's favourite is the Mango Habanero. "It works with everything!"



WILD ATLANTIC DISTILLERY

Founded in 2020, this distillery has racked up multiple international awards for its spirits in the last five years, including its Wild Atlantic Irish Gin, Strawberry & Elderflower Gin, and Irish Vodka infused with Amalfi Lemon.

Most recently, co-founder James Nash says he is delighted to have released the brand's first single malt whiskey – at what is the first whiskey distillery in the North-West of Northern Ireland for 100 years. Made using barley grain (fermented for five days and triple distilled), the spirit is stored in bourbon casks for two years, and finished in rare Pedro Ximénez Solera casks. "That was expensive, but worth every penny! The whiskey has a lovely sherry finish to it. Our three-year is available now, and this year our four-year aged will be out. We're really delighted with how it's tasting."

MELTING POT FUDGE



Nostalgia and comfort food remain at the forefront of consumers' minds when they treat themselves, and gourmet fudge is one of the products that's catching their attention in speciality retail. Melting Pot Fudge, founded by three sisters in Belfast in 2004, is one of the most natural, traditional varieties on the market says Jack McAdorey. "It's made to a third-generation recipe in the traditional pots, the same way as it's always been, using local Irish milk and butter. It's boiled up, cooled, beaten by hand and cut by hand. That's it!"

Butter and Salted Caramel are the leading flavours, followed by favourites like Chocolate & Orange. The range includes 50g and 80g bars, and special packs ideal for the gifting market.



NORTHERN IRELAND

WHERE FOOD AND DRINK INNOVATION ARE FLOURISHING

Passion, tradition and forward-thinking go hand-in-hand in the country, *Speciality Food* discovers



WHOOSH

Interest in healthy convenience food is on the rise as consumers look to move away from UPFs. A brand helping its customers eat well on the go is Whoosh, which began as a Thai and Vietnamese restaurant on the Northern Irish coast 15 years ago. Founder, Thana Thammavongsa, says, "Our customers kept saying they wanted something to have at home when they didn't have time to cook – something they could just take out of the cupboard, and this was our solution." With a 12-month shelf life, Whoosh's instant meals contain noodles and a spice pot, and are ready to eat (after adding hot water) in five minutes. "We want to encourage customers to reduce food waste, so they can add leftover protein, or vegetables or nuts or seeds to our pots to make a great meal in an instant," Thana adds.

Last year Whoosh added four new flavours to its range, including Vietnamese Pho, and Thai Satay. "They're all natural ingredients, with no MSG, no colourings and no preservatives, and they're gluten free."

CULT!

When she went vegan, Antonela Schiano craved cheese - plant-based cheese with that slightly crumbly texture and sharp, flavoursome tang. But she wasn't impressed by what was on the market. "I just wanted to be able to have a nice cheeseboard with a glass of wine, but everything I found in supermarkets was very rubbery and plasticky," she says. After experimenting with her own recipes at home, she landed on a fermented cashew base cheese that even her non-vegan husband raved about, and got to work bringing the product to market.

Four years later, the cheese has undergone a rebrand, and Antonela's greatest pride is that dairy cheese eaters say they're happy to put it on their cheeseboards. "That makes me so happy!"

Cult! cheeses are 100% natural. The biggest seller is Blackheart – infused with liquid smoke and layered with activated charcoal. Others in the range include Cashew e Pepe, Chimichurri, and a sweet and savoury Fudge & Pecan.



The landscape of Northern Ireland – from the buzz of its city centres, to the crystal-clear waters of its coastline, and the lush grazing pastures of its countryside – naturally make it a haven for food and drink producers.

As well as the warmth and generosity of the people, this part of the world is renowned for its exceptional free-range meat, luscious dairy, brewers and distillers; for its numerous artisans, working with the seasons, and with the bounty on their doorsteps, to consistently bring the remarkable taste of Northern Ireland to plates across the world.

Michelle Charrington, who supports Invest NI businesses from the London office, says, "In the world of speciality food, provenance is everything - and few regions deliver it with more authenticity than Northern Ireland. NI producers have a reputation for quality, sustainability, and character. But behind every NI bottle of whiskey, prepared meal or granola pouch on a British shelf lies a relationship that is as vital as the product itself: the partnership between Northern Irish producers and British retailers."

Northern Ireland, she continues, is a prolific producer of food and drink. "With a population of just under two million, NI produces enough to feed 10 million people. It is no surprise, therefore, that GB is our biggest customer. British retailers rely on the quality, value and innovation offered by NI produce to meet growing consumer demand for inspiring and delicious food and drink. Northern Ireland is a clear category leader in food-to-go, helping retailers bring theatre to their stores and tap into key trends such as functional snacking, including high protein and fibre products, as well as the sweet treats we're renowned for. In turn, GB offers producers access to a wider market and a more diverse customer base. The relationship fuels NI manufacturing expertise, stimulates NPD, and ensures that the best food and drink from Northern Ireland continues to reach tables across Britain."

Invest NI - a government organisation from the Department for the Economy, is charged with driving the promotion of and engagement with Northern Irish food and drink globally.

The team, led by director Gràinne Moody, take an enormous sense of pride in their work, enabling the export of NI produce – which contributes somewhere in the region of £8 billion to the economy each year. A highlight of the Invest NI calendar is its annual supplier showcase, which has been running for more than a decade. It's an opportunity for buyers and wholesalers to network, discover new brands, and experience what the country has to offer for themselves.

In 2026, due to high demand from producers, the event will move to a larger venue, demonstrating increased appetite across the board. "We're growing every year both from our perspective in terms of companies wanting to exhibit, but also from buyers and the media who contact us and want to come to the showcase," says Gràinne. "It's a really good event and always feels so positive."

Although Northern Ireland is renowned for its traditional, deeply ingrained farming community, and generations-old family food businesses, it's somewhere that doesn't stand still, with new food and drink coming into the sector all the time, often supported by the Invest NI team.

At the 2025 supplier showcase an entire floor was dedicated to an innovation and speciality hub. "As an organisation, we look to work with businesses to help them export, but also to develop themselves and new products," Gràinne continues. "There is so much R&D happening in all sectors within food and drink, and we're delighted to give existing and new start-ups the chance to showcase all the fantastic things they're doing."

If you're a retailer seeking to bring something new to your shelves in the coming year – something of high quality, with a story behind it, you needn't look further than NI, says Gràinne.

"We would love to help any buyers in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland get Northern Irish produce on the shelf. To that end, we have members of the Invest NI team based in GB and throughout the world. We are more than happy to introduce buyers to our companies. It's as simple as contacting one of our team if we haven't already reached out to you."

CONTACT INVEST NI

Find out more an investni.com and email michelle.charrington@investni.com or alex.taggart@investni.com

CAROL'S STOCK MARKET



Returning home to Northern Ireland after many years living in North America, Carol's Stock Market founder, Carol Bannahan, noticed a huge gap in the stock and bone broth market. "I couldn't find a healthy, convenient, all-natural stock – so I started making my own," she says. That was eight years ago, with Carol quickly selling out at markets within minutes shortly after launching, upscaling at pace to meet retail demand. "They're all very nourishing and made in small batches. I don't take any shortcuts," she adds. "Our bones are cooked overnight, for a long 24 hours. We've done all the work for you – just open the pouch, warm it up and have it as a drink, or use it in cooking."

Only free-range Irish beef, pork, chicken and turkey make it into Carol's stocks, which are increasingly being sought out for their high levels of protein and collagen – with around 10g per serving. The latest launches are Chicken Bone Broth with Turmeric & Ginger, and Cottage Bone Broth – combining chicken, pork and turkey for a rich, savoury taste.

SUKI TEA MAKERS



To mark its 20th anniversary, Suki Tea Makers underwent a brand refresh last year. Its USP, says Kerrie Knox, is that it's, "High-end, artisanal tea that's ethically sourced. Most of our blends are organic and Fairtrade and we're completely plastic free. Our teabags are made from a cornflour base, and we use Nature Flex in our packaging. We don't have any plastic through our system, and I think that's becoming more important to people. It's a big selling point for us."

There are more than 50 teas in the range, from matcha, to English Breakfast (favoured by English and Scottish customers), the Belfast Blend ("they like it stronger"), and more unusual varieties such as the fig oil infused Bushmills Black Bush collaboration, or Apple Loves Mint – mint tea with a refreshing hint of apple.

Both teabags and loose leaf are available.

FIBRE UP

The functional drink revolution continues apace. More consumers are turning to products with added fibre, protein or adaptogens. But some people are finding their guts a little bit sensitive to fermented products, or high fibre claiming products. Paul McCreery of start-up Fibre UP worked with the scientists at Quadram to develop their range, on a mission to help more people increase their fibre intake, the gentle way.

"Around 96% of people aren't getting enough fibre," says his partner Rebecca Ridgeway. "We wanted to create something that was easy for consumers to use and pleasant to consume. It's a soda with no added sweeteners, just the natural sweetness of the juice, and it has half your daily requirement of fibre."

Their ultra soluble fibre recipe has been designed to prevent the bloating and discomfort often associated with high-fibre products – and the flavours are proving a hit. "People love our Raspberry Lemonade," adds Rebecca.





MILGRO

Diversification has never been so important in farming. If you're a dairy farmer, it makes sense to add value to your product by producing cheese or ice cream. But what if you grow onions? Milgro found the ideal solution. "We started in 1989," says commercial and sales lead Ian Miller, "and grew and grew as the supermarkets expanded in Northern Ireland. The problem would be, what did we do with onions if they didn't make the grade for packing."

The solution was slicing and cooking them in high quality rapeseed oil until crisp, packaging up the resulting fresh, super crunchy onions. The brand is now beloved across the country. "People love them, and 14 years later, here we are." Milgro's Crispy Onions are all-natural, and available in foodservice and retail packs, with flavours including Original, Flamegrilled Steak, and new Chinese Salted Chilli. Just the thing for bringing something extra to salads, soups, sandwiches, steaks and burgers.

PAPAS MINERAL COMPANY



Twenty-five years of know-how goes into every bottle made by cordial producer Papas, whose best-seller continues to be its Original Ginger Wine. "It's my husband Wayne's granny's recipe, passed down around four generations," says co-founder Lora Adair. "He would have made it as a boy at Christmas to give to family as a gift."

Most recently two new ranges have joined the Papas family. Longbridge Drinks' RTD bottles are designed to be served alone over ice, or as mixers, and include a classic Belfast Ginger Ale. "Ginger ale was invented in Belfast in the late 1800s," Lora explains. "We spent years trying to get the right ginger bite, and what we've created is going down a treat."

Irish Sisters cordials have been developed as a premium, sister brand to Papas, featuring a more fiery ginger wine, Raspberry & Rose cordial, and Lavendar cordial. "That's been so popular over the summer!"

COMMENTATORS



LYDIA STUBBINS
DIVINE CHOCOLATE



LOUISE COLLINS
BOOJA-BOOJA



SPENCER HYMAN
COCOA RUNNERS



JENNIFER EARLE
CHOCOLATE ECSTASY TOURS



NATALIE KEANE
BEAN & GOOSE



CONSIDERED INDULGENCE

Chocolate is no longer a straightforward treat – in 2026, consumers are demanding more from retailers than ever before

As we enter a new year, with new trends and innovations ahead, there are two key factors at play within the chocolate sector that experts are confident will shape the sector for years to come: the appreciation of quality and all that entails, and the recognition that chocolate isn't necessarily a sugar-laden confection, instead a considered indulgence that doesn't need to come with guilt attached.

"Two of the major recent trends that look set to continue into 2026 are premiumisation and healthier indulgence. While the challenges of a tough economic climate mean that many consumers might not be able to afford big luxuries at the moment, they are turning to affordable luxuries instead, and chocolate definitely comes into this category," says Louise Collins, marketing communications manager at Booja-Booja. "Many people are willing to treat themselves to a little chocolate indulgence that might be a little more premium and expensive than your average chocolate bar, if it feels special and luxurious."

The health consideration

The increasing awareness of ingredients and the dangers of UPFs are playing a role too, says Louise. "The focus on 'cleaner' ingredients is growing, with more and more consumers checking labels and looking for chocolates that are made with organic ingredients and not packed with artificial additives and preservatives; treats they can enjoy with a clearer conscience."

Lydia Stubbins, marketing director at Divine Chocolate, agrees that health is a – potentially surprising – driver when it comes to chocolate purchases. "Research shows that shoppers are increasingly seeking chocolate that feels indulgent and premium while also being mindful of their health, with dark chocolate emerging as the preferred choice thanks to its higher cocoa content and lower sugar levels. Latest trend data highlights this shift, with dark chocolate growing +22% over the past year, compared with milk chocolate at +10%, and white chocolate declining by -2% [Source: *Nielsen value sales, L52wks Total Coverage data to w/e 6/9/25]."



Ethics also play a role, she continues. "There's also demand for ethically-sourced products as consumers more frequently question the provenance of their food, with Fairtrade and B Corp options allowing shoppers to choose delicious and conscious options. For retailers, this highlights an opportunity to offer high-cocoa, premium chocolate that meets the expectations of discerning shoppers."

The language of flavour

Education is an important step towards persuading consumers to upgrade from mainstream chocolate to lovingly crafted options with a shorter ingredients list and complex flavour journey. "Learning the language of flavour and savouring is like learning to read – it opens up a whole new world. Nobody is ever going to stop people playing with TikTok and get them to buy books instead if you don't get them to read," explains Spencer Hyman, co-founder and chair of chocolate at Cocoa Runners.

Cocoa Runners use the concept of BLIC – Balance, Length, Intensity, Complexity – when it comes to educating consumers about the nuances of chocolate, a concept borrowed from the world of wine.

When it comes to the language independent fine food retailers should teach their customers, provenance is a good place to start. "Try to find out where the bean comes from," suggests Spencer. "When you buy a bottle of wine or specialist coffee, try to know not just the country of origin but the farm – where it's been grown and how it's been harvested."

Sharing stories

Telling an engaging story and applying a sense of place to a product also adds value, as Natalie Keane, co-founder of Bean & Goose discovered. Inspired by a childhood spent across London and Ireland, she and her sister created Bean & Goose to offer an authentic taste of Ireland in a delicious format. "We wanted to translate all of the beautiful countryside flavour stories of Ireland into chocolate. We are surrounded by ingredients and flavours, colours and artists, landscapes and stories that we can really play with, so we add things like soda bread, smoked Irish sea salt and Connemara seaweed to our bars to add a sense of place."

Even the moulds used by the brand tell a story: of the Irish landscape, specifically the topography of one of the founders' homes where the first Bean & Goose bar was produced.

By carefully curating a selection of high quality chocolate that ticks the boxes of complex taste, proven provenance and storytelling, *Speciality Food* readers can inspire their customers to level up their chocolate consumption.

STOCK CHECK 2026 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



DIANA'S CHOCOLATES PEANUT BUTTER
Slow roasted peanuts are crushed into a creamy butter with sea salt, and blended into 55% chocolate. Dairy-free and sold in recyclable, plastic-free packaging.
dianaschocolates.co.uk

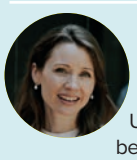


SECOND STREET ROASTED HAZELNUT TOFFEE BRITTLE DARK CHOCOLATE
The Irish maker's irresistible plant-based toffee brittle, enhanced with hazelnuts and coated in smooth Belgian dark chocolate.
secondstreetbakeshop.com



CHOCOLAKE MILK CHOCOLATE KUNAFA PISTACHIO – SUGAR FREE
Suitable for diabetics and those following a low sugar diet, this delicious milk chocolate bar with a kunafa crunch helps even more people tap into the Dubai bar trend.
chocolake.com

WHAT TO **STOCK**



Jennifer Earle, founder of Chocolate Ecstasy Tours, shares her stocking tips

Using great cocoa beans that have been well-fermented and then carefully roasting and conching them is what makes truly incredible-tasting chocolate. It's the hallmark of small craft bean-to-makers of which there are now more than 50 in the UK and Ireland. There is so much variety and depth and complexity in truly great chocolate that is just not available in confectionery chocolate which tends to be much more one dimensional and often includes "natural flavours" or "natural vanilla" to give it some flavour that people will find palatable.

I think we will see more interest in unusual origins of cocoa amongst gourmet consumers as they realise the flavour available and the pleasure in comparing the different taste profiles from different makers and origins and percentages. But always unusual inclusions and flavours will attract initial purchase for what's often a high price point purchase in the minds of many consumers. More tea, flowers and crunchy biscuit/baked goods, plus savoury twists.

A bright NEW LOOK for *Divine*

AS SEEN ON TV



The UK's favourite ethical chocolate brand is relaunching in 2026

Stock up on new packs from January, with full media support from February.

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SCOTLAND'S SPECIALITY FOOD & DRINK SHOW 2026

Source Scotland's finest produce at this dedicated event, taking place 18th-20th January in Glasgow







Tasty morsels from north of the border are enough to get farm shops salivating. So if you want a slice of Scotland's fine food and drink then head to Scotland's Food & Drink Show, the premier buying and sourcing showcase for food and drink.

Taking place at the SEC in Glasgow from 18th–20th January 2026, this event celebrates the innovation, quality, and rich flavours that make Scotland's food and drink sector truly outstanding. With around 100 exhibitors from around the country and beyond, this show features newcomers alongside firm favourites, meaning something for everyone.

New exhibitors to look out for include The Wee Tea Company, MacKays, The River Tweed Whisky Company, Sir Woofchester's, Victus Emporium. Bear's Kitchen, Spice Kitchen and Wander Cuppa. Returning producers will introduce fresh product lines and reconnect with loyal customers. Don't miss tastings and information from Island Larder, Stewart Tower Dairy, Kilted Fudge Co, Biggar Gin Company, The Cress Co, The Chocolate Tree and Gin Bothy.

In the centre of the Show is the Launch Gallery celebrating start ups such as Foreva Farmers tonics and soft drinks, Chevron Hot Chocolate and Bealach Gin. Regional food groups are a highlight of the Show and in January one to focus on is Food from Argyll with its rich wealth of fine food and drink from cheese to gin to Skye salt.

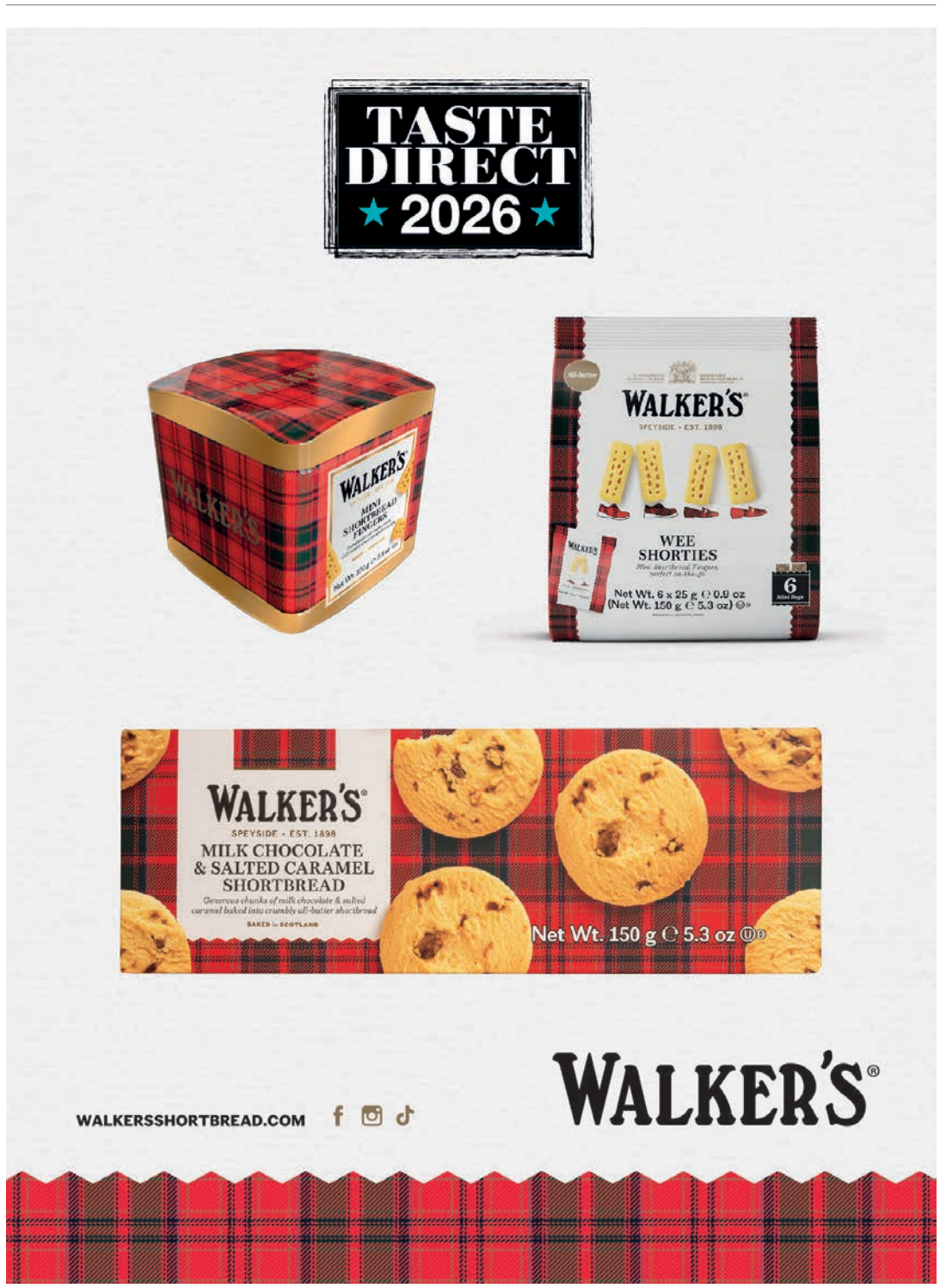
Emma Niven from Loch Leven's Larder said: "At this Show it's brilliant to be able to see some of Scotland's finest from both the food side and gift, under one roof. We always source some great new companies and place healthy orders with existing companies."

But the Show isn't just about products—it's a hub for learning and growth. Attendees can participate in an engaging programme of panel discussions, workshops, and masterclasses covering topics such as:

- 2026 retail trends from an expert panel
- Mastering TikTok and AI
- How to improve your visual merchandising
- 'Made in Scotland' – what does this mean to the food and drink sector
- A 1-to-1 interview with House of Bruar owner Patrick Birkbeck

> "We know how vital this Show is for fine food and drink retailers across Scotland, the UK, and beyond. Attendees will leave armed with new products and insights to stay ahead of the competition. Register now and join us for an inspiring and rewarding experience"
>
> **MARK SAUNDERS, SHOW DIRECTOR**







● Reinvigorating Scotland's town centres and high streets

Sponsored by The Giftware Association, the Best Product Awards will feature a dazzling display of winners in the centre of the Show and a high profile ceremony at the end of the first day of the Show. Judged by industry experts, including Rosalind Erskine from The Scotsman, Giovanna Eusebi from Eusebi's deli and John Sinclair from Craigie's Farm Shop, this is the place to find what's 'hot' in the world of food and drink.

On Tues 20th Jan Nessie's Den, a light hearted session similar to the TV favourite Dragon's Den, will feature new, young companies pitching to three expert retailers. Their valuable commercial advice has helped raise some new companies from selling in a few places to widespread national distribution.

The 2026 Show is being organised in collaboration with Scotland Food & Drink who will bring some of their members, as well as key buyers.

Show Director Mark Saunders sums it up: "We know how vital this Show is for fine food and drink retailers across Scotland, the UK, and beyond. Attendees will leave armed with new products and insights to stay ahead of the competition. Register now and join us for an inspiring and rewarding experience."

Held in conjunction with Scotland's Trade Fair, this event offers a one-stop shop for retailers, who can source gifts, homewares, fashion accessories, crafts, jewellery and food and drink all under one roof, making it a great day out.

Scotland's Speciality Food & Drink Show 2026 is free to attend for registered trade buyers. Exhibitor applications are now open, and visitor registration will open soon. Please visit: scotlandstradefairs.com

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT: Scotland's Speciality Food & Drink
WHEN: 18th–20th January 2026
WHERE: SEC, Glasgow
WEB: scotlandstradefairs.com

GROWING APPETITE FOR **SCOTTISH FOOD AND DRINK** ACROSS THE UK

New research from The Knowledge Bank has demonstrated that shoppers across the UK have an appetite for food and drink produced in Scotland.

The study showed that British consumers are actively seeking out Scottish food and drink more than ever, with 56% of shoppers outside of Scotland stating they would like to be able to buy more food and drink produced in Scotland, with that figure rising to 84% in Scotland.

According to the research, consumers view Scottish produce as being high quality, and they also associated it with supporting the local economy, reliable availability, freshness and high standards of production.

One English shopper described Scottish food and drink as "a premium product, worth paying more for," while a Northern Irish shopper believed that purchasing Scottish food and drink "means fresher, often higher-quality produce."

More than 7 in 10 respondents felt that it is important for supermarkets to stock Scottish products, in both branded and own label formats, and Scottish shoppers stated that they would be "annoyed", "sad" or "disappointed" if Scottish produce was not on retailer shelves.

Nearly 8 in 10 actively seek out or prefer groceries made in Scotland, according to the research. One Scottish shopper exampled, "The products produced in Scotland taste a lot better".

Carol Saunders, head of insight at The Knowledge Bank, said, "It's great to see the growing appreciation for Scottish food and drink across the whole of the UK. Consumers clearly recognise what we've long known – that we have a wide basket of amazing food and drink in Scotland, which stand out for their quality, flavour and the care that goes into making them.

"Looking ahead, successful Scottish companies won't just be the ones highlighting their country of origin. Explaining what that means to consumers with regard to sustainability credentials and quality perceptions, and layering with other benefits such as health, exciting new flavours and recognised certifications is the route forward as a winning combination."



Treat your customers to the ultimate afternoon tea spread

1 DORSET TEA
PREMIUM GOLD TEA



Also known as the Sunshine Blend, this rich, aromatic tea combines the very finest Rwandan and Kenyan leaves, adding a touch of Assam for malty depth. It's smooth and bold – everything you need to soothe the soul. The blend is sourced from Rainforest Alliance Certified farms, and packaged in 100% biodegradable tea bags, with recyclable boxes for an even more sustainable sip.
dorsettea.co.uk

2 WILD LIFE BOTANICALS
NUDE



A game-changer in the low and no market, this refreshing, sophisticated non-alcoholic (0.5%) wine has been called 'best in class' by top critics. Made using real wine, it's lifted by an elixir of vitamins, minerals and botanicals, and contains 60% fewer calories than Champagne or Prosecco. Off-dry, yet fruity and aromatic, the drink's wellness-boosting ingredients list includes Damask rose, lemon balm and ashwagandha. It's beautifully boxed too.
wildlifebotanicals.co.uk

3 CAKEHEAD
CAKE SELECTION



Bring indulgence to the afternoon-tea table with two of Cakehead's standout creations. Their luxurious Tiramisu Slump, a coffee caramel filling, topped with Belgian white chocolate cream cheese buttercream. Their famous Kinder Brookie traybake, blending cookie dough and brownie, filled with creamy hazelnut spread, creating pure decadence. Adding a touch of modern sweetness to classic British traditions.
cakehead.co.uk



4 HILTON MACARONS COSY COLLECTION



Handcrafted in the heart of Suffolk, Hilton Macarons brings indulgence to any afternoon tea. With 11 Great Taste Awards and an entirely gluten-free range, their Cosy Collection warms even the chilliest of days. Enjoy comforting classics like s'mores, sticky toffee, toffee nut and spiced berry, alongside adventurous miso caramel and Irish coffee. Boxes of 6, 12 or 18 include every flavour.
hiltonmacarons.co.uk

5 THE GLORIOUS MESS STRAWBERRY MERINGUE NESTS



The Glorious Mess's Strawberry Meringue Nests create effortlessly stunning desserts. Baked to a classic Swiss recipe in Shropshire, they're crafted with British eggs and natural colours and flavours. Top with cream, fresh berries, and coulis for a deliciously messy delight. Vegetarian and made for those who believe the best desserts don't have to be perfect – just gloriously good.
thegloriousmess.co.uk

6 GHILLIE & GLEN SCOTTISH SMOKED SALMON



Smoked salmon is an elegant addition to any afternoon tea. Ghillie & Glen's is produced using the finest quality salmon from the West Coast and islands of Scotland, cured and hung for 24 hours, and smoked to develop a velvety texture and unmistakeably luxurious taste before being hand trimmed. It needs nothing more than a spritz of lemon juice or twist of black pepper.

7 THE COTSWOLD CARDILLO



The perfect afternoon tea with The Cotswold Cardillo's artisanal delights: four exquisite biscotti—Almond & Cherry, Hazelnuts & Coffee, Orange & Chocolate, and Pistachio & Bergamot. Clara and Matteo blend Italian tradition with Cotswold ingredients, crafting treats that honour heritage while embracing bold, modern flavour. A fusion-inspired journey of taste!
cotswoldcardillo.com





A TASTE OF TRADITION – THAT SPEAKS TO THE MODERN CONSUMER

European charcuterie is in greater demand than ever before, bringing heritage, authenticity and exceptional flavour to the contemporary table

Strings of salamis in myriad lengths and sizes. Deeply maroon-coloured legs of aged ham, sliced thinly to order. Elegant terrines and pâtès, studded with nuts and dried fruit. Tender, savoury rillettes. No deli counter is complete without paying homage to the beauty and heritage of European charcuterie, and these products remain the bedrock of fine food retail, revered the world over.

There are nearly 500 varieties to speak of, each one not only offering convenience, but telling the stories of generations of makers and their culinary lores and customs. This authenticity and dedication to the art of charcuterie in Europe is recognised by numerous products being granted PGI and PDO status, signifying their contribution to food history, and continued importance and presence today.

For the contemporary deli shopper, charcuterie is a must-have, and often a reason to visit independent retailers. A pot of rillettes, some slivers of salami, or a slice of terrine make an easy lunch or supper, transforming a simple plate of vegetables or salad into an effortless meal. The rise of charcuterie and grazing boards as an occasion has thrust these products even further into the spotlight, with consumers actively seeking out quality, provenance, and delicacies they haven't experienced before.

It's important for deli managers to not only offer the charcuterie selection shoppers expect, but to invest time in sourcing new grazing board centrepieces their customers can wow friends and family with when entertaining.

There are delicacies to discover widely throughout the continent, with some of the most masterful recipes coming out of Italy – renowned for its charcuterie prowess for more than 2,000 years.

The Pink Queen

Bologna is a very special city, imprinted with three millennia of history. Founded by the Etruscans along an important ancient trading route, its nickname 'La Grassa' (the fat) underpins Bologna's obsession with sharing the joy of cooking and eating.

Tucked amongst its labyrinthine streets and alleyways, in the shadows of the city's famous remaining watchtowers, or sheltered by centuries-old porticos, visitors will discover a network of butchers, pasta makers, bakers, cheesemongers, grocers and delis, thronging with locals and visitors curious about what their next meal might be.

A common thread across each of these stores is their adoration of Mortadella Bologna PGI. In fact, you can almost taste the aromatic, warming spices in the air.

Mortadella Bologna PGI is perhaps the single most important part of Bologna's larder. You'll find it folded into tiny handmade tortellini, sliced and served at room temperature alongside crusty bread and grissini, layered in focaccia with creamy cheese and a smear of pistachio pesto, and even transformed into a simple mousse, magically crafted by whipping it with ice cold sparkling water.

The name, Mortadella, is thought to relate to the Latin 'mortarium' - the mortar used by ancient Romans to grind meat – with its first official recipes appearing from 1661 onwards.

Evidence around its origins and this etymology can be discovered in the Archaeological Museum of Bologna, where a Roman monument depicts grazing piglets on one side, and a pestle and mortar on the other.

Today, the recipe and methodology behind making Mortadella Bologna PGI are overseen by the Consorzio Italiano Tutela Mortadella Bologna, founded in 2001 to protect the integrity of what they call the 'Pink Queen' (Regina Rosa).

True Mortadella Bologna PGI can only be made within the regions or provinces of Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Trento, Tuscany, Marche and Lazio.

Every single step of the process is highly controlled and measured, ensuring every single product meets the exacting standards of the PGI.

To begin, only the best pork (mainly from the shoulder) is very very finely minced to create the smooth texture Mortadella Bologna PGI is renowned for.

Next, the most flavoursome fat (from the neck) is cut into cubes, heated to melt away residual oils, cooled and dried, then added to the mix with the maker's mix of spices, salt and pepper.

Though the method and ratios required remain the same for each



WHAT IS THE **EU FAB 6?**

The EU Fab 6 is a campaign selected and co-financed by the European Union to promote EU agricultural products worldwide, with a focus on quality branded wines and deli meats.

To find out more go to theeufab6.eu





WINES OF **DISTINCTION**

Alongside charcuterie, the EU Fab 6 is putting the wines of three European regions on the map as part of its campaign.

Premieres Cotes de Bordeaux and Cadillac: Running alongside the bank of the Garonne, this region (just 60km by 5km) spans open valleys and verdant hills which enjoy excellent sun exposure. Here, the growers work to strict regulations, charged with protecting the purest traditions of Bordeaux, while adopting modern winemaking methods. Nature is high on their agenda too, with the territory certified by the SME (Environmental Management System), HVW (High Environmental Value) or AREA (Environmentally Friendly Agriculture in Aquitaine) environmental labels.

Garnacha: Four PDOs are associated with Garnacha grapes: Calatayud PDO; Campo de Borja PDO; Carinena PDO; and Terra Alta PDO. Contrary to popular belief, Garnacha is not just one variety, but several, from red and black, to white, grey, Tintorera and Peluda, each of which gives the wine a unique flavour profile and mouthfeel – be that a full-bodied red, to a fresh white or fruity rose. Garnacha grapes are also used to produce some of the most revered sweet fortified wines in the world.

Abruzzo: Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo DOC, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo DOC and Villamagna DOC fully express the spirit of the Abruzzo winegrowing region, where more than 30% of the territory is protected by four parks (three national, and one regional) and 70 nature reserves and protected areas. Thanks to its location, this territory benefits from a microclimate which lends itself to producing grapes of exceptional quality.

producer when it comes to the meat used in Mortadella, every consortium member has their own blend of spices and family secrets, so no two will ever taste 100% the same – the beauty of a truly artisanal product.

Once stuffed into casings and tied, Mortadella Bologna PGI is cooked in enormous hot air ovens for eight to 26 hours, depending on weight and size, taken to 70C inside – the optimum for achieving its velvety mouthfeel.

Each one is given a cold shower and allowed to fully cool before preparing for sale.

Stipulations that must be met for the PGI include:

- The sausage has to be oval or cylindrical.
- When the surface is cut it should have the desired consistency, be uniformly bright pink, and the fat pieces must be evenly distributed and not less than 15% of the total mass, adhering to the meat, with no other pockets of fat present.
- Only natural flavourings and spices may be used, and there is a limit of 2.8% salt in the mix.
- It should smell aromatic, and taste delicate.

Whatever the time of year, Mortadella Bologna PGI cuts a fine figure on the charcuterie board, and is a product your customers will appreciate if it's not already on the counter.

The hunter's sausage

Only the very best Italian-reared pigs are transformed into the original 'hunter's sausage' - Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora PDO – which takes its name and origins from the typical dried pork sausages taken out by ancient foragers, who needed food that would sustain them, but also stay in good condition, as they trekked through forests and across hills and mountainscapes.

To qualify for the PDO, the pigs used to craft this salami must have been born, bred and processed in specific territories across Central-Northern Italy (Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Lombardy, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria, Tuscany, Marche, Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise), fed in compliance with precise rules.

Noble cuts, such as shoulder, are selected, minced and flavoured with spices, before being stuffed and tied, resulting in a delicate aroma, sweet taste, and intense ruby colour, which certainly strikes up conversations at the table.

Further PDO stipulations include:

- The diameter must be no more than 75mm.
- It must be matured for at least 10 days in a location with sufficient airflow and a consistent temperature at between 10C and 15C.
- Maturation must ensure preservation at room temperature.
- The finished product should have a diameter of no more than 60mm, a length no greater than 200mm, and a weight not exceeding 350g.

Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora are the second most consumed charcuterie product in Italy, served typically in thin slices, beloved for their sweet, mild flavour and small size (making them very easy to cut and share).



A nod to the past

For many, New Year's Eve isn't complete in Italy until a plate of lentils, crowned with Zampone Modena IGP, is given pride of place at the table.

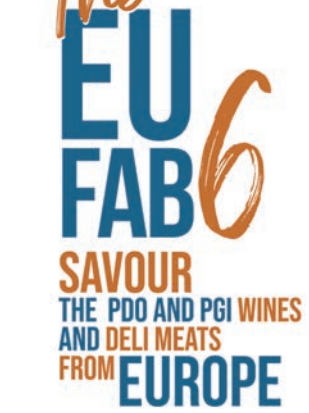
Made in and around Modena since the Roman times, and protected by the Consorzio Zampone e Cotechino Modena IGP since 2001, this succulent, intensely flavoured sausage (and its cousin, Cotechino) has a special place in the heart of Italians, and continues to be made to an ancient recipe across the entire Emilia-Romagna region as well as 10 out of 12 provinces in Lombardia, and Verona and Rovigo in Veneto.

Of the two products, Zampone Modena PGI is the most traditional, combining selected premium pork with chopped rind and seasonings that could include pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and wine – all wrapped up in the skin of a pig's trotter.

Most commonly found in retail outside of Italy is Cotechino Modena PGI, which follows the same recipe, stuffed into a casing, rather than trotter, making it ideal for cooking more regularly at home. After drying, both can be marketed as fresh products or, more often than not, they are heated and sold as pre-cooked with the advantage of being ready to serve after only 20 minutes in boiling water.

To meet criteria Zampone Modena IGP and Cotechino Modena IGP must:

- Be easy to slice and hold its shape.
- Be uniform in texture.
- Have a pinkish to slight red colour inside



These sausages are a brilliant way to bring something different to your deli counter, being rarely seen outside of Italian delis on the continent and in the UK. They have a number of uses and the flavour is incomparable.

Once sliced and cooked they render on the inside to become sticky, rustic and moreishly gelatinous, crisping beautifully on the outside. As well as being a natural partner for lentils, both Zampone Modena IGP and Cotechino Modena IGP melt into stews and braises, are dreamy in a sauce over polenta or creamed potatoes, or are commonly (especially by younger consumers) grilled and popped inside rustic rolls with sauces, eaten almost like a hamburger. Buonissimo!

For guidelines on healthy and balanced diets please consult the Public Health England's Healthy Eating Recommendations https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk

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PREMIÈRES CÔTES DE BORDEAUX · GARNACHA ORIGEN · CACCIATORE ITALIANO · CONSORZIO ZAMPONE E COTECHINO MODENA IGP

Co-funded by the European Union

THE EUROPEAN UNION SUPPORTS CAMPAIGNS THAT PROMOTE HIGH QUALITY AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

ENJOY IT'S FROM EUROPE



THE ART OF CHEESE PAIRING

To go big or go home, or keep it safe? The good news is that there's a smorgasbord of ways to pair cheese for optimum impact (and a basket spend boost)

COMMENTATORS



MARIA WHITEHEAD
HAWKSHEAD RELISH



DAN BLISS
PAXTON & WHITFIELD



DANIEL SMITH
STAG BAKERIES



FRANCISCO AND SABINA PERELLO
THE CHEESE HOLE



BRUNO ZOCCOLA
VALENTINA DELI



MIKE KNOWLDEN
PERENNIAL WINES

Finding the perfect pairings for cheeses is a true art form, not least because of the kaleidoscope of options available – not to mention the varying tastes and preferences of your customers and what they have a hankering for at any given time.

It's easy to think this is a case of stick or twist – do you stick to the pairings you and your customers know (a punchy chutney with a strong cheese, or a slightly sweeter preserve with a delicate goat or sheeps' milk cheese) or get confident with your own tasting skills and put some of your personal favourites out there, however 'weird' and wacky they may appear to some.

"It depends on the audience and the cheese, but you have to be careful that you don't overpower the cheese with the pairing," advises Maria Whitehead of Hawkshead Relish. "Often a condiment that is too strong dominates the cheese. I would look closely at texture and gentle flavours that work with the cheese and be careful to select the right combination so a softer milder cheese might work well with a texture such as fig but not a strong rich black garlic pickle for example. I have combined a soft goats cheese with our Fig & Orange Jam and that works brilliantly, and although designed as a sweet rather than a savoury condiment; with the texture, fruit and sweetness it works really well."

Products that strike the delicate balance between delighting adventurous foodies and not putting more traditional customers off are a surefire success. "These days consumers are also looking for something a bit different, yet safe to give guests," continues Maria. "Our Beetroot & Horseradish Chutney, Damson Chutney and our Fig and Cinnamon Chutney and Chilli Jam are all favourites, we also have the aptly named Cheeseboard Chutney as this is fabulously fruity with Figs, Cranberries, Apples and a dash of Pinot Noir. It works so well with a myriad of cheeses from soft to strong, including blue cheese, the figs give great texture and depth and the fruit cuts through and brings out the flavour of the cheese without overpowering it.

"If you can combine the flavour and as importantly the texture with the right cheese, it can be a beautiful match that elevates the cheeseboard."

At Paxton & Whitfield, Dan Bliss takes an analytical approach to cheese pairings. "There are a couple of ways you can approach pairings. Firstly, there is the old adage; what grows together, goes together. Cheddars from the West Country (Westcombe, Montgomerys, Pitchfork to name just three) are delicious with locally grown Ciders for example like Honeys of Midford or Piltons Keeved Cider," she begins. "Alternatively, look for pairings that are either harmonious or contrasting. A salty blue like a Stilton contrasts perfectly with a touch of sweetness like a Caramelised Onion Chutney. A funky washed rind, like Yarlington or Maida Vale have meaty qualities that are in tune with Charcuterie – I really like Cornish Charcuterie's Pink Peppercorn Salami."

Paxton & Whitfield's customers offer the business the perfect opportunity to experiment – but play around with the classics at your peril. "I think we would have riots if our Picallili ever changed recipe, we have people travel the world over to stock up – its just so beautifully British with a good chunk of cheese and a proper Pork Pie. But I do think people adore trying new things, food can be such an easy way to explore from the comfort of our own home. We have recently listed a Pickled Fennel and the team have had great fun trying different cheeses to pair it with, so far the favourite has been Cornish Yarg and Pickled Fennel!"

At Stag Bakeries, classic product combinations win out, says Daniel Smith, but there's still an appetite for adventure. "In our experience, classic cheese varieties will always remain mainstays on the cheeseboard – when we ask consumers what they like to pair with their crackers, Cheddar, Stilton and Brie still come up the most, especially in the winter



THINK **SEASONAL**



Dan Bliss of Paxton & Whitfield guides us through the cheese pairing year

In the winter months my favourite styles of cheese are big and rich alpine styles, think Gruyere or Comte, the savoury quality of them means that they work well with an accompaniment with a bit of bite, and I think pickled fruits and vegetables are ideal. There are some incredible British versions of these styles of cheeses really coming into there own – I am really enjoying Ashcombe and Corinium. Classically, I would pair with a Cornichon, for something more unusual, pickled quince or pickled pears. Also fabulous with kimchi if you like a touch of heat too.

In the spring months, the cheese world gets excited about new season goat's milk cheeses – the milk is fresh and the cheeses that are made with this milk are just bursting with juicy acidity. One of the oldest pairings in the world is cheese and honey, and I think its still pretty unbeatable. Try Acacia honeycomb with a goat's cheese with a mousse like texture like Sinodun or Dorstone for divine salty sweet combo.

In the summer, I enjoy lighter, brighter cheeses – especially those made with sheep's milk. Cullum and Corra Linn are too excellent British examples, think Manchego or Pecorino if you are looking for continental cousins. Often with a good salty acidity, you need something to pair that balances out this profile. I love pairing cheese with nuts – almonds would work well here, as would cashews and hazelnuts. Perfect with a glass of something chilled!

The autumn for me is synonymous with British orchard fruit. I think a crisp apple is one of the most perfect things to pair with cheese. Perfect with traditional English cheeses like a proper clothbound Cheddar such as a Montgomery or a more crumbly textured cheese like a Yoredale Wensleydale or Kirkhams Lancashire.

Bloomy rinded cheeses are notoriously tricky to pair with, particularly with wine. I personally like pairing something like Baron Bigod from Suffolk or Dozmary from Cornwall with a preserve with a little warmth. Think a tomato chutney with tamarind or a mango chutney with cumin seeds. I love decadent cream enriched cheeses with frozen grapes. Going completely wild – try Stichelton with a Dark Chocolate Digestive biscuit and thank me later!

> "Try Acacia honeycomb with a goat's cheese with a mousse like texture like Sinodun or Dorstone for divine salty sweet combo"





months when people are reaching for familiar comforts. But we also have customers who are looking for novel tasting experiences first and foremost, and for them local speciality cheeses and artisanal condiments seem to be of particular interest."

In our experience, consumers are very well versed now not just on UK cheeses but on Continental cheeses too. There's a vast selection to choose from and we notice a real eagerness from consumers to broaden their palates. This is very exciting as a cracker producer because we now look to offer a wider range of biscuit textures and flavours to match this and go with particular types of cheese. We have seen a real uptick in people pairing their cheese and crackers with speciality pickles, chutneys and pâtés from UK producers too – there's a host of award-winning options out there for consumers to choose from to compliment the cheeses they have carefully selected.

Mike Knowlden of Perennial Wine believes that cheese and wine pairings are worth a second look.

"Good retailers will have a strong sense of their customers and how their tastes fit on a spectrum from traditional to innovative," he says. "Even food adventurers can be drawn to traditional comforts, so it's wise to have some classics alongside recommendations that might push people to try something new.

"On the classic side, Vin Jaune with Comté is my number one. Although it's a classic it's still under the radar for many as the wine is much less well-known than the cheese. Vin Jaune is fascinating, with its nuttiness complementing the Comté whilst the super crunchy-apple acidity cuts through. Another favourite is soft, washed-rind cheese with sparkling wine. This could be a traditional style like a Crémant de Loire, or something more playful like a Pét-Nat or Col Fondo. These methods have been embraced by natural winemakers in recent years and can have more yeasty, savoury flavours to complement the funkiness of the cheese. I really enjoy sparkling wine with cheese at the recognition of Sauternes with Stilton, for example." Sweet wines deserve their time in the spotlight, says Mike. "I think good sweet wines absolutely deserve more attention and are often great value for the complexity and joy they offer. I'm keen to keep recommending that people try them, especially with salty cheeses. These wines usually have great acidity to keep things balanced too."

Branching out is key to inspiring exciting new pairings, he continues. "A couple of things I'm seeing a bit more of and would like to suggest



> "People's tastes in wine are changing towards lighter, fresher styles and it's fun to reflect this in cheese pairing. Lighter wines tend to have plenty of acidity, and this is great at keeping things refreshing in the face of rich cheese"



STOCK CHECK 2026 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



ISLE OF WIGHT TOMATOES OAK SMOKED TOMATO BALSAMIC

This is a very special vinegar, produced in small batches, steeping oak smoked Isle of Wight tomatoes in Modena Balsamic vinegar for several weeks for a sweet, beautifully smoked flavour.

iowtomatoes.co.uk



WEST COUNTRY LEGENDS VINTAGE CHEDDAR CHEESE WAFERS

Rich, golden and delicate. Delightful when gently warmed yet equally irresistable enjoyed straight from the pack.

westcountrylegends.co.uk



OLINA'S BAKEHOUSE GLUTEN FREE FIG & SUNFLOWER SEEDED TOASTS

Crisp, tasty toasts absolutely packed with berries and seeds, and produced in small batches. Free from gluten.

gourmetpartners.co.uk



DRIVERS BREAD & BUTTER PICKLES

Sliced Gherkins, Silverskin Onions and Jalapenos pickled in a sweet cider vinegar with a delicate kick of heat from added chilli flakes.

pickle-lovers.co.uk



THE LONDON HONEY CO PURE LONDON HONEYCOMB

Straight from beehives on London's rooftops and urban corners. This has bright, warm, citrussy notes.

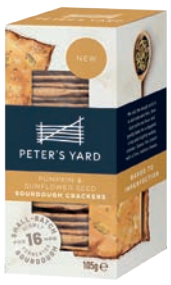
londonhoneycombcompany.com



STOKES BEETROOT RELISH

Packed with crispy refreshing shards of beetroot steeped a deliciously syrupy red wine sauce.

stokessauces.co.uk



PETER'S YARD PUMPKIN & SUNFLOWER SEED SOURDOUGH CRACKERS

These snappy sourdough crackers are made with the finest ingredients and will work perfectly alongside all cheeses and dips.

petersyard.com



TWO&ONE VERDE HARVEST

Extra virgin olive oil is an underrated pairing for cheese, and this oil is beautifully fresh and clean.

twoandoneoliveoil.co.uk



THE CHUCKLING CHEESE COMPANY GLORIOUS GARLIC PICKLED ONIONS

A powerful pairing of crunchy, juicy baby onions, pickled in a garlic infused liquor.

chucklingcheese.co.uk



TRACKLEMENTS STICKY FIG RELISH

Plump ripe figs are soaked in spiced vinegar and cooked gently with rich, dark sugar. Tangy, sweet and luxurious tasting.

tracklements.co.uk



are to look beyond just wine and to look beyond just the famous cheese origins. In particular artisanal cider can be a great pairing for cheese, and there are lots of amazing producers in the UK. A few favourites include Little Pomona, Wilding and Naughton. Cider often has some tannin, or mouthwatering acidity – or both – which counterpoint the cheese. Apples and cheese work just as well as grapes and cheese! With regard to cheese diversity, so many countries around Europe also make brilliant cheeses that are available here. I've been enjoying a couple from Greek islands this year based on sheep and goat milk, such as Graviera Kritis and Arseniko, for example."

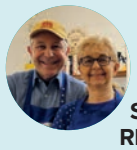
Bruno Zoccola from Valentina Deli believes that there's room for both tradition and innovation when it comes to cheese pairing. "At Valentina Deli we stock everything from classic chutneys and pickles to more unusual, artisan pairings, so it really depends on the cheese. I always say you should match the strength of the accompaniment to the cheese itself. A delicate cheese doesn't need anything too bold - honey is perfect here, especially our truffle-infused version, or a lighter honey if you want something softer. With stronger cheeses, you can go bigger and pair them with a punchy pickle or chutney. And for that middle ground,

"Our honey range is brilliant with softer cheeses, particularly the truffle honeys," he continues. "The fruit confits work really well too if you want something a bit different. Personally, I always end up coming back to Mostarda from Northern Italy, it's got the right mix of sweetness and gentle heat, and it works with loads of cheeses. Not many non-Italian customers go for it, but it's always on my cheeseboard. Classic caramelised onion chutney is still a favourite, and the fig and pear confits have really taken off recently as people look for something a little different.

"People are moving away from the idea that cheese always needs a traditional chutney, and they're starting to experiment more: honey with blue cheese like gorgonzola, fruit confits with goat's cheese, that kind of thing," he says. "There's more curiosity around regional Italian pairings too. Customers seem more confident mixing flavours and textures and are looking for accompaniments that feel a bit more special without being complicated."



RETAILER **INSIGHT**



Francisco and Sabina Perello from The Cheese Hole share their thoughts

SHOULD RETAILERS THINK TRADITIONAL OR INNOVATIVE WHEN IT COMES TO CHEESE PAIRINGS?

We think BOTH, but definitely be adventurous; its also good to note when MAGIC happens! Magic is when a pairing is not just "ooo, I can taste fig and cheese". It is when two or more things come together to create a whole new blended flavour that surprises and delights. Our fave example is Dark Chocolate (75%) with Hard cheeses especially aged Alpines/Cheddars and Manchego. They have been doing this in Europe for years and we are having some great success in introducing the concept. The keyis to have high Cocoa with low bitterness. Exquisite!

ARE CONSUMER TASTE PREFERENCES EVOLVING WHEN IT COMES TO CHEESE PAIRINGS?

Definitely. As our customers explore and taste pairings, increasingly they will ask for "what else can I try out"? Let's not forget PASTA!!!!. Many cheeses are remarkable on pasta; but not as a Parmesans sprinkle but actually as the STAR OF THE SHOW. Examples that are very popular include OG Goat (18 month Goat Gouda enriched with Cow's Cream), zested over fresh pasta and Olive Oil; and the real star from Alsop and Walker is Cheesemakers Special over pasta with plum tomatoes. This cheese is dense, rich and naturally sweet. It is a Cheddar made from a blend of four cow's milks, it does not become oily when melted and is a game changer when grated over fresh pasta and plum tomatoes (still in the pan), adding a knob of butter, then stir and serve. ASTONISHING!

WHAT IN YOUR RANGE WORKS WELL AS A PARTNER FOR CHEESE – AND WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITES?

Calabrian fig conserve with EVERYTHING and Sour Cherry Biscuits with Blues....Remarkable

WHAT ARE YOUR BEST-SELLING CHEESE ACCOMPANIMENTS?

Sour Cheery Biscuits and Calabrian Fig Conserve... AND MEMBRILLO!

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COUNTER(ACT) THE JANUARY BLUES

It's out with the old and in with the new at the cheese counter. Get ready to spread joy for another year

Well, that was a whirlwind, wasn't it? Selling cheese at Christmas and through the New Year is both a thrilling and frazzling experience where seemingly every minute of the day is taken up. By ensuring stock levels are high enough, managing pre-orders, dealing with long crowds of (possibly) impatient customers, and doing your darndest to create an all-encompassing festive experience that warms the cockles.

Congratulations for getting through it!

We hope you've had at least a little time to put your feet up and are ready for the big January reset. Though what you probably want to do is camp out on warm, distant sunny island, this is a fantastic time to 'blow out the cobwebs', assess the year before, and think about all the wonderful ways you're going to inspire cheese lovers, old and new, in 2026.

Clear the decks

Before you get cracking on your ambitious plans, get that cheese counter, those fridges and shelves in order. It can be easy, in the throes of seasonal selling, to shut up shop at New Year's and think 'I'll do that later'. Now IS your 'later'.

Give your cheese counter, service area, preparation areas, fridges and shelving a deep clean and a bit of love and attention. Perhaps more so than at other times of the year. Think of this as an early spring clean.

It's a good time to check those thermometers, inspect chopping boards and equipment to see if you need to invest in anything new, to do repairs, and generally to have a spruce up about the place.

Don't miss a valuable training opportunity

January tends to be a bit quieter in retail, but you've got to take the highs with the lows in this industry, so turn those less busy moments into key training opportunities for your staff.

Invest time in newer members you might not have been able to give as much attention to in the previous months' leading to Christmas. Can you upskill them in terms of learning more at an in-depth level about a selection of your cheeses? Teach them how to crack open and cut the more difficult varieties, like Parmesan or aged Gouda. Give a little masterclass in wrapping with waxed paper or glass wrapping cut cheeses for the counter. Any information or expertise you can pass on will be incredibly valuable to the experience for your customers in future.

Manage Christmas stock

They say you can never have too much cheese in stock at Christmas. In fact, so many retailers have shared their horror stories with *Speciality Food* about running out and trying to panic buy from wholesalers at the last minute. There will be some, though, who went over and above. If this is you, and you've got a few jarred truckles of Stilton, or more seasonal additions to the counter lurking in the fridges, use these to your advantage.

Get them out on sample again, and survey your customers. Do they like the cheeses? Would they buy them next year? What did they buy for Christmas 2025? Did they enjoy their purchases? What would they like to see more of?

See 'leftovers' as market research to help inform your buying habits for Christmas 2026, and maybe even what goes into the counter during the rest of the year.

It's also worth having a few recipes to hand as sales tools, giving shoppers 'at a glance' materials showing how they can use that piece of boozy Ubriaco cheese this month, or enhance their stews and braises with a touch of crumbled blue.

Build up the buzz

Most people feel a little flat come January. They're dealing with the pinch after splashing out on gifts, parties, booze and elaborate festive feasts. There's the weather to consider, with a sense of having to hunker down and get out of the cold. Oh, and isn't everyone on a diet?

How can you, as a cheese retailer, get more people into the shop?

First of all, ensure it's warm. That doesn't have to mean cranking up the heating (though it doesn't hurt), but can be as simple as adjusting your lighting slightly so the shop has a glow and cosiness about it. Restocking ambient shelves for a sense of generosity rather than New Year sparseness is very important too.

Next, consider value. If you really do have a lot of leftover cheese in your storeroom, perhaps now's the time to earn brownie points with thrifty consumers by launching some very special offers? Mystery boxes can be a real winner, especially when promoted cleverly online and on social media. Or you can go for the 'grab a last minute bargain' approach. Everyone loves a good deal!

Use social media and external signage as a continual force for good thoughout January, creating moments that spark joy and excitement on the dullest of days.

Maybe you could do a New Year's advent, with a different cheese on offer every day?

Invest in some new cheeses and invite customers in for a New Year, New Cheeses day. Or hook into dry January, again, with tastings, or by sharing loads of inspiration around what shoppers can pair with your cheeses that isn't boozy. Traditional, heritage apple juice from a local farm, perhaps, with a funky farmhouse Cheddar. Kombucha with an oozing washed rind cheese. Silky prune juice (yes, it works) with spicy blues. Or citrussy craft tonic water with a bright goats' cheese.

Make it fun. Make it engaging. Remind people (especially newcomers to your shop who visited in December) that cheese isn't just for Christmas.

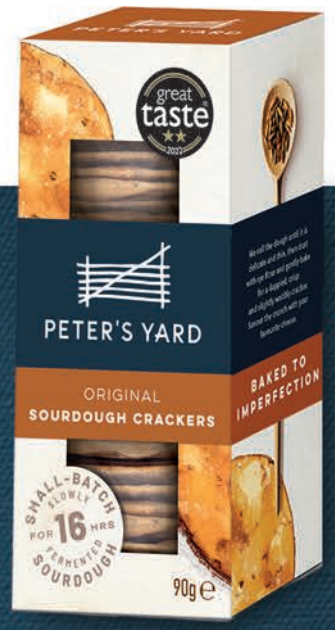
> "Remind people (especially newcomers to your shop who visited in December) that cheese isn't just for Christmas"



PETER'S YARD

IT ALL RESTS ON A GREAT CRACKER

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"When artisan became a luxury and why it never was"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

A lot of British cheesemongers have not been able to carry many soft French and Italian unpasteurised cheeses due to a ban introduced in May 2025. The measure was brought in to prevent the spread of Lumpy Skin Disease, a viral condition affecting cattle in parts of Europe. Although the disease poses no risk to human health and is not a food safety issue, the restrictions were put in place to protect the UK's livestock and agricultural industry.

Europe is hurting, and I feel it. Across France and Italy, friends in the dairy world tell me what it means for their unpasteurised cheeses to be halted at their own borders. These are small dairies for whom the UK is not a casual market. The flow of cheese has never been equal. The continent sends vast quantities of cheese to Britain, far more than we send to them. Their loss is economically profound. Ours is felt in flavour, theirs is felt in livelihood.

We in Britain can still export. They, for now, cannot send many of their unpasteurised cheeses to us. And this imbalance matters. When wheels of Brie de Meaux, Camembert de Normandie or Robiola cannot leave their maturing rooms for the UK, it is not only trade that is paused. It is a fracture in long-standing relationships and a blow to communities shaped by cheese.

Yet this difficult moment for Europe also casts a light on our own landscape. British farming is constantly challenged by an industry that demands more from farmers than it ever rewards. It is a job that needs protecting and one that must be paid properly if we wish to have any future in real food. Our distance from artisan production has been widened by decades of cheap, industrial food that works against nature rather than with it.

In just four generations, since the arrival of the supermarket, our relationship with food has changed beyond recognition. Most people believe artisan food is too expensive, when the truth is that artisan is simply how all food was once made. It is not luxury. It is food in harmony with land, livestock and season. But supermarkets have reshaped our idea of cost. Today the average shopper spends far less on their weekly shop than previous generations. It feels like progress, yet the hidden price is our health.

Much of modern food relies on exhausted soils, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, pushing ever harder for yields that nature never agreed to give. What appears cheap at the checkout becomes expensive in the surgery. We live in a world where the nutritional value of food has been driven down while the cost to human wellbeing rises quietly and relentlessly.

This is a moment to stand up for food sovereignty, to protect farmers, our landscapes and our health. Paying the true value of food is not indulgence. It is restoration. It is honesty. It is fairness for the people who feed us.

And so, while Europe struggles with the loss of our market, we must respond with empathy for them and responsibility for ourselves. Britain once held a rich tapestry of farmhouse cheese before industrialisation and the war years stripped much of it away. Now, with European unpasteurised imports restricted, a space opens for our own raw milk revival. A chance to support British cheesemakers and farmers who are rebuilding craft from the soil upward, creating cheeses that speak of their fields, their animals and their patience.

If Europe's struggle teaches us anything, it is that real food needs guardians everywhere. And right now British farmers and cheesemakers need us. They need our understanding, our willingness to pay fairly and our recognition that proper food has a value far deeper than price. This is our opportunity to renew what was lost, protect what remains and choose a future where flavour, health and craft are valued once more.

> "Right now British farmers and cheesemakers need us. They need our understanding, our willingness to pay fairly and our recognition that proper food has a value far deeper than price"



New format for elegant blue

Champignon-Hofmeister's creamy blue cheese, Grand Noir, is now available in 140g pre-cut portions, making it even more accessible for discerning shoppers in grab and go settings.

It's the first time the cheese, traditionally only available in larger wheels at the deli counter, has been presented in a fridge-friendly format, and taps into the rising consumer demand for smaller portions of premium products.

Grand Noir is lactose and gluten-free, suitable for vegetarians, and is the ideal next step up from its sister cheeses – the creamy, mild, soft Cambozola and Montagnolo – being aged for around six months, with a more intense, sharp, sweet taste and buttery finish.

Dominique Delacour, head of UK marketing for Tom Walker, which distributes Grand Noir, said, "Cheese buyers are increasingly looking for products that combine premium quality with ease of enjoyment at home.

"The new 140g Grand Noir format delivers exactly that - perfectly portioned for tastings, entertaining, or everyday indulgence during this time of the year. The product's convenient size and premium quality give retailers a versatile SKU to drive trial, attract new shoppers, and boost sales in a diverse category."

Interest grows for new goats' cheese brand

Philippa Jackson, founder of Flavour Moments, is still on a high, she says, following a recent trip to Doha in the Middle East, where buyers have shown keen interest in her new 'disruptor' brand and its Goats' Cheese Pearls.

Launched in April 2025, with work ongoing behind the scenes for nearly three years, Flavour Moments was conceived by Philippa following many years working for large retailers in the US and UK.

"I'd been looking at the category for a while, and it was becoming apparent to me that, for so long, cheese had no innovation or newness in it. If you think about it, when you walk into a supermarket, all the shelves have new products all the time, but you never really see that in cheese. The way it's packaged, consumed and portion controlled has been the same for cheese for a long time. I wanted to create something that could really tell a story on the shelves, stand out, and also look really beautiful," she said.

Flavour Moments are formed of Wiltshire-made goats' cheese, moulded into 'pearls', with different jam-like fillings – currently Fig, Honey or Pear, plus the recent launch of the Truffle Honey Christmas special edition.

The response so far has been "phenomenal", continued Philippa. "People say they've seen nothing like them before. I'm thrilled, especially as I made the leap in June to leave my full-time job to focus on this. It feels quite refreshing to have that affirmation."

New orders are being taken now for the cheeses, which have a shelf life of 28 days.



SPECIALITY FOOD



THE GREEN ISSUE

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Cryer & Stott release whisky-infused cheese

The team at Yorkshire-based Cryer & Stott have been enjoying their new blending facility immeasurably – saying it's allowed them to work with even more local producers, to create unique, tasty and diverse new products.

The family-run wholesaler and maker of Rhuby Crumble (with forced Yorkshire rhubarb and vanilla), Yorkshire Cask (with Kirkstall Brewery Virtuous IPA and wholegrain mustard) and Sheffield Forge (with Henderson's Relish), has released three new cheeses in recent months.

Business development manager, Jemma Ladwitch, said they're constantly thinking of new ideas, and relish the opportunity to incorporate Yorkshire-made ingredients.

Yorkshire Spirit, infused with whisky from Filey Bay distillery, is something they'd wanted to create for a long time, she explained. "They're so lovely to deal with and we like everything they stand for. Yorkshire Spirit is made with our mature Yorkshire Red. You get the sweetness and maturity of the whisky, and that blends perfectly with the maturity of the cheese, which is aged to around 12 to 15 months. It marries really well and is such good comfort food for winter."

Two further cheeses have joined the collection alongside Yorkshire Spirit. 1606 Rebel combines Yorkshire Red with a Scotch Bonnet chilli jam from The Chilli Jam Man, and Knaves Mire melds York Gin's rhubarb gin with Cryer & Stott's Eh Up Yorkshire Mature Cheddar.

All are available to retailers now.

"It's our first year producing our own cheeses on-site, so it's been great for us being able to create our flavours with no red tape," added Jemma. "We can come up with an idea and just make it. We're also happy for farm shops or retailers, if they have an idea for a flavour, to come and see us to create their recipes. There's a 20kg minimum order."





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Golden Hooves shares Impact Report



First Milk, the farmer-owned dairy co-operative behind regenerative food and drink innovator, Golden Hooves, has revealed the results of its Impact Report for 2024/2025.

Amongst the results are the potential of a 78% increase in soil carbon sequestration, up to 203,000 tonnes CO e – the equivalent of planting a staggering nine million trees – as well as a decrease of 3.4% in the carbon intensity of the co-op's milk, with data collected rigorously from all corners of the business, including over 700 family-run farms.

First Milk member farms currently take in over 360,000 trees, 5,564km of hedgerows – greater than the distance between London and New York – and rotational grazing of cows on 48,000 hectares of land, up 54% since 2024. With a 6% increase in land within the co-op's regenerative programme year-on-year, up to 89,977 hectares, which would be comparable to 125,000 football pitches, even more of Britain's landscape is now able to benefit from the First Milk programme.

Leona McDonald, director of Golden Hooves, said the Impact Report is "hugely exciting. We now have the data to show that regenerative farming delivers real benefits for farmers, nature, and consumers alike. Golden Hooves gives us license to celebrate this progress out loud – bringing food lovers great products, real stories, and proof that fantastic flavour and fantastic farming go hand in hand. With momentum building and more recognition coming our way, the numbers show that regeneration is here to stay. So look out for our hoof – it is proof that the product you are buying is 100% deliciously regenerative – and join the Regen Revolution!"

Young Buck is back

In the lead up to Christmas 2024 cheesemonger and cheesemaker Mike Thomson of Belfast's Mike's Fancy Cheese faced one of the biggest challenges of his career so far.

Stepping into the maturing rooms where his blue, Young Buck, was on the last part of its journey before retailing, rather than seeing wheels of mottle-edged beauty before him, Mike witnessed a total meltdown of the products, as the room's temperature control had malfunctioned, taking the space to a balmy (and not suitable for keeping cheese) 30°C.

"If it had melted at any other time of year it would have been fine," he reflected, "but because it was Christmas week, all hands were on deck in the shop. I put the cheese to bed and thought 'that's us until Christmas', but when I looked in to make an Instagram photo in the final push, it had all melted – 350 wheels!"

Thankfully the Christmas stock had already been taken for the season, but the incident put the maker on a backfoot. The maturation room hadn't been empty in 11 years.

Buoyed by other award-winning makers, who got in touch to tell Mike of their own disasters, Mike picked himself up and dusted himself off, and stocks of Young Buck are back in the swing for 2026 onwards.

"We were able to keep making at the time," he revealed, "but the production was smaller. We had another room where we could mature the cheese, and could only do around a quarter of what we did before."

It wasn't until July that storage levels reached what they were before, allowing Mike to up production.



"Everything last year was about bringing Young Buck back!"

The raw milk blue is made in 8kg rounds, crafted entirely by hand three times a week and aged for a minimum of three months. It transfers between three maturation rooms during its life, developing fruity, fresh flavours, a slightly crumbly texture, and a buttery mouthfeel.

Mike said it's "lovely" to have the cheese back and also thinks the disaster of losing so many cheeses has helped him to be even more resilient. "We know we can destroy everything and continue as a business," he joked, "which is a good thing. The hardest thing, and something I'm very bad at, was saying 'no' to people who wanted the cheese because supply was so limited and we had to keep some back for ourselves. That was tough. But we're now getting out more, doing tastings and getting back to normal. It's almost like it never happened. And we're so grateful for the support we had. We've been very well supported by the cheese community."

COMMENTATORS



ALEX JACKSON
ICERTECH



SUZY GEDNEY
SMURFIT WESTROCK



BOB VINES
TSC AUTO ID



BEN INGS
INVISIBLE SYSTEMS



HOW TO KEEP YOUR COOL

Sustainability and technology go hand-in-hand in today's packaging industry, reports *Speciality Food*

There was a time when having chilled or frozen food delivered to the door led, more often than not, to disappointment.

That thrill of ordering a favourite ice cream or range of incredible cheeses from the other side of the country, and the anticipatory wait for its arrival, could be marred by poorly constructed packaging (crushing what's inside), ineffective insulation (who wants half-melted gelato?), or the feeling of guilt when your order arrived in layer upon layer of unnecessary plastic or polystyrene in a bid to keep it safe, secure and, importantly, cold.

Times have moved on, thankfully. A raft of improvements across the packaging sector, and especially within temperature-controlled packaging, have transformed the industry. The Covid lockdowns had a lot to do with ongoing momentum here, and the shift up a gear, as consumers demanded more doorstep deliveries, of anything and everything, from charcuterie boards and chef-made meal boxes, to recipe kits, ethical meat and fish boxes, and more.

Approximately 2.3 million meal delivery boxes alone are likely to have been delivered in the UK during 2025, according to Statista, with chilled food and drink delivery accounting, it adds, for around 10% of retail food value.

These numbers are not to be sniffed at, demonstrating a supercharged marketplace, and one that needs rapidly to listen to brands and their customers, who are more often putting the environment at the top of their demand list, alongside the expectation that goods will arrive in one piece, and safe to consume.

Why is it so important to get temperature-controlled packaging right?

"If packaging fails to hold temperature, so does the product within it," says Alex Jackson, sales and marketing director at Icertech. "Poor temperature control risks a variety of issues, including spoilage, safety concerns, and negative brand image. Getting it right protects product integrity and reduces waste, but just as importantly, it ensures a reliable, repeatable customer experience that brands can confidently stand behind."

These are sentiments shared by Smurfit Westrock's UK head of marketing, Suzy Gedney, particularly the line around safeguarding a brand's reputation and delighting customers. "From artisan cheeses to fresh ready meals, temperature-controlled packaging plays a crucial role in preserving quality, flavour, and safety," she explains. "When done correctly, every shipment arrives exactly as expected, whilst also creating a more sustainable and efficient supply chain."

In a market where customers are willing to pay a premium for quality and freshness, Suzy continues, just one poor delivery experience can have a lasting effect on brand loyalty. In fact, she adds, approximately 80% of customers (according to data from Meteor Space) say they wouldn't return to a brand if the packaging was poor. "It's not something you can leave to chance."

As we've already mentioned, keeping an eye on the environmental impact of packaging is something both brands and shoppers are doing more regularly. For manufacturers this means taking accountability for materials, prioritising as much as possible those which are recyclable, resistant to moisture, insulated, and compliant with EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) regulations. Creating innovative solutions to keep ingredients fresh is what led Smurfit Westrock to work with Mindful Chef, which is able to deliver its top-quality meals while cutting waste and reducing its carbon footprint.

Ultimate, effective packaging in this sector strikes a balance between performance, reliability and responsiblity. "It keeps your products safe, boosts customer satisfaction, supports sustainability goals, and encourages consumers to have trust in your brand. Choosing the right solution leads to fewer damages – this is key, as 34% of packaging-related returns are due to product damage (Amcor) - less waste and more confident customers, " says Suzy.

HOW CAN TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED PACKAGING HELP FOOD AND DRINK BUSINESSES TO SCALE UP?

Brands need packaging that keeps perishable foods, drinks and other temperature-sensitive items fresh, especially as they try to break into new markets. "Proper temperature-controlled packaging ensures that everything, from fresh produce and dairy to meat and fresh sauces, arrives in perfect condition, all without the risk of spoilage or damage, even when being shipped internationally," says Suzy. This peace of mind means you can focus on growth, rather than constantly worrying about damaged products.

This is something Alex firmly aligns with, saying reliable temperature-controlled packaging opens the door to wider distribution, enabling businesses to reach new regions without compromising on quality. "By ensuring products arrive in perfect chilled condition, businesses can increase order volumes, support new sales channels such as e-commerce, and grow without the risk of logistical failures becoming a barrier to expansion."

The right packaging is more than a means to protect what you're shipping, Suzy adds, it's crucial for scalability, allowing you to extend your distribution cover with greater confidence – particularly on longer journeys, where even small changes in temperature can have a significant impact.

Scalability, Suzy continues, also depends on operational efficiency, with space-saving, flat-packed designs simplifying storage and shipping, making them more cost-effective. "This means that more products can be shipped simultaneously, and the likelihood of damage during transit is reduced, leading to smoother operations, fewer losses, and more room to expand your business."

WHAT SHOULD BRANDS AND RETAILERS CONSIDER WHEN INVESTING IN TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED PACKAGING?

A good starting point is understanding a product's specific temperature requirements and transit times, begins Alex. "From there, businesses should consider the full end-to-end journey variations in courier handling, seasonality, storage limitations, sustainability credentials, and ease of packing." It's also important, she continues, to evaluate performance through real testing, rather than assumptions. "The right solution should be proven in real-world conditions, not just on paper. We always provide free-of-charge samples to enable customers to do just that."

Suzy says Smurfit Westrock's ISTA lab enables the team to recreate real-world scenarios within a temperature-controlled chamber, where they test every box to ensure they're strong, reliable and ready to do their job effectively. Working with packaging manufacturers which go through such rigorous processes gives the businesses that use them peace of mind, she thinks.

WHAT'S NEW IN **TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED PACKAGING**?

- **SMART AND SENSOR-DRIVEN PACKAGING**
Wireless sensors and smart labels with the ability to continuously record humidity, temperature and other factors are being more frequently used, allowing businesses to track conditions in real time. Advancements include autonomous packaging that can sense if a product is spoiling, with solutions in-box to prevent this happening.

- **FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS**
Some packaging manufacturers are using hybrid insulating and cooling methods to allow multiple temperatures in different compartments within the same shipment, allowing for better flexibility, cutting waste, and reducing empty space.

- **PCMS**
Phase change materials that melt or go solid depending on temperatures are being adopted more widely alongside VIPs (vacuum-insulated panels), which deliver high thermal resistance in thinner packaging – reducing weight and bulk.

- **PRE-CONDITIONED AND FIBRE-BASED**
These options, such as insulated liners or boxes, are being designed with reuse in mind as part of closed-loop systems.

- **NANOTECHNOLOGY**
'Intelligent' packaging that helps protect food and drink against moisture, oxygen and light with bult in indicators for freshness and environmental exposure, is being advanced at pace.

In addition to efficiency (such how streamlined packaging is for storage, as already mentioned), Suzy says now more than ever brands should think about sustainability when looking at their packaging options, especially with EPR legislation coming into effect, and consumers becoming more conscious of the environment impact of their choices.

According to Deloitte's research, 49% of consumers now say they would be willing to pay more for sustainable packaging and delivery, which puts added pressure on brands to use materials which are recyclable, renewable and responsibly made and sourced.

WHAT CHANGES ARE BEING SEEN IN THE INDUSTRY?

Alex says the shift towards more sustainable materials is what's driving a large number of businesses within the sector. "At the same time, the industry has moved from one-size-fits-all, to tailored, data-driven solutions designed around real operational needs."

Corporate responsibility is being discussed more and more in boardrooms, concurs Suzy, saying temperature-controlled packaging is no longer only about maintaining the right temperature, it's about being environmentally responsible, with Deloitte stating 75% of consumers surveyed are more likely to buy from brands offering sustainable packaging and products.

Changes go beyond insulation performance, Suzy adds. "Brands are moving away from plastic packaging and towards smarter solutions, with new designs - such as corrugated boards with moisture-resistant coatings - making it simpler to store and ship products, keeping them safe as they journey from A to B. That means lower costs and less wasted space, whilst also supporting EPR compliance."

WHERE IS TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED PACKAGING GOING NEXT?

"Future innovations in our industry are exciting," says Alex, "New and novel materials will be introduced to the market, which combine sustainability and high performance. Packaging design will be done with the environment, disposal and performance in mind. Recycling changes in 2027 also mean that flexible plastics will become curb-side recyclable, that means LDPE and other recyclable plastics will be used in coolants, if they are not already."

Icertech's own innovation has led to more lightweight solutions, perfect for brands and retailers looking to be more agile. These products include the Eco-Box, consisting of a double cardboard outer, with two padded paper liners, keeping contents at 0-8C for up to 48 hours, while being fully recyclable.

> "By ensuring products arrive in perfect chilled condition, businesses can increase order volumes, support new sales channels such as e-commerce, and grow"
>
> **ALEX JACKSON, SALES AND MARKETING DIRECTOR, ICERTECH**

"They're something we're very proud of," she says.

Innovation is also at the heart of Smurfit Westrock, which boasts more than 1,600 designers, 30 experience centres, and expertise in materials science and supply chain optimisation.

"We develop innovative paper-based materials with advanced barriers and coatings that can resist moisture, grease and temperature fluctuations," says Suzy. "We also design packaging that perfectly fits products, branding and supply chain requirements, using our ISTA lab to test the packaging's durability in various conditions.

"Our product innovation focuses on reducing waste, making packaging more circular and helping brands meet their sustainability goals, without compromising performance or shelf life. We also use insights from more than 100,000 supply chains to optimise packaging processes, improve efficiency and scale solutions globally. In fact, more than half of our raw materials come from recycled fibre, which enables us to reuse 14 million tonnes of paper every year."

Circularity is something being discussed more and more in packaging, with many retailers seeking out brands and wholesalers providing this option in order to meet their own sustainability goals.

Smurfit Westrock puts great emphasis on a circular business model, adds Suzy. "By reusing, recycling, and responsibly replacing natural resources, we make our operations more restorative and efficient. We work with local organisations to repurpose materials we can't use, turning potential waste into new opportunities. We even transform by-products from paper production into valuable resources for the chemical, medical and pharmaceutical sectors."

She thinks beyond this, innovation will continue to combine smarter materials with connected technologies, making packaging more interactive, trackable, and sustainable than has ever been possible before.

These developments represent the next generation of packaging that not only protects what's inside, but also helps brands deliver greater transparency, efficiency, and consumer trust.



HOW **RFID** AND **IOT** TECH ARE CHANGING THE GAME

Smart labelling is set to be a core feature of much temperature-controlled packaging in the future, enabling businesses to greater assure the protection and quality of their products en route to, and on arrival with consumers.

An area of growth is RFID (radio frequency identification) whereby data is encoded in smart labels or tags, captured by a reader via radio waves. Unlike traditional barcodes, no line of sight is needed to read RFID tagged items, and multiple items can be tracked in seconds.

This ease of use is seeing it being used more and more often in retail, manufacturing and logistics.

Expert Bob Vines, of TSC Auto ID, says RFID is especially important where perishable items, like frozen food, meat or dairy, are being shipped. Adding the labels, "enables factors like temperature, humidity levels and expiry dates to be monitored, thus making it easier for store operatives to manage stock rotation, decide which items to discount, as well as minimise risk of customers consuming unsafe items. Integrating RFID with IoT (Internet of Things) into labelling systems enhances supply chain intelligence."

Other benefits, he adds, include preventing counterfeiting to protect product authenticity, helping to meet compliance such as the Digital Product Passport expected as early as 2027, and improved quality control.

"Even with the best specialised packaging, temperature monitoring is non-negotiable," adds Ben Ings, COO at Invisible Systems. Live temperature monitoring, he says, "creates a traceable, end-to-end audit trail that integrates seamlessly with temperature monitoring systems (TMS) and warehouse management systems (WMS). This means brands can act fast, automatically flagging and isolating stock for disposal if a temperature excursion occurs."

Ben is seeing more businesses embrace IoT to strengthen this process, particularly in fresh food and grocery operations. "Pairing temperature sensors with asset tracing technology ensures accountability at every touchpoint.

"Without temperature monitoring, resilience and quality assurance fall apart. Looking ahead, as cellular networks continue to improve and IoT technology becomes more accessible, temperature monitoring will become an industry standard."



10 KEY FOOD AND DRINK TRENDS FOR 2026



Start the year right with your finger on the pulse of the industry, as *Speciality Food* rounds up all the food and drink trends for 2026 you need to know

At *Speciality Food* we pride ourselves on being 'in the know' when it comes to what's happening on the food and drink scene. Join us as we dip our toes into 2026, revealing all the big trends you should keep your eye on according to analysts and industry insiders.

Look out, throughout the year, for content diving further into many of these topics, helping you expand your own knowledge and expertise to share with customers, old and new.

1 PROTEIN

There's no getting away from the value of the word 'protein'. Protein claims abound in both food and drink today, and the macronutrient remains a hot topic, sought out for its ability to sate appetite, and important role in health, particularly as we age.

Innova Market Insights says interest shows no sign of slowing down, and its research reveals consumers are looking for protein in myriad forms, for different occasions, to support their overall wellbeing.

Tastewise agrees that protein has shifted into the mainstream, fuelling innovation in everything from breakfast items to RTD drinks. The strongest growing category, interestingly, is meat, at three times the rate of plant-based alternatives. "Consumers are actively seeking restaurant-quality cuts at home, while rewarding operators who deliver meat-centered value, and rejecting plant-based alternatives that rely on processed ingredients," they say. "This shift is about a return to foods that feel real, where authenticity is the new measure of value."

2 KOREAN FOOD AND INGREDIENTS

Korean fried chicken has been a big deal for a while, but as the market for Asian food and ingredients grows with consumer discovery (through socials and dining out) they're looking for more. In fact, 51% of those asked by Bidfood said they'd like to try Korean food in the next year or two, and 43% said they'd pay more to experience it – showing particular interest in Korean barbecue, dumplings, bulgogi, jeon pancakes and bibimbap.

Synergy says the bold flavours of gochujang and kimchi are gaining popularity at a pace, as K-culture integrates especially into the lives of Gen-Z shoppers. They report 5.5% growth in global conversations around Korean food on socials in the last year.

And Tastewise reports Korean ttokbokki (a type of oblong dumpling) is making huge waves online right now – it's one to watch.

3 SWAVOURY/SWALTY

We've brought you the 'swicy' trend (which is still very hot), but now you've also got to consider 'swalty' or 'swavoury', which has been picked up as a new flavour profile to watch by both Bidfood and The Food People. They allude to a host of products combining salty and sweet ingredients. We're talking bacon jam, salted caramel, fruity hot sauces and ferments and more. So many brands are jumping on board, taking this beyond the classic sweet salty popcorn. Did you see, for example, Heck's special edition Pork & Strawberry sausages released for Wimbledon?



4 WHOLE FOODS

There are two types of consumers putting more whole foods in their baskets – vegans and vegetarians seeking completely natural alternatives to the processed fake meats and plant-based alternatives they might have been eating for years, and those actively thinking about ways to add more protein and fibre to their diets.

Synergy says, "European consumers are starting to throw out the idea of 'alternatives' and recognise the benefits of natural plant-based foods," leading them to tofu products, beans, pulses and vegetables.

Mandy Savan, content director at Stylus, says fibre is the buzz nutrient to watch within whole foods in 2026, having evolved from a "quiet gut health hero" to a "headline ingredient" across snacks, drinks and wellness product development.

"Beyond digestive assistance it will be lauded for its ability to contribute to better mood, energy and immune health. Expect fibre to be marketed less like a supplement, more like a lifestyle must-have – making it more appealing and attractive to everyday consumers."

5 MIDDLE EASTERN AND EUROPEAN FOOD

Tom Gatehouse, senior strategist at Egg Soldiers, says he expects to see a new wave of Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern staples filtering further into the public eye in 2026 – beyond hummus and harissa.

"Amba is one to keep an eye on as tastes broaden beyond hot honey's 'swicy' moment. Taking tangy, fruity and spicy as its foundations, amba's true mainstream integration may come via creamy blends - amba aioli and mayonnaises that deliver impressive tingles through recognisable formats," Tom begins.

"Then there's labneh, already familiar to many shoppers, which is shifting into its next phase: flavoured and infused varieties," he continues.

"Retailers are beginning to explore labneh with herbs, spices and smoked notes, namely a way to add premium differentiation to chilled dairy and deli categories."

Also making its way onto dining tables is the fermented chilli paste, shatta, which taps into demand for globally-inspired heat. "It offers retailers a chance to expand their chilli paste and hot sauce ranges beyond the usual suspects."

Then there's what Tom calls a 'wild card' - tirokafteri – spicy whipped feta. "With Greek cuisine enjoying steady popularity and consumers increasingly seeking bolder flavours, a spicy feta proposition feels not just logical but overdue. Ideal for dips, spreads and mezzes with a point of difference."

6 FUNCTIONAL DRINKS

Taste comes first with all drinks but, say our experts, there is an expectation today that they'll (particularly soft drinks) do more than hydrate us.



Consumers are looking for healthier versions of their favourite cans and bottles, says Synergy, often choosing natural or low-sugar options. "At the same time, there is a growing interest in functional flavours inspired by wellness trends such as botanicals, superfruits and adaptogens. "The challenge in 2026 isn't just creating great-tasting drinks, it is creating them with purpose."

Currently 28% of bottled drinks are sold with a functional claim, representing a 23% CAGR in product development, with most of these veered towards energy and alertness, and mental clarity and brain health considered the top motive for buying according to Synergy's research. These feature ingredients such as matcha, guarana, vitamins and L-theanine. And 'clean' labels, with only natural additives, are high on consumers' must-have lists.

7 PICKY TEAS AND HOME DINING

M&S defined itself in 2025 as the 'home of the picky tea', though we all really know it's Britain's delis, farm shops and food halls that hold the key to a delicious 'spread'.

More and more consumers are choosing to entertain at home or forgo a traditional cooked meal in the evening or at lunchtime for a selection of bits and pieces to tuck into, be that crusty sourdough bread, pots of olives, wedges of cheese, or a platter of dips and dunkers.

This, says Innova, has resulted in a swathe of format changes, as brands realise the power of occasion dining, switching up portion sizes, and versatility.

This is something Matt Whelan, managing director at Fieldfare, has noted too, saying shoppers are frequently turning to the frozen category for convenience, quality and flexibility, with the brand's research showing more than a third of UK consumers are now premium frozen shoppers.

"This shift is giving rise to the freeze fine dining trend, which we expect to continue strongly into 2026," Matt explains. "Many consumers are drawn to it due to ongoing cost-of-living pressures, as it allows them to enjoy premium meals at home without the expense of dining out."



This year, says Matt, will see continued growth in varied eating occasions, from smaller plates and grazing menus, to shareable dishes and elevated breakfasts. "Consumers are embracing these formats because they encourage experimentation and create more engaging mealtime experiences at home or out of home."

8 NOSTALGIA AND RETRO FOOD AND DRINK

The draw towards traditional foods and ingredients is in part because people feel overwhelmed by rapid societal change, says FMCG Gurus. "This is prevalent across all demographics, but especially Generation Z. Rising concerns about global conflict, personal finances and shifting cultural norms are driving worries about the macroeconomy. This is pushing consumers towards trusted brands, familiar flavours, and products that remind them of simpler times."

As spending out-of-home declines, the insight expert says people will continue to trade up on premium at-home treats. "Taste matters, and indulgence must feel both rewarding and justified."

Daria Pashkova, marketing manager at Ohly, says brands are meeting modern demand by finding ways to create healthier versions of nostalgic favourites by reducing salt, sugar and fat content, and finding ways to boost natural flavours. "This shift allows consumers to indulge without guilt, while still enjoying the comfort and satisfaction of their favourite foods."

Mintel agrees that food rooted in tradition is helping to reduce consumers' feelings of vulnerability and lack of control.

But for shoppers in 2026, it adds, nostalgia doesn't necessarily mean rewinding to a specific year or era, but rather taking refuge in dishes and products with a romanticised view of simpler times. There's a strong social presence of 'trad' living, with influencers taking a step back, making their own bread, butter, pickles, preserves and ferments, and this is something many (especially younger people) are being drawn to.

9 NEW WAVE TEA AND COFFEE

These hot drink categories have undergone an enormous amount of change in the last couple of years, with excitement building across demographics, but largely with Millennials and Gen-Z who are demanding more from their brew. They want to know where the beans or leaves come from. They're excited about colours, foams, froths and syrups, and the ability to customise their drinks. And they have fully embraced iced tea and coffee, even when it's gloomy and wet outside.

Functional coffee with turmeric, ginger, adaptogens and collagen – which advocate more than a buzz – are super on-trend, explains Synergy, as influencers highlight how these brews can turn a daily ritual into a mindful experience. Mushroom coffee was searched for, it says, more than 165,000 times in one month on Google.

In tea, matcha is dominating, with 2025 having been the year of the multi-layered, rainbow hued matcha latte.

What's next? According to Tom at Egg Soldiers, Hojicha is the one to watch in 2026. "Already appearing in specialist cafés, this Japanese roasted green tea is gaining momentum in industry circles. Made from the same plant as matcha but roasted rather than steamed, hojicha delivers a very different flavour profile, namely soft sweetness, toasted nuttiness and gentle caramel notes," he says.

10 DESIGNER DAIRY

Stylus's Mandy believes dairy will be increasingly recognised not only for its calcium contribution, but as a "functional wholefood ally".

"With growing interest in gut health, protein-rich snacking and recovery will boost interest in formats like kefir, strained yoghurts, and grass-fed milks. Many consumers will also look for dairy products produced via minimal processing – and possessing clear ethical and sustainable credentials."

Visit specialityfood.com to read about more of the trends driving food and drink in 2026.







PICTURES: KATE DARKIN

BRITAIN'S BEST DELIS: LAURA'S LARDER ORPINGTON

It's important to follow your dreams says Laura Roberts, founder of Laura's Larder

Laura Roberts has been a foodie forever, she smiles. "I baked for my friends at school, and catered one of my mum's leaving dos from work. As soon as I was able to get into a kitchen, I would cook for my family," she says.

"Sometimes," she jokes, "it was the same things over and over again, but I was always, always passionate about food from way back, and I always said I would like to open a restaurant or deli. But I think, when you're young, these things don't seem possible – too hard or too expensive."

Despite it feeling like an impossible dream, Laura spent her youth and early adulthood dutifully collecting and gathering trinkets and decor she could one day use, should her ambitions come to fruition. "And I was obsessed by farm shops and delis. I would go in, then come out with a box of stuff, taking photos of products and saying to makers, 'if I ever get a deli, you'll be in there'."

Marketing and digital media were where Laura landed, however, eventually setting up her own digital PR consultancy, Good Stories, moving to Holt, where her deli-led desires were fulfilled by the well-bedecked stores of North Norfolk.

"Then, in 2017, my brother got diagnosed with leukaemia. He loved his job. He used to run ITN. One day the doctor called him at work and said, 'you have to come in straight away'. He never went back and died in 2021. I thought, if someone calls me tomorrow and said my working life was over, would I have done what I wanted to?"

It was a moment of complete clarity for Laura, who travelled far and wide around the UK to find a deli and start a new life – the life she'd always hoped for.

Starting afresh

Laura landed on premises in Orpington, pitching the idea to her husband in a two-minute call to her husband. She knew, she says, that it really was a dream, and that plenty of food businesses fail, but also that she had skin in the game when it came to setting up and running a successful company. To her, it felt like a no-brainer.

"The area has a large number of primary schools, and young families are moving here all the time. There wasn't a deli back in 2020, and the building and location were everything I wanted."

> "We care about what we sell, and these people care about what they eat"



Of course, opening just as a global disaster (Covid-19) struck wasn't ideal. "However, in hindsight, that period of time was good for shops like ours. People didn't know we were here, but 21 years of digital marketing helped me pivot to focus on social media, delivering essentials packs and themed boxes. That got people following me on Instagram to see what we had every week. I really was basically a delivery person for a while, and I'd open up the shop for a bit, then go home and homeschool the kids!"

A vision 20 years in the making

Laura had years to think about what her deli would look like, and largely that was somewhere that celebrated sharing good food, with lots of samples.

"It's a higgledy-piggledy deli, but in Covid nobody wanted to touch anything, and nobody wanted you to touch anything. I wanted charcuterie hanging from the ceiling that I'd slice in front of people, and all that went out the window. So the experience wasn't there at the beginning. But I remember the first day I could put a sample on the counter. A customer came in and did a little happy dance!"

Being interactive and encouraging engagement is very much at the core of the shop.

Today, Laura says anyone who visits is struck immediately by the sheer number of products on display. There are jars, bottles and tins everywhere. "Some say they feel a little overwhelmed when they come in, but I love that sense of abundance. I always say to people we are a traditional deli.

"We champion British produce,



with a little taste of Europe and further beyond."

At the core of Laura's Larder, Laura says, are bakery, cheese and wine, with everything else riffing off these pillars. "If you have cheese and wine you need crackers. If you have crackers you need butter and chutney. It builds from there," she explains.

Having a younger audience thanks to the proliferation of families in the area, Laura says she





relishes the chance to bring in new food trends alongside staunchly classic deli offerings. "We have a sign outside saying, 'good vibes and food supplies', that's so 'us'."

Something Laura's Larder's become renowned for is its lunchtime offering. The counter boasts homemade cakes that change daily – from lavender and honey cheesecake to oat, date and nut bars or apple and cinnamon cake. There are homemade quiches, soups and salads. And social followers wait with bated breath every morning to find out what Laura's special sandwich of the day (all made to order) will be.

"People say it's their appointment to view the post on Instagram! At 11am I'll have people calling up saying, 'I'm trying to plan my day and I haven't seen what your special is yet', and friends say they look at it to get advice for making things themselves at home."

A vocation, not a job

Running any business is a lifestyle, not a job, and Laura adores it. "Everyone says it's going to be so much work, and they were right, obviously, but luckily I had run my own businesses before, so I was aware of some of the behind-the-scenes – it's the bricks and mortar side of things that brought a whole new level of things I wasn't aware of."

One of her favourite parts of running the deli is sourcing, speaking to producers about why and how they make things. "When customers come in, I can talk confidently about everything we have, and if I know them, I'll know which products they'll like so I can make recommendations."

Laura muses that she was "much more well off and had more free time" in the past, "but I'm happy I made the change".

She calls running the shop a performance, but "it's also lovely because we're humans and need that interaction. It's really nice to be part of the community."

Moving with the times

Laura gets a huge amount of satisfaction out of meeting producers and introducing to Laura's Larder products she knows the multiples won't have.

Trends she's picked up on recently include a steering from younger customers towards natural wines. "They're also embracing things like Korean cooking in the same way. Yes you can go online and buy kimchi, but you haven't got someone there talking about how it was made, how to use it, and how it made them feel. Our customers appreciate the personal touch."

Something else Laura is noticing, again, with younger shoppers, is how much attention they're paying to labels. "They're really studying them before they buy something, and I don't think I've seen that from young people as much as recently. I love it because we always fare so much better than the supermarkets in this area. We care about what we sell, and these people care about what they eat."

LAURA'S **FAVOURITE PRODUCERS**

- **MAKAN MALAYSIA**
Run by two girls in Reading who make Malaysian sauces. They're so fun and engaging. I love people like that!
- **CHILI MAVEN**
She's also so much fun, and I really love the depth of flavour in her products.
- **BARON BIGOD**
It's something we're synonymous with – a really fantastic British product.
- **HOMEMADE**
Our 'made at Laura's Larder' range is popular. People make a beeline for the homemade cake, fresh salads, quiches and more. Having this element alongside the artisan British producers really sets us apart from the crowd."

What makes a great deli?

Curating lots of things from lots of different places, rather than going to one or two wholesalers is key so you don't become an 'identikit' shop, says Laura. "I go to multiple sources. I have a tiny shop, but there's 1,800 lines in my till from over 300 suppliers!"

Being personable without being intrusive goes a long way as well. "I hate walking into sports shops where everyone's staring at their phones and doesn't want to help. It pays to say, 'hi, how are you?' and, 'can I help you?', asking questions and following up with the 'performance'."







TASTE DIRECT ★ 2026 ★

Your chance to sample new and exciting products for free! Simply fill in the form and samples will be sent directly to your store

Fudge Kitchen

Artisan confectioner Fudge Kitchen's nostalgic range blends traditional flavours with sustainable craftsmanship. This delightful collection of classic British treats is designed to evoke fond memories with every delicious bite. From Rock Salted Peanut Brittle offering a nostalgic childhood crunch, to tangy Raspberry Coconut Ice conjuring sweet summer days, each product celebrates simple pleasures of the past. For classic indulgence, the new Vanilla Crumbly Fudge delivers a melt-in-the-mouth experience, while Salted Caramel Crumbly Fudge offers a decadent mix of sweet caramel and sharp salt, bringing a beloved flavour combination to life.



SAMPLE PACKS FIRST 50!

Walkers Shortbread

TASTING SAMPLE PACKS FIRST 100!

Still run by Joseph's family, Walker's Shortbread maintains the tradition of producing the finest products to family recipes for both the retail and foodservice sectors. All Walker's shortbread is guaranteed to be made with the finest pure butter and to contain no artificial flavourings, colourings, or preservatives. Combining quality ingredients, superb packaging and product innovation has established Walker's as the leading brand of shortbread worldwide. Also granted a Royal Warrant of Appointment from His Majesty the King for the supply of shortbread to the Royal Household in 2017, this followed a Royal Warrant of Appointment by the Queen and Queen Mother in 2002 for oatcakes.



Potion De V

Introducing the first and only aged and handcrafted pure vanilla extract in the UK. Using the finest Grade A organic vanilla beans and ageing them results in a profound depth and complexity that cannot be achieved in factories. Ethically sourced single-origin vanilla is then hand-bottled, with vanilla beans added to every extract bottle—giving the user the flexibility to use both the extract and the beans. Handcrafted in small batches, Potion De V's vanilla extracts are 100% pure, natural and allergen-free, with super-clean labelling of simply two ingredients. The extracts come beautifully packaged in a glass bottle with a cork top and a matching box. Amaze your customers with this delicious handmade product, bringing a "wow" factor to your shelves.

FREE SAMPLE





Olives Et Al

TASTING SAMPLE BOX FIRST 100!

Olives Et Al has been championing the art of proper food since 1993 – real ingredients, made by real people, the old-fashioned way. What began as a love affair with Mediterranean olives has grown into a full pantry of bold, honest flavours – from small-batch dressings and pickles to the finest snacks and nibbles. The range is still made by hand in Dorset, with care, curiosity, and a generous glug of Extra Virgin Olive Oil in almost everything they do. Over 20 years ago, Olives Et Al developed their own way of kiln roasting nuts in small 60kg batches and some top-secret techniques. The result? Perfectly golden, deeply flavoured, and utterly irresistible. Every jar, bottle, and bag tells Olives Et Al's story – full of character, flavour, and a little adventure. Made to share, to savour, and to always leave you wanting more.



Pulp

SAMPLE BOTTLE FIRST 100!

Pulp Low Alcohol Apple Cider is refreshingly light at 0.5% ABV. Deliciously sophisticated, the light carbonation teases the tannins, leaving plenty of body and the sweet aroma of real cider with a touch of acidity as the end note. A full-flavoured medium cider, its low alcohol label is not to be underestimated. Perfect for the designated driver or those moderating, it offers a full-bodied cider experience. Every cider at Pulp is crafted from homegrown fresh cider apples and created pip to pint in under five miles at the family farm in Herefordshire, which has been cared for for over a century. Traditional skills passed down the generations, blended with modern techniques, come together to shape an a perfectly undeniably refreshing tipple taste.



Mont58

MIXED SAMPLE PACK!

Mont58 Coffee is a small, independent, award-winning coffee roastery based in South London, recently named one of the UK's Best 100 Small Businesses for 2025. They source high-quality, ethically traded beans from sustainable farms and roast every batch by hand in small quantities to ensure exceptional freshness, flavour and consistency. Mont58's product range includes freshly roasted retail coffee bags, 100% arabica premium instant coffee, and fully compostable coffee pods compatible with Nespresso® machines – all designed to deliver great taste with minimal environmental impact. Sustainability is at the heart of everything they do, from their direct relationships with growers to their plastic-free packaging and carbon-conscious practices. Mont58's mission is simple: to create coffee that tastes great, supports farmers fairly, and helps build a more responsible coffee future.

Suma

STORE CUPBOARD TASTER
FIRST 50!

Suma is food done fairly. As a worker-owned, equal-pay co-op, they put people and ethics at the heart of everything they do. Suma's store-cupboard essentials are crafted for independent retailers who value quality, traceability and integrity. From richly nutty Black Chickpeas to vibrant Cherry Tomatoes and smooth, flavour-forward Refried Beans, each product reflects their commitment to sustainable sourcing and honest production. Ideal for retailers seeking dependable, ethical staples with genuine provenance.



Biltong Boss

SAMPLE PACKS
FIRST 50!



Multi award-winning Biltong Boss brings energy, passion, and expertise to the category, blending time-honoured preparation with bold, confident flavours that keep customers coming back for more. Each pack delivers an impressive 40% protein while remaining low in sugar and saturated fat. Biltong Boss uses premium cuts of responsibly sourced beef, expertly hung and air-dried for exceptional tenderness, then finished with their signature spice blends that packs real character. From the classic, hearty Original Beef Biltong to adventurous favourites like Volcano Boss, Truffle Boss and beyond, this is a brand that continues to tick every box for flavour, quality, and innovation.

Fairfields Farm

Made with potatoes grown at the independent farm and cooked on-site, Fairfields Farm award-winning crisps are also carbon neutral*, vegan and gluten-free without compromising on taste. With eight delicious flavours including Sweet Chilli, Roast Rib of Beef flavour and Cheese & Onion flavour, there's something for everyone. Available in 40g single serve and 150g sharing bags.
*For details, visit: fairfieldsfarmcrisps.co.uk/sustainability

SAMPLE BOXES
FIRST 50!





A.Vogel

SAMPLE PACKS
FIRST 60!

Give your customers a reason to season with Herbamare Herb Sea Salt. Herbamare contains unrefined sea salt infused with fresh, organic herbs and vegetables such as thyme, rosemary and kelp, providing a unique flavour to your seasoning. The salt is traditionally harvested by hand from unique salt marshes in Aigues-Mortes, an area of France well known for its rich agricultural land. Organically grown herbs and vegetables are then steeped with the sea salt for many months to capture the distinctive quality and flavour of Herbamare®. Add a little extra punch with Herbamare Spicy with added chilli powder, pepper and horseradish. Get 125g of both varieties in the sample box!

TASTE DIRECT ★ 2026 ★

Getting your hands on free samples could not be easier. Simply fill out your details below or save yourself a stamp and visit tastedirect2026.com

Taste Direct is only open to retailers and potential stockists of these products

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Job Title:

Business Name:

Phone Number:

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Business Type (Deli, Café etc)?

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Postcode:

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Company Website:

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● To meet current data protection legislation we need your permission to share your data with our Taste Direct partners. Tick here to accept. ☐

- **Walkers Shortbread** ☐
- **Pulp** ☐
- **Fudge Kitchen** ☐
- **Potion De V** ☐
- **Olives Et Al** ☐
- **Mont58** ☐
- **Suma** ☐
- **Biltong Boss** ☐
- **Fairfields Farm** ☐
- **A.Vogel** ☐

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FINAL CALL

Happy 2026!

After a Christmas filled with delicious food and drink, everyone at team Speciality Food has a spring in their step, looking to the year ahead, ready to excite and inspire you – our lovely readers.

Behind the scenes we're busily plotting special editions, like our Green issue, planning our trips to events such as Lunch, Farm Shop & Deli, and Speciality & Fine Food Fair, and researching new products, trends and retailing tips to help you to have the best year in business yet.

Something that can't be ignored, at this time of year, is the ritual of setting resolutions for the year to come. Countless numbers of people (maybe you're one of them) will be hitting the gym, cutting back on junk food, and maybe even going vegan this January in a bid to improve their health.

January is an ideal month for goal setting. For looking back at the year that's passed, reflecting, taking stock, and thinking about what you're going to do bigger and better in the months ahead. And that doesn't mean hitting the treadmill!

As part of your 2026 reset why not...

• **Read our big trends feature in this issue.** It's packed with insight from across the food and drink industry, including analysts, retailers and wholesalers. Are there any trending categories you could invest more heavily this year?

• **Make an events action plan.** Events really do add a feather to your cap, and those retailers which do introduce ways to engage with consumers outside of the hard sell, tell us they're seeing a consistently positive impact – especially when it comes to families. Experiences generate interest from non-traditional customers, help with social reach, and can build shopper loyalty. If you haven't 'done' Halloween yet, maybe now's the time to get your thinking cap on?

• **Invest time in staff training.** January is typically quiet across retail and hospitality. Use this period to upskill staff. The more knowledge they have, the more beneficial they are to customers, and in turn to your business. Hold in-house tastings, chats with brands you sell heavily, or even off-site visits. Knowing your stuff is what sets you apart as an independent, and what will keep people coming back to see you.

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

5 MINUTES WITH

LEWIS HAYES, FOUNDER AND MASTER DISTILLER AT DROPWORKS



WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD AND DRINK INDUSTRY?
I always wanted to be an actor, I studied theatre and film at Manchester University.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
Cleaning the post office sorting house on a night shift. This taught me a lot about the importance of teamwork and the small cogs in any machine that help the wheels to keep turning.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
People who care more than they should about the tiniest details – in rum, in art, in life.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
Selling balloons in my local shopping centre. I was terrible at it. Kids loved me, parents hated me. It taught me a lot about the importance of adding value to society and being proud of your work.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF YOUR JOB?
The mixology moment – where I get to taste the creations that bartenders put in front of me.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
Having meetings about having meetings is the worst thing for me, it really pulls me out of living in the present and feeling productive. It's like the feeling your tyres get deflated on your bike and if you're cycling into a headwind.

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD/DRINK INDUSTRY?
It's a chaotic family reunion where everyone thinks their cocktail is better than yours. Frustrating at times, exhilarating at others. Nothing beats the creativity, the passion, and the diversity of people who genuinely love what they do.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
Probably a Sri Lankan curry feast, surrounded by family and friends – we'd all be drinking Funk Drop Negronis and Barrel Drop Old Fashioneds.

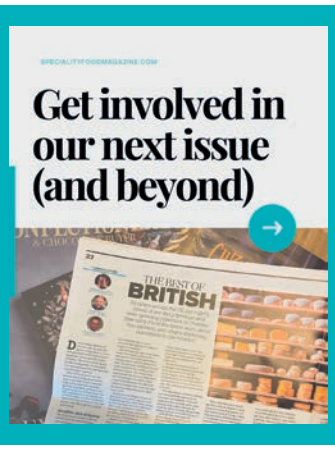
WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
"This is not the Service Industry; You are not a Servant. This is Hospitality and you are the Host"

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN (AND DRANK)?
A friend played a prank on me in a Turkish restaurant once and I ended up saying yes to drinking a shot of rabbit's blood – joke was on me?!

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?
Ducks Newburyport by Lucy Ellmann.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Savoury, Rum does not need added sugar if it's made well in the first place.

BE CONNECTED



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SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE

Inside the next issue of Speciality Food:

- The Green Report 2026
- Sustainable Champions
- Sustainable Drink Trends
- Innovations in Sustainability
- Future Proof Farming
- Frozen Food: Brands to Watch
- IFE 2026 Show Preview

THE GREEN ISSUE





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NIRVANA CHOCOLATE MILK STOUT

Sometimes nothing hits the spot like a great stout, but when you're drinking less alcohol – or none at all – it can be tricky to find an option that has the same indulgent, enveloping mouthfeel as a high percentage one. Thankfully, Nirvana have done it again with their latest release, perfectly timed with the colder weather – a Chocolate Milk Stout which offers notes of toffee, caramel and lightly roasted coffee alongside creamy chocolate. The ultimate indulgence for the start of a new year.

nirvanabrewery.com

TOBY & CO THE GREEN ONE

On the subject of low/no, we love this classy take on botanical beverages – perfectly portioned to wrap up and toast with friends, wherever you're celebrating. This drink has been crafted by a specialist with years of experience under his belt; and it shows, with a refined taste of English country garden botanicals and herbs combined with notes of fine tea and Champagne. Plus, it's functional too, supporting hydration, energy and cognitive clarity.

tobyandco.uk





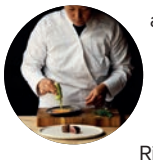
OTHER FOODS CRUNCHY SHIITAKE MUSHROOM CHIPS

We all appreciate the innovation prevalent in the snacking industry, but this was a real eye-opener for me – satisfyingly crunchy and perfectly seasoned mushrooms that genuinely scratch the itch for something toothsome and thoroughly savoury. We'll always love potato crisps but in the name of health-boosting, and trying something new, these are well worth a go – especially when New Year resolutions are at their peak.

otherfoodsuk.com

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Nina Matsunaga, chef-owner of The Black Bull & Tsuchi



At The Black Bull and our newly opened Tsuchi restaurant, the way we source our produce lies at the heart of everything we create. At the foundation is a commitment to quality, seasonal British ingredients that are ethically and sustainably produced. We always try to source as locally as possible, but only if those producers align with our wider philosophies. Just because something is good doesn't automatically make it right.

Our beef, from spring to autumn, is from the Sedbergh area. Hereford beef from Brian & Caroline Capstick in Howgill, which grazes on the hillside overlooking the Howgill Fells that dominate our countryside views. The rest of the year, we have British White beef from North Yorkshire, where the grass lasts long into the winter, and they are fed brewers' grain from a local brewery.

Our lamb and hogget are mainly Herdwick, farmed locally by Richard Hoggarth at Heights of Winder farm and are the best we know in the area. Richard has also started to supply us with goat and guinea fowl with great results. Height of Winder is an idyllic farm, lovingly farmed by Richard, which we've always felt has transpired in his livestock.

Pork from James Hadwin, at Mansergh Hall farm, is certainly the best we've found in the area. We don't currently serve chicken as we haven't found a supplier that matches our philosophies.

The only salmon we would consider serving is wild, traditionally smoked salmon from Sally Barnes at Woodcock Smokery in Ireland. She sources only from local fishermen, though sadly, Brexit has made importing this almost impossible.

We are fortunate to be between two excellent coasts and make the most of both. Hodgsons Fish, based in the North East, supply the bulk of our fish, always fresh, seasonal, and therefore reflected in a menu that changes accordingly with the seasons.

For fruit and vegetables, we've recently begun working with Charlotte Corns at Sunny Bank Kitchen Gardens, an organic grower soon to be certified. This is our first year using Charlotte's produce, and it's been a genuine game-changer. Her regenerative, organic, and no-till growing methods mirror our own ethos perfectly, and we're excited to continue this journey with her.

These same philosophies resonate through all of the produce we use. Our flour is from Wildfarmed, which is all regeneratively farmed. Our caviar comes from N25 Caviar, our specialist Japanese ingredients come from SushiSushi and the Wasabi Company. Asparagus from Spillman's, Rhubarb from Tomlinson's, tomatoes from the Isle of Wight, and honey from the Northumberland Honey Co. to name a few.

The same care applies to our drinks. Wine is, after all, another form of agriculture, with good and bad producers alike. Our wine list includes both conventional and natural wines, with a focus on small, conscientious producers.

For beer, we champion the local breweries, Fell Brewery, Farm Yard Ales, and Lakes Brew Co. For non-alcoholic options, Zingi Bear, a locally made ginger switchel by Laurie Freeman, is a favourite. Our spirits come from smaller, independent producers, sourced through Masters of Malt, who support niche distillers.

TALKING ITALIAN

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FRESH STARTS

Look beyond the classics for an authentically exciting taste of Italy

Now that Christmas is over, you might be feeling glad that everything's back to normal – stock, staffing (and stress) levels – and be keen for things to settle before you make your next big move. No doubt you already have a couple of plans that took the back foot while you and your team focused on the festive season, but may we suggest adding a little exploration of Italian fine food onto your schedule?

We all know – and love – the Italian classics, including the modern must-haves such as pistachio crema, but if you've stuck to the same shopping list for the past 12 months or more it's worth rifling through wholesalers' catalogues to see what's new.

The great thing about Italian cuisine is that, often, the packaging is as good as the delicacy within – making even the simplest foodstuff worthy of gifting – whether to a loved one or oneself. Panettone is as much loved by shopkeepers for its sales-boosting appearance as it is for its unique texture and flavour, but there are plenty of other attractive avenues to explore beyond the Christmas period.

Look for fabulous olive oils draped in gilded labels which tell the unique story of their provenance – and offer something different to what you already have on your shelves. Those presented in ceramic bottles have the added bonus of being enjoyed long after the oil has been relished.

A great number of ambient products are both beautifully presented and a culinary novelty to us Brits – there's still plenty of store cupboard staples that Italians consider to be everyday but which we view as an authentic luxury – so trust your foodie instincts and try out the products which excite you most.

Of course, there will always be an appetite for the classics – with excellent reason – but by getting inspired by the cornucopia of incredible, authentic produce available to stock, either directly or by passionate wholesalers, you can excite yourself and your staff as much as your customers to try something new as 2026 begins.



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