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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the November/December issue of *Speciality Food* – our final publication in what has been yet another tumultuous year.

With Christmas nearly upon us it is once again time to focus our collective attentions on what makes Britain's fine food industry great; undoubtedly a challenge considering the myriad of difficulties all business (from across the sector and beyond) have faced over the past 12 months and continue to face.

However, it is these USPs that make all the difference to our offering. Superb customer service, unrivalled connections with producers and the environment, and an unparalled focus on quality are what will help *Speciality Food* readers stand out from the crowd and continue to succeed.

To that end, in this issue you'll find a raft of features providing inspiration, business advice and product recommendations to help support your endeavours throughout the rest of 2022 and beyond.

Merry Christmas to you all.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
holly.shackleton@aceville.co.uk





Rishi Sunak announced as new PM: the industry reacts

After Liz Truss stepped down after just 46 days in power, the food and drink industry calls on new PM Rishi Sunak for increased stability and support

In late October, Liz Truss announced outside 10 Downing Street that she was resigning as prime minister. A week later, Rishi Sunak was announced as the new PM after his leadership rivals failed to obtain the 100 MP votes necessary to run for office.

Speaking to the country, he stated, "It is the greatest privilege of my life to be able to serve the party I love, and to be able to give back to the country I owe so much to. The United Kingdom is a great country, but there is no doubt we face a profound economic challenge. We need stability and unity, and I will make it my utmost priority to bring our party and our country together.

For some, this news may have come as a relief, after Liz Truss's chancellor's mini-budget caused the value of the pound to plummet and tax cuts did little to help struggling small businesses.

But this means that the UK is due to have a third prime minister in just three months, and the fine food and drink industry is concerned with how this uncertainty will affect retail in the crucial golden quarter.

A need for stability

Jeff Moody, commercial director of the British Independent Retail Association (BIRA), highlighted, "What small businesses need now more than ever is stability in the government so they can plan for the future.

"Retailers are now seeing real sales declining even with much higher prices masking the volume drops previously. Consumer confidence is at an all-time low, so BIRA is calling for Conservative MPs and members to make a quick and correct decision enabling the government to focus on the urgent needs of the economy.

"Businesses need certainty so they can plan, and consumers need the confidence to start spending again – both can be achieved if the government starts to give real clarity now."

This feeling was reflected by Martin McTague, national chair of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), who added, "It is incumbent upon the next Conservative Party leader to show they can provide stability and take the necessary steps to secure economic growth in the face of significant recessionary pressures.

"Businesses are crying out for an end to the political turmoil and a focus on remedying the economy, supporting small firms through the hard winter ahead."

For Mark Kacary, managing director of Norfolk Deli, this is all too real. He explained, "What this means for small businesses like ours is that we now wait for another seven days (minimum) to understand who will be leading the country, probably another two weeks to understand what their policy and their strategy will be, and what that then means to how or if small businesses can expect any support or if they will be expected to close their doors for good in the new year.

"Ideally, I would hope for a general election. I know this means more instability, but to gain stability I feel the public deserves to have its say and opinion heard on what they think of this government's achievements over the last 12 years."

Simon Jones, co-owner of Forest Deli, agreed, "We need a general election and it's as simple as that really – but, that will mean months with no government and total uncertainty on every aspect of business and bills."

The new prime minister

Britain's new prime minister, Rishi Sunak, will have a hard task of restoring the industry's faith in the government.

As Martin explained, "Whoever becomes prime minister must knuckle down, see through the delivery of the energy support package for small businesses – as already approved by parliament – and the reversal of the hike in national insurance.

"Beyond that, there must be a focus on securing prosperity for the longer term, making sure we have the right support for improving broadband, housebuilding, labour supply, and the tax and regulatory framework – so we can build our way out of the increasingly negative economic climate."

Jeff added, "Quick and proper decisions on reforming Business Rates, Levelling up and Tax reform will also help the retail economy plan, survive and prosper, fuelling economic activity."

For Simon, action needs to be swift and decisive. "Retail and hospitality are in a very precarious place, and the run-up to Christmas is going to be tough. Q1 next year is going to be brutal, as inflation isn't going away, and costs are only going to increase."

Mark agrees. "To impose whatever is needed to create a sense of stability in the market a sense that they have some idea of what they are doing and to rapidly listen to the various bodies who will all tell those in power that unless they want to see a glut of businesses close, they need to provide some assurances that there is support available and to spell out clearly what this means for the long term.

"I feel that if businesses and business owners knew exactly what to expect in terms of costs and taxes as a consequence of being able to remain open, they will accept it, and find ways to work with it. What is totally unworkable is a mini-budget one week, and two weeks later that budget being scrapped, followed by a leadership vacuum", he concluded.



Government plans to scrap environmental schemes considered a "catastrophic mistake" for nature

Wildlife and farming groups have criticised the proposed move away from Environmental Land Management Schemes (Elms) as a huge step backwards for food security and the environment

Environment Land Management Schemes, devised by the former environment secretary Michael Gove, were constructed to encourage farmers to create space for vulnerable species such as wading birds and dormice, as well as absorbing carbon to help the country reach its net zero targets.

However, sources at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) have revealed to the Observer that they are considering paying landowners a yearly set sum for each acre of land they own, which would be similar to the EU basic payments scheme of the common agricultural policy.

A 'CATASTROPHIC MISTAKE'

According to the Soil Association, the replacement of Elms with EU-style yearly sums would be a "catastrophic mistake", considering the current state of British food security and soil health.

As Gareth Morgan, the group's head of farming policy, explained, "We are shocked to hear reports that the government may ditch plans to pay farmers to protect nature and climate – this would be a catastrophic mistake.

"Tackling the climate emergency and mass declines in wildlife populations is vital for our long-term food security, so to abandoning plans to transform the way we support British farmers at such a crucial time would be an outrage.

"A handbrake turn on the progress made on the biggest opportunity to fix our broken farming support system in the last 50 years would not only betray nature and climate, it would also betray all those farmers who have invested so much already in tests and trials for the new Environmental Land Management Schemes."

This is something Vicki Hird, head of the sustainable farming campaign at Sustain, also strongly believes. She told *Speciality Food*, "The Elms timetable and budget needs to be implemented faster rather than slowed down. Any 'review' of the existing plans could investigate specific concerns, such as whether it supports good farmers enough, the impact on upland or small farmers, and if it is ambitious enough.

"If a review stalled the switch to more nature-friendly farming, the scheme could lose the support of farmers, the treasury who pay for it, as well as the vital chance to protect nature and deliver on the UK's climate goals. All are vital for food security and resilience."

THE NEED FOR NATURE-FRIENDLY FARMING

Environmental groups have proved that urgent action towards more regenerative, nature-friendly farming is needed to protect the British countryside.

According to Roger Kerr, CEO of Organic Farmers & Growers (OF&G), "Michael Gove famously stated that we are 30-40 years away from the eradication of soil fertility. Four years on and too little action has been delivered. The long and short is we don't have time to keep stalling.

"Therefore, OF&G has repeatedly called for organic's proven 'real world' evidence of delivery, to be given clear and unambiguous recognition."

As Vicki added, "Farmers are already struggling with rising prices and poor harvests as well as loss of labour. They also face increased competition from low-standard food imports thanks to badly negotiated trade deals."

Gareth concluded, "We know most farmers care deeply about the environment and it is vital that they're rewarded to protect it – especially in the face of trade deals that threaten to undercut British farmers with imports of food ordered to lower environmental and animal welfare standards.

"The government must proceed with the most evidence-based solution – a rapid shift to agroecological, nature-friendly farming."





Food inflation hits 40-year high to reach 14.5%

UK food and non-alcoholic drink inflation has now hit a 'grim milestone' as it rises to 14.5% year on year, data shows, leading to increased concerns about consumers' budgets as the UK approaches the festive period.

After 14 months of consecutive rises the annual inflation rate for food and non-alcoholic beverages is estimated to be at its highest since 1980, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The sector made the largest upward contribution to month-on-month increases in the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), which rose by 10.1% in the 12 months to September 2022, up from 9.9% in August.

Karen Betts, chief executive of industry body The Food & Drink Federation, said, "Today marks a grim milestone with food and drink price inflation hitting 14.6%, according to CPIH data, in September, a level not seen since the 1980s.

"Food and drink manufacturers continue to do everything they can to keep product prices down but huge rises in ingredient, raw material, energy and other costs mean they have no choice but to pass some price rises on.

"Recent economic turbulence in the UK has made a difficult operating environment for businesses in our sector worse. Companies urgently need a stable economic outlook and a coherent policy framework to enable them to make investment and other critical decisions that are central to their businesses and to the prosperity of their local communities."

Fresh milk saw a 34.5% rise across the 12-month period according to ONS data derived from the Retail Prices Index. Oil and fats were up by 29.1% while butter increased by 27.9%, eggs rose by 23.2%, biscuits and cakes were up 18.8% and bread rose 14.7%.

> "Today marks a grim milestone with food and drink price inflation hitting 14.6%, according to CPIH data, in September, a level not seen since the 1980s"



The Food Foundation calls for mandatory reporting on healthy and sustainable food sales

In its annual report, The Food Foundation has called for health and sustainable targets across the food industry

Named *The State of the Nation's Food Industry*, a new report from the Food Foundation has revealed that obesity-linked disease is crippling the NHS and negatively impacting our environment and climate.

Along with a number of food businesses, the charity is calling on the government to introduce mandatory reporting of sales of fruit and vegetables, high fat salt and sugar foods, plant and meat-based proteins and the amount of food waste they generate.

Rebecca Tobi, senior business and investor engagement manager at the Food Foundation, explained, "The need for food businesses to address the twin issues of diet-related ill health and the climate crisis is more urgent than ever.

> "The retail sector is currently ahead when it comes to health and sustainability commitments"

"If we are to meet Net Zero commitments on climate change and reverse the downward trajectory of the nation's health, it is imperative that food businesses recognise their responsibility.

"The retail sector is currently ahead when it comes to health and sustainability commitments – it's time for caterers and restaurants to do the same."

The report also highlighted the need for supermarket chains to give more support to low-income families. Only Sainsbury's and Iceland currently promote the Government's Healthy Start scheme intended to support access to fruit, vegetables and milk for children aged under four.

Getting involved with these promotions is something independent fine food retailers can do to help poorer families and demonstrate their dedication to providing healthy, sustainable food.



"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas"



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

The nights are drawing in, there is a distinct nip in the air for early risers, and talk about doom and gloom is once more resplendent on the front pages of the national press.

There's nothing new about all of this of course – just seasonal change. Statements along the lines of 'Christmas is cancelled' have been ever present during the two Covid years.

However, what makes it different this year is an alarming new strain of doom and gloom with unprecedented side effects. For example, electricity blackouts, rising inflation, interest rate hikes, spiralling energy costs amid threats of war in Europe.

In other words, this existential is bigger than the last existential.

So at a time when Father Christmas must be ramping up the production of toys at the North Pole I thought it would be good to carry out my own poll of confidence levels among small business owners. And who better to ask than the 60 or so Startisans, or start up artisan food traders, who attend our fine food market on the Duke of York Square every Saturday? As small business people they will be at the sharp end of commercial travail and the vicissitudes of cost increases. Plus a few of them are no strangers to the concept of complaint. So, on Saturday October 8th I conducted an unofficial, unscientific, anonymous, itsy, bitsy, teenie, weenie, yellow, polka dot opinion poll by asking the traders what their view of Christmas 2022 actually is. For example, will it be positive for your business? Will it be negative? Are you a 'don't know'? Or should I mind my own business?

For a start, everybody was keen to discuss what the prospects are for them. Some sell basic produce like meat, fruit and veg, bread, cheese, fish, quiches and pies, cakes, pasta and honey. Some sell products that make good gift ideas for Christmas such as chocolates, cakes and alcohol. Some sell hot food for immediate consumption. They range from relatively seasoned old hands to first year newbies. Initially the replies were quite startling but on reflection and considering the context completely understandable.

82% were positive or very positive about Christmas 2022 despite it all. 14% were unsure and just 4% were negative. Initially it looks like some traders are experiencing a messy divorce from reality. However, market traders generally are very positive human beings who nurture and treat their businesses like beloved offspring. As one of them said to me, "If I read the newspapers on a daily basis I wouldn't get out of bed in the morning". And there is a feeling that after Covid the viewpoint about a 'crisis' has shifted. The traders have become more stoical about the future.

The second distinction to be made is that our market takes place in an area of London that is affluent and where the local community visits not just for the basics but also for treats and unusual artisanal products not frequently found elsewhere.

There was some nuance among the positive responders. Some admitted to being hopeful rather than assured about Christmas and could possibly shift in the next few weeks to the 'don't know' spectrum. Among the 'don't knows' were several people who had only just started their businesses in the last 12 months so were reticent about their prospects for their first ever Christmas. Finally, the small minority who were feeling negative about Christmas were essentially selling products that are not really seasonal products. They are already feeling the pinch due to rising costs and falling demand. If I ask all the traders the same question in January would the same feeling still be around? However, in the main they are more positive about the challenges and more open to new ideas in developing their businesses.

In terms of existential challenges to businesses, a great book by Rutger Bregman called Human Kind references the Blitz of 1940. On London 80,000 bombs were dropped over a period of nine months. Neighbourhoods were wiped out, a million buildings were destroyed and more than 40,000 people were killed in the UK. The result was, according to accounts of the time, a 'calm serenity' which did not bring out the worst in people but the best. The same thing happened when Britain retaliated against Germany. Both bombing campaigns had the opposite effect of the intended purpose – they actually strengthened morale. A lesson that still can be seen today in Ukraine.

Shops during the Blitz that had windows blown out by bombs put up signs saying "More Open than Usual."

Best wishes for a successful Christmas 2022.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STATS

£110 million

The government has announced that there is to be £110 million of new funding made available to rural businesses through the Rural England Prosperity Fund (Rural Fund). This find will be for small businesses to help strengthen the rural economy, and businesses have until the 30th of November to apply for a grant. The fund will be available from April 2023 and will be invested into projects that will create rural job opportunities, such as farms looking to open a shop.

£20 million

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, is to invest more than £20m into the capital's network of markets. City Hall will be investing £20m from its Good Growth Fund and an additional £3m to support street markets, covered markets and wholesale markets. He has also appointed a group of 19 experts to help markets to flourish, and a new website which will make it easier for young people and new traders to access pitches on markets right across London by streamlining the license application process.

80%

According to a survey of 1,000 people around the UK, 80% are worried about their spending over the festive season and a further 60% said they will be spending less this Christmas compared to last year. With consumers turning to budget supermarkets in order to spend less, independent retailers have been advised to strive to maintain high customer service levels and create value propositions.

1.9%

The Office for National Statistics has revealed that the volume of trade done by specialist food shops such as butchers and bakers was 1.9% lower in August than in July this year – a greater drop than the 0.9% fall seen by supermarkets. Overall food store sales volumes were 1.4% lower in 2022 than in February 2020, indicating that they are still below pre-Covid levels.

NEWS IN BRIEF

FOOD AND DRINK INDUSTRY DEMANDS ADVANCE WARNING OVER BLACKOUTS

The National Grid has warned that blackouts could take place between 4-7pm during exceptionally cold days in January and February if gas imports are reduced. But members of the food and drink industry have insisted that advanced warning must be given in the event of blackouts over the winter to safeguard the provision of food and drink.

FINE FOOD BRANDS COMPETE FOR ROYAL WARRANTS

Producers of fine food products such as Wilkin & Sons and Paxton & Whitfield are set to face an official review to decide if their royal warrants will be retained or removed. The appointment of His Majesty has provided an opportunity for sustainable and ethical brands to be granted a warrant, as King Charles values these credentials highly.

POSSIBLE SHORTAGES OF TURKEYS THIS CHRISTMAS

Industry chiefs and farmers have warned there could be 50% fewer turkeys available this Christmas as the sector battles the largest-ever outbreak of Avian Influenza among captive birds across the country. Over 300,000 turkeys have already been lost, with predictions that the number hit could 'easily double'. This is coupled with issues such as high feed costs, resulting in fewer turkeys placed in the UK for the Christmas market to begin with.



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"The run in has begun..."



STEFANO CUOMO
MACKNADE

I have touched on looking for leaders amongst our political elite before... feels a bit like looking for a four-leaf clover amongst verdant cattle pastures – you have faith there must be one, you've just got trudge through all the... well... cow dung.

Anyhow, the political distraction continues, and meanwhile in our own little SME world we are making momentous decision one after another, day by day, as we navigate the waters ahead of us.

Sharing the weight of these months with peers continues to be critical, in not only spreading the burden, understanding that we are not alone, but for finding novel ways forward, borrowing dynamic plans and exchanging what has worked and what has not... building our memory banks and setting blueprints for the future.

A real positive of these economic times that we are going through is that it is shared across sectors – well that is not exactly the positive, rather that it has brought me closer to other industries, whether production and manufacturing, or civil services and education – all of us sharing thoughts, bonding and building stronger more diverse business networks than I have had before.

Now onto September, October, November and...! The change of season is now done and in spite of choices we have had to make, the cool winds are blowing and the suggestion of the scent of cloves and cinnamon is in the air!

The shop is starting to fill, the mechanics of family festivities are on the shelves, and a reminder of how our sector does it best!

Celebrating all that is good about humanity, through the 'breaking of bread' around the communal table, family feasting and festivities, whether the simple scent of a Christmas satsuma or the rich, dense stench of a cheeseboard left out for hours!

It is something we have to address – this dependence on the seasonal flows of our sector – but at the same time the quietness of September feels like a forgotten normality. Covid skewed it all but before, this was the truth... holidays sucked our cash, and the 'back to school season' meant new flows were being set, resulting on tightening of the purse strings... with October the run in then began.

We will have to watch it this year – but I do believe that family and friends will want to be together around food, and not only food... but great food!

Soul nourishing food that reinvigorates us through these long, dark days and it will be the delicatessen, the food markets and farm shops, cheese rooms and craft grocers that will be there to share it all!

I am concerned as to whether the spend will translate to the normal 'packaged treats' and we will have to watch the sales flows and pricing impacts, taking a view on margin loss to make sure we nail the 24th. It will be incessant and not letting the view drop will be critical, but I believe the big emotive and experiential departments of green grocery, delicatessen, meat, wine and drinks will thrive – we must just continue to remind our communities how good our produce is both in flavour and narrative, how it represents who we are and where we are from, how purchases made through us flow back down through our whole community, making sure every local spend nourishes the people around it.

I know our whole supply chain will work closely together – gone are the days where each step looked to load the next with the risk. Wholesaler and retailer must work hand in hand to manage stock and sales, so all benefit and the risk is reduced.

Producers too – staying in constant contact with the channels that will engage all our customers and deliver the sales we all need – a strategy of togetherness has never been more important.

I have grown up with many of our suppliers, understanding how every part of the route, from field to plate, pulses has always been critical. We each have our role to play, to not only tell the story but make sure each and everyone of us gets the value required.

Great food and drink will always be the vessel that brings us, every one of us, together, and never more so than this Christmas!

> "Great food and drink will always be the vessel that brings us, every one of us, together, and never more so than this Christmas!"

Shoppers are buying less veg in the cost-of-living crisis

With budgets stretched in the current financial crisis, consumers are ditching vegetables in favour of cheaper, more calorie-dense foods – how can fine food retail help?



According to new research, vegetable sales are down by nine percent compared to last year. This matches a new survey by YouGov, in which 26% of participants said they had bought fewer fresh vegetables due to financial pressures.

VEGETABLES: AN UNAFFORDABLE LUXURY?

According to Rob Percival, head of food and health policy at the Soil Association, "When budgets are squeezed, some families opt for foods they believe to be energy-dense or filling, reducing their purchase of fresh vegetables."

Rebecca Tobi, senior business and investor engagement manager at the Food Foundation, agreed, as she added, "Calorie for calorie, vegetables cost more than less healthy foods, which means that for many families looking for cheap and filling ways to feed themselves and their families, veg can be seen as an unaffordable luxury.

"Vegetables can also sometimes be seen as a riskier purchase – why spend a lot on veg if there's a chance your children won't eat it and it'll end up in the bin? We need to change both how affordable veg are in relation to other foods, and how appealing they are to make sure we don't see the UK's low levels of veg consumption drop yet further."

HOW CAN INDIES HELP?

While government help would provide some much-needed relief, indies can use their access to local, seasonal and healthy produce to help.

> "Use your voices to campaign for better access to food for everyone"

Speaking to *Speciality Food*, Lucy suggested, "Use your voices to campaign for better access to food for everyone. Adopt a local school or community organisation and provide fresh food at cost to enable savings to be passed on to households that might be struggling. Have a wonky veg box a bit cheaper.

"Publicise and champion seasonal and locally grown produce with recipes and information on how to cook certain things. Allow shoppers to buy in smaller quantities or conversely in larger e.g., a full tray of tomatoes or a sack of potatoes for economies of scale."

Environment department could ban solar power projects from most farmland

Former environment secretary, Ranil Jayawardena, asked his officials to redefine 'best and most versatile' land (BMV), which is earmarked for farming, in a bit to halt solar panels being placed on agricultural land. He argued that it impeded the growth of food production. At the time of going to print it is unknown if Therese Coffey, who has since taken on the role under new PM Rishi Sunak, will continue with the plan.



Currently, most solar farms are built on and planned for 3b land, so this move would scupper most new developments of the renewable energy source.

In fact, his plans to extend BMV to grade 3b would ban solar from about 41% of the land area of England, or about 58% of agricultural land. This leaves higher-grade land that is unsuitable for solar farming.

While the new environment secretary's ambition of boosting food production is a positive one, this could impact independent retailers championing sustainably grown produce.

Commenting on the environment secretary's plans, Dustin Benton, policy director at the thinktank Green Alliance, said, "It would be odd to redefine 'best and most versatile' agricultural land to include soils that aren't of high quality, just to block solar farms.

"The UK desperately needs to expand renewables so we don't have to pay the extortionate cost of gas. Solar is one of the fastest energy sources to be deployed, so we should move quickly to build more in light of the gas crisis."

But speaking to *Speciality Food*, Tom Bradshaw, deputy president of the National Farmers Union, explained, "Renewable energy production is a core part of the NFU's net zero plan and solar projects often offer a good diversification option for farmers.

"However, there is a need to strike a balance between food security and climate ambitions. It is important that large-scale solar farm development is located on lower-quality agricultural land, avoiding the most productive and versatile soils.

"Utilising roofs and farm buildings for solar should also be incentivised as it delivers a sustainable method of energy production while avoiding any land use conflict."



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How a weak pound is affecting speciality food importers

With the exchange rate of the GBP precariously low, we examine the impact on fine food retailers reliant on foreign imports

After the previous chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng announced his 'mini-budget' in September, involving sweeping tax cuts which would be paid for by higher government borrowing, international investors panicked and the pound dropped.

Despite a U-turn on the proposed plans and a new chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, along with Liz Truss' resignation and Rishi Sunak's appointment, which restored some confidence in the pound, the exchange rate is still significantly lower compared to where it was at the beginning of 2022.

This has created uncertainty for UK businesses that import and export goods

THE EFFECT ON INDIES

Because food is mostly bought in sterling, US dollars or euros, a weak pound affects UK food prices "directly", according to Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City, University of London. For indies who import speciality food from the EU and the USA, this means increased costs across the board.

Adrian Beale, co-owner of Buckey and Beale, told *Speciality Food*, "As importers, the exchange rate is a key part of our business and something we look at on a daily basis. Most of what we purchase is paid in dollars, so we rely on a stable pound to keep wholesale prices stable for our customers.

For Jen Grimstone-Jones, owner of Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop, "The fall of the pound against the euro will make our Continental cheeses more expensive. We are fortunate in that most of our suppliers have to give us two to three weeks' notice of any price changes so the immediate fallout will be tempered slightly.

"But there will probably also be a knock-on effect on our British cheeses as any cheesemakers that export cheese may take more orders from outside of the UK, this could mean that their cheeses are harder to come by, thus driving the price up.

"However, I think we will be protected from this in that we tend to buy directly from small, artisan producers who don't necessarily sell many of their products overseas. It is going to be a bit of a waiting game to see what happens."

Patricia Michelson, owner of La Fromagerie, added, "For my business, the interest rates have meant that the exchange rates are more volatile than ever. We are battening down the hatches and consolidating. We are buying carefully and negotiating where we can.

"But the costs of bringing in products since Brexit has put a huge cost onto the selling price as paperwork and transport alone mean tens of thousands of pounds being spent in order to comply with the new laws. Importing is indeed a problem and won't go away or get easier to manage for the foreseeable future."

A FINANCIAL SOLUTION

With small businesses already concerned about rising costs and increased energy bills over the winter period, the government needs to act quickly to rectify the financial situation.

For Adrian, "Raising interest rates traditionally increases the value of sterling as it increases the returns for those holding it, so that will help, however, this also increases the cost of borrowing – which many businesses need to do to stay afloat.

"Overall, the government needs to reassure the financial markets that they have public spending under control, that they can balance the books, and that sterling can be as much of a safe haven as the dollar.

"That won't be happening overnight though."

Britain's fruit and vegetable crops at risk

2022's record-hot summer has left British reservoirs depleted and at risk of not replenishing in time for next year's crops.

Farmers have warned they will not be able to grow crops next year if predictions that the drought will last until next summer prove accurate.

This could spell disaster for the agriculture sector, which has already faced reduced yields for crops including potatoes and barley and struggled to harvest vegetables over the summer due to a lack of seasonal workers. The knock-on effect for food retailers would be further shortages and thus a drop in sales.

Consistent above-average rainfall is needed throughout the autumn and winter to bring England out of drought, and this is not looking likely from advanced weather predictions.

Leaked slides from a national drought group meeting, seen by the Observer, show there are concerns that because reservoirs are still empty due to record dry conditions, the fruit and vegetable supply chain could collapse.

They read, "If reservoirs cannot be filled during winter 2022/23, which it is felt could be a possibility, this would have serious implications for businesses, the supply chains and those employed within them.

"Confidence is needed by the sector to have access to water to enable cropping plans to be enacted. Where confidence is not available, cropping rotations are being reviewed and reductions in areas of irrigated crops/water-hungry crops are being undertaken."

Organic food is on trend in 2022, so how can indies sell more of it?

As organic food grows in popularity, we explore how fine food retailers can sell more nature-friendly produce

2022 was another successful year for the Organic September campaign. But now that it's over, how can indies continue to push organic and generate more sales?

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

But successfully selling organic produce comes down to the art of educating your customers in a non-patronising way that also resonates with people.

Maddie explained, "I think the best way to do this is by keeping it simple. Organic has many benefits for consumers – be it ingredient provenance, freshness, taste, sustainability etc.

"Whilst there is a general perception amongst consumers that organic food is better, we believe it is our job as producers and retailers to add tangibility to this statement and provide the relevant information in an easily digestible way.

"Stats about the impact of organic – for example, the fact that insect and bird life is 50% more abundant on organic farms really helps consumers understand how their purchasing decisions relate to a real-life issue that they care about. By working to understand exactly what their customers care about, retailers can add value and relevance to the benefits of organic."

Mitch added, "We like to tailor our content in order to ensure we aren't just waffling at our customers with regard to why they should be buying organic products. Although this information is important, we believe it should always be paired with something light-hearted. Thus, we like to suggest recipes from our recipe hub, point to community events and collaborate with suppliers in order to create content that is both educational and entertaining."

For Roger, the simple answer is increasing the visibility of organic products in-store and raising awareness of organic's values to help build customer interest. He told Speciality Food, "It is also important to keep supporting organic's loyal following and to reiterate that organic food, with its roots going back to the middle of last century, is food you can trust because it is underpinned by legally binding standards.

"It is critical in the face of the current environmental challenges that we bring greater clarity to people about the choices they make and how they can affect positive change through the food products they buy."

SELLING MORE ORGANIC

But explaining to customers the benefits of organic fruits and vegetables is the easy bit, the hard part is turning this into sales.

According to Maddie, "We believe that retailers must cater their ranges to consumer demand, and look at how the products they stock can solve a particular problem their customers face. Since the pandemic, more and more of us are prioritising our health and looking for products that can deliver high-quality ingredients and reductions in salt, sugar and fat.

"There is also a shift away from big brands, with consumers gravitating to challenger brands that have much more of a focus on sustainability, ethics, and innovation. By understanding these needs, retailers can ensure they are stocking a good range of products that perfectly match their target consumer."

Mitch recommends using the community built by independent retail to your advantage. "It comes down to strengthening our ties in the local community. We've steadily built a loyal customer base by combining bespoke, personal service and quality organic produce.

"By striving for a supreme customer experience, word of mouth has worked in our favour. Along with friendly reminders of the health, taste, and environmental benefits of organic, we believe this is why our independent outlets are thriving."



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MEET THE PRODUCER

Drynks Unlimited's Richard Clark and Alex Kennedy are on a mission to get the British public to rethink drynking

The world of no and low drinks is an ever-growing one, with big brands jumping on board every day. But for trailblazers like Drynks Unlimited, alcohol-free drinks aren't just an opportunity to cash in on the latest trend, but the heart and soul of the business. Smashed, its range of alcohol-free beers and ciders, aren't just an addition to an alcoholic product, but are all carefully brewed and de-alcoholised using an innovative cool vacuum distillation machine. Put simply, it literally 'smashes the alcohol out' of its lager, pale ale, and shandy, as well as its apple and berry ciders. Founder Richard Clark has already chalked up huge success, winning investment from *Dragon's Den* then going on to be stocked in retailers across the UK and internationally.


RICHARD CLARK

72% of consumers drink alcohol-free year-round

But for Clark, there is still more to do. He's keen to remind us all that alcohol-free drinks shouldn't be part of a trend, or a 'one-off', but something that fits with his own company's slogan– rethinking drinking. "Drinking alcohol-free products doesn't have to be seen as a negative choice, or something you just do for 'Dry January' or 'Sober October'," he said. "It's an all-year-round option. It's also not just about alcohol-free beer or lager – it's a cider, a glass of wine, or cocktails." For Clark, the figures back the idea that his zero percent drinks can be consumed any time, anywhere.

That means not only drinking alcohol-free drinks on certain specific occasions – or all the time – but when it suits. He cites statistics from VYPR's study of 2,000 independent consumers that shows that while, yes, lots of us look to reduce our drinking at set times such as January, there's an overall desire by 'ABV curious' consumers to explore the alcohol-free options out there, with nearly three quarters of


L-R: RICHARD CLARK AND ALEX KENNEDY

consumers (72%) drinking alcohol-free drinks all year round. That freedom and flexibility also means not having to choose being alcohol-free permanently, he says, citing the fact that 79% of consumers who drink alcohol free also drink alcohol at least once a month.

When it comes to the 'anywhere' part, Clark's keen to remind us that the zero ABV option is about more than pubs or supermarkets, but has the bonus of being available in places where alcohol just isn't an option. "It's in coffee shops, hotels and leisure and travel hubs and gyms." And while once seen as unusual, not opting for alcohol is as much of a social occasion as drinking can be, he says. "You don't necessarily have to drink alcohol-free products on your own – it's a group social choice. It's not just about the person who's pregnant, or the designated driver - everyone can join in, whether you're at a meal or on a night out, or just getting together."

28% enjoy the taste of 0% ABV – and it's on the up

The flexibility and freedom offered by alcohol-free options like Smashed are great, but their appeal also has to come down to taste - something he thinks they've nailed. Drynks Unlimited believed in creating 'real drinks' like alcoholic ciders and beers, before then de-alcoholising them, gently removing the alcohol with its unique Cool Vacuum Distillation process to turn them into zero percent products that still taste great. According to VYPR stats, 28% of consumers enjoy the taste of alcohol-free drinks, but Clark is always on a mission to see that increase. For him, it's not about producing a second-rate alternative, but the real deal. "A 0% beer or cider that smells of alcohol, has a proper head, and tastes great. That's something that's key to us, but it would be great to see the sector as a whole pushing for that kind of experience when it comes to alcohol-free drinks," he says.

78% want more choice of alcohol-free options

It might sound counter-intuitive to be encouraging competitors, but for Clark it's important that consumers have choice when it comes to alcohol-free drinks. "We have the only real 0% British cider that's actually been fermented on the market, which is great." But in his view there's always room for improvement, with VYPR stats showing that 78% of consumers want more choice when it comes to their alcohol-free options, with 58% wanting better wines and 37% wanting more choice of alcohol-free ciders and ales. "We think what we're doing is great and really does stand out from the crowd, but it's great to see more and more people offering alcohol-free options, including the big brands. When they come into the category they help raise awareness and the more choice we offer to consumers, the more they'll see that no and low drinks can be drunk any time, anywhere, whether that's on the odd occasion or all year round."

Producers can also do their bit to support retailers, says Clark, not just by providing more choice, but by offering staff training and samples so they can help educate and inspire consumers. "At the end of the day, consumers need to believe in these products and in the fact they taste great, are flexible, and can be consumed wherever, whenever. We can help do that, and play a key part in helping people rethink the way they drink."



> "78% of consumers want more choice when it comes to alcohol-free options, 58% want better wines and 37% want more choice of alcohol-free ciders and beers"
>
> SOURCE: VYPR RESEARCH, OCTOBER 2022





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BRINGING THE SPANISH SPIRIT TO THE UK

When Speciality Food digital editor, Victoria Smith, visited the historical Puerto de Indias distillery, she discovered that there's much more to fruity gins than just their delicious flavour

As a result of its premiumisation in recent years, the popularity of gin has soared to unprecedented heights in the UK. In short, the gin boom is far from over.

The IWSR's data concerning global gin consumption stratified by price bands is particularly revealing. The CAGR (2013-2018) for gin sales in the ultra-premium segment was an astounding 50.1%. No other price point has shown such dramatic growth – sales of premium and super-premium gin rose by 14.7% and 25.2% respectively.

Strawberry has been voted as the UK's favourite gin flavour, with more than one in five consumers (21.9%) saying they'd pick it over any other flavour when shopping. It's particularly popular with the younger demographic, with over half (54.5%) of 18-24-year-olds rating it as their favourite flavour.

Clearly, the UK already has a flourishing market of pink and flavoured gins, from Gordon's Pink all the way to Malfy Rosa Pink Grapefruit. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find a retail or bar shelf without a fruity variety.

However, what the British gin market lacks is the addition of real strawberries in the distillation process and a taste of Spain. This is where Puerto de Indias steps in, as a pioneer in creating the world's first fruit gin distilled with real strawberries. It has brought with it a flavour revolution and a new way of drinking gin.

Breaking into the UK market

When Puerto de Indias created the first real strawberry gin in 2013, they shared their creation with friends and family, and the unique strawberry taste was spread entirely by word of mouth from Carmona to Seville and from Seville to the world. In fact, the brand's first active campaign wasn't until 2020, seven years after the initial launch.

These first campaigns, along with current branding, continue to focus on its target market: women. "Our strawberry gin was designed for the female consumer and we always think of the female as our main driver, so our campaigns and products appeal directly to them", explains Juan Miguel Perez, international director at Puerto de Indias. "We even did a special edition to highlight women's rights which featured 11% less gin to represent the gender pay gap in Spain, which is 11% less than men."

Puerto de Indias quickly became the number two strawberry gin in the world, but its presence in the UK is still growing. Juan explains, "The market is mainly made up of British gins, but Puerto de Indias is among the top five imported flavoured gins in the UK.

"For us, the UK market is so important because it is the biggest market in the world and there are so many British people coming to Spain on holiday, looking for the Spanish experience and eager to try different products than ones available in their own country. Once they try the product, they can take that experience back to the UK and continue to enjoy the Spanish spirit at home."

But what makes Puerto de Indias unique in the UK market? "It's made using real strawberries, and not many brands can claim that", says Juan. "When you drink spirits it's more than just the flavour itself, it's what it represents – what is your affinity with the products? What colours, flavours, and smells do you relate to?"

Of course, its unique premium quality and rich history the gin encapsulates makes it ideal for the British fine food and drink market. As Craig Chapman, a spokesperson for Puerto de Indias tells *Speciality Food*, "One of the elements that make Puerto de Indias gins so interesting is the use of natural ingredients. The natural strawberries used in our flagship strawberry gin creates a flavour profile that sets us apart from other brands.

"By only using the very best, natural ingredients we are a great fit for fine food and drink retailers, where shoppers are looking for only the very best. Add to the mix our striking new bottle design and you have a recipe for success."

> "Puerto de Indias, the number two worldwide strawberry gin, is also among the top five imported flavoured gins in the UK"

@specialityfood

A beautiful mistake

I joined a group of gin enthusiasts and journalists to discover the history of strawberry gin, and experience the breathtaking Spanish area that inspired it.

Situated 33km east of the magnificent city of Seville, Carmona, the home of Puerto de Indias, is a small picturesque town set 250 metres above sea level overlooking the central plain of Andalusia. We began our tour in a small open-air train that traversed the quaint cobbled streets of this stunning Moorish town, passing the historical sights of Alcázar de la Puerta de Sevilla, Plaza de San Fernando and the Gate to Cordoba.













> We hope to continue on our journey of revolutionising the way gin is produced and keep delivering on the excellent taste we are known for

> One of the elements that make Puerto de Indias gins so interesting is the use of natural ingredients. The natural strawberries used in our flagship strawberry gin create a flavour profile that sets us apart from other brands

Accompanied by members of the Puerto de Indias team, we then explored the distillery and museum to discover the history of both Seville and its famous strawberry gin. Hidden behind the distillery gates is a haven of white stone walls with vibrant pink painted features, thriving plants and trickling waterfalls. The distillery is nurtured by an underground water spring from Roman times and the stunning effect evokes the vibrance of strawberries and a real passion for the brand.

Interestingly, the creation of Puerto de Indias' strawberry gin in 2013 was in fact, an accident. After a failed attempt at macerating fresh strawberries in alcohol, the founders decided to try adding strawberries to the gin they were already distilling in the copper stills, and this so-called 'beautiful mistake' started a revolution in the gin industry, breaking all standards of traditional gin for 400 years.

We learned about the dedication and care put into the artisan production as we were taken down to see the copper stills, which date back to 1880 and are still used to distil Puerto de Indias today. As our hosts explained, the fresh Andalusian strawberries, picked from less than an hour away from the distillery, are macerated for 24 hours, before being added to the distilling gin. The process also uses sustainable wood from local olive trees, chosen for their quality and desirable burning temperature.

Because Puerto de Indias was created in an area of Spain with so much history, the shape of the bottle was designed to commemorate one of Seville's most important monuments.

As we toured the city on a horse-drawn carriage, we were taken back to the 16th century, when Seville was surrounded by walls, and Christopher Columbus was discovering the Americas.

Over 500 years ago, Seville was the most important port in the world, and all goods from Columbus' discoveries were checked in at what is known as the Torre del Oro, the Golden Tower – a dodecagonal military watchtower. The bottle is uniquely shaped to match this iconic monument, featuring twelve sides and a silver emblem of both the tower and a ship to commemorate Columbus' journeys.

A taste of Spain

At the distillery, we were invited to participate in a tasting experience of both the strawberry and blackberry flavours, which instilled in me a newfound appreciation for gin. The table in front of us was a tempting spread of Spanish cheese, cured meat and chocolate along with fresh berries, juniper and samples of each gin.

First, we crushed juniper berries between our fingers to release the aroma of the gin, and gently inhaled the fresh, aromatic scent. In order to try the strawberry flavour, we took a bite of a fresh strawberry, while swirling the pure strawberry gin. Finally, we took a sip. The strawberry gin was surprisingly smooth, with a real taste of fresh strawberry and a hint of vanilla. It had a light, summery flavour, ideal for inspiring memories of holidays in the Spanish sun. Once we had tried the gin with a strawberry, we were encouraged to pair it with a square of rich, dark chocolate. This combination was a match made in heaven, with the slightly bitter notes of the dark chocolate balancing out the sweetness of the strawberry.

This process was then repeated with the blackberry gin – releasing the juniper aromas, and swirling the gin to experience the scents. But this time, we were greeted with a truly autumnal feeling, with hints of cinnamon and spice. We bit into a fresh blackberry before sipping the gin and feeling a pleasant warmth that evoked the spirit of autumn. I'd never tried a blackberry gin quite like it before.

Our tasting expert then encouraged us to try an unusual pairing – blackberry gin with white chocolate. Unlike the strawberry gin with dark chocolate, this pairing wasn't a perfect match, but it did provide interesting flavours and demonstrated a contrast between the creamy chocolate and rich spices of the gin.

Beyond strawberry

The blackberry variety launched in the UK on the 19th of October, bringing this autumnal flavour just in time for the cosy season. According to Laura Noguera, Puerto de Indias' global consumer director, "After years of experience in this constantly evolving sector, we wanted to stay true to our innovative character and create this new flavour.

"With it, we hope to continue on our journey of revolutionising the way gin is produced and keep delivering on the excellent taste we are known for.

"We have already seen great success exporting our Puerto de Indias strawberry gin from our Sevillian distillery to the rest of the world, and we are hoping to repeat that same success and strengthen the Spanish spirit with our blackberry flavour."

Puerto de Indias isn't stopping there. Now that its Blackberry gin is available in the UK, the brand is experimenting with more fruity flavours, of course, using real fruit.

ginpuertodeindias.com/en/

UPSELLING OPPORTUNITIES

Try sampling Puerto de Indias with these delicious and unusual food pairings:

STRAWBERRY GIN

- Good pairing: Fresh strawberries, dark chocolate
- Unusual pairing: Jamón (Spanish ham)

BLACKBERRY GIN

- Good pairing: Fresh blackberries
- Unusual pairing: White chocolate

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PRODUCT NEWS

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Porridge-to-go from Bio&Me

Bio&Me have launched two of their popular high fibre porridge blends in a new sachet format – catering for the growing demand for convenience breakfast options.

The brand now offers Apple & Cinnamon, made with 13 of the recommended 30 diverse plant-based foods and prebiotic fibres, and Super Seedy & Nutty, made with 14 of the 30 weekly diverse plant-foods and prebiotic fibres, to help health-conscious consumers support their gut health.

As well as being high in fibre, both new products contain no added sugar and are suitable for vegetarians and vegans.

Dr Megan Rossi, creator of Bio&Me, said, "Good gut health starts with your gut microbiome. Your biome is central to the community of trillions of microbes, including good bacteria, that live within you. You can look after your biome by eating plenty of plant-based foods. Starting your day with a bowl of one of my gut-loving porridges is an excellent way to boost your plant-based intake in just one sitting!"



bioandme.co.uk

Odysea extends Mediterranean range



Odysea, purveyors of high quality Greek and Mediterranean foods, has launched 13 new products into their range.

The new launches: Piri Piri Gordal Olives, Double Stuffed Red Pepper & Almond Olives, Gherkin Stuffed Olives, Harissa Houmous, Aubergine Imam, Chickpeas in Tomato Sauce, Seafood Salad, Pitted Queen Nocellara Etna Olives and Big Gordal Olives, offer food lovers the authentic taste of the Mediterranean in a number of versatile formats.

Panayis Manuelides, founder of Odysea, said, "We've seen a rise in the popularity of Greek and Mediterranean food and find consumers are looking for authentic products made with high quality ingredients and clean labels.

"Meze-style eating taps into the growing trend for a more informal, relaxed way of eating and entertaining. Our ambient meze and olives are perfect to keep in the pantry till needed which helps cut down on food waste, plus they come in recyclable glass jars."

odysea.com

Three new dips from A Little Bit

A Little Bit, experts in providing food lovers with accessible, homemade-tasting food products, has launched three new dips.

The newly launched dips are Peamole, Spicy Salsa and Onion & Chive Dip, and are ideal for sharing, dipping or spreading.

As per the rest of the range, the new products are made using fresh herbs and the finest quality ingredients, and are 100% free of preservatives, colourings and additives. They are also gluten-free and suitable for those following a vegan diet.

Laura Bounds MBE, owner of A Little Bit, said, "The new dips are intended to elevate the A Little Bit Food's brand; introducing a new fresh tasting, approachable trio of products that further expands the range and encourages a new and exciting sharing experience that is guilt-free."

alittlebit.co.uk





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Naturelly launches healthy fruit gummies



Naturelly has launched a new real fruit juice confectionery product containing high levels of fibre and no added sugar or artificial sweeteners.

With each pack containing the recommended daily requirement of fibre and only 68 calories, the new release is ideal for consumers looking for guilt-free indulgence.

Plus, the low sugar mixed fruit gummies are suitable for vegans.

Dean Dempsey, founder of Naturelly, said, "We are totally thrilled to make available our Naturelly low sugar mixed fruit gummies that are high in fibre and all the benefits that come with that for you and your child's gut health and immunity. Not only are they so epic the nutritionals are all green, they are HFSS compliant, vegan friendly and contain no added sugar or artificial sweetener. Most likely, they are the healthiest sweets in the world."

naturelly.co.uk

The African Foodie celebrates North African Cuisine



A new brand championing North African cuisine has launched into the UK food scene. The African Foodie aims to boost the visibility of North African vegan cuisine across Britain, as well as working alongside a small number of artisanal producers and growers to create local jobs.

The business's Vegan Society-endorsed range includes Berber Harissa, Shakshuka, Omek Houria and Mashwiya.

Alsamani Khider, founder of The African Foodie, said, "From my studying days at English universities, I quickly realised that time-poor consumers were starting to look ever further afield to the Middle East, Northern Africa and South America for 'healthier World Cuisine' solutions (reduced sugar, low fat, best-in-class vegetables) that marry exotic spices with a growing appreciation for sound, plant-based thinking.

"In time, The African Foodie hopes to celebrate the finest food traditions from across the African Continent, however in the short-term the focus is very much Tunisia and Libya – vibrant hotbeds of artisanal, vegan-leaning fayre."

theafricanfoodie.co.uk

New Look for Rendles



Springvale Foods has launched a range of new-look premium savoury sharing snacks in a bit to grow independents' sales.

The new packaging features colourful and distinctive designs on card sleeves and includes the strapline, 'Rendles. For the love of food'.

Two new products have been released alongside the seven existing lines, and the line-up now includes Mini Cheese Twists, Mini Cheese Straws, Cheese Palmiers with Gouda and Edam, Cheese Palmiers with Honey & Mustard, Paprika Palmiers, Cheese Straws with Mediterranean Herbs, Cheese Crispies, Cheese Stars and Cheese Trees.

Darran Goody, managing director of Springvale Foods, said, "Our customers, the independent and speciality food retailers, are under immense pressure from the major supermarkets and we have invested in the Rendles brand to help them differentiate themselves from the supermarkets with a superb range of quality products exclusive to the independent sector."

loverendles.com

"Planet saving packaging"



LAWRENCE BARNETT
WONDERLAND DESIGN

The world of packaging recyclability and sustainability is *the* hot topic.

As brand packaging designers, pack material recyclability is yet another design consideration. And very often on front of pack alongside various other claims.

As consumers, we are bamboozled by all today's packaging recycling jargon. Recyclable, widely recyclable, recycle at large supermarkets only, less plastic, plastic free, biodegradable, compostable, home compostable, made from recycled materials. It's a message minefield where 'recyclable' is sometimes only theoretical.

Consumers are demanding more environmentally friendly packaging materials and some of the big retailers are beginning to stipulate recycling criteria for brands they are considering listing. With Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) due to be implemented within 18 months, this will place more onus on individual businesses for the packaging they use in the UK. Clearly, the stakes are high.

So, what can you do to navigate this? Here are some guiding principles:

1 Keep it simple. Try and stick to commonly understood materials, where possible. Paper, card, aluminium and glass. Plastics are perhaps the most confusing as to how recyclable they really are, whether it's a second life or ocean plastic or whether it's a plastic made from recycled plastic but isn't recyclable.

2 Less is more. Are there ways to reduce the amount of your packaging? Your design agency may have some ideas about this or your manufacturer may have other alternatives. New, innovative pack formats for your product's packaging can help you stand out in the category. Recently, we have worked with a packaging format that allows consumers to refill the pack.

3 Beware the smoke and mirrors. Don't take as read the headline from the manufacturer – for example, there are plastics made from plants that take just as long to break down as regular plastics! There are also compostable materials that only break down using particular industrial composting facilities. Talk to the manufacturer and understand the recycling practicalities.

4 Going bio. For bio-plastics, perhaps opt for home compostable rather than bio-degradable or industrially compostable. There is a TUV (a technical inspection certificate) verification that certifies how the material is degraded and how long it takes.

5 Take responsibility. Whatever packaging you use for the product, this is part of your brand and says a lot about your values. Be clear about your pack's recyclability and how it is to be disposed of.

Very often it is not possible for food and drink brands to use verified sustainable packaging materials that are fully recyclable. This may be for a variety of reasons. But don't fret. There could be a compromise. And, even if there isn't, there is a strong chance that the way your product is made, or its provenance, has its own sustainability benefit that is worth highlighting on pack.

For the longer term, it might be possible to work with your packaging manufacturing partner to explore bespoke ideas for your brand. This may sound expensive but there are smaller manufacturers out there that are flexible enough to help you find an innovative solution that could make your brand famous.

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FOOD GROWS ITS ROOTS IN RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism is where consumer interest, authentic experiences, health and wellness and an appreciation of our natural landscape meet — all influences shaping our industry into one that appreciates local, diverse and community-driven food, finds Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe



COMMENTATORS



UDI ALROY
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CHRIS WALSH
NFU MUTUAL

Tourism provides a considerable contribution to the rural economy. In its latest findings published in July 2022, the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs reports that gross value added (GVA) from tourism in predominantly rural areas was worth approximately £11.5 billion in 2018.

The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines rural tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/ culture, angling and sightseeing". It refers to these activities in non-urban, otherwise known as rural areas, which are characterised by a low population density, landscape and land use that is dominated by agriculture and forestry as well as a traditional social structure and lifestyle.

"The rise of rural tourism is linked with emerging widespread nature and deeper forms of access to the less humanised landscape," says Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco, assistant professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Gastronomic Sciences and honorary fellow of the Department of Anthropology of the Durham University.

Rural tourism is a direct product of the increased urbanisation that has taken place in recent decades and shaped our living environment, Filippo Fontefrancesco details. Widespread lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic restricted people's mobility, subsequently accelerating rural tourism and leading to its extensive appeal and uptake among consumers, retailers and restaurants. UK farmers and country business insurer, NFU Mutual, has seen tourism become an essential part of the rural economy.

The role of food

Food has a strong connection to rural tourism, with consumers actively seeking information, guidance, education and experiences that bring together activities that celebrate food and nature. "Current trends go in the direction of appreciating those products that better express green, ethical and historical identity," says Filippo Fontefrancesco.

There are two core strands to rural tourism and both of them lend themselves to the food industry and current consumer demands. Firstly, the increasingly popular branch of tourism is associated with fitness and sportive access to a non-urbanised environment. Secondly, rural tourism is linked to the search for authenticity, which is also about sourcing and finding local, typical food production. Food is at the heart of rural tourism's identity.

"Consumers look at rural production as safer and strongly linked with traditions, meanings and possibly tastier than other products available in town," Filippo Fontefrancesco adds.

FoodTech and Agritech startup CarobWay sees a flux of people and families participating in rural tourism. "The main idea is to learn where foods are coming from, get closer to mother earth, pick fruits and learn how to cultivate, how food origin is being grown, harvested and made," confirms Udi Alroy, CEO and co-founder of CarobWay.

NFU Mutual explains that its farmers produce an excellent range of speciality foods and rural tourism allows consumers to sample them via specialist retailers and restaurants. "We see rural tourism as a gateway which gives the public the opportunity to experience the UK's glorious rural landscape and heritage in close quarters," Chris Walsh, farm specialist at NFU Mutual, relays.

Debunking rural tourism myths

Rural tourism understanding has shifted in past decades. Approximately 50 years ago, socialist writer Raymond Williams pointed out the process of cultural creation. Social anthropologist Filippo Fontefrancesco explains that this is the idea that the countryside intertwines opposite understandings of the country, which is "seen as a place of backwardness and unique access to nature and inner fulfilment".

"The process continued and we are in a phase in which urbanites tend to identify rural communities as sort of paradisial realities, overlooking the daily struggles the communities face in terms of marginalisation, impoverishment and ageing," he continues.

"Plus, the reality of agriculture is often mythologised, making it appear a sort of bucolic existence, without appreciating the important interrogatives producers have to cope with every day in terms of technical and technological development, as well as economic sustainability."

Growing awareness surrounding the reality of agricultural life and food production helps rural tourism garner increased respect and a deep appreciation for the dedicated efforts required to provide local, authentic, nutritious and sustainable food amid the backdrop of rural tourism.

Appealing to consumer demands for fresh, authentic and healthy

Consumers want to go natural and fresh, getting as close to basic fresh foods and beverages as possible. "The main belief is that raw foods or fresh food is much healthier and, in most cases, fun and fascinating," says Alroy.

Through its discussions with farmers, NFU Mutual finds that many people love the opportunity to stay in the heart of the countryside, where they can relax and explore as well as meet farmers who produce their food and share experiences and stories about their lives.

Rural tourism creates a unique opportunity for consumers, farmers, retailers and restaurants alike as, by its very nature, the concept brings together community, health and wellness and looking after the planet.

Factors propelling rural tourism

"Most tourists today are looking for new adventures while cuisine and culinary become one of the main themes when we travel globally," says Alroy.

We seek local foods, local cuisine, exotic ingredients and most importantly, tourists are looking to be part of the creation of foods. As a result, we see more culinary tours, self-picking, cooking and farm vacations to give consumers a genuine rural tourism experience.

"Travellers are looking to enjoy the outdoors, going back to the sources

> "Consumers look at rural production as safer and strongly linked with traditions, meanings and possibly tastier than other products available in town"





of foods and beverages, especially as those are always representing culture, flavorism and open for new things," Alroy shares.

From the UK perspective, recent obstacles with international travel have highlighted the rural tourism opportunities closer to home. "Global tourism is facing many challenges, from international tensions, long queues at airports, fast-rising prices and overcrowding at resort locations," says Walsh. All these factors make the great value for money and easy access to a country retreat in the UK more attractive, Walsh states.

However, there are similarities between British and global rural tourism, as both are "linked with the search for an alternative experience of the environment, the recovery of the sense of roots and traditions, as well as the attempt of finding a safer and healthier environment compared with the one of a city", Filippo Fontefrancesco details.

> "Rural tourism creates a unique opportunity for consumers, farmers, retailers and restaurants alike as, by its very nature, the concept brings together community, health and wellness and looking after the planet"

Ingredients, finished products, local food groups and retailers

Rural tourism comprises a rich interlinked network of passionate players keen to convey the benefits and beauty of rural tourism. Subsequently, local food groups and retailers that focus their selected stocked finished products on promoting locally sourced produce, hero ingredients and authentic provenance stories lead.

The growing food movement is having a significant impact on manufacturers' ingredient selections and finished formulations. Origin, provenance and sustainability are important to today's shoppers. "Consumers today would like to hear the story behind the ingredients and the food we eat, as well as climate change and environmental issues that impact our food," says Alroy.

"Rural tourism changes the way we eat and observe foods," Alroy emphasises. Today's consumers want to know where our food's ingredients have come from, how the farmers grow and cultivate the crops, what traditional and advanced methods they use and if they impact the planet. In addition, buyers want to hear stories about heroes and small businesses like bakeries, brewers and farms that make a difference.

With an increasing amount of on-the-pack information available at consumers' fingertips, choosing natural, fresh and those perceived as healthier foods are clear demands. "We do not want to compromise on synthetic ingredients in our food," Alroy notes.

"The chance to sample excellent local produce is one of the great draws of rural tourism," says Walsh. The retailer's role is to allow consumers to explore and enjoy product origin, fresh foods and specific ingredients such as exotics spices and herbs, Alroy details. "We see more and more retailers looking to incorporate innovative and new products that consumers can relate and contribute to," Alroy notes.

"Shops which showcase the best of local produce are a real asset and local food groups also help visitors access the best food in the area they are visiting," Walsh relays.

The future of rural tourism

"Overall, rural tourism is here to stay and grow," says Filippo Fontefrancesco. However, the velocity of its growth is strongly affected by the overall economic instability we are living in at the moment, he adds.

In this respect, while rural tourism is a sector that welcomes investment to promote forms of slow and sustainable tourism, on the other hand, the "actual possibility of seeing the sector blooming next year is deeply jeopardised," Filippo Fontefrancesco warns. That said, in a similar vein to events in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic, considering the different sectors of the tourism industry, rural tourism may be the one "less touched by the uncertainty".

Working with rural businesses, NFU Mutual states it sees a great future for 2023 with an increasing range of accommodation, food and attractions on offer to suit all budgets and visitor tastes. "We see tourism playing an increasingly important part in the rural economy, helping support farms as they move towards a greener, more sustainable future and providing jobs for isolated communities," says Walsh.

Rural tourism does not only provide a beneficial vacation, but it is also an educated and wonderful experience that can be shared with family and friends. "I believe more and more people will take part in local tourism due to the fact that it is something completely different," says Alroy. It encourages consumers to try, engage, explore and feel connected to the people who grow and nourish our food and the planet. After all, celebrating outdoor tourism with lots of activities is hands-on, and most importantly, Alroy shares, promotes many new lessons in life, diet and experience.

"I predict that more people will open their house and their kitchen to tourists and this experience will connect us better to the hosts and maybe even move people to live in the countryside, grow crops, cook and enjoy the active life in a different way than going to the gym and drinking sports drinks," highlights Alroy.

"Providing what today's tourists desire is crucial to the success of rural tourism, and food groups are doing a great job providing access to the best local food our farmers produce," concludes Walsh.







COMMENTATORS



KRISI SMITH
BIRD & BLEND



THOMAS DEGARNHAM
FIREHEART COFFEE



LINDA BARRIE
CHOC AFFAIR



HALIMA MARKEY
SKOULIKAS BEDFORD



URVASHI AGARWAL
JP'S ORIGINALS



CRAIG HARRIES
FLAVOUR HEAD



LOUISE ALLEN
WHOLE FOODS MARKET



ADRIAN BEALE
BUCKLEY & BEALE



FULL **STEAM** AHEAD

The hot drinks sector is awash with innovation; these are the buzzwords to cash in on during the colder months and beyond

Sustainability

We all recognise the growing importance of living and working in a more environmentally-friendly manner, but how is the British hot drinks sector sizing up to the challenge? For Krisi Smith, co-founder of Bird & Blend, being eco-conscious is an integral part of what the business is and does. "Obviously we are tea experts and we have built a community around that but our mission statement isn't actually anything about tea! It is to build a successful company that bases its decisions on people and planet, not just profit," she says.

Sustainability is of optimum importance at Fireheart Coffee, too, as environmental factors can have – as is already being proven – a dramatic impact on the coffee category. Thomas DeGarnham, co-founder, explains, "Coffee itself is very susceptible to climate change and we're already seeing producers making changes at the farm level to combat warming temperatures." Indeed, he says, "making sustainable business decisions is crucial for the future of coffee."

At Choc Affair, a family-run chocolate manufacturer which supplies a range of hot chocolate flakes, "Every bean is responsibly and sustainably produced, with a little extra paid for every kilo to help reforest the cocoa-growing regions of Colombia," begins Linda Barrie, founder. "It's also why we never use cheap shortcuts like palm oil, and support the small farms and cooperatives we work with and the local community that surrounds them, as well as within our local community, York."

"Sustainability has been hugely important for us since brand inception," begins Urvashi Agarwal, founder of B Corp-certified tea business JP's Originals, which has made a concerted effort to reduce the sometimes hidden eco impact of tea products. "The majority of traditional tea bags/pyramids have microplastics (yes, even the ones which look like paper!) and so we were keen to ensure all of our packaging was entirely plastic-free. Our envelopes, boxes and even labels are completely recyclable, with our pyramids being compostable too!"

"It's easy for brands to compete on products and pricing but not many can offer transparency on sustainability goals," she continues. "This year alone has brought to light the limitations and cost implications of transport costs from a commercial perspective but also an increase in interest from consumers on becoming more conscious of their own carbon footprint. We conducted a survey amongst a random group of 30 people, with 72% claiming that they would be more inclined to spend more on a FMCG so long as the product was produced locally and plastic-free."

Health

Brits consume around 100 million cups of tea every day, according to the UK Tea & Infusions Association – which offers an impressively wide scope for different tastes and health needs, a consideration with growing importance following the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. With JP's Originals customers alone being "tea fantatics, caffeine-free drinkers and wellbeing-focused clients", the tea industry's cup runneth over with innovative new ways to quench the UK shopper's thirst for a quality cuppa with health credentials.

Halima Markey, business development manager at Skoulikas Bedford, explains, "Amidst a global health crisis, many consumers want more control over their wellbeing. Growth in demand for herbal tea and the additional healthy ingredients in teas are some of the factors that are driving the growth. As well as the addition of new flavours and assortment of tea is predicted to provide growth opportunities for the tea market, Celestial Seasonings/Teas" – both supplied by Skoulikas Bedford – "offer this."

Initially JP's Originals key focus was just speciality teas with an emphasis on provenance to bring about the same passion for teas as that of coffee, wine and even chocolate. However, Urvashi says, "During the inception of the brand, I suffered an unexpected illness, which was later diagnosed as an auto-immune condition called ITP, and discovered the virtues of CBD. I then decided to evolve the brand to include wellbeing blends to give us the balance we need. We now have teas and infusions for pain, inflammation, digestion, detox, hormonal imbalance and sleep! CBD combined with powerful natural ingredients has shown to have even greater benefits than when taken alone."

> "Making sustainable business decisions is crucial for the future of coffee"

Indulgence

Arguably, few hot drinks offer the same level of indulgence as hot chocolate – and the good news for chocolate lovers is that good levels of growth are predicted for the next few years, and speciality hot chocolate houses are expected to increase in numbers, according to Linda. "It's an exciting time for hot



chocolate, as more consumers are looking for the next niche product and trend. We've had it with coffee for years, gin more recently, and now it's time for hot chocolate."

Speciality Food readers will be well aware of the importance of tangible quality of food and drink products. "Quality and indulgence are incredibly important in today's market," agrees Linda. "As consumers we've moved away from powdered drinks and are desiring a real, authentic, good quality experience that allows us to feel indulgent, and worth taking a moment for, and as time is so precious, if you are going to have a hot chocolate, it should be a delicious hot chocolate."

Could 2022 be the start of the hot chocolate revolution? Halima says so: "We believe from recent feedback, customers are bored with coffee and want something new, and something interesting. I've read Britons are following the same path with hot chocolate that they have trodden with coffee, according to food analysts, who point to the rapid shift from drinking instant coffee to owning coffee machines and taking out high-end bean subscriptions."

Flavour

The scale of potential innovation within hot drinks is vast, and Bird & Blend have been delighted to explore the outer reaches of its potential – much to the delight of adventure-seeking tea lovers. "We're blend specialists," explains Krisi, "creating all of our own recipes of tea that range from award winning classics like our Earl Grey Creme and Gingerbread Chai to the weird and wonderful like Rhubarb & Custard and Monkey Chops. Innovation is one of our biggest drivers and our unique blends such as Dark Choc Chilli Sticky Chai, Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster and Jelly & Ice Cream (to name only a few) continue to delight our customers and place Bird & Blend in a leading position in tea innovation in the UK and across the globe."

Bath-based tea producer Flavour Head is also on a mission to "turn tea on its head, to transform what we see as an undervalued category," explains managing director Craig Harries. "We've got fresh ideas, colourful design and a commitment to creating blends of tea that really deliver on flavour.

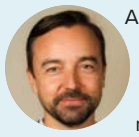
"Blended more like cocktails than conventional fruit and herbal teas, each infusion has up to a dozen ingredients making up its multi-layered flavour, all 100% natural and responsibly sourced before being hand blended in small batches."



> "There is no doubt that the British hot drinks sector offers a whole host of opportunities for retail right now, and the speciality sector is right at the centre of its most exciting innovations"

A WINTER CLASSIC

Mulled drinks are a standout icon of the colder seasons, but all were not created equal. Adrian Beale, co-founder of Buckley & Beale, introduces Aspen: the mulled spice specialist shaking up the category



A lot of people think that Aspen Mulling Spices is relatively new, or that the name is made up, but it actually dates back to 1970, and really does originate from Aspen, Colorado – where it is still produced to this day. It was started by Kiefer Mendenhall and his wife, Mary, who, after packing up sticks from Indiana, purchased a little gift shop in the Colorado mountains called Wax & Wicks. They would often serve hot mulled cider in the shop for customers, and after being repeatedly asked the recipe, they finally packaged the spices into milk cartons for sale in the shop.

The range now mainly consists of four best-selling flavours: Original – which combines all the classic flavours of Mulled Wine such as clove, nutmeg, and cinnamon; Caramel Apple -- which is amazing in cider or apple juice, Cinnamon Orange – which is delicious in cranberry juice; and a sugar-free version of the Original made with Stevia. Tradition has played a huge part in Aspen's success over the years, with mulled wine being a fixture at Christmas markets across the UK and Europe for centuries. The smell is one you recognise instantly, and conjures up images of snow-covered cabins, roaring log fires, and chestnuts roasting.

Skoulikas Bedford
Continental Fine Foods

NEW

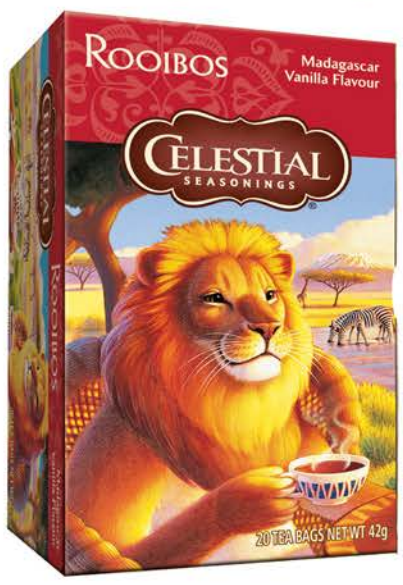
CELESTIAL SEASONINGS

NEW

'All-natural tea products that nourish your body and feed your mind and spirit.'



✓ An exhilarating blend of rich black tea and roasted maté



✓ A naturally caffeine-free tea from the warm climes of South Africa



✓ Decaf green tea, lively lemon and fragrant jasmine infused with our time-honoured sleepytime

Distributed by Skoulikas Bedford Ltd, Bedford, MK42 0SP, UK. info@skoulikasbedford.com

STOCK CHECK 2022 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



BLUE GOOSE ECO COFFEE PODS

Grown as a 'garden coffee' in smallholder plots in the world-renowned coffee region of Yirgacheffe, enjoy floral, sweet, bright flavours and aromas.

bluegoose.coffee



CHINA BANKA NATURAL ROASTED COFFEE

This roasted coffee delivers milk chocolate sweetness, a full rounded body with hints of soft red fruits including strawberry, and subtle floral notes including jasmine.

farrerscoffee.co.uk



FLAVOUR HEAD CITRUS SUNRISE

This vibrant creation is bursting with layers of zesty citrus fruits and rich sweet coconut and sunflower petals.

flavourhead.com



DARK WOODS UNDER MILK WOOD COFFEE TIN

A medium roast that delivers familiar and crowd-pleasing caramel sweetness, this is the brand's first and still best-selling blend.

darkwoodscoffee.co.uk



MINOR FIGURES CHAI CONCENTRATE

Made using only organic ingredients, this versatile product boasts sweet and spicy notes.

minorfigures.com



CHOC AFFAIR CLASSIC MILK HOT CHOCOLATE

This beautiful milk hot chocolate is made from 45% cocoa solids milk chocolate and is flaked by hand in the beautiful City of York.

choc-affair.com



D'AMAZONIA SLEEP TEA

Containing 14 powerful ingredients to help you achieve a serene night's sleep.

damazonia.co.uk



NOOJ CREAMY ALMOND PASTE

A versatile and planet-friendly plant-based milk option.

noojfood.co.uk



ALT COFFEE LONDON THE CAPTAIN'S ROAST

The beans used in this blend vary seasonally to ensure the very best quality, and The Captain's Roast is roasted darker to bring out deep and rich chocolatey notes.

altitude-coffee.co.uk



VELO EL SALVADOR GROUND COFFEE

This ground coffee has delicious flavours of milk chocolate, almond, shortbread and hints of orange, and the medium body and acidity lends itself to a balanced and mild cup.

velocoffeeroasters.co.uk



Flavour Head is unapologetically flavour-first. "So often fruit and herbal teas look beautiful and have an enticing aroma, but the flavour just doesn't deliver. We've used whole fruits and herbs to create a well-rounded sensory experience that includes a strength of flavour that you've never experienced before. Much like the third wave coffee and craft beer movements transformed their categories, our range of botanical teas have been created to reignite excitement and enthusiasm for tea, rather than taking it for granted as an uninspiring staple."

Experience

As Linda explains, "more and more people are looking for an experience, something they can take part in." In the world of Choc Affair, says Linda, this takes the form of "an Instagrammable hot chocolate they can share on social media – lashings of cream, toppings, something they can engage in and post a reel or photo about."

Whether or not your business has a social media-heavy approach, considering the special extra touches that can transform your shoppers' experience with your hot drinks offering from wan to 'wow' will reap dividends. "It's going to become more important that businesses are bringing that experience to their customers, and hot chocolates really offer that opportunity," says Linda. "If you can think it, you can create it – there's endless recipes, spices, decorations you can introduce to a menu."

The wonder of experimentation runs through the heart of Bird & Blend, too. "Our colourful Wall of Tea is made up of over 100 blends of tea, across nine tea types and we bring new flavours out each season," explains Krisi. "In-store, customers can explore the Tea Wall like a pick 'n' mix sweet shop – tasting and smelling the teas and we discuss the blends, brewing methods, and recipe ideas. We also have a vast selection of in store drinks made to order, including our flavoured matcha and seasonal drinks."

Considering the full extent of your customer's journey – from approaching your shop front to curling up with a mug of something steaming – is an opportunity well worth exploring. "We are passionate about tea, but we are a people business really – we aim to create a whole experience for our customers as soon as they walk in the door," says Krisi. "The experiences and community that we build in-store (and online), that really tells our story keeps our customers coming back time and time again. They also love to tell their friends about us, making word of mouth one of our biggest growth channels, from day one and still today."

There is no doubt that the British hot drinks sector offers a whole host of opportunities for retail right now, and the speciality scene is right at the centre of its most exciting innovations. By experimenting with the new generation of flavour profiles out there, catering for the growing demand for health and sustainability-focused options, and making sure your selection offers something extra special for those seeking out indulgence and a one-of-a-kind experience, you're sure to become a go-to for discerning shoppers thirsty to fill their cup.

RETAILER INSIGHT:



Louise Allen, senior local forager at Whole Foods Market, shares her tips for a strong-selling hot drinks range

WHAT ARE THE CORNERSTONES TO A GREAT QUALITY HOT DRINK SELECTION?

It is essential to stock a wide variety and choice of products to meet our customers' needs, be it convenience or caffeine-free options, whilst ensuring all products come from ethical and sustainable sources.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST-SELLING PRODUCT?

We have found that Columbian coffee is our most popular product, in both ground and capsule format.

WHAT HOT DRINK PRODUCTS DOES WHOLE FOODS STOCK?

At Whole Foods Market, we stock a wide range of hot drink products including coffee; ranging from convenience in instant and capsules to speciality and single origin and tea; ranging from English Breakfast to a wide range of herbal infusions, premium matcha, hot chocolate and coffee alternatives such as chicory.

WHAT TRENDS HAVE YOU NOTICED IN THE HOT DRINK SECTOR?

Premiumisation at home is an ongoing trend. More customers are buying into premium coffees and hot chocolate in order to create the barista experience at home. Sustainability is still important, and hot beverage companies are continuing to innovate in this area with an increasing number of brands moving to compostable packaging made from plant-based alternatives.

WHAT'S IN THE FUTURE FOR QUALITY HOT DRINKS IN THE UK?

Climate change and the increasing cost of coffee is going to be a challenge to the UK market, therefore exploration into alternative coffee species (alternatives to Arabica) and innovation in fermentation to bring flavour to cheaper beans will be imperative for UK-based coffee brands to remain profitable.

> "It is essential to stock a wide variety and choice of products to meet our customers' needs, be it convenience or caffeine-free options, whilst ensuring all products come from ethical and sustainable sources"







Plant Based World Expo 2022

We explore the five trends taking centre stage at Plant Based World Expo 2022

Plant-based and food-tech trends will be centre-stage at the Plant Based World Expo, which returns to Olympia London on 30th November-1st December 2022. Europe's only trade event dedicated to plant-based food will offer an exclusive overview of the exciting new innovations and products that are transforming the food industry.

With a third of Brits looking to go vegan, according to a study by YouGov, the plant-based food market has grown rapidly over the last five years. In fact, sales of meat and dairy-free alternatives have doubled, making plant-based one of the fastest growing categories in retail, so there has never been a more exciting or relevant time to get ahead of the latest trends. Plant Based World Expo Europe will play host to over 150 exhibitors, from household names through to cutting-edge start-ups, which will display their latest innovations and tried and tested favourites. Here's a flavour of what trends can be experienced across the show floor:

1 PRECISION FERMENTATION

Food-tech start-ups around the world have been exploring the use of precision fermentation in the recreation of dairy and meat. Unlike, traditional microbial fermentation, where microorganisms convert food into products such as beer, bread, and yoghurt, precision fermentation involves turning microorganisms into mini factories producing specific enzymes or protein ingredients. This truly is a green game-changer.

2 MYCELIUM AND FUNGI

The naturally meaty texture of most mushrooms makes them work well as high-protein ingredients in plant-based meat alternatives such as 'shroomdogs' (mushroom sausages) and 'wings' (shredded oyster mushrooms). But at Plant Based World there are some companies taking the functionality of mycelium as an ingredient in plant-based products to the next level.

3 WHOLE-CUTS AND DELI SLICES

Beyond burgers and chicken nuggets, plant-based meat alternative companies are looking at new formats to satisfy sophisticated palettes. One of these formats is whole cuts which can replace meat in the centre of the plate, including steak, chicken breasts, and salmon fillets. Another trend is deli slices, going beyond ham and chicken alternatives to give customers more choice. In fact, new for 2022 is the Best Whole Cut Meat Product category at the coveted Plant-Based Taste Awards - the only plant-based food awards to judge purely on taste where winners will be crowned at the show.

4 INDULGENT CONFECTIONERY

Plant-based and vegan confectionery used to be restricted to dark chocolate, mostly over 70% and rather bitter. Innovation has exploded the plant-based confectionery category beyond this with a variety of indulgent 'milky' chocolates, snacks and baked goods including croissants and specialty pastries.

5 FUNCTIONAL FOODS

As health concerns continue to be a driver for increasing plant-based foods in diets, functional foods – whole, fortified, enriched, or enhanced food – are an important source of health benefits beyond essential nutrients. Innovation in this space includes products with energy-boosting properties, those that aid sleep, or edible beauty with ingredients such as collagen.

More generally, the quality and breadth of plant-based meat and dairy alternatives on display at the show is an excellent representation of the incredible innovation taking place right now. There is a trend across the board for plant-based foods that truly replicate the experience of meat-eaters. These trends can be seen from retailers as well as the out-of-home market.

An example of a company making waves in creating like-for-like seafood options is Verdino Green Foods, which will be presenting its new range of products for the first time in the UK, including alternatives for salmon, white fish, sashimi, poke, and more. Its brand 'Unfished' is manufactured with pea protein and aims to revolutionise seafood alternatives, offering lines in chilled, frozen, and ambient.

Also showcasing the latest in meat alternatives, Miami Foods will present its healthy take on plant-based products. The professional health-hackers take old-favourites and redesign them to drastically reduce saturated fats and calories, without compromising on taste. Miami Foods will use the show to present its smoked streaky bacon rashers, classic burgers, and Louisiana Chick'n, as well as unveiling some brand-new products for the very first time.

Showcasing cutting-edge cheese alternatives is Purezza, the UK's first vegan pizzeria, making its trade event debut at the show. The company will showcase its vegan mozzarella which features on its award-winning pizzas and is now available for retail and foodservice professionals looking to create plant-based alternatives fit for pizza aficionados.

As well as a show floor hosting household names and emerging start-ups, Plant Based World Expo Europe offers a range of interactive show features including a seminar programme which will arm visitors with tangible advice. This year, the show will introduce the 'Start Up Zone', a partnership with Vevolution, the world's leading vegan marketplace, as an exclusive area dedicated to emerging plant-based businesses.

For further information, or to register for a free pass to attend, visit plantbasedworldeurope.com.

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE: Olympia, London
WHEN: 30th November-1st December
WEB: plantbasedworldeurope.com





Ensure your customers' Boxing Day spreads are a roaring success with these satisfying options

1 WHOLLY GELATO
WHITE CHOCOLATE AND LAVENDER GELATO

This inventive ice cream offers something different on Boxing Day, featuring white chocolate and lavender flavours for a creamy, floral treat. Wholly Gelato uses the milk from its mixed-breed, free-range herd to produce Italian-style artisan gelato, and the full range totals almost 30 flavours meaning there's definitely something for everyone!
whollygelato.co.uk

2 ALDWICK JUBILATE
ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE

This English fizz features strawberry, stone fruits and hints of toasty brioche, with a mousse as creamy as you'd expect in the very best Champagne. Pinot Noir grapes at Aldwick Estate are meticulously harvested by the team and other volunteers, then aged on its lees for 18 months prior to disgorgement, making the perfect Boxing Day tipple.
aldwickestate.co.uk

3 PETER'S YARD
SOURDOUGH CRISPBREAD

Peter's Yard sourdough crispbread discs make a great centrepiece for Christmas with their traditional central hole (a nod to when crispbread would have been baked at harvest time and hung on a pole over the fire to stay crisp and dry throughout the Scandinavian winters). Snap and share them with cheese, smoked salmon and cured meats.
petersyard.com



4 CLEMENCY HALL
CHRISTMAS TRIO PACK

A selection of three festive cheeses, featuring Clemency Hall's classic 18-month matured Victorious Vintage Cheddar, Truffle infused Cheddar and a Christmas Pudding Cheese treated to fruit and spice. The perfect additions to any Boxing Day cheeseboard spread onto crackers or crispbreads and adorned with a dollop of festive chutney.
rowcliffe.co.uk

5 LIMONCELLO DI CAPRI
LIMONCELLO

Made by the Molinari family, Limoncello di Capri sits in a class of its own. This delicious adaptable drink is made from 100% Sorrento IGP lemons, with no additives or preservatives, and has wide-reaching appeal as a post-meal digestif, a simple, unique spritz or as a fresh twist on classic gin and vodka cocktails.
limoncello.com

6 ATKINS & POTTS
SEAFOOD AND MUSTARD SAUCES

This Seafood Sauce with Lemon Zest & Dill offers a fresh combination of zingy richness and sweet aromatic flavours, fabulous with fish cakes, salmon filo parcels or as the dressing on a prawn cocktail. The Dill Mustard Sauce is a Scandinavian classic and the traditional accompaniment to gravadlax, but also works wonderfully well with egg sandwiches, salads and ploughman's, or even as a dip for crudites.
atkinsandpotts.co.uk

7 THE CHESHIRE SMOKEHOUSE
HICKORY SMOKED CASHEWS

The Cheshire Smokehouse has been smoking fine foods for over 115 years. Using brick smoke kilns and the finest hickory chippings, their Real Smoked Nuts are produced in small batches by hand with care and attention. After smoking, they are dry-roasted and seasoned with salt. A must with a good gin and tonic or cold beer.
cheshiresmokehouse.co.uk

COMMENTATORS



GIOVANNI BATTISTA
VENCHI



CLAUDIA GALETTI
BELLAVITA



MATTEO FERRARI
WHITE RABBIT PIZZA



SALLY ASSINDER
GAROFALO



VERONICA GIRAUDO
TARTUFLANGHE



MARTA MESSA
SLOW FOOD



EMILY MALLABY
ASSOCIAZIONE
AMBASCIATORI DEI MIELI



PERI EAGLETON
SEGGIANO



OLIVIA VACHON
EATALY



HALIMA MARKEY
SKOULIKAS BEDFORD



CHARLES CAREY
THE OIL MERCHANT



PAUL SKELLY
ROWCLIFFE



DANILO CORTELLINO
CHEF AND AUTHOR

THE RISE OF LA DOLCE VITA

From unforgettable products to worldwide campaigns promoting fine produce and its makers, Italy offers a new culinary horizon for fine foodies

We can all attest to the allure of great Italian food. Most of us have at least a handful of Italian dishes in our repertoire – spaghettis bolognese and carbonara, vibrant green pesto and pizza (potentially created Neopolitan-style on an Ooni, lockdown-style) – and our collective larders just don't feel complete without a pack of dried pasta. It's little surprise that Italian cuisine has long been considered one of Brits' most favoured foodstuffs, but what's the current state of play, and where do the opportunities lie now? To find out, *Speciality Food* spoke to Italian food experts from across the industry. Spoiler: the future looks bright for la dolce vita.

Celebrating the art of Italian living

As purveyors of fine quality produce from just around the corner and across the world, *Speciality Food* readers have a valuable role to play when it comes to promoting the very best of Italian food and drink. Thankfully, there's a raft of producers passionate about helping you do just that. After all, who better to communicate the wonder of Italian produce than the makers themselves?

"Our mission is to bring to the UK what makes Italy so 'Italian': the maximalism, the ability to amaze, the conviviality, the colour and the ability to appreciate small moments of everyday happiness, just like sharing a box of chocolates with your loved ones," begins Giovanni Battista Mantelli, maître chocolatier at Venchi – a heritage Italian brand that has brought fine quality chocolate and gelato recipes to an adoring audience since 1878. "Crunchy or creamy, milk or dark chocolate, Gianduja, with nuts or surprising fillings to savour layer by layer... in Venchi's colorful Chocogelateria you can find a rich selection of chocolates, an entire wall of chocolate bars, delicious handmade pralines, chocolate fountains and many authentic Italian gelato flavours freshly made every day in the boutique lab following the Italian tradition, only with natural and selected ingredients."

Renowned for, in Giovanni's words, "celebrating the Italian art of living", Venchi – and its fellow fine food counterparts – exist to bring the very best of Italy to food lovers across the world.

For Claudia Galetta, strategic partnerships director at Bellavita, Italian passion is a tried and true asset of Italian cuisine: "We don't just put passion in what we do, we were born passionate," she says. With producer pride in what they do built in, ensuring quality and a story to connect with – both boons for fine food retailers – fine Italian food and drink is naturally aligned with independent fine food retailers' messaging. "We naturally put love, energy, beauty, fun, as well as hard work, in everything we do. It is contagious though so even our foreign colleagues buy into the dolce vita mood pretty quickly once they join the team. New Italian products in the UK are actually, very often, exceptional regional food that have existed for many years and this is fantastic. This happen in Italy as well where products from a region get to be known by other regions. I find this sensational."

An evolving feast

Italy may be overflowing with delicious food and drink traditions, but that's not to say that even its most passionate advocates are choosing to stick not twist. For Matteo Ferrari, chef and co-founder of White Rabbit, there's no reason why one of the country's most iconic dishes – pizza – shouldn't be evolved to suit today's audience. "With 1 in 10 people in the UK avoiding gluten, there is a clear opportunity to provide authentic Italian food that is gluten-free – and this is what White Rabbit is all about. Bringing the joy of Italian cuisine, to all," he begins. "We want everyone be able to have the Italian experience no matter their dietary needs (also spending as less time as possible in the kitchen and reinvesting that time to really enjoying that treat moment). You can sit at our table to enjoy authentic Italian food whether you are coeliac, vegan or flexitarian."

And while the archetypal image of the hours-long Italian feast rich with family and friends is a real selling point of Italian food scene, shoppers don't need to have a whole afternoon to while away slow-cooking a ragu or fermenting the perfect pizza dough. "Italian food fundamentally delivers on consumer demand for convenience, simplicity and taste enjoyment without compromise. In a world moving so fast, Italian food remains a go-to if you want to treat yourself – or the persons you love – and enjoy the moment together in full," explains Matteo.

As the international landscape evolves as a result of numerous outside influences, one product which is stayed the course – proven itself to be an invaluable asset to UK storecupboards, in fact – is pasta. "It's been a strange road for the last two years for pasta, one of the stockpiled products during the pandemic, when quality Italian pasta was eaten by many here in the UK as everyone tried to get their hands on any pasta available, finally there was an appreciation of the slightly more expensive quality Italian pasta and the realisation that all pasta is not the same," explains Sally Assinder of Pasta Garofalo – fine pasta makers since 1789. "However, we are in a completely different scenario as food inflation continues to accelerate now at a 14-year high. With the dramatic increase in energy and interest rates, eating out will become less frequent and home dining will once again become more of a treat with quality authentic premium pasta being seen as a very affordable alternative to dining out and delivering restaurant quality food." In good news for coeliacs, and in line with Matteo's philosophy, Garofalo is also catering



> "A growing interest in provenance, traceability and Italian farmer's respect for their land and their produce makes me very confident that Italian products will continue to take up many pages in our list, and those of our competitors, in the future"

BEST-SELLING **BITES**



Masha Rener, head chef at Lina Stores, introduce's the iconic London restaurant's most popular dishes

At our delicatessen in Brewer Street and in our online shop, our 30-month old Parmigiano Vacche Brune DOP is one of our most popular products. It's a mature cheese with strong flavour, produced exclusively from the milk of the Bruna Cow. From our cured meats selection, the Prosciutto di San Daniele DOP is widely considered to be one of the finest cured meats produced in Italy, if not the world. It's an 18-month matured ham from Friuli Venezia Giulia that is sweeter and less salty than its famous rival from Parma.

At our restaurants, our 30-egg Yolk Tagliolini with black truffle, butter and Parmigiano Reggiano DOP is one of our most popular dishes and a firm guest favourite. Tagliolini are traditional long pasta found in lots of regions, including Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Molise and Piemonte. In Piemonte, the shape is also often called 'tajarin' in the local dialect and is made with lots of egg yolks. Each batch of pasta dough for our fresh Tagliolini is made with Italian flour and 30 egg yolks, which gives it its wonderfully vibrant yellow colour. In Piemonte in particular, the pasta is often served with local black truffles, which the area is well known for. We serve ours with butter, black truffle and 18-month aged Parmigiano Reggiano for a wonderfully rich and indulgent pasta dish.







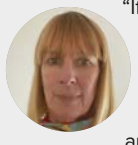
to the gluten-free crowd. "If a fine food retailer is stocking gluten-free pasta, an area still growing, then look for shapes that can't be found in the supermarkets. At Garofalo we regularly hear from customers how great it is to discover our more interesting gluten free shapes like mafalda corta or casarecce and even linguine," says Sally.

Truffle – an iconic food synonymous with Italian cuisine – is another product combining tradition and innovation in the hands of Tartuflanghe. The business, producer of delicacies including fresh and freeze-dried truffles, storecupboard favourites and sweets, is a proud ambassador for the unique product. "Truffle is appreciated all around the world because it gives a magic touch to all dishes, with first historical studies since the eighteenth century," explains Veronica Giraudo, export director. Tartuflanghe is located close to Alba, a town in the Piedmont region of Italy which is considered by experts to be the home of the white truffle. "The Alba White Truffle is the most prized in the world for intensity, richness and complexity of aromas: over 120 aromatic molecules that blend in perfect balance and, depending on which trees they grow under, reveal varying hints of bush and artichokes, garlic and hay, very delicate notes of honey and hazelnut, but also moist earth and spices," she explains. With such a rich and unique flavour to bestow on food lovers, it's no wonder that truffle has become something of a legend in foodie circles.

Tartuflanghe has continued to experiment with the prized ingredient since it was launched in 1975. "This helps us to 'invent' upcoming trends: visionary flavours of the future in functional, practical and contemporary forms that are meant for everyone," says Veronica. "The excellent management of

PASTA 101

Sally Assinder of Pasta Garofalo shares her tips for stocking the best of the best



"If a fine food retailer is wanting to stock premium quality pasta there are a few easy checks to make. First look at the protein level in the nutrition table – 14g per 100g indicates a robust durum wheat has been used has been used to make the pasta dough. The high level of protein will give the desired al dente texture when cooked. Second check is to see if the pasta is bronze drawn ie formed through a metal die as opposed to a Teflon die. Bronze drawing creates a rough, porous surface to the pasta and the sauces sticks and is absorbed into the pasta, as opposed to a Teflon die formed pasta, which is smooth and the sauce easily slips off the cooked pasta. The Pasta Di Gragnano IGP symbol on a pack indicates high a protein level and bronze drawn as well as other factors desired for a premium quality Italian pasta."

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The value of Italian oil



Charles Carey, The Oil Merchant, talks us through the fundamentals of the must-stock product

It was Autumn 1984 when I drove to Tuscany to buy my first olive oil, becoming one of the first people to begin importing single-estate-bottled extra virgin olive oil into the UK. Olive oil of this quality spoke of the land that it came from, and the knowledge and passion of the producers, just like chateau-bottled wine.

HOW IMPORTANT IS ITALY TO YOUR BUSINESS?

We love Italian products, but we are aware that where they led the field in quality olive oil, there is competition now from many other countries. Back in 1980s many buyers of good olive oil considered that Italian oil was by far the best from Europe and Tuscan oil was the best Italian oil. Italian producers also spent time considering their packaging. It was easy to sell. But, as far as extra virgin olive oil is concerned, Italy must be aware that our customers now understand that you can buy very good Spanish oil, and appreciation of Greek oil is growing. France is still lagging behind in appreciation, but there are some interesting oils from the southern hemisphere.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ITALIAN OIL?

Extra Virgin Olive Oils are similar to wines; different varieties of olives create different flavour profiles, as grape varieties create differing wine styles. Italy can provide all these profiles. From specific estates, farms or village co-operatives delicate oils from Lake Garda or Liguria can be compared with medium fruity oils from the Molise and Puglia, and Tuscany, Umbria and Sicily can provide more intense flavours. On a more commercial level, Italians are accomplished blenders of oils from different countries.

HOW SHOULD FINE FOOD RETAILERS APPROACH STOCKING THEM?

Any good delicatessen should have at least five good estate bottled olive oils, as well as a more commercial, cheaper, oil for everyday cooking. Those estate bottled oils should have differing flavour profiles as suggested above. So Italy could be a store's sole provider of olive oil. But why not spread flavour profiles amongst different countries? There is no argument that Italy is a producer of great olive oils, but just as I would not say that a good wine from Burgundy was better than a good wine from Bordeaux, I am not going to say that a good Italian oil is better than a good oil from, say, Spain. They are just different.

HOW ABOUT OTHER ITALIAN PRODUCTS?

After extra virgin olive oil, our strongest seller is Balsamic Vinegar of Modena. We have two suppliers; La Vecchia Dispensa and Giuseppe Giusti. La Vecchia Dispensa produce very special vinegars with a huge amount of care and attention. They are very traditional both in their production methods and the finished look; everything is still done by hand. Having always imported one balsamic vinegar from Giuseppe Giusti, we now have stock of their wider range. They have been producing balsamic vinegar since 1605 and their flavoured balsamic and striking packaging have strong appeal on shop shelves.

I still puzzle why buyers of really good (and therefore likely to be expensive) oils then blend them with dubious quality vinegar. I wish we could sell more of the good ones like the varietal vinegars from Cesare in Piedmont.

Of our store cupboard ingredients there is one which stands out for popularity – both with shops and with private customers – and that is La Favorita Live's Pesto alla Genovese. Made with fresh basil from Liguria the sauce is left unpasteurised as it contains no Parmesan. It is a kitchen must have (and great to have on standby to feed vegan friends).



> Our mission is to bring to the UK what makes Italy so 'Italian': the maximalism, the ability to amaze, the conviviality, the colour and the ability to appreciate small moments of everyday happiness

production and processing has enabled us to establish a special bond with the world of haute cuisine, which we help innovate through constant research and development in our artisan laboratories. Our products, from salty to sweet ones, have been awarded in major international competitions, and have even gone into space. Meanwhile, we continue to experiment, constantly searching for the perfect taste and the absolute sensorial experience."

In the right hands, the future looks bright for Italian truffles – and their place on British independents' shelves. "Our goal for the future of the truffle are: create a rational, traceable and guaranteed truffle cultivation, from the spore to the table, and promote the regeneration of a natural environment, now greatly at risk, that continues to host the Alba White Truffle," says Veronica.

The Slow Food effect

This is no doubt music to the ears of Slow Food, a global movement founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986 to promote public interest in local food cultures and traditions. "The guiding idea is that food is a prism through which to view the world, and the most effective tool for transforming it, as it links so many other aspects of life, from culture and politics to agriculture and the environment," explains Marta Messa, Slow Food secretary general. "Through our food choices we can collectively influence how food is cultivated, produced and distributed, and thus change the world."

It's not for nothing that this now global movement – it is currently active in 160 countries – began in Italy. "Italy has a particularly strong food culture: sharing meals together on a daily basis or spreading a table cloth as a sort of unspoken ritual before every meal are examples of how engrained food is in the Italian way of living. So Slow Food is an easy fit in the Italian way of experiencing food," says Marta.

"Italians constantly celebrate food and everything that happens around it, and Slow Food has at its core the joy of food as a way to change the food system for the better, for everyone. In fact, food resonates in every culture, well beyond Italy. Slow Food in fact fits within all cultures, as all cultures are rooted in food traditions. Most importantly, we all need food to live and our movement is about everyone's right to food. As a global movement, we act together to ensure good, clean and fair food for all. We believe in uniting the joy of food with the pursuit of justice, for the right to pleasure and policies that defend the multitudes from that minority of people who want to turn happiness and life itself into commodities."

Of course, to butcher John Donne's phrase, Italy is not an island – it is as impacted by environmental and social factors as the UK marketplace – and one of the sectors most feeling the pinch is honey. "We are facilitated by a global trend:





consumers are nowadays more conscious about the quality of what they buy, especially concerning food. They look at the food products with a discriminating approach, also made possible by the wide range of information that is now available," explains Emily Mallaby, member of the board for Associazione Ambasciatori dei Mieli (AMi).

"In Italy there has always been an important beekeeping culture, favored by the generosity of our territory, both in terms of landscape diversity and variety of blooms. Bees both benefit from and increase this variety," Emily says. "Our country can count on a real wealth in terms of quality and variety of honeys. We can produce up to 40 different single-flower honeys, as well as an infinity of wildflower honeys. This fortune is something we are very proud of and which has always generated an important market, both domestic and foreign."

"In Italy, a good channel through which local quality honey enters people' houses are local markets. There, beekeepers directly sell their own products to consumers and have the opportunity to describe to people the terroir of their honeys." For consumers who do not have the pleasure of face-to-face interactions with producers, AMi exists to bridge the gap. "The association wants to represent an interface between the world of production and that of consumption, starting from the experience and values underlying beekeeping, to transform them into elements of knowledge and cultural growth," says Emily.

Thankfully, for Italy's honey sector as well as the country's environment, "the number of beekeepers, especially for self-consumption, has been continuously growing in recent years. The increasing awareness of the importance of bees and their role as pollinators, consciousness about environmental issues, the post pandemic desire to change life or simply to get closer to nature, is leading to a further increase in the number of beekeepers."

> "There will always be quality Italian food – the demand is there, probably customers are now a bit more savvy and tend to buy less but better quality products"

The British outlook on Italian food

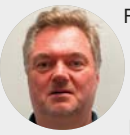
While simplicity is one of the keys to Italian food's success in the UK, that's not to say that fine food shoppers won't be looking for story, provenance and proof of quality in the Italian products they purchase. "Our recent research showed that consumers ultimately associate Italian food credentials with great taste, however authenticity and quality is the key to driving repeat purchase in retail," says Matteo.

Indeed, according to Peri Eagleton – who co-founded Seggiano with her husband David over 30 years ago, "Authenticity, great taste, organic and ethical credentials" are vital to Italian food's strong reputation in the UK. Seggiano's extensive range of fine quality produce – from pasta and sauces to flatbreads, condiments, storecupboard staples to sweet indulgences – is testament to its philosophy of never compromising on quality. "There are plenty of Italian producers who capitalise on the roots of Italian culinary excellence, whilst economising with cheaper ingredients and food production aids," she explains. "Seggiano on the other hand has gained brand reputation through ensuring authenticity, genuine provenance and by not cheapening the experience with poor quality ingredients."

Lina Stores, a London institution for 78 years, has also put quality at the forefront of its plans since its inception. "Whether it's in our delicatessen or in our restaurants, we have always put quality first: it's at the heart of everything we do and it is never compromised," explains Masha Rener, head chef at Lina Stores. "This along with good old-fashioned Italian hospitality, are probably the main

THE **ANTIPASTI** OPPORTUNITY

Rowcliffe's Paul Skelly lists the must-stock products that will help you cash in on the growing consumer taste for sharing plates



For delis looking to offer more regional Italian antipasti products, starting in northern Italy you will find fresh Mozzarella, basil and pesto, polenta fritta, tuna and cannellini beans, balsamic onions, fresh fig, olive tapenade, Prosciutto di Parma and mortadella.

The central region is known for rich sauces, olive oil and famous cheese, dishes using assorted regional meats and cheese such as prosciutto, salami, Gorgonzola, and Fontina should be considered.

The south features bold flavours of tomatoes and herbs, plus dishes such as Romano cheese, garlic and pepper antipasto, black olive tapenade, escarole flat fillet anchovies, sweet and hot soppressata castelvertrano olives, artichokes, and roasted pepper bruschetta.

By celebrating Italian regional diversity through its antipasti ingredients there is a real opportunity for growth for regional Italian cuisine and its wonderful ingredients in the UK's growing sharing plate food scene.





STOCK CHECK 2022 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



LOISON PANETTONE AGRUMATO

An artisanal panettone enriched with five citrus fruits: citron, orange, lemons, chinotto and late mandarin, tied together with warming vanilla notes.

shop.loison.com/en



OLIVES ET AL PROPER GENOVESE BASIL & PINE NUT PESTO

Authentic, Italian made classic pesto that tastes just the way it should – try it on fresh pasta.

olivesetal.co.uk



GAROFALO POTATO GNOCCHI

Italian potato dumplings with a velvety and smooth texture.

pasta-garofalo.com



MUTTI PASTA SAUCE ROSSORO TOMATO

Carefully selected tomatoes combined with Parmigiano Reggiano without added sugar.

mutti-parma.com



CLEMENCY HALL ANTIPASTO

Marinated mixed vegetables (green and black pitted olives, artichokes, mini gherkins, sun dried tomatoes and mushrooms) in oil.

rowcliffe.co.uk



MR ORGANIC BALSAMIC VINEGAR OF MODENA

A traditional blend of wine vinegar and a selection of organic grapes, which have been matured over time in wooden casks.

mr-organic.com



SEGGIANO FIG & WALNUT PANFORTE

The natural caramel flavours of sweet figs combine deliciously with the creamy taste of Italian walnuts in this unusual panforte.

seggiano.com



LIMONCELLO DI CAPRI

This delicious adaptable drink is made from 100% Sorrento IGP lemons, with no additives or preservatives and has wide reaching appeal.

limoncello.com



RISO GALLO CARNAROLI RISOTTO 1856

Prepared with traditional recipes by mixing high quality dehydrated ingredients with the best carnaroli.

risogallo.co.uk



GRANA PADANO

The best-selling PDO cheese in the world – naturally lactose-free.

granapadano.it



reasons why our guests keep coming back. They know exactly what to expect – from our cured meats to cheeses, and antipasti to fresh pasta, everything is of the best possible quality straight from regional Italy. We want Lina Stores to be a place everyone can come to – from Italians missing their Italian food from back home to Londoners who want a taste of authentic Italian cuisine."

Italian food already holds an impressive market share of Italian food and drink, and this is set to grow according to Claudia. "The UK is the 4th country for imports of food and beverage from Italy after Germany, France and USA, and although Brexit is causing quite a few prices increases and difficulties to import from small producers, the demand will continue to grow," she says. And while the cuisine is a strong seller on supermarket and independent shelves alike, there's plenty more for all to discover – buyers and consumers alike. "There is an amazing world of Italian food to discover," Claudia continues. "I still recall when only a few years back Burrata, Stracciatella, pinsa, fregola, pistacchio pesto, colatura di alici and much more were not known in the UK or certainly not known by consumers." It is the role of fine food buyers to discover excellent new products for their customers to enjoy, something which Bellavita is proud to support. "Bellavita Expo is the result of 12 months of scouting," says Claudia, "and we pride ourselves on listening to buyers and ensuring they find the Italian products they are looking for at our show."

Catering for tomorrow's fine food consumer

Keeping a foot in the past with an eye to the future is the key to Italian cuisine's continued success in the UK market. "The future for Italian cuisine is to dig even deeper into our regional food tradition but at the same time be able to innovate and open to new trends," says Matteo. "The real challenge will be to keep alive our roots while building delicious traditional food that everyone everywhere can enjoy."

"Italian food is not only associated with a delicious sensory experience, but with tradition and provenance, which has made it famous and also give it a particular quality and authenticity," says Peri – all attributes which must be maintained by businesses new and established. "At the minute it seems a few relatively 'new' distributors will have more troubles than the established ones to bring goods in the country," explains Seggiano's Vincenzo Spalice. "We might soon find ourselves in a place where there are less distributors but stronger. There will always be quality Italian food – the demand is there, probably customers are now a bit more savvy and tend to buy less but better quality products."

For Lina Stores' Masha, a successful range of Italian food and drink should be at once traditional and innovative. "We see it very much as a balance," she explains. "There

The story behind an Italian retail icon



Since landing in London, international Italian retailer Eataly has become one of the city's gastronomic icons. Here, Olivia Vachon, marketing manager at Eataly London, talks us through what made it such a destination for lovers of Italian food

The original idea behind Eataly was very simple: to gather all the high-quality Italian foods together under one roof, where you can eat, shop and learn. Oscar Farinetti, our founder, first envisioned the Eataly concept in 2002. After five years of researching and planning, the first Eataly store opened in Torino, Italy, in January 2007.

Eataly London offers a market with more than 6,000 Italian products as well as the largest Italian wine shop in the UK. With four restaurants, six eateries, a caffe and three bars, Eataly is spread across two floors in a 40,000 square foot space. Eataly London is the largest Italian food destination in London, winning several awards since their opening in April 2021, that include the R200 'Best New Opening' award.

When people think about Eataly, it is our priority to ensure these customers know that most products are made and produced in Italy. The small number of items that aren't, come from local producers here in the UK. The provenance of ingredients, combined with sustainability and craftmanship for our products are key, essential topics for us.

We love to re-tell the stories of these incredible producers, whether that's in-store or through our digital channels. It explores how powerful and unique the offerings at Eataly London truly are, as we remain a space where you can eat, shop and learn all under one roof. It is also the background we give to our clients, by empowering them with knowledge on the origins of our products is truly unique. Many of the products we offer at Eataly can not be found anywhere else in the world, from unique wines imported only by us, to specialist olive oils and pasta.

We want to empower more people to develop the complexities of Italian food, When we talk about seasonality, or the difference in Italian regions where produce and wine originate from, you start to understand the amount of storytelling we have, and the platform we have to communicate this on. So, I see the future of Italian food in the UK as very strong. We have such a rich culture with so many complexities woven in, this really is just the beginning for Italian food in the UK.

are those traditional Italian products that our customers have been asking for for decades, including fresh, handmade pasta, classic meats and cheeses or San Marzano tomatoes DOP, for example. However, there are also newer products that have become more popular in the last couple of years in London. For example, we have been stocking 'Nduja for decades but have seen its popularity rise over the last decade or so as it's become more accessible outside of Italy. A spicy salami spread from Calabria, it's made from a mixture of ground pork and hot chilli and is an incredibly delicious ingredient that can elevate any dish as it's so versatile. We have also recently seen a higher interest in pistachio products as customers embrace using them in their cooking. Pistachios from Bronte, a village behind Mount Etna in Sicily, are generally considered to be the best quality and we use them in our Pistachio & Olive Oil cake in our delicatessen."

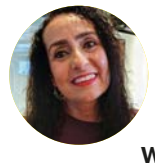
For Charles, it's important that fine food professionals maintain a positive outlook despite the clouds currently on the horizon. "Let's move on from the B-word and from the collapsing value of the Pound against the Euro," he says. "Those are problems that we importers must suffer. Our customers, the lovely shops that we sell to, have many problems too, as do their customers. But there is always a place in one's life for good food, and good food and Italy are synonymous. That, along with a growing interest in provenance, traceability and Italian farmer's respect for their land and their produce makes me very confident that Italian products will continue to take up many pages in our list, and those of our competitors, in the future."

While the British appetite for great Italian food holds strong, the sector treads carefully. "It is uncertain what the Italian food scene holds," says Slow Food's Marta. "While the European Farm to Fork Strategy has laid the foundations for greater sustainability, the pushback has been strong and visible, at European as well as at Italian level." The challenges faced by Britons and across the world are just as active in Italy. "In light of the current climate, economic and geopolitical situation, marked by an increasingly-frequent extreme weather phenomena, the reverberations of the Covid-19 pandemic, rising inflation, political instability and war, we have all the more reason to work to strengthen diversified food systems and local economies that nourish people and communities rather than feeding the profits of a few multinationals. This is as true in Italy as it is anywhere."

By supporting quality Italian producers' mission to promote – and support – the future of the very best of the country's food and drink, independent fine food and drink retailers in Britain can not only supply their customers with a cuisine they are increasingly hungry for, but push for a better future for artisan makers across the country. The good news is that there's plenty to sink our collective teeth into.

5 MINUTES WITH

HALIMA MARKEY, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER AT SKOULIKAS BEDFORD



IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHAT DO CONSUMERS WANT FROM ITALIAN FOOD PRODUCTS?
Authentic products from quality producers. To experience the products they have tasted on holiday and or at traditional restaurants. Consumers are interested to learn about provenance of products, but most importantly the products must deliver in taste and quality.

WHAT ITALIAN PRODUCTS DOES SKOULIKAS STOCK?
Vicenzi Biscuits, La Fiammante Tomatoes, Granoro Pasta, Pan Ducale Biscuits and Crostini's, Pasticceria, Venezia Cakes & Cannoli's, Fiorucci Meats, D'amico Preserved Vegetables

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP-SELLING ITALIAN FOODS?
Vicenzi Savoiardi, Vicenzi Amarette biscuits La Fiammante Passata, Pan Ducale Crostini's, Fiorucci Mortadella cooked meats.

WHAT'S IN THE FUTURE FOR ITALIAN CUISINE IN THE UK?
To make sure that the quality and authenticity of products remains as good as ever. Don't be fooled with cheap alternatives that don't use quality ingredients and are not even made in Italy!

> "With price increases across everything, I believe that only fine foods will survive when it comes to imported Italian products in the UK. The UK public is well-travelled and now, more than ever, knows how to differentiate a great quality Italian product from an average one. These days it's all about authenticity and traceability. Wines, speciality meats, premium pasta, flour, rice and hard to find Mediterranean vegetables are all on top of the list together with renowned Italian cheeses such as Grana Padano PDO. The UK public is accustomed to these products and whoever can afford them will get their hands on them, just like an Italian would"
>
> DANILO CORTELLINO, ITALIAN CHEF AND AUTHOR











A CHRISTMAS ICON

Dr. Andrea Tanner, Fortnum & Mason archivist, shares the history, magic and planning that goes into creating an internationally renowned festive destination

We were founded in St. James's in 1707, by William Fortnum (a footman to Queen Anne) and Hugh Mason, who owned a livery stable off Duke Street. Beginning with candles, made from part-used palace candles, the company soon became famous for tea, coffee, exotic fruits, and wines. Responding to the needs of its customers, in the 18th century, the company invented the 'scotched' egg for travellers, created unparalleled picnic baskets, and sourced the very best in British and overseas specialities for its customers worldwide. Everyone remembers their first encounter with us, and no wonder – over our centuries of history, we have been committed to delivering a sense of pleasure to anyone who walks through our doors.

Fortnum's has been a 'must visit' destination for over 300 Christmases. Charles Dickens wrote about the glorious sights, sounds and smells of Fortnum & Mason on Christmas Eve, and this tradition of creating a beautiful festive space, filled with old favourites and new seasonal produce has continued to this day. Customers come to find the plum puddings, Elvas Plums, candied fruits, handmade chocolates, mince pies and turkeys that they have known all their lives, but there is always something new to discover – like our pickled Brussels sprouts, for example.



Everyone interested in delicious things to eat and drink shops at Fortnum's. Customers come from all over the world, and also from around the corner. Some customers start Christmas with a visit to Piccadilly, or on our website. We have those who come but once a year, while others are weekly friends.

Fortnum's is the home of all things Christmas, and this can be experienced through the beautiful displays on the shop floor, tastings, and events – and the iconic windows, which have been delighting Londoners since early in Queen Victoria's reign. Each year we put our heart and soul into creating a magical experience for our visitors, from the initial design concept to the recipes for products and in the restaurants, and the beautiful packaging. It takes a huge amount of care, thought and effort, and we are thrilled when our customers approve of our Christmas specialities.

It is important to us that we create unexpected, exciting, and entertaining displays. Each part of the store should be joyful for both our adult and younger customers. We try to find ways to weave charm, wit, and humour into the designs., so that you go home enchanted by the experience.

Our customers are all over the world, and we want to include them in the magic of Piccadilly, which is why we share as much as we can on our social channels for as many people as possible to enjoy – wherever they happen to be. The Christmas atrium display is popular with our Piccadilly visitors. Each scheme can be viewed from every floor, which inspires customers to engage with the story of the display. We love creating new and exciting displays for this magical, light-filled space.

It is our heartfelt wish to create joy in an uncertain world. Watching our customers' delight in the variety of festive displays in our Piccadilly home and our other stores is a hugely rewarding part of the job.

At Fortnum's, service is at heart of what we do. We strive to be totally customer-focused in all areas of the business and aim to provide an exceptional customer experience and journey to our customers. We endeavour always to go above and beyond for our customers, for they are the most important people to everyone at Fortnum's.

Christmas is our busiest time of year, so across our operations we bring several hundred people (mostly students and young people) to help. Additionally, everyone from head office gets involved on the shop floor during the festive period. You might find the chair or the chief executive – or even the archivist – filling the shelves or serving you at the tills.

SEASONAL SPECIALITIES

Every year we offer tried and tested favourites, but we always innovate. This year we have created the Tipsy Hot Chocolate Gift Box (£100) that might just inspire customers to create a delicious new Christmas tradition. Add in a measure of our Chocolate Chestnut Liqueur to the rich milk Hot Chocolate – and, voila! A new family favourite.

The Sparkling Christmas Hamper (£215): we have crammed everything from Rosé Champagne to Prosecco to our exciting sparkling tea. We have included the English Sparkling wine with the Champagne so that you can conduct your own wine comparison.

This year we have also created an alcoholic sparkling tea, for those who are not the designated drivers, but have fallen in love with our sparkling tea.

We have also revisited our own invention – the Scotch Egg – to make it taste more Christmassy.

"Charles Dickens wrote about the glorious sights, sounds and smells of Fortnum & Mason on Christmas Eve, and this tradition of creating a beautiful festive space, filled with old favourites and new seasonal produce has continued to this day"

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The Life & Soul of the Pantry



BARISTA-GRADE HOT CHOCOLATE

Drinking chocolate is following in coffee's footsteps. The future is craft and bespoke says Sally-Jayne Wright

So you're in the mood for hot chocolate. Will that be a 34% cocoa blend with pink pepper, thyme and sea salt, or a 72% single origin Peruvian topped with grated orange zest? Perhaps you'll choose a white chocolate with matcha.

Hotel Chocolat, Chococo and Knoops are just three businesses with cafés where consumers can explore the delights of liquid chocolate. Lockdown accelerated this discovery. Deprived of cafés, consumers bought hot drinks equipment and drinking chocolate subscriptions. Online retailers abound; they range from well-known names like Whittard to more recent arrivals – Hotties, Love Cocoa and Calm Cocoa.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE TREND?

- Appreciation of higher cocoa solids eating chocolate
- Awareness of dark chocolate's health benefits. Quality chocolate is rich in plant compounds with protective antioxidant properties and contains zinc, magnesium and iron. Consuming high-cocoa chocolate, rich in polyphenols, may even balance the community of microbes living in our gut known as microbiota
- Mood boosting
- Success of Hotel Chocolat's £99.95 Velvetiser which heats and froths hot chocolate

So how do you explain the drop in retail sales of drinking chocolate, as reported in *The Grocer* in September? Volumes down 6.8% (Kantar 52 w/e 12 June 2022)? Some suppliers believe shoppers are losing interest in the kind of highly processed, mass-produced, middle-market brands sold in supermarkets, which are often high in sugar and low in cocoa. "Flakes (made from real chocolate rather than powder) are perceived as being a more indulgent treat," Love Cocoa's CEO James Cadbury told Rick Bull in *The Grocer*.

WHOSE BRANDS DO YOU LIKE?

We lapped up Chococo's 72% Ecuador dark chocolate flakes. We also enjoyed the doubly warming hit of South Devon Chilli Farm's award-winning Chilli Drinking Chocolate and the hard-core buzz of a melt-able block of Willie's Cacao 100% Peruvian Black.

WHAT'S THE MOST UNUSUAL DRINK YOU TASTED?

We were blown away by Knoops zero-calorie Cacao Tea which won three Great Taste Award stars in 2021. It's eco-friendly because it's made from a by-product – roasted cacao husks. The aroma entices, the tea satisfies and the taste of superior Venezuelan chocolate lingers on the palate. For customers worried about their waistlines, this is the one to stock.

Post-Covid, shoppers are very health conscious. So consider a functional option like Choc Chick Immunity Blend or Cheerful Buddha Cacao Bliss packed with superfoods. Don't over-order. At a food hall, we came across a £19.99 pouch of antioxidant hot chocolate reduced to clear.

HOW DOES HOT CHOCOLATE LIFT MOOD?

It contains theobromine, a stimulant that accelerates the heart rate and gives you a slower release boost for longer than caffeine. The darker you go, the higher the level of theobromine.

WHAT'S THE MOST WE CAN CHARGE FOR A CUP OF HOT CHOCOLATE IN OUR CAFÉ?

Anything from £3.50 to £6.75 for a large cup of 100% single origin from the Solomon Islands – Knoops' most expensive item. You can go north of a fiver if you include extras. We saw a Bailey's Hot Chocolate for £5.20 at the Lakeside Café, Leeds, and a hot chocolate with ice cream float for £5.10 at a London ice cream parlour. A white hot chocolate sprinkled with gold dust – £3.80 at the Oaktree Coffee House in Colchester – seemed a very reasonable treat.

HOW DO WE MAKE CUSTOMERS FEEL THEY'VE GOT VALUE?

Could you copy Starbucks and have a hot drinks loyalty card? Or make hot chocolate part of a 'meal deal' and upsell croissants, cinnamon buns, luxury biscuits, waffles and churros.

WHAT MILK SHOULD WE CHOOSE?

Non-dairy milk is largely consumed by those based in cities and large towns (Mintel). Knoops' best-selling milk is full fat dairy, oat comes second, and there's growing interest in hazelnut milk.

ANY TIPS ON SUPPLIERS?

For the café, try Firetree's vegan oat milk chocolate drink; a 10kg bag of nibs makes 285 cups. The Chocolate Society can supply shakers, arguably as effective as Velvetisers at frothing and more affordable. With gifting needed to support sales through the cost-of-living crisis, you can bundle £25 shakers, cookbooks or mugs with pretty hot chocolate tins. Cocoba can provide stir-in chocolate spoons and hot chocolate bombes.

HOW ELSE CAN WE MAKE THE MOST OF THE TREND?

- Choose products with sunflower rather than soya lecithin to sidestep potential allergens
- Curate accompaniments. For example, flapjacks complement the oaty notes in Firetree's oat milk chocolate drink
- In summer, promote iced chocolate frappes
- Tip from Knoops: while cool hipsters may seek the complexity of single origin hot chocolate, there are just as many fans of sweet nostalgic blends – the equivalent of Cadbury's Dairy Milk

WILL THE TREND LAST?

Yes, but only if indies and coffee houses push product differentiation. They must educate consumers about eco credentials, taste, origins and cocoa solids percentages, while offering them variants such as salted caramel, mocha and mint chocolate to make ordering fun. Not by accident does Knoops have counters inside Harrods and Selfridges where chocolate baristas help customers design their ideal fix.

Just think. One day, chocolate could have more options than coffee.

ABOUT **ONE** IN **THREE** CONSUMERS AGED **18-34** SAY **MOOD BOOSTING** AND **RELAXATION** CLAIMS ARE **KEY** TO THEIR **PURCHASING** DECISIONS

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LAST MINUTE CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS

With only a few weeks left to go until the big day, we speak to fine food retailers to find out what their biggest Christmas concerns are and their last-minute tips for seasonal success

COMMENTATORS



AMY COLEMAN
RHUG ESTATE



TOM NEWEY
COBBS FARM SHOPS



MARK KACARY
THE NORFOLK DELI



HEATHER COPLEY
FARMER COPLEYS



SIMON JONES
FOREST DELI

As the biggest retail event and food occasion of the year, Christmas is planned months in advance to make sure those crucial weeks go smoothly. By summer, the festive stock has been ordered, and when an autumn chill winds its way through the trees, the decorations are ready – if not already up – and promotions are underway.

But with economic and political uncertainty casting a shadow over the festive season, there is plenty of scope for last-minute preparations. In fact, independent retailers especially have the flexibility to adapt last minute – whether that's updating their website or social media, sending out a final newsletter to customers, or getting in extra seasonal staff to help offer the best customer service.

Christmas concerns

This year, fine food retailers have a lot to be worried about – from the cost-of-living crisis to rising energy bills and a revolving door at Number 10. As Tom Newey, CEO of Cobbs Farm Shops, puts it, "Christmas is always incredibly hard to plan for, but this year feels especially hard to predict." But what are indies' biggest concerns for Christmas 2022?

For Amy Coleman, farm shop manager at Rhug Estate, "My biggest concern is the knock-on effect of the ever-increasing cost-of-living and the sacrifices people are going to have to make this year as a result of this.

"At Rhug Estate we pride ourselves on providing customers with the highest quality products and services and inevitably this comes in at a cost higher than that of supermarkets and such like.

"It could go either way for us and other farm shops over the festive period, people may choose to go all out at Christmas as they have been cutting back on other things or they may have to reconsider their usual spend at that time of year and cut back on the "luxury" items they usually buy."

Heather Copley, co-owner of Farmer Copleys, is also finding it difficult to predict which way it will go. "My biggest concerns are twofold: firstly, are people going to come and buy their 'normal' purchases, have I pre-bought too much, then secondly, are people going to spend more on food and family gifting rather than non-food gifts and thus have we got enough?

"What we really need is a crystal ball. We have made an educated decision by keeping bought-in stock at last year's levels, thinking seriously about the lines that we are going to stock, and having the ability to upscale all of our on-site and homemade produce including hampers."

This is a common dilemma for independents, and Mark Kacary, managing director at Norfolk Deli, is taking a similar approach. "We are looking at Christmas and having to make an educated guess as to what we think people will spend, how many fewer people we will see come into the shop in the lead up to Christmas, and informing our customers as often as we possibly can that if they want something they need to order it," he explains.

Eleventh-hour preparation

While indies have the benefit of being flexible over the festive period, this doesn't mean they shouldn't be prepared. As Amy explains, "To ensure things run smoothly the key (for us anyway) is to be prepared.

"We planned all our Christmas events in early September this year, to ensure that we have the time to make sure the events we have scheduled run efficiently and to the highest standard for our customers to enjoy."

For Heather, "The team are going to be key more so than ever before, so we will be keeping them upbeat to ensure the customer has a really positive festive experience.

"We will be ensuring the ambience of the shop is delightful and everything that customers want to feel at Christmas, we aim to make Farmer Copleys 'the' place to shop this Christmas, we are having a positive outlook, even though as business owners it is unsettling at the moment."

Making sure both staff and customers are happy is something Tom also feels strongly about. His last-minute preparations involve "Making sure rotas are planned well in advance and that staff are prepared for (we hope) a busy period and ensuring key equipment – from fridges to tills – is working properly.

"It's an incredibly pressured time for all the staff and small gestures of recognition will go a long way to making them feel special – we need them on top form as they represent us over this crucial trading period."

After all, as Tom puts it, "If your team are embracing that Christmas spirit, then so will your customers."

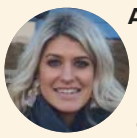
But for Mark Kacary, there won't be any last-minute preparations as such. "We are not and will not be making any last-minute purchases. This could work for us if the doom

> "Christmas is always incredibly hard to plan for, but this year feels especially hard to predict"



ADVICE FOR NEW INDIES

With so much uncertainty going on, new independents are likely going to struggle over the next few months. Five fine food retailers with decades of experience between them from around the country share their top tips with *Speciality Food* readers



AMY COLEMAN, THE RHUG ESTATE
My advice would be to consider the challenges everyone is facing and think about ways you can offer your customers incentives to shop with you rather than elsewhere. This could be through a loyalty scheme, discounts or promotions or customer service, for example.



TOM NEWEY, COBBS FARM SHOPS
Don't over-order products and find yourself with Christmas-themed stock you end up wasting off in January, hammering your margins. Running out of some non-core lines in the day or two before Christmas is absolutely okay. In those febrile days running up to the big day, your customers will likely be as stressed as you are, albeit for different reasons. Empathy is vital, even if inside you feel like screaming.



MARK KACARY, NORFOLK DELI
Understand your market. Understand how your customer is, what level of disposable income they might have, and what effect the economic situation is likely to have on them. Understand the area your business is located in, and who is your competition. What will you be seeking to sell which is available elsewhere in a cheaper format?



HEATHER COPLEY, FARMER COPLEYS
Have a stiff drink! In all seriousness, if it is your first year as an independent retailer, you've had a baptism of fire and thus best foot forward attitude but keep a check of your numbers, know your numbers and if you need to shift some product lines, remember your first loss/discount is your best loss.



SIMON JONES, FOREST DELI
For any new businesses, my honest advice would be to not overstretch yourselves, and not to overstock – but it is a fine balance. Having a lot more crackers and chutney in-store is no bad thing, as that will still sell next year, having too much very ripe Brie left is not such a good idea! Also, what another local deli told us when we opened, don't panic when it goes very quiet in mid-December – customers are making fridge and cupboard space before stoking up for the season.



and gloom turn out to be true, but also means that if there is a higher demand and desperation to get something, we will be able to shift things we wouldn't ordinarily be able to shift, just because it's Christmas," he explains.

Seasonal success

With customers feeling a strong pull towards the multiples this Christmas as costs mount, independent retailers need to ensure they give them a reason to shop with them for seasonal success.

As Amy explains, "I would look at ways to offer customers a reason to shop with you rather than somewhere else. Given the current cost of living crisis, I would be looking at ways to offer promotions and discounts to incentivise people along with low-cost events to encourage more visitors."

At the Norfolk Deli, Mark does this by championing local Norfolk produce and making sure his offering is unique. "None of the supermarkets near us sell local produce", he explains. "Local beers, wines, spirits, cheeses, chutneys etc are only available in shops like ours. They also offer customers a great option for a low-cost unique, useful and cost-effective gift.

"If an independent can offer customers something which is local, unique (in that it's not widely available everywhere) and at a price that it can be seen as a relatively cheap gift or an inexpensive luxury, you will find that you're not stacking your shelves with items which look and feel like an upmarket supermarket brand, they will support local businesses and offer gifts as well as food to your public."

But whatever you specialise in at your store, the most important thing is to sell it with a smile, according to Simon Jones, co-owner of Forest Deli. "As always, people like to shop for quality food and drink at Christmas. As long as you are offering that with the right team of people to help you, take a deep breath on the 18th, open the door and smile, and it will soon be Christmas", he tells *Speciality Food*.

Heather concludes, "Have a positive attitude, do the best you can for your team, your customers, your suppliers and ultimately this will reflect in them looking after your business, keep the heart in the business, because, many high streets and national retailers have lost their heart."

> "The team are going to be key more so than ever before, so we will be keeping them upbeat to ensure the customer has a really positive festive experience"



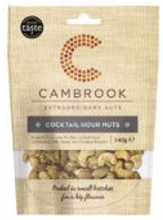
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thewoodenspoon.co.uk



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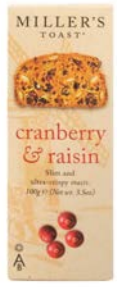
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COMMENTATORS



CLAIRE HARCUP
SUN VALLEY RICE



IAN BUTT
POTTS'



CAROL LONGBOTTOM
SUMA



MADDIE GRINHAM
MR ORGANIC



MARK KACARY
THE NORFOLK DELI



SELLING THE STORECUPBOARD

With the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis changing the way consumers shop and eat, we explore how to sell store-cupboard essentials in 2022 and beyond

Whether housing simple ingredients such as chopped tomatoes and pasta for whipping up a meal from scratch – something consumers rediscovered during the pandemic – or pre-prepared staples to save time and effort, the storecupboard has remained a mainstay of people's food habits throughout history.

But what are consumers looking for in 2022, and how have consumer habits changed over the past few years when it comes to stocking up on essentials?

Tapping into consumer demand

While the essentials are still as popular as ever in kitchen cupboards, consumers are wanting more from their storecupboards in 2022, seeking out sustainability, quality and products that cater to dietary requirements.

Therefore, indie retailers need to be attuned to the trends dominating the market. As Carol Longbottom, part of the marketing team at Suma Wholefoods, explains, "Our range has grown to cater to emerging trends within the food industry, and now has over 100 products including pasta sauces, tinned beans, pasta, rice and oils.

"Each product we create is designed to help consumers who enjoy high-quality food but are also conscious of the environmental impact of their shopping choices.

"For the fine food sector, attributes such as BPA free tins, Organic or B Corp certified brands are increasingly important for the consumer."

In fact, sustainability and provenance continue to be key trends in 2022 and beyond, something fine food retail can certainly cash in on. According to Ian Butt, commercial director at Potts', "Our most popular and most relevant lines now are our 100% recyclable stocks and brand-new cooking sauces in aluminium 'drinks cans'.

"They allow consumers to shop the same premium products that Potts' are known for without having to sacrifice making the most sustainable choice. They also come with a pretty significant shelf presence too!"

This is something that Carol has also noticed, as she tells *Speciality Food*, "Interest in organic and the provenance of food continues to grow. Food retailers should be looking to stock high-quality organic basics, but also stand-out luxury products that can be used to create exciting recipes.

"The move towards flexitarian diets has gone mainstream now, with consumers expecting to see plant-based alternatives alongside meat and dairy options. So, vegan pates, nut butters and spreads are popular.

"It's important to keep up with new trends like alternatives to wheat flour, for example, oat flour or ancient grains, which offer options for those wishing to reduce or eliminate gluten from their diets."

Changing consumer habits

The last few years have completely changed the way people shop. From lockdowns during the pandemic to rising inflation causing a cost-of-living crisis, independent retailers need to stay up-to-date with how consumers are stocking up.

As Maddie Grinham, brand manager at Mr Organic, explains, "During the pandemic, we found that consumers were becoming more experimental with their shopping choices in order to re-create restaurant quality meals at home. Products including our baking range, chopped tomatoes and pastas were hugely popular.

"Since emerging out of lockdown, we have seen greater demand for our products aimed at busy cooks, such as our healthier choice pasta sauce range, as shoppers became more time-poor and were looking for quick, nutritious meal options.

"We expect this trend to change somewhat as shoppers navigate the cost-of-living crisis. As consumers start to eat out less and become more conscious of their basket spending, we anticipate increased sales of our cupboard staples such as tinned beans and grains.

"Our beans in particular are showing to be a strong seller, as customers look for a lower cost, plant-based alternative that is both high in protein and low in sugar and salt."

Claire Harcup, head of sales and marketing at Sun Valley Rice, has also noticed that shoppers are purchasing cupboard essentials in this time of uncertainty. "Consumers are certainly feeling the pressure of inflation and looking to cook on a budget. Maintaining a well-stocked store cupboard is key to keeping household food costs down. At the same time, they are in search of a taste the entire family will enjoy, nutrition, diversity of use, and sustainability."

As a common household staple, "Rice not only checks all of these boxes, it's a food for all seasons, cuisines, and dietary needs (esp. those with celiac disease). It's a whole grain that boasts protein and fiber. Perfect for consumers looking out for their health and avoiding processed foods", she adds.

But just because storecupboard ingredients are deemed staples, it doesn't mean people aren't opting for premium quality, as Carol points out. "During the pandemic, we saw people spending more on luxury and specialist food at home because they weren't going out. The current cost of living crisis is seeing the same, so catering to consumers looking for higher-end and distinctive foods is important.

"As people continue to spend time at home, either for leisure or work, we've seen a focus on snacking with nut butters and pates, as well as good quality, tasty convenience food for quick and easy lunches. With this in mind, we've extended our vegan convenience range and it's proving popular."

Presenting the idea of the storecupboard going premium, Ian adds, "With the instability in the economy right now, I think people are set to return to cooking and eating at home. I think the next year could be quite positive for premium UK food businesses, as people refocus their spending on quality grub made at home.

"Given our placement at the premium end of the market, we have always found that the 'classics' remain high on peoples' shopping lists. Lots of us were cooped up and unable to eat out during the pandemic which led to a need for quick and interesting meal solutions at home.

"If you were in a place to offer 'premium convenience' products such as we do, there was a huge market for these products."

Upselling the storecupboard

With a financial crisis changing consumer shopping behaviour,

> "Shoppers may be more selective on what they spend their money on this year but they will continue to buy good quality products from genuine brands if given the choice, especially in the run-up to Christmas"





"This also opens up the opportunity to upsell on a packet of pasta (fresh or not). Offer the customer idea of what they could buy to make a meal, for example, pasta, a jar of passata, fresh olives, a tin of anchovies, a lar of capers and some cheese from the cheese counter, and hey presto, you have a tasty pasta dish."

But as Ian suggests, "Rather than upselling, 2022 should be about ensuring that the shoppers continue to spend. I believe offering quality products with sustainable options where possible gives retailers the best chance of maximising sales for the rest of 2022.

"Shoppers may be more selective on what they spend their money on this year but they will continue to buy good quality products from genuine brands if given the choice, especially in the run-up to Christmas."

Nevertheless, with many consumers counting their pennies, Mark warns that the next few months will be difficult for smaller independent retailers.

"It has to be remembered that in an age where many people are buying supermarket own brand products to make their money stretch further, premium quality fine food store cupboard produce from man independent will become harder to sell.

"I do think that there will be an increasing number of people who would love to have a pantry or a store cupboard (or more correctly the money to stock either), but the foreseeable future is going to be tough and independents will have to accept (unless they're located in the right place) that sales of store cupboard products might not be what we are all used to", he concludes.

> "As far as what should fine food retailers look for in storecupboard produce, then it will have to be items that people can make a meal with"

upselling techniques are more important than ever.

For Carol, social media and in-store signage are king. "Recipes and social media can showcase luxury products and alternatives to more traditional ingredients. People use their phones to look for inspiration and Instagram is the place to go for delicious recipes.

"Signage and point of sale are really important for fine food retailers. Consumers might be looking for new products or plant-based options, but won't necessarily know where to look for them in-store, so it's important to make it really clear."

A key method for Maddie is capitalising on popular flavours and cuisines – and providing customers with all the ingredients to create new dishes. "Playing into trending cuisines and dishes in the market to offer consumers the experience of cooking restaurant-style meals at home is increasingly important as we enter a time of reduced disposable income.

"To help upsell, pairing and bundles are always a good way to attract the customers' attention. For example, pasta sauces with spaghetti bundles or a homemade hummus kit are a great way to solve a particular need for the consumer," she explains.

Mark Kacary, managing director at The Norfolk Deli, agrees, adding, "As far as what should fine food retailers look for in storecupboard produce, then it will have to be items that people can make a meal with. We stock a selection of products which can be used either as a base for something like a pizza or the start of a pasta sauce.

> "As consumers start to eat out less and become more conscious of their basket spending, we anticipate increased sales of our cupboard staples such as tinned beans and grains"

STOCK CHECK



SUMA ORGANIC CHOPPED TOMATOES WITH BASIL

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PLANET RICE POWER BLEND

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BOTREE SEASONINGS BLACK KAMPOT PEPPER

Citrus aromas combine with a unique heat to produce an unmistakable taste sensation.

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BBC showcases artisan cheese producer in Suffolk

Artisan cheesemaker Jonny Crickmore and his wife Dulcie, the creators of Barod Bigod, appeared in a BBC documentary *This is England* in October, showing their resilience during the pandemic.

The film explored how a tough period of low milk prices in 2012 forced them to be creative and think of new ways to innovate, grow and thrive. The couple started selling raw milk from the farm gate before using it to create the now-famous artisan raw-milk cheese, Baron Bigod. The farm went from selling a few cheese wheels a week to dispatching more than 3,500 each week, with the business continuing to thrive thanks to money-saving, sustainable methods.

Jonny told *Speciality Food*, "Having control over so many of the steps in the process helped us manage to avoid getting drawn into low milk prices and the extra costs which have come in this year. For example, we grow a lot of crops ourselves rather than having to buy feed. Covid-19 was actually fine for us, as people thought of cheese as a small treat when they couldn't go out for meals or a holiday.

"It is huge recognition that the BBC found us and that we are interesting enough to do a story on. It's an honour to be on BBC1 on a Friday night. The future of artisan cheese is strong and looks good. Once you get a taste for artisan cheese it's easy to get addicted to it and hard to go back. The threat is not having enough cheesemakers – there is a lot of infrastructure, cost and hard work in the beginning which can be daunting."

CHEESE FACT FILE...

CAWS PENHELYG ABATY GLAS



- **Country of origin:** Wales
- **Region:** Aberystwyth
- **Milk:** Unpasteurised cows
- **Description:** A creamy blue Brie-style cheese, made from locally-sourced organic raw milk and suitable for vegetarians.

Price of milk and cheese increases with inflation

The cost of food has risen by 14.6 per cent in the 12 months to September 2022, the highest level since April 1980. The largest increases can be seen in the prices of bread and cereals, meat, milk, cheese and eggs.

The war in Ukraine has put pressure on the price of cooking oils in butter and has escalated the cost of fertilisers and feed used by farmers to produce milk, resulting in skyrocketing production prices.

Dairy farmers are being advised to fix prices for fertiliser and feed as they head into the winter. John Allen, managing partner at Kite Consulting, explained, "There is a reluctance to manage risk. Farmers are hesitant about milk prices and believe they are going to fall, and if they fix forward on fertiliser and feed, they will have higher feed and fertiliser prices and a lower milk price."

Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2022: IJ Mellis, Edinburgh

AGEING PROS



Originally started by Iain Mellis in 1993 following many years spent in the cheese industry, Edinburgh's IJ Mellis has become an iconic cheesemonger – no wonder when the business has such insight at its core.

"He opened his first retail store in Edinburgh's old town on Victoria Street after locating a damp, small, cave-like premises, ideal for maturing and selling cheese," explains Iain's son and now director of IJ Mellis, Rory. "After two years he opened his next store in the west end of Glasgow and was joined by my mum, Karen.

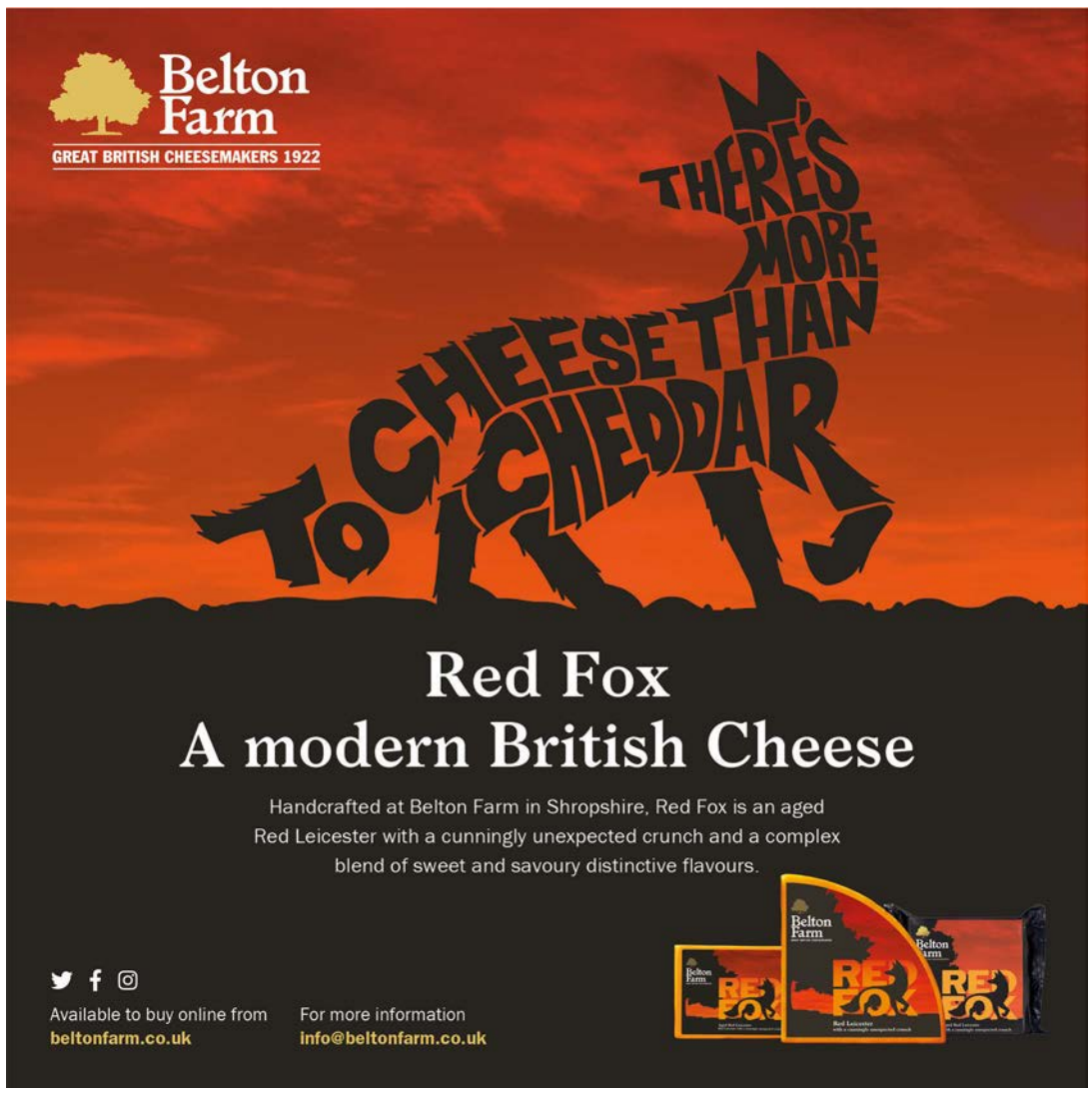
"Mum's background was in nursing, and when she joined my dad in the business, she brought with her a warm and personal touch which is something we encompass in our customer service style and are well known for," he continues. This valuable combination of expertise and great customer service is something that fine food independents are rightly famed for, and something which the IJ Mellis team offers in droves.

"Above all else, I believe that as we are a family-owned and operated business, our passion for cheese and genuine care for our customers is evident in all that we do. Whether it's our cheesemongers talking through different cheeseboard options and offering tasters in our stores, to our warehouse assistants who carefully cut, wrap and deliver all over the UK, each person does their bit to make sure we are providing the best possible service."

The shape of IJ Mellis has changed "considerably" over the past three years, but Rory is facing the future with typical attention to quality and stability. "The growth of our e-commerce community has allowed us to reach more customers further afield. However, we have still focused on providing our trade customers with quality service and products and placed a big emphasis on making sure our retail customers feel the same way," he says.

"Sales have increased online; however, we are still seeing just as many lovely, loyal faces walk through the front doors of our retail shops, wine bar and even maturing rooms in recent years. We strongly believe that nothing can replace human interaction and there is no better way to select your cheese than by receiving a taster from the block in one of our stores."

Find out more about why IJ Mellis was highlighted in our Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2022 publication by downloading it for free from specialityfoodmagazine.com/issuedownload.



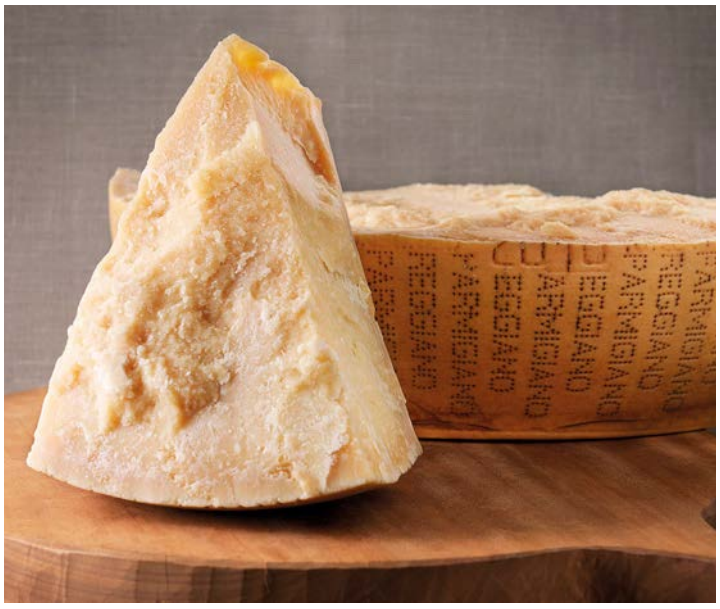
Parmigiano Reggiano Consortium trials tech to battle copycat producers

The Parmigiano Reggiano Consortium is taking a technological approach to protecting the unique product, by trialling the insertion of digital labels into the casein skin of 100,000 wheels of cheese. If the trial is successful, the chips will be rolled out more widely to stamp out copycat producers.

According to the organisation, the move is designed to improve traceability, inventory tracking and control, product authentication and quality assurance testing, product serialisation and consumer safety.

Describing the process, the consortium explained that "By integrating p-chip micro transponders into casein tags, the consortium can better control its inventory and protect and differentiate its products against look and sound-alike brands and have access to unmatchable track-and-trace technology to protect itself in the case of recalls or other issues," it adds.

According to Nicola Bertinelli, consortium president, this tech rollout was designed to "convey the value of our product globally and distinguish it from similar-sounding products on the market that do not meet our strict requirements for production and area of origin."



NEWS IN BRIEF

UK CHEESE EXPORTS INCREASED IN 2022

Despite a mixed export performance across the whole dairy category, cheese saw an increase of 22% from January-August 2022. The biggest contributor to this growth was Cheddar, where exports were up 25% year on year for the period. This was primarily driven by increased exports to the EU (+35%), particularly France, Germany and Spain. However, this growth was against a low comparable in 2021, when exports were hindered by both new regulations and reduced demand from importers due to Covid restrictions.

PLANT-BASED CHEESE START-UP SECURES FUNDING

Popular Netherlands alt-cheese startup Willicroft has announced that it has raised €2 million to fuel growth in the UK, Germany and the Nordics. After enjoying success in the Netherlands and Belgium, the brand's This is Not Cheese range expanded into the UK in 2020 and is now set to enter further European markets.

BOROUGH CHEESE COMPANY OPENS NEW STORE IN BRISTOL

After years at London's Borough Market, the Borough Cheese Company has opened a shop in Bristol. The North Street Cheese Company, is located in the Bedminster area, which is already home to several indies in the city. The shop will be managed by Kim Trethowan and niece Tilly, part of the family behind the popular Pitchfork Cheddar and Gorwydd Caerphilly.



"Autumn: time for cheese"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

Autumn is a beautiful season for cheese. As the leaves gently drop and carpet the ground with gold and brown, we start looking forward to warming dishes. When I walk with my Labradors Cheddar and Blue, I often think about what meal to prepare for the family when I get home.

Seasonality is key when it comes to eating in the Grant household and we are careful to stick to the British food calendar. Cheese, of course, is available all year round, however if you want it at its best you will often find certain cheeses that are prime for picking as the nights begin to draw in.

One such fabulous cheese is a proper farmhouse Cheddar, such as Montgomery or Pitchfork. Cheddars often reach their peak between nine and 12 months. This is a great time to ask your local cheesemonger to recommend one that is showing particularly well.

Cheddar is a versatile cheese and can be used as an ingredient or celebrated on its own. I enjoy grating a handsome pile on top of a well-cooked jacket potato. The potato has to have crispy and slightly charred skin, whilst maintaining a moist centre. The children absolutely love a chunk of good butter, let's say Keen's Whey Butter, placed in the cut open potato. Then I grate a pile of Keen's Cheddar on top. The heat easily melts the butter which oozes down the sides of the potato and the cheese melts perfectly on top.

A simple cheese toastie done well with good bread in a pan is always a winner. I pour a little rapeseed oil plus a chunk of butter into the pan. Then I add the sourdough sandwich, that I have crammed full of good Cheddar, and let one side cook over a medium heat. On top of the sandwich I place a steak weight. Once satisfied that the bread is browning and cheese melting I turn it over and add a little more butter with oil. Whilst this is cooking I season the sandwich with cracked black pepper. I serve this on a warmed plate along with a homemade vegetable soup. The children love dunking their toasties into the soup and literally wolf it down.

Obviously as a cheesemonger and retailer I want to encourage my customers to buy more cheese. The addition of a recipe card thrown in with the purchased cheese is a great way to encourage customers to use the cheese in different and nutritious ways. Cheese can easily become the star attraction when it comes to dinner time. Cheese is nutritious and forms part of a controlled diet. Many customers only buy artisan cheese to place on their cheeseboards. I agree that a cheeseboard is the only way to appreciate the cheese's characteristics without distraction from other ingredients. However good cheese should and must also to be appreciated as a primary ingredient for the main meal at home. Try making a simple cheese and potato pie. It can be served with some lovely veggies. This will be a filling and nourishing family meal without breaking the bank.

My column for this month is aimed to encourage cheese retailers to talk to customers and find out how they intend to use their cheese. I actively encourage cheesemongers to engage in conversation about favourite cheese recipes and making cheese the primary ingredient.

We are at a challenging time as I write and we need our customers to embrace artisan cheese over industrial. Already large creameries are beginning to produce more artisan-styled cheese – shockingly, they are beginning to look like the real thing but lack any depth of flavour. Industrial cheese is cheap and encourages people that have a tight budget to buy supermarket brands. We need to talk to our customers about why artisan is better, more nutritious and can also be super versatile when it comes to cooking. Use autumn as an opportunity to promote warming cheeesy main meals with great British cheese. Now let me get that toastie on!

> "We need to talk to our customers about why artisan is better, more nutritious and can also be super versatile when it comes to cooking. Use autumn as an opportunity to promote warming cheeesy main meals with great British cheese"

SPONSORED BY

PETER'S YARD

HOW TO CHAMPION LOCAL CHEESE

With more consumers looking to buy British, we explore how independent fine food retailers can champion their local produce



Whether you're already a regional cheese specialist or just starting to explore your local produce, find out how to make the most of the growing 'Buy British' movement and support artisan cheesemakers.

The demand for local

The idea of buying local has always been a strong appeal for indies, but this demand has grown rapidly over the past few years, largely driven by the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit.

As Jen Grimstone-Jones, co-owner of Cheese Etc, the Pangbourne Cheese Shop, explains, "During the lockdown, we took as much cheese as we could from our local producers as we wanted them to be able to continue making and selling cheese.

"Local produce is just so important, as people like to know where their food is coming from and many of our local cheeses come from less than 10 miles away from our base in Pangbourne."

Shoppers are also becoming increasingly aware of their environmental impact, as Oli Smith, co-owner of The Bristol Cheesemonger, adds, "I think, as a nation, we have all become more interested in the provenance of our food in recent years and there are is a myriad of reasons for this.

"People want to know more about the way their food is produced, for environmental and animal welfare reasons, as well as being really keen to reduce food miles."

Showcasing regional produce

There is a strong case for cheesemongers and delis to champion their local produce and tempt customers with alternatives to the classic cheeses from their area.

"We have always stocked our local cheeses, as I think every independent cheesemonger does. We build up relationships with the cheesemakers which means we get to see (and taste) any new cheeses that they might be experimenting with and in return, they know that they have a constant, reliable outlet for their cheeses", Jen explains.

"We are very lucky in that one of our members of staff used to work for one of our local cheesemakers. She knows all about their cheeses and is a fountain of knowledge when it comes to making and caring for young cheeses."

For Oli, the decision to maintain his store's focus on regional cheeses after taking it over a few years ago was easy. "The Bristol Cheesemonger has been a local cheese specialist since day one. When I first started working at the shop, I was really taken by the company's dedication to showcasing local and seasonal cheese, and focus on close relationships with the producers.

"Bristol's food scene is extremely vibrant and environmentally conscious and we are fortunate to have some of the world's finest cheesemakers very nearby, so the decision was entirely natural. Since Jenny and I took on the business that ethos has remained critical."

Making recommendations

While you have a wide variety of locally sourced cheeses that you know inside out, your customers may not know where to start. Therefore, it's important to be ready with recommendations for your regional produce.

This is certainly the case for Oli, as he tells *Speciality Food*, "The significant majority of cheeses in our shop are from producers that most people will not have heard of and our team are delighted to be asked for recommendations!

"We try and narrow things down a bit by asking customers what sort of things they usually go for and by testing out cheese until we find something ideal for each person. That being said, the service is personal and will vary depending on who is serving and what cheeses they think are tasting particularly good at the time.

"Our customers value our varied opinions – we even have an online product called the Cheesemonger Selection where whoever picks up the order will just put together whatever selection they think is best, so that our online customers can enjoy that quality of service too."

Jen has a similar approach. "Usually when people ask us for recommendations, we always talk about our local cheeses first, then the British and then the Continental," she explains. "We are lucky enough to be able to offer a complete local cheeseboard and our 'local gift box' is our most popular gift available through our website."

> "Get those cheeses front and centre on your displays, taste them out, and share the stories of the producers with your customers"

Local upselling

Tempting customers to swap their classic Brie for a British variety might sound difficult, but once they set foot in your shop, they've already made the first step according to Jen.

"Our local cheeses are situated in the centre of our cheese counter. It tends to be the point that most customers gravitate to so they are highlighted before we even begin to talk to customers.

"To be honest, our local cheeses are so good that they almost sell themselves, and one of our local goats' cheeses is probably my favourite cheese of all time which all of our staff relay to our customers!"

Oli agrees that keeping it simple is best. "Knowing the product and the producer really is so good for sales as well as for supporting British cheese. Get those cheeses front and centre on your displays, taste them out, and share the stories of the producers with your customers.

"Your relationship with the producer will make you and your customers find small, brilliant producers and support the diversity and growth of British cheeses."



COMMENTATORS



MICHAEL THOMSON
MIKE'S FANCY CHEESE



STEPHEN FLEMING
GEORGE & JOSEPH



PATRICIA MICHELSON
LA FROMAGERIE



MATTHEW HALL
BUTLERS FARMHOUSE CHEESES



JEN GRIMSTONE-JONES
CHEESE ETC



CAROLINE BELL
SHEPHERDS PURSE

BLUE CHEESE: NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS

We explore how fine food retailers can curate the perfect balance of tradition and innovation in their blue cheese selections, to tick all their customers' boxes this winter and beyond

Blue cheese is unapologetically synonymous with Christmas. After all, no cheeseboard is complete without a sharp and salty blue to add variety. As Patricia Michelson, owner of La Fromagerie, explains, "It is the time of year when I will bring out just one perfectly formed, rib-tickling, throat-scratching, eye-watering blue-veined cheese."

But what are consumers looking for in their blues as we approach the end of 2022, and how can fine food retailers upsell them?

Catering to demand

Today's fine food customer is more discerning than ever, looking for something special to make their cheeseboard unique.

According to Matthew Hall, fourth-generation owner of Butlers Farmhouse Cheeses, the festive season is the perfect time to do this. "At Christmas, consumers are looking for something extra special when choosing blue cheese at their fine food retailer.

"They want quality, British blue decadence that reaffirms and validates the reasons why they love to shop there. People want to indulge at Christmas, too – the creamier and richer the blue, the better. They want a velvety cheese that coats the mouth."

Caroline Bell, joint managing director at Shepherds Purse, adds, "Consumers are looking for variety, quality and depth in their blue cheeses, and with the diverse range available they are free to choose the right blue cheese for them, and the occasion they buying for.

"As consumers have more choice, they have increasing opportunities to understand the breadth and depth of the category. Helping the consumer to be able to identify the differences, further deepen their knowledge and experiences of the nuances can help retailers to add value to their experience."

For Stephen Fleming, owner of George & Joseph, it's all about palate-friendly local cheese. "We're seeing a trend towards milder, creamier blue cheeses – Montagnolo is proving very popular with our customers this year, as is Leeds Blue which is made locally."

Also noticing this trend, Michael Thomson, director at Mike's Fancy Cheese, adds, "Most of our customers are looking for that blue Brie style as it's a nice way into blue cheese – it's the creaminess they are after.

"Most well-made blue cheese should achieve that melt-in-the-mouth texture as the main function of the blue is to break the cheese down and unlock all the different tastes and textures, not for the blue to be the main flavour."

As Jen Grimstone-Jones, co-owner of Cheese Etc, the Pangbourne Cheese Shop, tells *Speciality Food*, "Blue cheese and Christmas are the perfect match. I have to admit I am a huge fan of our classic Colston Bassett Blue Stilton PDO. I have fond childhood memories of when my dad would bring home a two-kilogram Baby Stilton which only he and I liked so we would feast on it for weeks!

"But blue cheese has come a long way and we now sell a huge variety. We get a real mix of requests when it comes to blues, some people want something soft, creamy and mild whilst others come in looking for a blue that will 'bite back'!

"I am adding another Italian blue this Christmas – the Blu 61.

> "We're seeing a trend towards milder, creamier blue cheeses – Montagnolo is proving very popular with our customers this year, as is Leeds Blue which is made locally"



This is soaked in dessert wine and topped with cranberries – it tastes of Christmas with every bite and I am sure our customers are going to love it!"





A well-balanced selection

When it comes to stocking blue cheese, having a selection that appeals to everyone is an easy win.

As Jen explains, "We try and make sure that we cater to all tastes. We have a range that includes cows', sheep and goats' milk cheeses and they vary from mild to strong, creamy to crumbly, there's even a washed and a smoked."

At Mike's Fancy Cheese, which specialises in small-scale Irish cheese, "We have a nice range on our counter, and we are lucky to have a great range of blues. If you have the space, stock at least one of each milk type, cow, goat and sheep, and a range of textures from soft to crumbly.

"But keeping the selection tight with cheese turning over quickly is more important, as you don't want sad, dull, sweaty cheese!", Michael adds.

This is something Stephen also recommends. "On our counter we have a range of blue styles, with variations on the intensity of flavour, texture and different milk types. We have creamy blues like Gorgonzola, sheep's milk blue like Roquefort, and buffalo milk cheese like Shepherds Purse's Buffalo Blue."

Variety is extremely important to Patricia at La Fromagerie. "What makes a great blue is the melding of rich buttery crumbly pate with sharp threads of blue running through to bring their steely strength and create intensity to your senses. I believe British blue cheeses have a great depth of flavour and texture, as well as variety, but they also have subtlety and mellow fruitiness too.

"Every year we have blues from the UK, France, Italy, Spain and Germany as well as the powerhouse blue from USA – Rogue River Blue and Smokey Blue", she explains.

"We will be suggesting Stilton and Stichelton of course, but also Devon and Beenleigh Blues from the UK, Roquefort, Fourme d'Ambert and Zelu Koloria (a Basque Blue) from France, our extraordinary Gorgonzola Dolce Cremificato or Naturale from Italy, Cashel Blue from Tipperary, Picos Valdeon and Cabrales from Spain, and a sweet buttery-rich blue from Bavaria – Bayrischer Blauschimmelkase (for those who want a really gentle blue)."

Upselling blue this Christmas

Despite the country facing economic uncertainty, shoppers will still be looking to treat themselves this Christmas, with many choosing to comfort themselves with luxury food items. Therefore, "Fine food retailers must meet the consumer desire for decadence and sell the dream of exciting blue cheese pairings", Matt says.

As Caroline explains, "Blue cheese has become synonymous with Christmas and the winter weather, I think in part to the rich, umami warmth it can bring to the palate and to any dish. It pairs well with other foods and dishes that suit the season too, and it's a cheese that becomes richer and warmer by being warmed and melted.

"Independent fine food retailers have the opportunity to upsell this season by sharing pairing suggestions and recipes that evoke this naturally warming experience that blue cheese can offer."

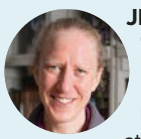
For Michael, the key to upselling is simple. "Coming out of Covid, it's great to be able to sample again. And nothing sells cheese better than a piece on the end of a knife. Knowing your producers' story and understanding what your customer wants in a blue will help to match the two."

But as Matt suggests, "Show as well as tell. Create on-shelf displays and tastings that place blue cheese not only with premium crackers and chutneys, but with accompaniments like dates, jams, fruit cake and biscuits, too.

"The beauty of blue cheese is that you have a carrier to add more flavour than a hard cheese. For example, it really lends itself to sweeter tones from fruit or honey.

BEST SELLING BLUES

Three cheesemongers from around the UK reveal their most popular British cheeses



JEN GRIMSTONE JONES, CO-OWNER OF CHEESE ETC, THE PANGBOURNE CHEESE SHOP IN READING

Our best-selling blue at Christmas is always our local Barkham Blue. If you don't place a pre-order with us at Christmas you will not be able to buy Barkham from our counter! Colston Bassett Blue Stilton PDO comes a very close second. We also do a spooning Gorgonzola Dolce PDO, not just at Christmas but all year round, and it will be right up there in our Christmas sales.



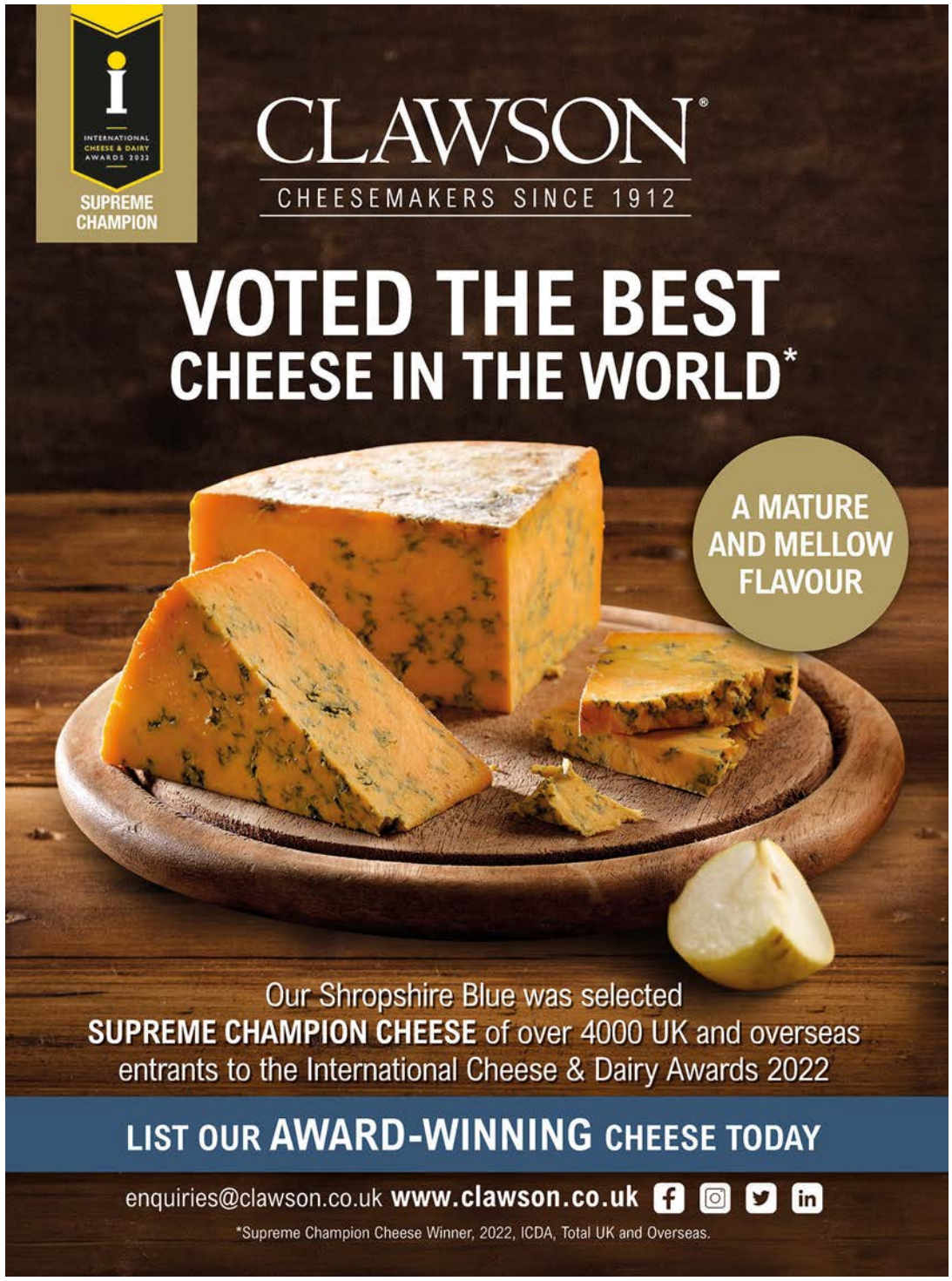
MICHAEL THOMPSON, DIRECTOR AT MIKES FANCY CHEESE IN BELFAST

Our biggest seller is Young Buck as it is the cheese we make ourselves and one of the main reasons people find our wee shop down a back alley in Belfast. Next would be Cooldolce, a raw milk Gorgonzola style from Tipperary, and then we also have Boyne Valley Blue from Michael Flanagan in Louth.



STEPHEN FLEMING, OWNER OF GEORGE & JOSEPH IN LEEDS

Top-selling blues at George and Joseph are Colston Bassett Stilton, Gorgonzola Dolce, and Leeds Blue.





You can experiment with flavours and make a blue the centrepiece on a Christmas cheeseboard. It's then that they'll take the customer experience even higher."

For Stephen, it's all about creating this experience in-store. "Often our customers are looking for something a bit special and different at Christmas, so we carry cheeses like Gorgonzola Dolce at Christmas time. We spoon this into pots in front of the customer, which gives a great element of theatre which then tempts other customers to buy as well", he explains.

Jen agrees, "We offer a lot of tastings in the shop, people can try cheeses before they buy and this always helps to boost sales. Most people do include a blue on a balanced cheese board and so we sell a lot of blue all year round but there's something about cold winter evenings that draws people to blue cheeses."

Ultimately, as Bill Mathieson, managing director at Long Clawson, says, "Retailers and delis need to celebrate British cheese and inspire and inform customers about the versatility of the great British Stilton."

Selling blue outside the festive season

But retailers must remember that while it peaks over the festive period, blue cheese can be eaten all year round, despite it being a tough sell at some points.

For Caroline, "Whilst it's undeniable that blue cheese is a Christmas hero, it remains the favourite of many throughout the year due, in part, to its diversity and versatility, and we certainly see popularity being sustained throughout the year.

"It's great to enjoy on its own, and then there's no easier way to lift a dish in terms of flavour and richness than sprinkle on, or stir in, blue cheese, and in summer, the BBQ offers the perfect opportunity to allow blue cheese to shine."

Matt adds, "Blue cheese is most definitely for life, not just for Christmas, so retailers need to highlight the versatility that it offers year-round and show people that they can have that Christmas feeling again.

"Cooking with blue cheese brings a whole new flavour profile and so it's a fantastic hack to reinvent your leftovers and add some oomph to your mid-week meals.

"It's a big opportunity for retailers to drive blue cheese sales away from the Christmas period, the challenge will be managing limited shelf space. Inspiring and selling those different eating occasions at point of purchase is the way to win."

This is something Bill also points out. "We know that consumers have a latent love for Stilton, but they don't know why they don't consider it beyond the Christmas cheeseboard!

"They are looking to be inspired throughout the year in how they can use it in different recipes – it's perfect for steaks, burgers, pasta dishes or warming risottos.

"Looking at consumers, the biggest impact on spend has come from the pre-family lifestage (Kantar Worldpanel 2021), which is a great opportunity to target a younger shopper with our Blue Stilton and Shropshire Blue.

"Two thirds of consumers are using cheese in a hot meal (Mintel Cheese Report 2021) and thinking about blue cheese beyond a cheeseboard."

But as Christmas ramps up and cheese sales rise, as Patricia points out, "This year, more than any other, we need to remind ourselves that life is for living and the festive season is for family, friends and wrapping up another year but also about how we can be better in the next."

> "Create on-shelf displays and tastings that place blue cheese not only with premium crackers and chutneys, but with accompaniments like dates, jams, fruit cake and biscuits, too"

PAIRING: WINES AND BLUE CHEESE

Patricia Michelson, owner of La Fromagerie



Cheesemongers and delis alike pull out the stops with their cheese offering at this time of year.

While you suggest cheeses for the perfect board, it is actually the blue at this time – when you have dug deep to buy a good bottle or two of wine, or an aged port, or even push the boundaries trying a Madeira or Marsala that you'd never thought about at any other time of year – which is the one style that works.

I would say to get a few interesting wines in stock and look at how they partner with the cheese course, but also as a stand-alone cheese like a blue which you can enjoy right at the end of the meal or an hour or so after a heavy meal such as Christmas lunch.

The Picos and Valdeon are big hitters as is Roquefort, and therefore be careful not only what you wish for but also what you drink as often a white wine will fare better with its cutting acidity, than a red with its tannins. Better still is a fortified wine like Port, Marsala or Madeira – the old-fashioned wines fare much better than you think with cheese and are well worth showcasing.

Downton Abbey lovers may pass the port as a Tawny of 30 years is something wonderful with cheese, but I go further back in time to Jane Austen, Dickens and Samuel Pepys and pass the Marsala or Madeira.

These are magical with blue cheese and while we may be humbly turning off the heating this winter to save a few pennies, we can at least warm our cockles with a deep glass of silken dessert wine while tucking into the blue.



STOCK CHECK



CORNISH BLUE
An award-winning, sweet and creamy cheese ideal for newcomers to blue.
cornishcheese.co.uk



CURD & CURE TIDDLY BLUE
A unspiked, semi-soft blue cheese rind washed in Dudda's Tun Kentish Cider.
curdandcure.co.uk



BUTLERS FARMHOUSE CHEESES BLACKSTICKS BLUE
An eyecatching and versatile blue cheese handmade in Lancashire.
butlerscheeses.co.uk



SHEPHERDS PURSE YORKSHIRE BLUE
A mild and creamy blue cheese made with milk from proud Yorkshire cows.
shepherdspurse.co.uk



TWO HOOTS BARKHAM BLUE
Barkham Blue is made from Channel Island milk and has a rich blue taste and fabulously buttery texture.
twohootscheese



MIKE'S FANCY CHEESE YOUNG BUCK BLUE
A raw milk Stilton-style cheese, aged for a minimum of 12 weeks.
mfcheese.com



HARTINGTON BLUE STILTON
Pierced and matured for nine weeks, the result is a unique tangy and creamy blue Stilton.
hartingtoncreamery.co.uk



MONTAGNOLO AFFINE
A mellow triple cream soft blue with veining and a natural grey rind. Subtle and gentle, sweet with hints of salt.
finecheesesltd.co.uk



CLEMENCY HALL SHROPSHIRE BLUE
A mellow and well-rounded blue cheese with a creamy, soft texture.
rowcliffe.co.uk



CASHEL BLUE
An easy-eating blue cheese with a pleasantly buttery texture and a balanced amount of blue veining.
cashelblue.com

COMMENTATORS



PAM HINDS
ROTACLOUD



TOBY FOWLSTON
ROBERT WALTERS



JULIA KIRBY-SMITH
BETTER FOOD TRADERS







HOW TO KEEP STAFF ONSIDE THIS CHRISTMAS

Festive trading can be chaotic, but there are ways to come though it with staff loyalty on a high for '23

Let's be honest: Christmas trading can be gruelling. There will be headaches. There will be lost delivery drivers, and card machine dropouts as a queue is building, and regulars expecting the earth despite ignoring all your last orders messaging. This much we know. But all is well when your team is on its a-game and putting out fires all around your operation, right?

That's why phrases like 'quiet quitting' or 'the big resignation' really are the nightmare before Christmas. While you navigate the demanding currents of retail in December '22, your employees young and old will be responding to crosswinds of their own. When it comes to retaining and motivating staff the game has well and truly changed, so how can you hang onto the people – arguably your business's biggest asset – who will help your business thrive this Christmas?

All about the money?

'I could earn more stacking shelves in Aldi' has become seductive thought for many a frazzled professional – you may have considered as much yourself when lavishing hours of labour on an unrewarding project. But basic remuneration (£10.50 per hour at Aldi, if you're still tempted) isn't your only leverage over teetering staff. "The cost-of-living crisis has affected the things that motivate staff," says Pam Hinds, head of HR at staff management software provider RotaCloud. "Pay is obviously one of the most important factors when it comes to taking or staying with a job, but creating a great working environment is also key to staff motivation."

"In all cases of economic hardship it's young workers on lower salaries who feel the financial burden more," adds Toby Fowlston, chief executive of recruitment consultancy Robert Walters. "Their lack of experience – exacerbated further by the pandemic – puts them in a much weaker position than their older, more experienced counterparts when trying to bargain for higher pay."

The good news, if your costs are already far north of your comfort zone, is that you can do a good deal to mitigate an underwhelming wage offer. "Employers will be unable to increase pay at the same rate of inflation," points out Toby. "That's a fact, so this is where softer perks and benefits really do have a chance to make a difference." Pam agrees. "Offering things like flexible and reliable working hours, extra benefits like discounts and rewards, and good amounts of annual leave to help support a positive work/life balance, and all help with employee retention."

Can you be more flexible?

"One of the keys to retaining and motivating your staff is to offer as much flexibility as possible," says Pam. "This could be flexibility over their hours, like making accommodations for childcare or making sure shifts are fixed and hours are regular; over the locations they work (if possible); or flexibility in their positions such as offering training so that they can move up or sideways into a different role should they want it." Could you rethink the rota to allow your full-time employees a couple of precious half days to go to the school nativity, or get on top of Christmas shopping? Is there wiggle room to allow Saturday juniors to dabble in social media posts that expose your aisles to new attention while fleshing out their CVs?

"By offering flexibility you give staff more autonomy over their working lives and their time outside of work," says Pam. "Flexibility is consistently one of the most requested workplace benefits, and one of the top cited reasons for taking a new job." It could also be the antidote to 'grind culture', the idea that employees must work ever harder, smarter and faster to reach their life goals. With traditional milestones (home ownership, starting a family, early retirement) out of reach for most millennials, a better work/life balance in the here and now is more attractive than ever.

> "By offering flexibility you give staff more autonomy over their working lives"





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Fighting 'quiet quitting'

So what about your younger team members, whom statistics suggest are likely to have moved back in to the family home and be more determined than their predecessors to put their own wellbeing above your expectations of them? The phrase 'quiet quitting' – coined in a viral clip by TikToker Zkchillin – resonates with many millennials whose disenchantment with work manifest an inner determination to 'act their wage' and stop going above and beyond. "This behaviour isn't something entirely new," says Toby. "There have always been less motivated individuals in the workplace. However, the real concern here is that unlike those few workers who tend to consciously be less productive at work, 'quiet quitting' is often a subconscious act borne out of frustrations toward the workplace. It's easy for managers to pull their employees up on lack of productivity, but unless they get to the bottom of the 'why' their motivation has dropped, then quiet quitting could well become a silent movement that has a damaging effect on your business's productivity and profitability."

Listening is an invaluable exercise, says Julia Kirby-Smith, who ran the Fridge of Plenty urban farm shop in Crouch End until this summer, when she took up a leading role at sustainability network Better Food Traders. "People don't often think about performance management in retail, but in the farm shop we made sure we did annual appraisals, including personal development chat in the conversation to check in with our staff. You need to know where they are at. For example, we had someone who'd been training part-time as a teacher. Having a chat over a coffee meant I could hear what she was saying... it was obvious she wanted to go back to teaching at some point so then that was on the horizon. Scheduling these chats helps you see what's coming rather than getting a sudden shock. It might also mean you can find ways of working with staff – maybe letting them go part time or moving them into a new role. If you can find a way to work with your staff it helps you keep them on, even if that means reduced hours so they can follow their other passions."

> If you can find a way to work with your staff it helps you keep them on

Retaining experience

It's not just millennials who will benefit from a personalised approach. New analysis from The Health Foundation finds ill health unrelated to Covid-19 is pushing people over 50 out of the workforce. Which brings us to 'the great resignation', the phenomenon whereby older workers – you know, the ones who can convert from pounds and ounces and have the best horror stories about Christmas sampling events past – quietly exit the workplace a few years before anyone had expected.

Whilst many older workers were staying in employment longer before the pandemic, a long-term trend for underlying ill health has been exposed in the last year, causing The Health Foundation to focus on the barriers to work for staff suffering ill health. "If the government's growth plan is to achieve its overall aims, it must treat health and wealth as inseparable," says Alice Major, one of its analysts. "Focusing on supporting people with ill-health back into employment can boost labour supply and make a substantive contribution to growth."

Pam believes strong listening skills will help get your approach to motivation right for your whole team, whether they need extra support with an evolving health problem or a role that better fits their future aspirations. "There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to motivating staff, and choosing perks or benefits based on age categories or assumptions is not only going to do you a disservice, it's potentially discriminatory," she says. "You should speak to your staff one-on-one, find out what their individual needs and motivations are, and design a benefits package or incentive programme based on those conversations. The investment in time that you make here will far outweigh the costs of implementing something that no one wants or uses." You might even be surprised by the incentives that matter most to your staff. "Increasingly we're seeing utility vouchers, travel cards, and streaming subscriptions all being offered to prospective employees," says Toby. No one's suggesting you hook Christmas storeroom temps up with Disney+, but could a staff discount card or training in transferrable skills sweeten the deal? Maybe.

Lowering stress

A recent edition of *Desert Island Discs* threw up an interesting fact: chefs within Clare Smyth's brigade at thrice-Michelin-starred restaurant Core work in silence to help concentration and lower the adrenaline rush of service. This holistic approach may sound far-fetched, but a mental sweep of your workplace could throw up some opportunities to create a more pleasant working environment. Where could excess noise be reduced? How might more orderly storage lower frustrations for everyone? What impact could a more comfy break space have on workers' impression of how much they're valued? "During busy seasons like Christmas, you can limit some of the chaos by having systems in place to manage the extra workload and admin," says Pam. "Making sure you have things like rota planning, time tracking and leave management tech set up in advance can minimise some of the disruption. You can give people advance notice of their schedules which reduces last-minute changes, and warn people of busy periods and holiday blackouts so there's less chance of being short-staffed. You can also use labour forecasting tools to have advance sight of your temporary extra staffing needs and costs."

"Have a team meeting in November to talk through Christmas opening hours, training and seasonal stuff like how to sell a hamper, and how to do shipping," says Julia. "It's important to do all that ahead so people know what's coming. Maybe you can do fun events that your staff can actually get involved in, too. And allow them to have a small glass of mulled wine on the shop floor. Not everyone would take that view but it's nice if you can make it jolly for them as well so they can get in the festive spirit. In the farm shop we'd often get gifts and cards sent by customers and suppliers – it's good to make sure they get shared out. We'd have an area in the back where the staff could have a chocolate box or whatever. It's about making sure everyone feels part of it." Taking your team with you through a merry Christmas could bag your business a happy new year.

RECRUIT RIGHT



"If you find the right people in the first place – people that fit the ethos and culture of your business – that will save a lot of stress in the long term. Life becomes really difficult when you have to hire people on top of running the shop, and keeping the wrong people makes life really difficult. Having the right team – good at the operations side but also selling and customer interface – is essential, especially at Christmas!"

JULIA KIRBY-SMITH
BETTER FOOD TRADERS



FINAL CALL

After uncertainty clouded the past two Christmases due to the Covid-19 pandemic, retailers were likely looking forward to a relatively straightforward festive season this year. But the golden quarter once again is in trouble, with many retailers expressing concerns over energy bills, whether they have ordered too much stock, and getting enough customers through the door.

As I am writing this column, the new chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng has been ousted after just 38 days in office and replaced with former health secretary Jeremy Hunt who has already reversed the majority of the announcements made in the mini-budget.

What this means for the food retail sector is currently unclear, as energy bills and inflation continue to rise, but unlike in 2020, Christmas is far from cancelled. Instead, retailers and shoppers alike will be decking the halls (potentially just less extravagantly) over the next couple of months. Be mindful of 'The Lipstick Effect' this season as shoppers focus on little luxuries rather than big-ticket items, and remember that fine food retailers are well-positioned to cater to this growing demand.

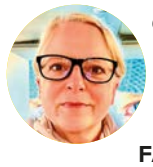
We can count on the fact that the average Brit will be keen to celebrate this Christmas with some edible escapism, and retailers who cater for this will no doubt find success.

Whatever may happen in the run-up to Christmas Day, consumers are preparing themselves for anything, and it's best that retailers do the same. But during this challenging time, remember to take care of your staff. Christmas can be a busy yet rewarding time for retailers, and by playing your cards right you can boost loyalty among both staff and customers.

Make sure your staff are fully briefed and feel comfortable supporting customers before the festivities begin, especially as many consumers may be sticking to budgets and in need of extra help this year. And remember, we're all in this together!

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

5 MINUTES WITH
KATE SALTER, FOUNDER OF PINK SALT SHED



WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I'd be a writer. I love to write poetry and prose, matters of the heart and observational things. I'm in the process of writing a book about my son's early arrival into the world.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
My very first job was working in a newsagents when I was 16.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
I'm inspired by the want to be good at something, and on the journey that I'm on to achieve bigger and better things.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
When I was young, I worked for a company that made shaker pots for a well-known brand of diet milkshakes. I'd check thousands of the shaker pots for defects.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF YOUR JOB?
Sending out invoices and reconciling accounts paid. I love getting orders in too. I enjoy talking to prospective clients and moving forward with getting new retailers on board.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
I have to increase my prices within the next couple of weeks and I'm not relishing the thought of potentially difficult conversations.

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I hate all of the fast food that has next to no nutritional content but people go mad for it. There's a lot of competition out there and everyone wants to make their margin so the bottom-of-the-line margin is squeezed and squeezed.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
I'd want to go back to Hell's Kitchen in Las Vegas and have the beef wellington.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
There's three: 'stop blaming everyone else' and 'you get out what you put in' and 'look after yourself and you'll be the best for others that you can be'.

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
The fattiest meaty soupy stew in Crete. I'd not have that again by choice.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?
A friend of mine, Philip Trotter, wrote a book called *Into the Fire*. I don't have a favourite, but I like a bit of romance and a thriller at the same time.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Savoury, all day long!



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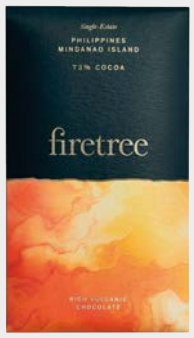
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smallandwild.com

FIRETREE CHOCOLATE PHILIPPINES 73%
This single-estate volcanic chocolate is made from cocoa beans grown in the most southerly of the larger islands of the Philippines – and in the 'Goldilocks zone' 10 degrees on either side of the equator. The unique conditions on Mindinao Island give this chocolate a distinctive flavour complimented by layers of citrus, honey and caramel notes.
firetreechocolate.com





ANGELS DARE SECRET GARDEN
This gently carbonated craft canned cocktail fuses fine dry gin with the delicate flavours of peach, elderflower and apple before lifting them with a refreshing zing of lemon. With an ABV double that of canned cocktails at the multiples – 10% – shoppers can be sure they're getting premium quality and quantity. With RTDs generating steady sales around the festive period, this cocktail is bang on trend.
angelsdarecocktails.co.uk

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Kevin Daiglish, head chef at Amuse



Amuse is a refined, yet relaxed dining experience in the heart of Aberdeen City, with menus that highlight the best local and regional Scottish produce available from land to sea, and a touch of classic French flavours.

It was really important to me to bring something new to Aberdeen. It's my home and I've seen it change so much over the last few years, and I recognised a huge opportunity to breathe new life into the hospitality industry in the North-East and bring something a bit special to the table. We have the privilege of having some of the country's finest producers in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, so designing menus is always a joy.

I like to focus on local availability to showcase the very best to diners, and fish is something I have threaded throughout my menus. Given our location, it would be silly not to take advantage of what's on the doorstep. I work closely with suppliers like my fishmonger, Blue Flag Seafoods at the Peterhead Fish Market, to source monkfish and halibut, and Murray McBay in Montrose for crustaceans – they now have the incredible Lobster Shop.

The menu changes almost weekly to reflect availability which keeps it exciting for our diners. Building personal relationships with my suppliers is something I take great pride in, and I've been working with both suppliers for many years now.

When it comes to meat, Gordon McWilliam is the best of the best for beef and lamb. He works with selected premium farms around the North East for restaurants and he never disappoints.

Although we do work with some bigger suppliers, I love to work with small, local family businesses like Katy's Eggs in Banchory. Katy and her husband Dougie started their business just over 10 years ago and it's a good feeling to be able to support small independent businesses like theirs over the years. You can buy their eggs in a fantastic shop called Nature's Larder which also sells organic vegetables from nearby Lembas Organics in Stonehave.

> "We have the privilege of having some of the country's finest producers in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, so designing menus is always a joy"

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AN ITALIAN TWIST ON CHRISTMAS INDULGENCE

With more Brits branching out with their flavours and cuisines this festive season, we explore why Italian treats are gaining popularity in 2022

Italian food is one of the most appreciated in the world. In fact, a study commissioned by Napolina found that the average Brit will enjoy an Italian-inspired dish at least twice a week, with half stating this is due to its versatility. At Christmas, Italian gastronomy certainly shines, and Brits are increasingly taking notice.

Waitrose is reporting sales of Italian desserts like panettone are up 57% year-on-year, while Selfridges ordered 80% more stock of its salted caramel panettone last Christmas, after selling out in 2020. Since 2004, the number of searches for panettone on Google from the UK has increased almost five-fold – indicating British curiosity for Italian festive delights.

One of the powers behind the growth of Italian festive treats is that producers are starting to break from traditional recipes and offer more variety for their customers – including vegan and gluten-free options. Italian food wholesaler Skoulikas is seeing the demand for free-from panettone growing year on year, while Cotswold Fayre has noticed alcoholic flavour twists creeping in, resulting in items such as Limoncello panettone.

It is also endlessly versatile as there are dozens of ways to enjoy panettone – toasted with butter, as part of a bread-and-butter pudding, chopped into fruity croutons, or as an Italian version of French toast. It is this versatility that has won over the UK, as chefs, foodies and retailers alike yearn to experiment.

Artisan Italian products like high-quality oils, panettone and alcoholic beverages also make the perfect gift for hosts or loved ones and are a great way to boost the festive spirit. As Brits open their minds and hearts to traditional Italian desserts and dishes on the Christmas dinner table and at seasonal soirees, fine food retailers are well placed to cash in.

Are you passionate about Italian food and drink? Get in touch via victoria.smith@dcthomson.co.uk.



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