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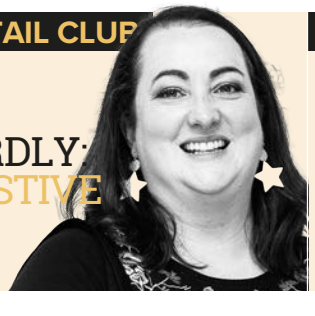
SPECIALITY FOOD

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS



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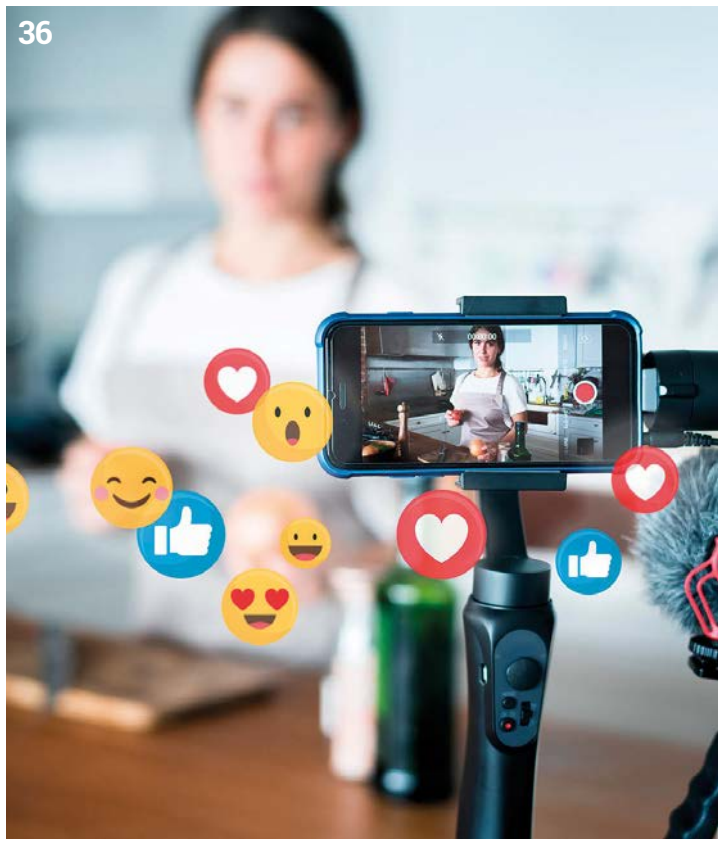
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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the October edition of *Speciality Food*.

Christmas preparations are in full swing at fine food and drink establishments across the UK, and this issue is packed full of product recommendations, retail advice and inspiration to help you make the upcoming festive season a success. The cost-of-living crisis might be taking hold of many shoppers' purse strings across the UK, but that doesn't mean that they won't be on the lookout for considered ways to make their Christmas extra-special – and building a rapport with their local *Speciality Food* reader can play a large part in that.

We also explore the opportunities that are abound online, deep-dive into the British cheese sector, delve into the next-generation ready meals satisfying the evolving consumer palate, and find out what the future potentially holds as a result of the ongoing energy crisis and new monarch, King Charles III.

I hope you find it an informative and inspiring read.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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What can our industry expect from King Charles III?

As we say goodbye to Her Majesty the Queen after 70 years on the throne, *Speciality Food* asks what's next for the food industry under Charles III

The industry paid its respects to Queen Elizabeth II in September, as millions queued to paid to see her coffin in Westminster before she was laid to rest alongside her late husband Prince Phillip.

As the nation's monarch for 70 years, she witnessed the food industry evolve, tackle important issues such as sustainability and adjust to the rise of e-commerce.

A champion of the countryside

The farming industry shared its sorrow at the news, reflecting on the late Queen's love of the British countryside and the natural world.

Helen Browning, CEO of the Soil Association, announced, "It is with immense admiration that we reflect on Her Majesty's extraordinary service to the UK and the commonwealth and we share the nation's sorrow at her loss. We will celebrate and miss her equally as a remarkable monarch, inspirational woman and a trusted constant across seven decades."

Thanking the Queen for being a steadfast champion of the British countryside and rural way of life, Mark Tufnell, president of the Country Land Association (CLA), said, "It is with profound grief that we note the passing of Her Majesty the Queen, but it is also with sincere gratitude that we remember her tireless service to our nation and its rural community."

Also acknowledging her support for farmers, National Farmers Union (NFU) president Minette Batters, announced, "Words cannot describe the deep sense of sadness that I and the rest of the farming community will feel at the news of the passing of Her Majesty the Queen.

"Her Majesty has been the embodiment of duty and public service, seeing the country through seven decades where we have seen a huge change in our nation and in our fields. The Queen's deep connection to the countryside has been valued enormously by farmers and has left a remarkable legacy that will continue for generations."

This love of the countryside has been passed down to the now King Charles III, who has spent the past 50 years speaking out about climate change, pollution and deforestation.

In fact, last year he went live on BBC radio to discuss the importance of nature, healthy soil and carbon sequestration. He told the nation, "Around 35 years ago, I set out to show it was viable to adopt a sustainable approach to farming so that we could produce nutritious food without destroying the soil that grows it.

"Year after year, I've watched with increasing concern as many of this country's precious landscapes were diminished in the name of efficiency."

Greener pastures ahead?

Along with the Queen's death comes the termination of any current royal warrants awarded to food and drink producers, with two years to remove the coveted royal insignia from their packaging and website.

At present, the application process involves supplying the royal households for at least five years and demonstrating environmental and sustainable policies.

However, the crowning of King Charles III presents an opportunity for stricter environmental targets in order to gain a royal warrant, and the allowance of new, environmentally-focused businesses to gain one.

Carina Millstone, executive director of food campaign group Feedback, told *Speciality Food*, "Whereas royal warrants have historically been granted to some big food brands manufacturing unhealthy food with dubious environmental credentials, the king may wish to bestow royal warrants to companies addressing the issues close to his heart.

"This could be an opportunity for Charles III to continue his life-long leadership in tackling some of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change, deforestation, and the necessary transition to agroecological farming.

As Martin Ballantine, managing director of PR agency Piracy Corporation, explained, "The new monarch has historically held outspoken and passionate views on a diverse range of matters – most notably on farming, conservation and the environment.

"Our new king has the opportunity to really firm up on the 'green' side of warrant granting, such as setting hard environmental targets and genuine, measurable, commitments for previous holders – plus allowing new, environmentally-focused, businesses to gain one, (or, better yet, replace an old holder) without a past royal trading history.

"A progressive monarch would, surely, be happy to give a royal 'thumbs-up' to those who are already acting responsibly? Those, for instance, who've led the way in the B-Corp movement, in the elimination of plastics, or in championing regenerative agriculture?"

As the farming community, ethical producers and indie retailers call for British leaders to champion quality, sustainability and provenance, this presents a significant opportunity to change the current modus operandi for a greener future.

> "This could be an opportunity for Charles III to continue his life-long leadership in tackling some of the most pressing issues of our time"



"That little extra something"



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

It was very good to see the Speciality & Fine Food Fair back at Olympia again in rude good health. I thought it was extremely busy when I visited on the Monday, with many interesting newcomers and still many of the usual suspects we have all depended on for so long.

As that fine actress Dame Edith Evans once told an overbearing director, she needed to give the audience what she was famous for – "That little extra something". And the event at Olympia I thought delivered it.

That little extra something was on show again at the Golden Fork Awards at Southwark Cathedral later on in the evening. This event seems to go from strength to strength and I thought the cathedral lent itself very well to the occasion.

Surrounded by the tombs of many eminent people like Sam Wanamaker and Edmund Shakespeare (William's younger brother) we celebrated the winners in the various categories of the Great Taste Awards including the Supreme Champion – Fermented Fresh Green Kampot Peppercorns.

I am pleased to say that the Partridges Startisans Award for the outstanding Start Up Artisan went to Soyze for their inspirational sauce initiatives. It was also very good to present the Lifetime Achievement Award to Stuart Gates, another columnist of this magazine, who has contributed so much over the course of nearly 40 years to the development of speciality food in the UK.

I think he may have got the biggest cheer of the evening. Stuart, like the other winners, has certainly provided that little extra something to the trade over so many years.

All these upbeat experiences contrast starkly of course with the current front pages of the national press. It is becoming even more difficult to get out of bed in the mornings with so many dire predictions awaiting us at the first glimpse of the mobile phone. Energy price increases, staff recruitment struggles, product supply problems, inflation hikes, business rate warnings, war prospects, transport strikes and yes even rent and service charge rises are bedevilling our attempts to move on from the Covid-19 era.

It is true to say I cannot recall a time when such a coalition of enemies ranged against small food businesses. It looks like the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have each brought along a mate.

I have often read that in order to avoid despondency it is helpful to write out a list of all the things that one is grateful for. With regard to running a speciality food store I think our list would look something like this:

Good sales in the summer – despite unpleasantly hot weather at times and a frightening lack of precipitation, sales held up well. Good weather generally helps smaller speciality food shops, unless everyone leaves for a foreign holiday.

A long-lasting product – speciality food is here to stay. We might not maximise opportunities all of the time but the opportunities are there.

We have learned a lot from Covid-19 – having faced a firing squad once and survived by trading through Covid (somehow), one tends to look at new threats in a slightly more dispassionate way, with innovative thinking and traditional manoeuvres.

We have been here before – economic shocks, crises and downturns happen every so often. I do not wish to belittle the current scary crisis but in 1974 lights were turned off. I hope it doesn't come to that this time.

Long standing staff – we have been very lucky to have key members of staff over the years who have kept the show on the road. When fridges break down, deliveries don't turn up and customers wander we have always got through with a collective effort.

As we now enter the run up to Christmas and with the going getting tougher it is important not to forget why customers shop with us. I would also like to quote Lawrence Olivier on determination. He once said words to the effect of, "If you want to succeed, forget it. If you NEED to succeed, go for it". And the United Kingdom needs its speciality food shops to succeed and provide "that little extra something".

> "As we now enter the run up to Christmas, and with the going getting tougher, it is important not to forget why customers shop with us"

Campaigners call on the government for stronger action on single-use plastics

A recent survey conducted by Yonder has revealed that 71% of the public want to see more plastic products banned, concerned they do not get recycled into new plastics

In response, environmental group A Plastic Planet has launched The Reduce, Refill and Replace Revolution as a ready-made strategy for ministers to make the UK a world leader in removing plastic from use in packaging.

The report from A Plastic Planet condemns plastic as "materially unsuited to single-use applications" and demands a range of new single-use plastic bans as early as 2024, including plastic sachets, bags, pots, single-use bottles, and fruit and vegetable wrapping.

According to Sian Sutherland, founder of A Plastic Planet, "The last five years of snail-paced plastic reduction have shown us that it is too hard for the industry to do this alone. The government has the capacity to move the market by simply outlawing the use of plastics where viable alternatives already exist, and to catalyse the innovations that will replace other plastics in future."

This is something Megan Adams, owner of Re:Store Refill in Hackney, also agrees with. "Our recycling systems cannot cope with the current volumes of waste being put through, and it's not acceptable for the UK to continue dumping waste on other countries. In order to really solve the root of the problem, we simply need to reduce the production of plastic.

"The UK has learnt from the successful implementation of the plastic bag charge, that actions such as taxes, charges, and bans are needed to actively influence customer behaviour when it comes to unnecessary single-use plastic. Other countries have already tackled fruit and vegetable wrapping, sachets and other packaging types listed, all of which are prevalent on products in the UK.

"From a producer perspective, legislation is needed to ban these single-use plastics, otherwise, producers trying to reduce their impact by using alternative materials are at a competitive disadvantage incurring more costs for sustainable materials. This legislation is needed now, in 2024 or even earlier", she added.



> "The last five years of snail-paced plastic reduction have shown us that it is too hard for the industry to do this alone"



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STEFANO CUOMO
MACKNADE

Following on from my previous missive on 'the taste of nostalgia' shaping the future, it is a theme that continues to grip me in this craziest of year – the year that Macknade turns 175. As I have said, my family came to Macknade as generational Kentish farmers, in the decade that Hong Kong was ceded to the British (Linda Jaivin's The Shortest History of China has been one of my summer readings – a brilliant book to chew through the epic that is China's heritage to the present day, and in a world that feels crazy, it underlines how time twists and turns, and with it human civilisation, giving a certain sense of context and balance to our present seemingly febrile world!).

As I walk the same land they did, not far off two centuries ago, the connection to my family and forebears feels very real; yet the thought of travelling the world via sail alone is mad – it reminds me of just how much our world has changed. Whilst the family ethos and shared community values that have driven us in the past remain, the 'here and now' feels very disruptive. We will however pull through to a calmer time supported by all we have learned in these weeks and I'm sure, in the months ahead.

I have familial joy for the past, more and more, learning to understand the good and the bad that have gone before, making sure they help shape forward thinking.

Macknade's heritage is a key part of who we are and continuity in turbulent times gives communities strength. But it is how we interpret the future, and set a clear path for our community to understand where we are going, that is so much more important. And in this, the individual, rich in heritage or not, is weak.

It is as a focused team that Macknade stewards our community, knowing the trust it has in us and what its collective aspiration is. As a team we create the plan and deliver it! I have had shaky moments these past months and it has been the strength of others reminding me of the importance of the team that have helped me refocus my balance.

The focus is the future. Yes, we learn from the past and it helps us interpret our next steps, but we have to be clear as to what we want to achieve and where we are going.

At Macknade our mission of creating our community's 'Favourite Place' has never been truer. We must be vehemently customer centric and sincere, shared experiences will continue to be king. In fact, it will define what it is that makes us human.

Economic headwinds are shouting 'cheapen the product', but with an infinite goal of human and environmental harmony, we will stay true to what we believe in. Supporting our customers through innovation (understanding data better to deliver improved experiences), product selection (engagement around lesser known, lower priced ingredients) and cost management (clear and engaging margin management to share our customer's pain) is important, but most of all, this means making sure we are offering the very best products that support our community's health and our shared environment, always delivering them at a fair price for everyone.

The need for cost control will make our models stronger – whether that is our hospitality-led Deli & Dining offer, or our retail-focused Food Hall model. Our teams are evermore engaged in the economics of the business, not just the delivery of the mission. This engagement and this openness and honesty will grow skills, build resilience and harbour a stronger team for the future. It means we have to be there for each other as it gets tough, but more importantly we will stay together, to enjoy overcoming the challenges as one.

As I look to the future, I have 175 years whispering at my shoulder. I am excited at the prospect of working with my team to deliver more Macknade sites, bringing change to more communities and delivering our mission to an ever-growing circle... chasing that infinite goal of harmony that I know is possible.

It is easy to get lost in the nostalgic and inflated views of the past, but where the strength really sits, I now recognise, is in the emotions and truths of those around us here and now, those with whom we set a course for the future and share in it with.

> "It is easy to get lost in the nostalgic and inflated views of the past, but where the strength really sits is in the emotions and truths of those around us here and now, those with whom we set a course for the future and share in it with"

How fine food retail can benefit from the adoption of more sustainable diets

With calls for a reduction in meat consumption to meet sustainability targets, we explore how indie retailers can use this to their advantage and champion a 'less but better' approach



Henry Dimbleby, the author of the National Food Strategy and government food tsar, has argued that the only way to have sustainable land use in the UK and avoid ecological breakdown is to vastly reduce the consumption of meat and dairy. But according to the farming industry, animal agriculture is essential to a healthy ecosystem.

As Patrick Holden, CEO of the Sustainable Food Trust, explained, "The debate about future sustainable diets has become unfortunately polarised around meat. In fact, all of us should be realigning our diets and moving towards sustainable choices, in terms of the consumption of both plants and animals.

But according to Laura Chan, policy officer for healthy and sustainable diets at the Soil Association, the sustainability issue with meat consumption is not the product itself but the scale on which it is produced.

"Current levels of meat consumption and the increasing prevalence of intensive animal farming in the UK are simply not sustainable. We are calling for less and better meat to manage consumption to address many of the failings in our current food and farming system while building resilience", she told *Speciality Food*.

Naturally, fine food retail champions locally produced products by working with trusted suppliers with short chains, which lends to a 'less but better' approach.

As Laura explained, "The independent food sector already champions many of the healthier choices that we need to make and retailers should encourage the uptake of less and better-quality meat while celebrating the diversity of produce and foods that we can grow here in the UK and which have a less destructive impact on the planet. This will include an emphasis on seasonal and local fresh foods."

> "Current levels of meat consumption and the increasing prevalence of intensive animal farming in the UK are simply not sustainable"



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Why indulgence will never go out of fashion (despite HFSS)

Despite some regulations being delayed, HFSS is coming into force in October this year. This is forcing indulgence brands to consider whether they should reformulate to meet the guidelines and continue to be positioned front and centre in retail stores, or stick to their guns and champion conventional luxury

According to Ben Davies, founder and CEO of intelligence platform Vypr, despite the new restrictions, 89% of consumers won't be deterred from satisfying their cravings for sweet, salty or fattening foods. He explained, "Comfort food is here to stay. As we head into the winter and financial tightening of household finances, indulgences may be the one thing that remains in the shopping basket.

"Altering products to make them HFSS- compliant could be a big gamble for indulgent brand owners. Reformulating them might end up removing what your customers are looking for."

Deirdre Burns, trade marketing manager at Forest Feast, added, "Taste will always be important to consumers. In numerous Mintel reports consumers have cited taste as key to purchasing decisions.

"It is important to give consumers choice and arm them with the tools to make informed decisions, but there will always be a demand for indulgent treat options, as consumers want to reward or comfort themselves while they relax after a busy week at work for example.

"Quality and great taste are more important than ever. Consumers are more discerning in what they are looking for from their snacks, therefore healthier options which still deliver on taste will always be in demand, but there will always be a place for luxury brands."

By focusing on chocolate that provides real flavour and ingredients, indie retailers can capitalise on a taste for indulgence.

For Deidre, "Consumers often visit fine food retailers as they know they stock products that have craft, heritage and provenance."

This idea of promoting quality over quantity is something Cocoa Runners strongly believe in. "Quality over quantity is fundamental when it comes to promoting craft chocolate.

"We believe it's a real shame that HFSS regulations are grouping together commodity chocolate (long list of unrecognisable ingredients, ultra-processed, bliss point) and craft chocolate (simple ingredients, a recipe that could be replicated at home).

"However, since this is the reality, indie fine food retailers will have to become smart with their packaging and encourage customers to prioritise quality over quantity. This is crucial as restrictions may come into place that limit the quantity of HFSS bought."





Cost-of-living crisis pushes sustainability off the agenda for poorer households

Kantar released its Sustainability Sector Index for 2022, revealing the cost-of-living crisis has made sustainable choices a luxury of the wealthy.

In fact, 68% of consumers believe that products that are better for the environment are more expensive, while 65% of consumers said rising prices have prevented them from doing more to help the environment.

The report also found that only one in three (35%) of consumers who are 'struggling' with the cost of living actively seek out companies and brands that offer ways to offset their impact on the environment, compared to 53% of those who are financially 'comfortable'.

Karine Trinquetel, sustainability expert, and global head of Kantar's sustainability transformation practice offer, explained, "Despite all the other crises happening across the world, the desire to become sustainable hasn't eroded. However, sustainability products often come at a premium, and that gets in the way of mass adoption.

"This is common even among the most engaged consumers, 77% of whom believe that sustainable products are more expensive, and price prevents them from doing more for the planet.

"As a result, sustainability is too often the luxury of the wealthier in society – and businesses miss out on this massive commercial opportunity."

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Fine food trends to capitalise on for Christmas 2022

With jingle bells ringing in the distance, it's important to hit all the festive trends this winter for a successful holiday season

This Christmas is going to be another break from the norm with the financial climate still shrouded in uncertainty. But that's not to say that consumers will be refraining from treating themselves.

MODERN TWISTS ON CLASSICS

This year, shoppers will be looking for the familiar classics but with a twist to impress loved ones and make Christmas truly special.

According to Laura Strapp, head of buying at Cotswold Fayre, "It's all about getting the balance right from tradition to innovative products.

"Christmas is always about tradition but also putting a spin and excitement on traditional well-loved lines. Best sellers will always be cranberry sauce, stuffing, and Christmas puddings, but it's always good to see that element of fun, for example, Gin Mayo and Ketchup.

"Also, consumers are looking for top-end good quality chocolate lines, and more development is coming from plant-based opening up lots of exciting flavours."

Helena Bush, digital marketing assistant at Sous Chef, added, "In recent years, Panettone has expanded into a range of incredible flavours – from matcha and pistachio to tiramisu and even Aperol spritz, the world of this rich and buttery Christmas delight has never been wider."

But that doesn't mean it has to be boring. According to Helena, "In 2022, we predict consumers will take a tour around the world of incredible tastes and aromas in their festive food choices. Terre Exotique's spice advent calendar counts down to Christmas with spices from across the globe to take a culinary tour with your festive recipes."

CHRISTMAS GIFTING

Spoiling our loved ones is synonymous with Christmas and fine food makes the perfect gift. In fact, according to Mintel, 34% of UK gift buyers bought food and drink as Christmas gifts in 2021 – and experts predict this year won't be any different.

According to Laura, "As we see more interest in food, consumers look to buy food items as gifts for the foodie in their life. A good spicy sauce is always a popular stocking filler! Drink gift boxes still prove popular, and getting a price point under the £20 mark is important to consumers."

When it comes to Christmas gifting, sustainability and quality are hot trends. Helena explained, "Unique artisan craftsmanship is the number one choice for gifts in 2022. From hand-painted Turkish ceramics to Puglian Splatterware from Italy, our gift range this year is all about celebrating individually-made pieces to treasure.

"Treating your loved ones to gifts you know will last a lifetime is the trend at the top of consumers' minds this Christmas."

This is something that Bryony Berry, marketing manager at Gadsby, has also identified. "This year we are seeing strong demand for hampers, gift boxes, and gift trays made from sustainable materials that can be repurposed long after the festivities."



> "It's all about getting the balance right from tradition to innovative products"

New PM Liz Truss could pull the plug on HFSS



The UK government is considering pulling its entire anti-obesity strategy, with ministers ordering an official review of the proposed measures to curb junk food.

The review could pave the way for Liz Truss to lift the ban on positioning products high in fat, sugar or salt in certain places around a store and advertising unhealthy products on TV before the 9pm watershed.

The review – which was ordered by the Treasury – is seen as part of the prime minister's drive to cut burdens on business and help consumers through the cost of living crisis.

But the review doesn't stop at HFSS, it may even look at whether the sugar tax, which began in 2018 and has helped make soft drinks much less unhealthy, should go too.

Katharine Jenner, director of the Obesity Health Alliance, commented, "We are deeply concerned. It would be reckless to waste government and business time and money rowing back on these obesity policies, which are evidence-based and already in law. These policies are popular with the public, who want it to be easier to make healthier choices."

THE STORY BEHIND THE STATS

81,326

Liz Truss received 81,326 votes to Rishi Sunak's 60,399 to become the Tory party's new leader in September, meaning she won by 20,927 votes (57.4% of the vote). Out of the four Conservative party leaders elected after a ballot of the whole membership between 2001-2019, she is the only one to have secured less than 60% of the vote. However, the turnout for the vote was 82.6%, lower than it was in the ballot that saw Boris Johnson elected in 2019.

143

Tree of Life UK Limited, based in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and sister wholesale company Health Stores Limited, located in Nottingham, went into administration last month, blaming tough market conditions and the loss of a big client. This has resulted in 143 people being made redundant across the two businesses and the loss of a major supplier for many small businesses.

650

Animal Rebellion, an animal and climate change group, which campaigns for a plant-based food system, launched a major campaign to disrupt the dairy industry in September. 650 activists took non-violent action in various stunts throughout the month, including spraying the Houses of Parliament with white paint to resemble milk. Another major target was the Arla depot in Hatfield which resulted in empty milk shelves across Hertfordshire.

12.4%

The latest figures reveal that grocery inflation has hit the 12.4% mark, adding £571 to the average annual grocery bill, according to the latest data from Kantar. Fraser McKevitt, head of retail and consumer insight at Kantar, admitted, "It seems there's no end in sight to grocery inflation as the rate at which food and drink prices are increasing continues to accelerate. Aldi has become the UK's fourth largest supermarket for the first time, which indicates that shoppers are looking to 'discount' stores as winter approaches.



NEWS IN BRIEF

UK SUPERMARKETS DITCH BEST-BEFORE LABELS

The likes of Waitrose, M&S, Morrisons, Asda, Tesco and Coop have all announced a total or partial scrapping of their traditional 'best before' and 'use by' dates on certain products, in some cases shifting to scannable codes that store staff can monitor to cull expired items. These efforts have been made in a bid to eliminate food waste, deeming perfectly good food ending up in landfills during a cost-of-living crisis unacceptable.

MACKNADE SHELVES PLANS FOR NEW RESTAURANT

Plans for a new 120-seat restaurant and food shop on Folkestone's Harbour Arm have been put on pause by Macknade Food Hall. The retailer has shelved its ambitious expansion bid in order to protect its core business throughout the cost-of-living crisis. Speaking about the decision, managing director Shane Godwin explained, "This is simply a case of us putting the project on pause while we assess the impact of the present economic landscape and focus on how we can continue to support our team, our customers, our suppliers and the wider Macknade community."

EXPERTS WARN OF FOOD SHORTAGES THIS WINTER

There is a risk of food shortages in the UK this winter according to experts, as the drought and high gas prices have put pressure on farmers. This is because although there has been rainfall across the UK recently, this has not been enough to replenish river, reservoir and groundwater levels, which dwindled during the record dry period. Ben Reynolds, the deputy chief executive of Sustain, said, "Growers are facing an impossible situation that is beyond their control. With the recent droughts and impact of the climate crisis making it harder to grow [reliably], worker issues, and energy costs going through the roof, there is a very real likelihood of empty shelves in the coming months. Some producers will be out of business, flying in the face of the government's aims for us to be more self-sufficient, and this will affect the health of the country if citizens can't access affordable healthy food.



PARTNER CONTENT



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Thermal protective packing just became more sustainable – and more in demand

An area of growth during the pandemic was home delivery of food products, including meals to be prepared by the recipient and ready-to-eat meals, as well as deliveries from grocery stores and other food retailers. While many pandemic-era trends were transitory, this one is here to stay.

Ranpak's latest paper-based cold chain packing solution has just raised the bar on sustainable total cold chain packing to meet growing consumer demands. The introduction of RecyCold™ climaliner, in combination with highly sustainable and effective RecyCold cool packs, is now available from the industry's leading supplier of sustainable paper-based cold chain total packing solution.

"With the introduction of RecyCold climaliner," said Ruud Titulaer, cold chain business leader at Ranpak, "we are leveraging our acquisition of Recycold Cool Solutions BV, a provider of fully recyclable sustainable cool packs, and our market success with our WrapPak Protector cold chain packing solution, to provide suppliers of food and beverages with a unique and even more sustainable approach. Our team of experts works with clients to determine the optimum configuration for their cold chain packing solutions, providing valuable advice, thermal tests and more."

RecyCold climaliner is available for both paper box lining and as a grocery bag solution. It offers excellent thermal protection for products in ambient, chilled and frozen temperature ranges for up to 48 hours, and its thermal protection can be augmented by using RecyCold cool packs. RecyCold climaliner is customized based on packer requirements and consists of an internal honeycomb structure, encased in a recycled paper cover. It is a thin (0.5 centimeter thick) thermal liner that is flexible for bending and overlays without decreasing its thermal protection properties, making it easier for packers to adjust the liner to a wide range of box sizes with a single product in inventory. It also enables the use of a smaller box than other thermal protection solutions due to its thin, flexible configuration, saving space and shipping costs. In fact, a sufficient inventory of RecyCold climaliner to provide thermal protection for 6,750 boxes is contained in just 18 pallets, compared to 188 pallets required for an equivalent EPS alternative. RecyCold climaliner comes in a fixed width of 38.1 cm, with multiple lengths available, and no additional equipment is required since it arrives prefabricated and ready to use.

"Paper is 100% sustainable, recyclable, renewable and biodegradable," Titulaer added. "And it provides a superior customer unboxing experience with no need for supplemental plastic packaging. Plus, RecyCold cool packs can be reused by the recipient, adding even more sustainability to the solution; and at end of life, the coolant gel is drain safe!"

Titulaer notes that the results of a standard test for one-day grocery deliveries of chilled products using a paper bag revealed that a single-layer RecyCold climaliner offers double the thermal protection of a paper or plastic bag alone. When a RecyCold cool pack is added, thermal protection more than triples in performance compared to insulation with no cool packs.

To learn more, visit ranpak.com.

British agriculture industry suffers mass food waste due to labour shortages

A new survey from the National Farmers Union (NFU) revealed that £22 million worth of fruit and vegetables has been wasted directly because of workforce shortages in the first half of 2022 alone

The NFU survey demonstrated the detrimental impact workforce shortages are having on the food and farming sector, resulting in significant crop losses at a time when the country is experiencing the worst cost-of-living crisis in generations.

The survey represents around a third of the UK horticulture sector, therefore the NFU estimates the overall value of food wasted is more than £60 million.

As Tom Bradshaw, deputy president of the NFU, explained, "It's nothing short of a travesty that quality, nutritious food is being wasted at a time when families across the country are already struggling to make ends meet because of soaring living costs."

Because the war in Ukraine has kept Ukrainians in their home country to fight against Russian forces, Britain has been left without its usual influx of seasonal workers – and the impact has been devastating

Tom said "This survey has demonstrated how crucial it is for fruit and vegetable growers to have access to the workforce they need.

"With the demand for the Seasonal Workers Scheme expected to increase again next year, it's vital the scheme has the capacity to facilitate the people the sector needs to pick, pack and process the country's fruit and vegetables.

"This means increasing the number of visas available to meet the sector's needs and expanding it to a minimum of a five-year rolling scheme to enable growers to have the confidence to invest in their businesses", he added.

But the war has shown that Britain cannot rely so heavily on seasonal workers from across Europe.

Gareth Morgan, head of farming policy at the Soil Association, explained, "Longer-term, we campaign for a transformation of the UK's food and farming system with a stronger focus on underlying resilience. This will mean a greater focus on more local supply chains that support local communities with jobs and nutritious, sustainable food."

> "This survey has demonstrated just how crucial it is for fruit and vegetable growers to have access to the workforce they need"

New food innovation centre in East Anglia

Broadland District Council, Hethel Innovation, and the University of East Anglia have collaborated to open a new food innovation centre in the heart of East Anglia, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (NALEP).

The project aims to support food and drink businesses in the East of England with access to a food-grade incubator site, bespoke advice and guidance, events and a community in the form of the Food Innovation Cluster. Running through to the end of June 2023, the project has been designed to establish the right foundations for food and drink businesses to innovate and grow.

The Innovation Centre contains 13 units ranging from 150m2 to 450m2, giving businesses a great opportunity to grow and scale onsite. Facilities also include test kitchens and sensory facilities to develop new products without interrupting production lines. Conference rooms are also available to host visitors and stockists as well as hold events. Units are still available for ambitious and exciting food and drink producers.

There is also a pot of £250,000 fully funded grant funding, where eligible food and drink businesses will be connected to consultants and experts for more focused support projects.

The centre opened its doors to food and drink at the end of September, with an exclusive two-day event that featured talks, tours, and networking.



How independent fine food retailers can survive rising inflation

With inflation predicted to hit 18% in 2023, we examine what needs to be done to help indies weather the financial storm

Fine food retail is already facing an uphill battle as the cost-of-living crisis has changed shopper behaviour and caused consumers to tighten their purse strings in preparation for steep energy bill rises from October.

Simon Jones, co-owner of Forest Deli in Colesford, told *Speciality Food*, "Our focus is cheese and local produce, and we maintain our relationships with all our suppliers which is vital to getting an advance warning on price rises. We buy direct from suppliers as much as we can, as that keeps our costs as low as possible and also ensures they are getting paid the right price.

"The price of every product is increasing so stock management is critical, and sadly we have already lost two local suppliers who were unable to carry on."

Although shoppers' budgets are stretched, it is up to indies to show they can get the same or better value by supporting their locals.

Tina McKenzie, policy chair at the Federation of Small Businesses, explained, "Our Small Businesses Index shows retailers are hit particularly hard as households look to cut down on non-essential spending in the face of significant price rises. We encourage consumers to support small firms.

"Many people will be tempted by large or discount supermarkets wrapping cost-of-living marketing around their products, but this is the time when your local small business needs you the most.

Tina added, "To help themselves stay afloat in the coming months, we suggest businesses make sure they're using all the reliefs available to them, including the Employment Allowance package.

> "The price of every product is increasing so stock management is critical, and sadly we have already lost two local suppliers who were unable to carry on"











THE AMAZON OPPORTUNITY

Want to boost your online sales but don't know where to start? Rosetta Brands is here to help the fine food industry master the world of e-commerce

Analytics, algorithms and Amazon. The world of e-commerce is certainly a far cry from bricks and mortar formats, and mastering online sales can all too easily become an aim that gets relegated to the lower reaches of the To Do list while you focus on speedier wins – but that's no reason to dampen your ambitions. With more shoppers than ever choosing to make purchases online, and the internet playing host to millions of fine food lovers, there has never been a better time to go online. *Speciality Food* readers jumped to the e-commerce challenge as Covid hit – launching and/or strengthening their own online retail formats at the same time as welcoming a raft of new-found customers – but the digital opportunity doesn't need to end there; Amazon is a tool ready and waiting to be explored.

We are all familiar with Amazon – the vast majority of us utilised the retail platform during the Covid-19 lockdowns and continue to do so – but with its myriad of complicated rules, regulations and terminology it can be hard for SMEs to find the time to master it to full effect. Thankfully, Rosetta Brands has developed keys to the Amazon maze and is here to support fine food businesses in their quest to open the door to the retailer's billions of international customers. With the Amazon 'back-office' taken care of, fine food businesses can focus on what they do best: creating the very best food and drink on the market.

While the scale of Amazon might well make it seem unsurmountable and on a different plane entirely to the majority of Britain's fine food industry, this is far from being the case. Take a step back, and what you'll see is an increasingly popular e-commerce format with the ability to connect your business with billions of customers around the world who are hungry for great food and drink products – all you need are the tricks and techniques to make it work for you, and you can follow its path to success.

A valuable new horizon

Amazon is undoubtedly a different proposition to the conventional bricks and mortar fine food retail format, but ignore it at your peril. "More than a third of UK over-16s (about 19 million people) are now estimated to be individual Prime members," begins Nick Comer, CEO and co-founder of Rosetta Brands. "It isn't going anywhere, and is the perfect delivery mechanism to connect with customers who only buy Prime. If you're not on Prime, your competitors will be and your consumer will choose them." Indeed, with today's shopper valuing convenience higher than ever, adopting a model that provides a quick and easy way for the public to relish your fine food credentials will reap valuable rewards.

The world of Amazon isn't clear-cut, and it's vital to 'play the game' for maximum results. Amazon is a complicated marketplace to navigate, and problems can span logistics, finance, marketing, sales order processing and beyond... None of that exists for Rosetta Brands clients, as they eliminate all of the Amazon pitfalls in their path. "With over 13 years in the Amazon space, our model turns Amazon into a simple wholesale relationship, with Rosetta being the key expert in the middle," explains Nick. "If suppliers have a direct relationship with Amazon, and treat them like a normal retail account, then they are destined to fail."

A simple solution

"Rosetta Brands is an e-commerce-as-a-service provider for Amazon Vendor," explains Nick. "We unlock the volume of Amazon sales without clients having to interface directly with Amazon and the Vendor back office." As Amazon's bulk volume platform via which the business owns and ships products via Prime and their established delivery network, Vendor is the ultimate place for producers to be online – but can come with its own set of challenges, all of which the Rosetta Brands team have managed and overcome.

A unique proposition in the UK's fine food world – "no one like us exists in either the food and drink industry or indeed the Amazon Vendor space," says Nick – Rosetta Brands' model maximises the end consumers' experience while simplifying the process for suppliers (an invaluable support system for time-poor but ambition-rich businesses). "We are unique in that our solution is 100% dedicated to unlocking Amazon volume – we don't pretend to be anything else."

Rosetta Brands has the keys to access Amazon's hordes of potential customers, and the experience to make it work for fine food businesses of all shapes and sizes... The time has come to conquer the apex of e-commerce.

To find out more about Rosetta Brands' solutions, visit rosettabrands.com.

TESTIMONIAL

"*Working with Rosetta to conquer the world of Amazon! We are a small family-run business and feel privileged to have been able to work with the Rosetta Brands team since 2019. Having failed miserably to find our way through the Amazon process ourselves, we saw an instant impact on sales of our products. The set-up process was straight forward and we've found everyone at Rosetta helpful and good to work with. They really know their stuff about the world of Amazon and offer opportunities to boost sales which we never knew were available to us. We are happy for you to get in touch with us directly if we can help you with any questions or concerns.*"

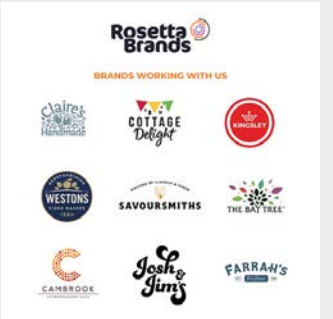
CLAIRE AND SHEILA, CLAIRE'S HANDMADE

HOW IT WORKS

Amazon may seem a huge beast to tame, but with the back-office tasks taken care of by Rosetta, it becomes surprisingly manageable. "We take away the full interface with Amazon, eliminating any physical or financial charges from it. We turn Amazon weekly demand into actual POs that ship to one Amazon UK location," explains Nick.

"Rosetta then works to optimise, advertise and showcase our clients' products into the top positions on Amazon, and our simple subscription packages are tailored to match your own strategies and desired outcomes with the Amazon format."

With Rosetta Brands' support – purchasing stock weekly, optimisation, advertising and playing the Amazon game – producers' SKUs grow in both sales and Amazon ranking over time, helping them on the path to continually growing recurring sales.



> "With Rosetta Brands' support – purchasing stock weekly, optimisation, advertising and playing the Amazon game – producers' SKUs grow in both sales and Amazon ranking over time, helping them on the path to continually growing recurring sales"

PRODUCT NEWS

Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

New Indian-inspired launch from Tracklements

Tracklements has created a new limited edition chutney in order to cater for the growing consumer demand for world flavours.

Date & Tamarind Chatni is an Indian-inspired combination of sweet dates, tart tamarind and an expertly-chosen blend of spices including fennel seeds, coriander seeds, ground cloves and asafoetida. Suitable for those following vegan and gluten-free diets, the new launch is the perfect partner for Indian snacks and dishes that would benefit from a kick of rich spice.



Becky Vale, marketing director at Tracklements, said, "This is a totally unique Tracklement which delivers fantastic heat and fulfils every desire for sweet, sour and flavoursome. It will delight fans of Indian cooking or anyone who wants to dial up white fish or pork chops. A real stunner."

tracklements.co.uk

Elephant Gin releases sustainable Negroni



Elephant Gin has released its first ready-to-drink cocktail – a take on the Red Negroni, a bittersweet aperitif.

Containing equal parts gin, vermouth and bitter liqueur, the 28% ABV cocktail has a rich depth and complexity, and a smokey mellowness from six months ageing in oak barrels.

All ingredients are produced in-house and are 100% natural.

True to Elephant Gin's sustainable core, each bottle features traditional Maasai beads which have been handmade by three women from a Kenyan Maasai tribe, and 15% of the profits from each bottle will go to the recently established Elephant Gin foundation, which supports the conservation of the African elephant.

Tessa Gerlach, founder of Elephant Gin, said, "The ready to drink trend is here to stay. Consumers like it simple, but at the same time insist on high quality. With our new Negroni we serve these demands and can offer existing and new customers a high quality ready-to-drink cocktail experience using the best possible ingredients without any artificial additives."

elephant-gin.com



New plant-based energy drinks from HEARTH

A new line of functional energy-boosting beverages has been launched by HEARTH.

There are two new flavours available – Passion Fruit and Lemon – each of which contains a carefully balanced list of ingredients including Yerba Mate, a naturally caffeinated and antioxidant-packed herbal infusion which provides a sustained release of energy and focus whilst maintaining a level of calm and relaxation.

The drinks also contain Ascorbic acid which supports the immune system, natural fruit juices, and no artificial sweeteners, flavourings or preservatives.

Pavan Gill, co-founder of HEARTH, said, "We discovered Mate as newlyweds, following Charan wanting to move away from traditional caffeine sources for his morning pick-me-up. It wasn't something that was readily available in the UK and you had to go to speciality stores or buy the traditional wooden gourd and metal straw to enjoy the benefits of Mate. We wanted to make it accessible and share the wonders of this elixir with more people. We set off on the journey of testing and tweaking until we came to Hearth as you know it today. It was and still is a labour of love, hence the strapline: from the Earth, with Heart!"

drinkhearth.com

Broadland Drinks presents Kindred

Kindred from Broadland Drinks has launched four new flavours into the alcoholic beverage market, designed to celebrate 'kindred spirit' flavours.

The four-strong range consists of Blood Orange & Raspberry, Apple & Blackberry, Maple & Pecan and Cherry & Almond.

The spirits are 20% ABV and can be served neat, with a mixer or as part of a cocktail.

Kat Hall, senior brand manager at Broadland Drinks, said, "Over the last two years consumer drinking habits have changed and they're now more adventurous with their drink creations at home, trying drinks they wouldn't have before and looking for new flavours. They want the experience and level of choice of a bar in the comfort of their own home."

"There has been a spike in interest for new and exciting alcohol flavours, consumers are actively looking for new and different products to expand their repertoire and add to their collection. Kindred is a great addition to the category, offering trend-led flavour innovation which will get consumers excited and creative with their drinks. There's a flavour for everyone and endless combinations and possibilities of how to serve it."

findyourkindred.co.uk







Dukeshill enters cider market

Artisan fine food experts Dukeshill have launched a Traditional Apple Cider, created in partnership with the award-winning Scottish cider artist Peter Stuart.

Handcrafted in small batches and made using real fruit, the cider is lightly sparkling and boasts a smooth taste and crisp apple finish thanks to its 100% juice content and long maturation period.

Des Smith, chairman of Dukeshill, said, "Bringing the right cider into our product portfolio has been a key ambition of mine since joining the business and it's been absolutely fantastic to work with Peter to do just this. As a retailer we are committed to supporting high quality, artisan producers and Peter's ethos supports everything we stand for at Dukeshill. We believe there is a real gap in the market for a premium, great-tasting cider and we're extremely proud of the product we're launching with Peter. Taking the time to make cider properly is at the heart of what we believe makes good cider. Commercial ciders are often made in a matter of days, rather than slowly over many months. This is the first in an exciting new range for us and i'm confident that together we can create something truly special that is suited not just to summer, but that has a year-round appeal"
dukeshillham.co.uk

New breakfast options from Primrose Kitchen



Primrose Kitchen, recently purchased by Rollagranola, has released two new granolas into its range of breakfast products.

The new flavours – Chocolate & CBD Granola and Orange & Cashew Granola – are made in the UK using wholesome, high quality ingredients and blended with chunky fruit, nuts, seeds, oils and spices.

Chocolate & CBD Granola is a sweet mix of chocolate, CBD from hemp tea, nuts, seeds and gluten-free oats, while Orange & Cashew Granola is made from gluten-free oats, cashews, chia seeds, coconut flakes, flax, pumpkin seeds, cinnamon and pink salt.

Robin Longden, CEO of Primrose Kitchen, said, "We're thrilled to have launched the new Primrose's Kitchen range to market and with two new granolas in the mix, there's even more ways for health conscious consumers to get a nourishing breakfast in.

"Aside from the unique flavours, the biggest USP is the vibrant veggies we use in some of the blends which bring extra nutritional wins to breakfast time. That, coupled with our small batch production line, makes for a great taste experience that's as good as you'll make at home."
primrosekitchen.com



Made for Drink extends range

Made for Drink, creator of snacks designed to be paired with quality alcoholic drinks, has added to its range with English Truffle Crisps and Original Seasoning Biltong, made with 100% Irish grass-fed beef.

The two new launches join the established snacks Duck Fritons, Chorizo Thins and Salami Chips.

Dan Featherstone, founder of Made for Drink, said, "Our ongoing ambition is to provide our retailers with common sense trade up opportunities within the snacks category, which is why we prioritise discerning 'me-time' moments, specifically Thursday/Friday night with a drink.

"We seek to make these moments as delicious and as memorable as possible, which is why we're always on the lookout for any gaping gaps where we can introduce real innovation and best-in-class intentions."
madefordrink.com

Vegan staple sauces hit market



Hawkshead Relish have created vegan versions of two storecupboard must-haves in order to cater for the growing demand for items suitable for vegans.

The No Soy 'Soy Sauce' is an allergen-free version of the ambient staple and is packed with umami flavours. This versatile ingredient is ideal for using in a wide variety of dishes including marinades, stir fries, gravies and dressings.

The No Fish 'Fish Sauce' is a must-stock for fans of Thai and Malaysian dishes who follow plant-based diets.

Both new products are made in small batches by the award-winning Hawkshead Relish team, and contani no artificial colourings, flavourings or preservatives. They are both gluten-free and suitable for vegans.

Maria Whitehead, co-owner of Hawkshead Relish, said, "We wanted to introduce several new products in time for autumn brim full of flavour and character, products that would encourage everyone to get in the kitchen whether they were soy intolerant, vegan or vegetarian and simply experiment with the dishes they cook as the nights draw in. Creating our new No Soy 'Soy Sauce' and a No Fish 'Fish Sauce' provides absolutely everyone with the opportunity of being able to produce comforting and warming Asian dish favourites this autumn."
hawksheadrelish.com

Festive gift range from Ahmad Tea



Tea specialists Ahmad Tea have launched a range of gift products.

In addition to the business's Kew Beyond the Leaf loose leaf tea caddies and teabag selection – an award-winning collection of tea blends including Majestic Breakfast, Splendid Ceylon, Garden Afternoon and Elegant Earl Grey – Ahmad Tea have released Bauble Caddies, the same high quality tea blends now presented in gift-ready festive baubles, and an advent calendar filled with speciality tea blends.

Tracey Wakelin, global head of marketing at Ahmad Tea, said, "As one of the finest tea brands in the world, we want to give tea lovers the chance to spread a little joy this Christmas...

"From crop to cup, a lot of love goes into producing our tea to ensure every sip is worth it, from hand plucking the best leaves in the world's finest tea gardens, to tasting the tea at each stage in its journey.

"Beyond great tasting tea, an Ahmad Tea gift is also one that gives back – as a brand we put people and planet first, and we donate 20% of our profit to local grassroots projects to help communities in need, from working with Children In Need India to support women and infants in Assam (which produces half of India's tea) to delivering clean water to hundreds of thousands in Niger affected by soaring temperatures."
ahmadtea.com

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CHANCELLOR REVEALS ENERGY SUPPORT FOR BUSINESSES: THE INDUSTRY REACTS

The prime minister informed the commons of her plans to help people deal with rising energy bills this winter, but businesses worry it isn't enough

The new chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, has announced more details on energy bill support for businesses.

Wholesale energy prices will be capped for all organisations for six months from the 1st of October, with prices to be fixed at 21.1p per kilowatt hours (kWh) for electricity and 7.5p per KWh for gas.

This represents less than half the wholesale prices which had been expected this winter. A review will be published in three months' time to identify 'vulnerable' organisations that will need further support after March 2023 such as hospitality and small businesses.

A promising plan?

The announcement was a relief for many as it ensures that retail and hospitality will not be forgotten this winter. But there are still some details yet to be clarified, and trade bodies are concerned as the expected hit to businesses could, in some cases,
be catastrophic.

According to Andrew Goodacre, CEO of the British Independent Retail Association (Bira), "It will be a relief to all independent retailers on the high street as they can now focus on the very important final quarter of the year.

Emma Jones, founder of small business support platform Enterprise Nation, added, "We welcome this bold and unprecedented move by the government which we hope will help the small business community avoid a winter of discontent.

"Small businesses and early-stage firms are being squeezed from all sides, and so this is overall very positive news. Small businesses have never experienced a price cap before, so we are on completely new territory here, but this crucially will help deliver the certainty we need to keep businesses going and stop them from closing down in the short term."

In fact, in a survey conducted at the end of August to Bira members, 65% of business owners had said a price rise would force them to reduce the number of staff they had or reduce wages, while 40% were considering limiting opening hours, and 23% were looking to permanently or temporarily close their business once the proposed price hike came in October.

While the proposed plan is promising for indie retailers, Jan Robijns, owner of The Broadway Deli & Grocery, pointed out that businesses will still be paying extortionate costs for their energy. He explained, "If the electricity is indeed capped at the same level as domestic rates, it will still be a lot higher than many businesses are paying currently. Three times more than many currently pay."

Six months isn't long enough

Experts and businesses are also worried that the proposed help won't last long enough, especially as it is set to be reviewed after just three months.

Andrew explained, "There is limited prospect of prices reducing in six months' time, and so we cannot afford to see business rates increase in line with inflation just as this business support comes to an end."

Rupert Evans, chairman of the Farm Retail Association and owner of Denstone Farm Shop, told *Speciality Food*, "Whilst we welcome the important announcement from for UK businesses, I am concerned that a six-month scheme wouldn't be long enough."

As Rod Addy, director general at the Provision Trade Federation explained, "The energy crisis will not cease any time soon, especially given Putin's declared intentions to escalate Russia's conflict with Ukraine. We would therefore press Government to continue this support beyond six months to offer longer-term certainty to enable them to plan ahead more effectively, as well as looking to it to develop sustainable long-term energy security for the British food and drink industry."

Ian Gadsby, managing director of business energy experts Ylem Energy, added, "The six-month guarantee does little to address the likely long-term increase in energy prices.The government is effectively sending a dangerous message to businesses, telling them they have six months' protection. However, businesses will still be paying high prices on the cap – much more than historic levels."

'Vulnerable' businesses

While the new announcement is reassuring for the majority of businesses, those deemed 'vulnerable' are still anxious about the coming months.

"As Paul Askew, chef patron of The Art School in Liverpool, explained, "There's a real risk there will be far less places for consumers to spend their money without further robust intervention, especially as we enter the critical fourth quarter of the year, where many hospitality businesses make a significant portion of their annual income. Last Christmas was derailed with the awful mixed messaging from the government around Covid, and huge revenue was lost. This simply cannot happen again. The hospitality industry cannot endure any more blows."

For Andrew, "Our focus now turns to helping the government determine which businesses are vulnerable due the energy increases, as we feel indie retailers fall into this category."

Hope on the horizon for indies

While the support still needs further clarification, particularly for indies and 'vulnarable' businesses, it will help to improve consumer confidence as we approach winter.

As Mark Kacary, managing director at Norfolk Deli, explained,

"At the very least, this action might mean customers will start believing they can visit independent retailers, and that they can plan for Christmas without the fear that any money they have will disappear before they can use it. It does mean that from a business point of view we can be a little more hopeful that people will spend and with careful use of energy that we will get through to the other side wherever that might be."

As Tom Newey, CEO of Cobbs Farm Shop, concludes, "What is very positive is the comfort consumers have been given and the hope that this should put more cash in their pockets, enabling them to perhaps spend more freely than they otherwise might have – that should directly benefit all us all."

> "It means that from a business point of view we can be a little more hopeful that people will spend, and with careful use of energy we will get through to the other side – wherever that might be"



COMMENTATORS



SIMON JONES
FOREST DELI



HEATHER COPLEY
FARMER COPLEYS



AMY COLEMAN
RHUG ESTATE



LAURA ROBERTS
LAURA'S LARDER



MARC SMITH
SMITH & ELLIS



PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS IN INDIE RETAIL

Despite an econimic crisis, indies look set to head into a successful season of selling this Christmas 2022

Christmas is the biggest time of year for retailers as shoppers come out in full force to put on the year's most impressive festive feast or seasonal soiree. With inflation currently at the highest rate in 40 years and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, indies are well-placed to make this Yuletide a successful one and offer a careful balance of quality and value.

The Christmas calendar

The lead-up to Christmas is an important time for any retailer, but for indies, it is the make or break for their seasonal success.

For Heather Copley, co-owner of Farmer Copleys, it's all about hosting events to get customers excited about the festive season.

"We are full steam ahead preparing for Christmas, we are nervous but confident that we will be the place to go and experience Christmas, to get that Christmas feeling, coupled with superb tasting foods.

"To support this, we have many in-store and on-farm events both large and small throughout November and December planned, thus we are hoping to drive footfall to us rather than an alternative destination, with the aim of providing a cost-effective 'day out' which drives footfall of customers and spend.

Amy Coleman, farm shop manager at the Rhug Estate, adds, "We are starting to put together our Christmas event calendar and we have a few shows lined up where we will be exhibiting our Rhug Estate hampers and taking meat orders for the Christmas period."

But Simon Jones, co-owner of Forest Deli is more concerned about getting his store ready for increased footfall and laying on extra staff. "We have seasonal helpers already booked in as we have a number of fairly large corporate hamper orders, which take a lot of time to put together, and to assist with front-of-house and backroom tasks to ensure we are always working a day ahead on orders.

"We always start to build up supplies of the ambient stock from now on which spreads the cost as well as ensuring we have all the essentials ready."

Cost is something that Marc Smith, managing director at Smith & Ellis, is also conscious of. "This year will have a different emphasis for us, that of cost: we have already experienced price shocks for all of our stock, packaging and now energy. For us to remain commercially viable, we have to pass these cost increases on to our customers which will have an impact on consumers' overall Christmas spend – this will coincide with many of our customers facing increased energy bills at home too, so must be considered carefully.

"We also work closely with the local farms to ensure that we have at least our minimum requirements ready for the period (plus a safety buffer - which usually gets sold in the last few days before we close!)"

The power of e-commerce

During the pandemic, online shopping surged in popularity as consumers faced restrictions and lockdowns, disrupting their usual habits. This trend is one that has remained post-Covid, and indies across the board are preparing for a busy online shop.

For Amy, "Christmas is always our busiest time of the year online, and I expect this year to be no different. We are working hard behind the scenes at the moment, getting all the products on the system, taking new images of products and putting all the procedures in place to make sure we provide the best possible service, that is straightforward and allows the customer to relax knowing they are going to have all the ingredients needed for Christmas dinner, delivered to their door. We deliver right up until a few days before the big day as well!"

Marc is positive about a strong online performance this festive season too. "Last year was our largest online Christmas period sales total, and we expect that trend to continue. We maintain and prepare our online shop throughout the year, which means that we simply only have to 'enable' the festive products to be ready. We simultaneously manage the capacity requirement (staff) about three to four weeks prior to the rush."

Getting online ordering systems





ready is a job that Simon also takes seriously. "The website is being updated with all new stock photography and also a 'live' stock system, so if a line sells out it won't be available to see on the site which simultaneously helps customers and us.

"We have always had a good gift trade from the website, especially the last two years with Covid restrictions. But as we will all hopefully be able to see family and friends this year, we are anticipating that online ordering may drop a little."

Like Simon, Heather is expecting a small shift back to in-person shopping this year as consumers seek out a personal touch and friendly faces over what can be a difficult time for many. "We feel people will probably visit shops in person more this year.

"But we do expect gift cards purchased via our website to increase, including our experience afternoon tea events. We are ensuring that our website presence is completely up to date with our full brochure available online to support sales across the business in whatever format the customers decide."

Going digital

Having said that, having a fully functioning website alone won't guarantee sales, and savvy retailers will be using every digital tool at their disposal to drive footfall and clicks this festive season.

As Amy explains, "Social media and newsletters are a very important part of increasing footfall during this time of year. It's a very competitive time of year and you need to be able to offer your customers something different. To achieve this, we look at holding special events, promotions, and benefits for visitors to enjoy and we advertise these through social media and our weekly newsletter."

Marc agrees, adding, "With so many people now using social media almost as a way of life, a strong presence is necessary to maintain visibility of our business – what we do, and what our core values are. Consistency is the key here, a quick splurge of activity in the last few weeks will not work - it takes some time to build a loyal social media base, and that includes carefully curated content, regular (but not excessive) posting, and prompt engagement with our fans.

"This consistent engagement keeps us relevant and visible in timelines, and allows us an excellent virtual shopfront for us to showcase our festive offerings."

But for Simon, old-school methods work just as well. He explains, "All the social media channels are invaluable at getting messages out to customers, but there is also a very fine line between doing just enough and too much. We are launching a loyalty card this month for customers, and will also use our mailing list to keep people informed of events. This enables us to inform those who have signed up to receive advance notice and early booking of dates for tasting sessions in the evenings in our Tasting Corner.

"These events we have found are definitely the best way to engage with our customers and for us to understand our customer needs and also an excellent opportunity for them to 'try before they buy' new cheeses and other products."

Offering quality and value

With rising costs a major concern for shoppers and retailers alike this winter, getting the balance right between quality and value is more important than ever before.

This is something Amy is very conscious of at the Rhug Estate, as she tells *Speciality Food*, "Christmas is a very expensive time of year for most, and that's why it is important to find the balance between quality and value for customers."

In fact, Amy recommends making sure that shoppers know that when they buy from you, they are getting something the multiples simply can't offer. "At Rhug, we offer a premium product and to ensure value for money we make sure that we offer a top level of customer service to go along with it.

"Whether this is delivering the parcels ourselves when the delivery companies aren't coping, offering a click-and-collect service so people can avoid the hustle and bustle, taking heavy shopping to the car for those struggling or offering our loyal customers a gift on us.

"People are not just paying for a product, they are paying for the whole experience which we always endeavour to be the best around!"

Simon agrees, adding, "For all businesses and customers, costs are increasing across the board, for us the key is to not compromise on quality. We focus on local suppliers and our customers really do understand that purchasing a gift hamper from us really does help multiple local businesses. We know we can't compete on price with the supermarkets overall, but we can on the quality of product and service."

For Heather, it's all about making sure there is something for every budget that still delivers on quality. "We have decided to streamline the products that are offered but keeping quality and local as key as always. We will have cheese truckles with special volume prices sold from the new self-service deli, then the artisan cheeses in large cutting cheese displays serviced by the deli team cut to order.

"These are products that will still be required and sought after by our customers, and we are trying to be very savvy for our customers and make savings on purchasing and service style where appropriate."

Simon also caters to a variety of budgets at Forest Deli, explaining, "In store and online we offer a 'build your own hamper' so our customers can add exactly what they want and work to their budget. One invaluable point is to also have pre-prepared gift hampers at specific price points so that whatever the budget a customer can purchase a quality gift within their price range."

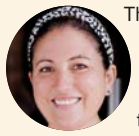
The challenge in this is demonstrating a balance of quality and value to the wider community. As Marc explains, "We ask the question 'Why should I buy from Smith & Ellis?' and this is where we can answer that question and describe in appropriate levels of detail how we can make peoples' meals the best they can be at the best value they can find.

"This is all based on a foundation of making sure that each part of our own sourcing and preparation keeps those two features in mind at each step, and underlined with the mantra 'Don't be greedy' - we see this every year from some businesses and it doesn't take savvy consumers long to realise that they are being exploited."

As Heather concludes, "Fingers crossed we've got it right. We are under no illusion that we will have to go the extra mile for our customers to ensure we all have a good Christmas, and customer service is going to be key to everything!"

RETAILER INSIGHT

Top tips for creating festive displays with Laura Roberts, owner of Laura's Larder



This is not a year for Christmas stock experimentation, is it? Many suppliers tell me that "people will just go for it" this year. I know they are doing their job and they could well be right, but what if people don't "go for it"? January can be a long month when you're broke and if I'm thinking that way, then others are too.

Christmas isn't cancelled, but we should be careful as we purchase this year. I am certainly terrified of left-over stock and what it might cost me. But I think that sentiment is also in customer's minds too. What do people do in times of crisis? We stick to what we know, what we love, and what makes us feel better. These are certainly good points to think of when buying and organising stock – what you are good at, what your customers love, and a peppering of Christmas nostalgia.

People love sweet treats and Panettone of varying flavours and sizes are a must, people keep and gift them and they are usually packaged in a way so that they stack into lovely displays which look great without spending loads on decorations.

Don't forget gifts for hosts too. Small, grabbable treat items. We try to make a display for this in store, as well as other themes with little blackboards which say, "be the dinner guest people want to invite" or "elevate your cheeseboard".

These little areas of display can be changed frequently so all stock is out in one way or another, we find moving things around the shop or having them in more than one place does help sales.

Never have less than three of one item on display however, I've learned there must be a psychological barrier for customers picking anything up from a shelf if the numbers of items are two or less. Slow selling items with long dates or anything which feels more 'January' are put to the back to be taken back out later, if people know you stock them they will ask, you'll need the space for everything Christmas.

Small nostalgic luxuries come in the form of vintage biscuit tins placed at eye level and visible from the window or door. "Do you remember these?" you'll hear, as people inevitably come in to see the rest. Nostalgia can also be found in condiments though, or liquorice, or marzipan fruits and even pre dinner drinks.

Ask yourself what one thing do you associate with Christmases of old? And what's the fantastic version of it that you can stock and display today?

We always let the products speak for themselves in the window display and opt for dried or paper decorations which keep it classy as well as being long-lasting. And never, never anything shiny or plastic, that kind of nostalgia should stay in the past!



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Elevate your Christmas displays this festive season with an array of gorgeous gifts

1 SNOWDONIA CHEESE
LUXURY CHEESE TOWER

Beautifully presented in recycled cellophane tied with a Snowdonia Cheese ribbon, this Luxury Cheese Tower makes the perfect Christmas gift for cheese lovers – or a centrepiece for your festive cheeseboard. A truckle of Black Bomber, their signature Extra Mature Cheddar, forms the base of the tower, topped with Red Storm, their vintage Red Leicester, and a mini Truffle Trove, their Extra Mature Cheddar with black summer truffle.

snowdoniacheese.co.uk

2 ROCKFISH
TINNED BRITISH SEAFOOD GIFT PACK

Hailed as the fishmonger of the 21st Century, Rockfish offers the highest quality hand-preserved seafood caught in Brixham. The gift pack contains four beautifully designed boxes, containing one tin of Rockfish Mount's Bay Sardines in Olive Oil, one of Brixham Cuttlefish, one of Lyme Bay Mussels in Escabeche and one of Brixham Bay Mackerel in Olive Oil.

therockfish.co.uk

3 WALKERS NONSUCH
LUXURY TOFFEE SELECTION

Great for giving and perfect for sharing, this Luxury Toffee Selection is a unique and novelty gift featuring four delicious chunky toffee bars along with a traditional toffee hammer that brings memories and nostalgia back to life. Varieties include Original Creamy, Brazil Nut, Liquorice and Roasted Hazelnut, all made with quality ingredients. Dating back to 1894, there's nothing quite like Nonsuch Toffee.

walkers-nonsuch.co.uk



4 HAWKSHEAD RELISH
CHRISTMAS CHUTNEY GIFT SET

This stylish gift pack includes four festive condiments, handmade in the heart of the Lake District using traditional open pans. Seasonal spices, rich apricots, ginger and orange are just a few of the ingredients that will bring your Christmas lunch to life with just a hearty dollop of Hawkshead Relish. All four chutneys are gluten-free, nut-free and suitable for vegans, so there's something for everyone this Yuletide.
hawksheadrelish.com

5 ISLAND BAKERY
SHORTBREAD GIFT TINS

These beautifully designed keepsake biscuit tins feature a lively Hebridean seascape with dolphins, whales, birds, a lighthouse, fishing boats and Island Bakery's own highland cow MacMoo rowing a boat full of biscuits. Available in a selection of indulgent flavours such as Peanut, Chocolate Chip & Toffee and Orange, Cranberry & Pecan, they are the ideal gift for any time of year.
islandbakery.scot

6 BLUE GOOSE COFFEE
ECO COFFEE POD ADVENT CALENDAR

Give your customers something entirely unique to add to their baskets this Christmas thanks to the UK's first Eco Coffee Pod Advent Calendar. Entirely plastic-free, from the packaging to the home-compostable Nespresso-compatible pods within, each coffee is organic certified including the world's first Sail Ship and Bird Friendly® pod coffees.
bluegoose.coffee/sfm

7 KINDRED
FLAVOURED LIQUEURS

Newly launched by Broadland Drinks, Kindred is on a mission to unite bold flavours that work perfectly together, as if they were kindred spirits. Available in four delicious flavours: Blood Orange & Raspberry, Apple & Blackberry, Maple & Pecan and Cherry & Almond, these beautifully designed 20% liqueurs can be served neat, with a mixer or as part of a tempting Christmas-themed cocktail.
findyourkindred.co.uk

HOW TO SELL CHRISTMAS

Catherine Erdly, founder of The Resilient Retail Club, shares her festive tips and tricks for indie retailers

2022 has been another tough year for small businesses and with a tough winter hanging over us, focusing on Christmas has never been more crucial. But what is the best way to prepare for Christmas, and how can speciality food stores use their Christmas sales to springboard their business into 2023?

Make a plan

Preparation means planning, and a sales plan is the foundation to growing sales during the festive season.

Don't have a sales plan? Now is the time to sit down and decide what to aim for in this all-important quarter.

Once an overall target is decided, break it down by month, then by week and also by day for peak weeks. Look at how sales can be expected to be split by sales channel, for example how many sales retailers expect to take on their website. Clearer, more attainable goals will help motivate their team to hit them.

Not only that, but having a clear plan will allow business owners to check their capacity and the support they have in their team. It's far better to figure out now that extra people or packaging is required than to realise that in the middle of the Christmas rush.

Top tip: Retailers need to set a realistic target based on how they are currently trading against last year. If in doubt, keep sales targets on the lower side to avoid over committing to stock or staff.

Tick some jobs off now

Alongside any planning, retailers can complete some pre-preparation tasks right now.

They should review their festive emails, social media content, events, collaborations and marketing materials. Having Christmas emails pre-drafted, social media content produced and scheduled will all contribute to growing sales at Christmas. Getting ahead now is vital.

What other jobs could be done now? Pre-planning shop floor layouts and windows also helps take the pressure off for retailers during the busy period.

The key with the final quarter of the year is that the focus must be squarely on growing sales, and nothing else. If there's a long-awaited website overhaul to undertake, a brand refresh or even a change of shipping partner – park that until the New Year and focus entirely on customers' needs for a magical Christmas season.

Sell across channels

Small business retailers should utilise as many channels and opportunities afforded to them to sell.

Online shopping is set to be popular again so whilst having a website is key, so is getting customers to it. Giving customers multiple platforms and opportunities to buy will enhance Christmas sales, whether that be selling on a website, at an event, via social media or in a bricks and mortar store.

What can they do to make their business easier and more appealing for their customers while also encouraging shopping across multiple channels? Can they offer click and collect services for example? Allowing customers to browse at their leisure from the comfort of their home, buy online but pick up for free in-store next time they are out and about, is the kind of convenience that their customers will appreciate but is not too time consuming for the retailer either.

For those retailers who also sell online, they must ensure their shipping service is tip top and clear, their stock levels have been carefully planned for and that their customer service staff can swiftly deal with any issues that might arise. This is a year-round goal but is never more pertinent than at Christmas.

Shopping online offers an ease and convenience coveted by many shoppers, yet so many online retailers seem to complicate the checkout process, with small businesses in particular falling foul of creating this purchase hurdle to a degree that's off-putting.

Constant requests for usernames and passwords, when many are weary of handing over their personal information to create yet another online account, can mean lost profits when consumers abandon their basket at checkout. Retailers should ensure their 'guest checkout' option is up and running over the festive period to avoid losing potential sales and new customers online.

Retailers should conduct a complete audit of their online presence, especially their website, before Christmas selling starts in earnest. The purpose of this is to help them identify where there might be problems or bottlenecks (such as the checkout process) and resolve them before they are starting to see greater levels of traffic.

It is also important to make the time to check websites once a week during the peak selling period, on both desktop and mobile, just in case there are issues that have not been identified.

Best foot forward

It is much easier to drive Christmas sales when retailers have taken the time to identify the best-selling products that are likely to be loved by their customers as gifts.

These are the products that should be featuring prominently on tables or other store displays and should be a major focus of marketing campaigns. From stock levels to social media content, hero products should take centre stage.

Business owners should remember the 80/20 rule – 80% of sales are likely to be coming from 20% of products. Taking the time to work out what these most desirable gifts or products are at Christmas will pay dividends.

If in doubt, remember that sometimes Christmas shopping can be overwhelming for customers, especially if they have a budget to stick to. By offering a gift card service, retailers are giving customers another gifting option that still is extremely popular across the demographics.

Standing out

For speciality retailers, the key to a successful Christmas shopping season is to ensure that they stand out through those small touches that larger businesses cannot match.

Whether it's taking part in local marketing events such as a late-night shopping event, or offering services such as click and collect as discussed previously, retailers should think about ways to go above and beyond.

Offering recipe ideas, cooking demonstrations, pre-made gift hampers or expert advice are all ways that speciality food stores can help their customers at Christmas. Some services, such as free gift wrapping, might be more time intensive in terms of staffing needed, but can also help set retailers apart.

For some customers, simply shopping with a business who remembers who they are and caters to their needs is just as important. Retailers should ensure that they are checking in with their most loyal customers during Christmas. Many







shoppers who are short on time and attention would really appreciate a thoughtful message from their favourite speciality food store with suggestions or reminders to help them take care of their food needs at Christmas.

Small businesses can also stand out through a "giving" approach. Many people feel more charitable at Christmas so incorporating a charity partnership or other types of giving back can be very powerful. Giving customers an altruistic reason to buy is crucial.

Map it out

Once retailers have their hit list of promotional messaging and know what they want to achieve by running that promotion, they need to map out the activity.

> "The key now is to prepare, map out activities and think about ways that you can continue to delight customers well into 2023"

They want to avoid bombarding their customers in one week with multiple messages then have a quiet week.

Map out content so it makes sense as it flows through the season – for example stocking fillers tend to be last minute purchases but secret santas are often purchased around the first week of December when people are getting ready for their Christmas parties – virtual or physical!

Map out promotional messages for each week – what is the main topic to communicate to customers for that week. Factor in other communications such as an email drop, a newsletter and social media feeds – ensure they work together and power up promotional messages throughout the festive period.

Another key is taking care of loyal customers. As well as planning out overall Christmas messaging, it is well worth retailers taking the time to map out a special set of communications just for their loyal customers.

These might include special shopping evenings just for regulars, the opportunity to order their Christmas food early or simply a voucher or discount code just for them. Whenever retailers plan an offer, they should think about what extra they can add for their most loyal customers.

Christmas and beyond

Small business owners rightly plough much effort into their customer experience for the festive season – but how can they retain this customer base after Christmas and beyond?

For every customer that has purchased during the festive season there is no reason why that relationship can't be continued into 2023. A promotion encouraging customers to return in January is often a great way to start building a long-term relationship.

For any new customers businesses have attracted over the festive season the new year is a great time to share their story with them. Being able to tell the story of how they came up with their business idea, or what the business and products mean to them is critical in reaching the modern consumer.

Working on a post-Christmas retention strategy now is a very wise move for retailers, not least it is considerably cheaper holding on to existing customers than trying to acquire new ones. Special attention should be paid to ways in which retailers can get email addresses from their in-store customers, so that they can use these to build on that relationship in the new year.

For any retailers who have had a turbulent summer and have begun to lose motivation, they should remember that there is still everything left to play for. Many product businesses receive over 50% of their entire year's sales in the final six weeks in the run up to Christmas! So the key now is to prepare, map out their activities and think about ways that they can continue to delight their customers well into 2023.

PLANNING MARKETING MESSAGES

Throughout the festive season retailers need to delight customers with their offerings, offer the solution to finding the perfect present and help them make magical moments with loved ones.

While the customer has a budget to stick to, they still want products that will wow the recipients. This is where small businesses can shine, because they can share the meaning, quality and special nature of their products with their customers. There are so many ways business owners can attract new customers throughout the festive period through clear messaging.

Here's an inspiration list of marketing ideas:

- Holding a launch evening in-store of the Christmas products
- A gift guide which could be a blog post on the website and shared via email and social media
- A free shipping offer for online customers
- Offering a free item for purchases over a certain amount
- Recipe ideas and/or cooking demonstrations
- A spotlight on particular producers
- Giveaways or other types of competitions
- Collaborating with other small or local businesses to cross-promote an offer
- Targeted discounts to help clear out slower moving stock
- Menu ideas
- Food shopping printable planners or checklists to help customers stay organised





COMMENTATORS



LAURA ROBERTS
LAURA'S LARDER



RALPH BISHOP
FRIDAY STREET FARM



ROSIE COLLINS
MACKNADE



DAWN DAVIES
THE WHISKY EXCHANGE

PREPPING FOR PARTY SEASON

With shoppers thirsty for something to celebrate, we share the nibbles and pairings to help your party season go with a bang

While the apex of party season soirees is no doubt New Year's Eve, the reality is that as soon as the clock ticks into December shoppers will be getting ready to celebrate the festive season in style. From twinkling intimate gatherings with friends and family to work dos and reunions with old friends returning home for Christmas, the month provides countless excuses to get together with loved ones and catch up over a delicious array of drinks and nibbles.

Party season offers a sparkling opportunity to showcase the very best cheese in your counters. For Laura Roberts, owner of Laura's Larder, "it's the pre packed whole pieces of cheese which look good on platters that sell very fast, for example the 250g Baron Bigod, Nettlebed's Bix, Little Rollright or the delectable St. Jude which all make lovely sharing cheeses on platters. Isle of Wight Blue for blue lovers is also a must." To really create a special occasion around your cheese selection, sell well curated partners for a variety of cheeses. "Accompany them with some fruity Miller's Toasts, breadsticks, a Cobble Lane charcuterie selection pack and some Belazu Borettane Onions in Balsamic, and all you need to add are friends," suggests Laura.





Showcase local produce

For recently expanded and refurbished Friday Street Farm, a shop, kitchen and butchery in Suffolk, their dedicated cheese room and impressive deli range is central to party season proceedings – indeed, the cheese team has recently started to supply bespoke cheese wedding cakes and food for parties. For general manager Ralph Bishop, deli must-stocks include 250g wheels of Baron Bigod, truckles of Suffolk Gold, Suffolk Blue, hog roast sausage rolls, Stilton and caramelised onion sausage rolls, and Lane Farm's Suffolk Smoked Ham as well as their Suffolk Honey & Mustard Ham – not forgetting a great selection of chutneys and relishes (especially those from local producer, Stokes) and biscuits to accompany these items. The support of local makers doesn't end there, as Ralph also recommends the products of local brewer Adnams alongside other wines of interest.

"We are finding local produce, even in these current times, is a key seller and one that our customers look for whilst shopping at Friday Street Farm," explains Ralph.

Offering quality food and drink from the local area is also key to Kent-based food hall Macknade. "Our purchasing team are always looking for new and unique products to offer our customers and we also focus heavily on local – choosing English sparkling over Champagne, Kentish crisps over other leading brands and so forth," begins Rosie Collins, marketing director at Macknade. "A number of these are small artisan suppliers who you won't find in the supermarket, for example Chartham Vineyards, whose wine is produced only a few miles from us."

Ralph suggests thinking beyond snacks and nibbles to truly satisfy customers looking to cater to guests during party season; after all, dinner parties are just as popular with food-loving consumers as standing events. "We have a great butchery right next door, suppling all types of locally sourced meat including oven ready-dishes that would be perfect for the party season. In the shop also, we have seasonal home grown produce e.g. pick your own strawberries, potatoes, sweetcorn and asparagus (when in season)."

Upselling for success

Upselling is a vital skill for independent food and drink retailers to have during party season and beyond. "The trick is in giving your customers plenty of inspiration," explains Rosie. "We like to include recipe cards on our display tables to give them ideas of what to serve and this will be no different for party season!

Alongside new creations, Macknade will be relying on tried-and-true pairings which have proven popular in previous years. "Manchego and membrillo is always a crowd-pleaser, as is our Mr Peppers Sausage Rolls (made using an old Faversham recipe!), paired with a sweet red onion chutney. As for the drinks, we're loving Van Nahmen's Sparkling Verbena & Riesling Tea as a non-alcoholic alternative this year and we're about to serve it at our next VIP event!" says Rosie.

"We do tastings in-store; during one we demonstrated making a platter and packaged the ingredients together which was a really great idea," says Laura. "We heavily use social media at Laura's Larder and we love to champion individual

> "However the economic and social powers play out over the next few months, customers will undoubtedly be looking for some edible escapism come party season – affordable but delicious food and drink to see out the year in style"





products on there to share their story so people understand why we sell it, why it has a certain price point and how we use it. People sometimes come in and show me the phone and ask "can you get me this?" It really does work."

"We also have a website that you can send cheeseboard requests through which we then make for collection, great for busy people who might remember late at night they need something and of course we're not open. I'd like to expand this offering further. We also have some priced platters using products from the shop and bakery which are easy for people who are entertaining."

An evolving opportunity

At Macknade the party food opportunity is constantly changing, with the team's focus moving as the public demands new and different solutions to party season. "For the first year ever, we are pro-actively targeting corporates and groups with our Christmas party menus," says Rosie "Previously, this was done on a reactive basis, but this year, we have created two special menus for our Ashford and Faversham sites, showcasing our wonderful ingredients from in-store. This year, the menus feature slow-grown Kentish turkey, Macknade panettone and Ashmore cheese profiteroles!"

For Laura, this year provides a new opportunity to showcase your customer service skills after a challenging few years for many. "I've got a lot of people coming into the shop worried as they haven't entertained for so long, or their children are now vegan or have vegan partners. Our role as guides and advisors this year is more important than ever." While customer service is the backbone of independent retail, it's always worth putting in that extra effort to develop strong, lasting relationships with your shops. "Building trust with your customers so they know you are selling them what is best for their request and not what is going to make you the most money is imperative and they will come back to you time and time again as a result," says Laura. "Listen to them; you don't have to throw everything in the air and change your strategy as a result but tailor and tweak, and you will be rewarded."

The cost-of-living crisis should be back of mind for all retailers as it is for consumers, but that's not to say that shoppers will forgo indulgence come party season. "My buying strategy for this whole season is around 'little luxuries'. I've based this partially on the theory that when facing an economic crisis consumers will be more willing to buy less costly luxury goods – it's called The Lipstick Effect. We don't expect people to be buying huge luxurious items but we think they will still spend on little luxuries."

Different shoppers could have different definitions of luxuries, however. "Luxury as a concept is interesting however and can mean different things to different people. Items can be the obvious luxury

> "The trick is in giving your customers' plenty of inspiration," explains Rosie. "We like to include recipe cards on our display tables to give them ideas of what to serve and this will be no different for party season!"

RETAILER INSIGHT

Laura Roberts, owner of Laura's Larder, shares her party season best-sellers



There are a few things that absolutely fly out come party season, firstly Cambrook Cocktail Mix No. 6, we can't stock the shelves fast enough. I think people love to share it with guests; it's a mix made for Claridges and will therefore bring some finesse to any cocktail gathering. They are also delicious! Then there are Perello Gordal Picante Olives – we stock these in the 150g tins all year round. I challenge you not to finish the tin whilst just opening the wine, though, so when party season comes, it's the 600g which become popular to share among larger groups of people getting together. Crisps go larger too – don't underestimate the humble 'chip and dip', a cost-effective way for a customer to fill a party table.

As a shop with a toe in Kent, we love Kent Crisps – the Sea Salt flavour is wonderful and will go with any dip. Innovation in this market is huge – if you can think it, there's a crisp made from it – and as a retailer, not having VAT on certain types is also a bonus as the price can feel more attractive to customers.

For sweet items, we tend to think of these along the lines of 'presents for the host'. The lovely Booja Booja flavoured chocolate truffles in the smaller boxes, or Flower & White's Meringue Balls, are grabbable items which don't cost the earth but feel like good quality to the giver and the receiver of the gift, especially when accompanying a bottle of wine.



PERFECT PARTY PAIRINGS



Dawn Davies, head buyer at The Whisky Exchange shares her favourite food and drink partners worth celebrating

CHARCUTERIE
The classic pairing might be a great wine or sherry, but why not try a mezcal instead – especially one with more meaty notes?

SMOKED SALMON
You could go traditional and go with Champagne or a smoky whisky, but why not try something new and go for a really good vodka, a category that is on the up – try one that has texture and flavour/or a cheeky calvados with its appley notes.

OLIVES
That lovely briny, salty character in olives is crying out for a fresh Pisco or a dry vermouth on ice.

NUTS
A great rum or a cognac is the ultimate pairing here – nuttiness with nuttiness or rich fruit-driven notes. What is not to love?

such as chocolate truffles, or truffled cheese, or a beautiful smoked salmon side (check out Lambton and Jackson's sashimi cut sides – wonderful for parties), but it can also mean 'this product has saved me time', or 'this product has made me look good in front of my friends or family', so we are thinking about all these concepts of luxury and we've price capped what we think people might be willing to pay (a new factor for this year) and we're hoping as a result our money will be spent wisely," says Laura. "Time will tell!"

However the economic and social powers play out over the next few months, customers will undoubtedly be looking for some edible escapism come party season – affordable but delicious food and drink to see out the year in style. Laura adds, "We have gone from promoting eat-at-home seafood platters during the pandemic (with scheduled collection slots!) through a slightly braver 2021 to a – we hope – happier and more inclusive party season in 2022. No one knows what 2023 holds for us, but we know it's not going to be great, so let's get the sequins out and party while we can, right?

> "We have gone through the pandemic and a slightly braver 2021 to a happier and more inclusive party season in 2022. No one knows what 2023 holds for us, so let's get the sequins out and party while we can, right?"



STOCK CHECK

2022 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE



STOKES CORONATION SAUCE
A festive special edition, this is made with a blend of curry spices, apricots and sultanas in a 12oz jar.
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A CHEESEMONGER'S GUIDE TO: FESTIVE CHEESE GIFTS

With Christmas just around the corner, making your cheese offering stand out with carefully curated gifts could make all the difference



As shoppers look for meaningful gifts to show their loved ones they care this festive season, three cheese experts share their top tips for creating something truly special.

Perfect pairings

Of course, key to any good cheese hamper or gift are perfect pairings. As Fraser MacLellan, owner of The East London Cheeseboard, explains, "We always look for good matches when making gifts from cheese. So complementary crackers, chutney, etc. that enhance the tasting experience are important.

"Appearance is also important for a gift. Other things that go into the hamper need to look good and create a good first impression. Luxury items are also a good addition to gifts as they are things that you'd perhaps be less likely to buy for yourself but are great in a gift, so things like truffled salami or slow-baked figs work well in a gift box."

Gemma Williams, owner of The Little Cheesemonger, adds, "I always make sure that accompaniments are relevant to the cheese and the other items in the hamper. Each item in the hamper should be complementary rather than a clash. It gets easier the bigger the hamper gets as you can create more links to other types of foods and drinks."

Making gifts special

When it comes to cheese gifts, indies need to be able to offer something truly special that their customers can't get from the multiples.

As Simon Jones, managing director of Forest Deli, explains, "For gifts the essential task is knowing what extras make hampers and cheese boards look special and individually put together.

"Being able to offer and explain the flavours and characteristics of the cheeses is the starting point, and directing customers to the chutney or pickle that works on the plate." This is something that supermarkets simply cannot do.

For Gemma, it comes down to knowing your produce really well. "So well that you know which flavours match from memory", she says. "You can throw anything in a hamper and hope they like it, but if you add your expertise and experience you can create something truly special and unique."

Fraser adds, "As a cheesemonger, it's hard to know everyone's likes and dislikes if it's a customer buying a gift for someone else, so in those cases a really well-thought-out selection that covers all aspects of enjoying cheese will help.

"It's important to use accompaniments such as crackers and chutneys that complement the cheese in the selection and if possible, have some relationship to it. For example, a Scottish selection could also include oatcakes and jams from Scotland. Drinks that are paired with the cheeses are a good addition, with tasting notes for the recipient so they get the best out of the pairings. You can then add another level and include cheese knives, or a nice slate or wooden board to complete the gift."

Upselling cheese gifts

As Fraser explains, "We have a lot of selections and gifts ready to go over the festive period so when we're talking with customers and they say they're looking for a gift for someone, then we offer them these selections as options. We also have gifts on display in the shop so that they're noticeable to anyone who comes into the shop.

"If a customer is buying cheese and we find out it's a gift, we'll offer crackers etc. or the option to 'upgrade' to a hamper. We have lots of pairings available, so from their cheese selection we can recommend wine, beer, etc. to add to the gift."

While in-store promotion is of course key to upselling appealing gifts, Gemma also suggests using digital tools. "We keep customers updated on social media platforms about what we offer, and make sure they know it's time sensitive."

The impact of cost-of-living

How Christmas will play out is difficult to predict at the East London Cheeseboard, as Fraser tells *Speciality Food*. "We've definitely seen a tightening of the belts with our customers, but it's been subtle.

"Perhaps Christmas will be the same and people will buy slightly smaller, less expensive gifts if the current trend continues.

"On the other hand, it's been such a terrible year for us all that people might have a bit of a blowout at Christmas. We saw this with Covid where it seemed like everyone was fed up and really wanted to enjoy themselves and share this with friends and family, so maybe the current crisis won't impact us too much.

> "You can throw anything in a hamper and hope they like it, but if you add your expertise and experience you can create something truly special and unique"

"It's always so hard to predict at the best of times, without throwing other external factors into the mix."

As Gemma sees it, "People are still going to buy Christmas gifts. We just need to hammer home how special it is to order from small local businesses like ours. That not only do they get more for their money in terms of quality, but they are also contributing to keeping high street shops open, a cluster of micro-producers and local people in work."

Simon concludes, "The inflationary situation and fuel costs are impacting all businesses and customers, people are definitely more price conscious than we have experienced in the last few years.

"We're hoping that people will still want a good Christmas and enjoy some treats and luxuries, and our focus will be on the cheese, as always, with the message of quality and local."

Thefore, this Christmas, the key to seasonal success is simply to make sure your selections cover all aspects of enjoying cheese. After all, no matter the budget or personal tastes, there is a cheese gift for everyone in 2022.





New speciality cheese facility to be built at Belton Farm

Belton Farm has announced that it has completed a major £1.75million investment in a new state-of-the-art speciality cheese cutting and packing facility at Belton Farm, Whitchurch, Shropshire. The new facility is part of a longer-term capital investment programme to enhance and future-proof Belton Farm's speciality cheese business.

Commenting on the new cutting and packing facility, Justin Beckett, managing director of Belton Farm, said, "The completion of our new cheese cutting and packing facility here at Belton Farm is an integral part of our plan to grow and develop our speciality cheese business. It comes in the year that we celebrate our cheese-making centenary here at Belton Farm and demonstrates that we are not only proud of our heritage but also focused on our future.

"The new facility has been purpose-built to enhance further our ability to provide the highest levels of product care and customer service; deliver greater efficiencies and operational flexibility, and allow us to offer innovative new pack sizes and formats. In doing so, we are confident that we will be able to meet the current and future needs of our growing number of speciality cheese customers both in the UK and increasingly overseas."

GLOBAL **CHEESE** PRICES **INCREASED** FOR A **TENTH** CONSECUTIVE **MONTH** IN **AUGUST**

SOURCE: FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANISATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Swaledale cheese loses protected status



One of the country's best-loved cheeses has lost its protected status – after it was forced to shift production 12 miles west to Wensleydale. For more than 1,000 years, artisan cheesemakers of Swaledale have crafted fine cheeses among the rolling hills of the Yorkshire Dales. But the Department for Environment, Food and Agricultural Affairs (Defra) has announced that the white, crumbly cheese has – for now – lost its elite food ranking as it is no longer made in the area.

Richard Darbishire, the owner of Swaledale Cheese, commented, "It's a sad day but we had no choice. Our plan is to rebuild the brand, bring back a sheep's milk version of the cheese, and also to launch a goat's milk Swaledale."

The team intends to apply for Swaledale cheeses to be given a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), a similar status to the PDO, which is less restrictive. Following Brexit, this would first involve securing protection under the new UK GI scheme, before applying to the EU.

Inspirational Cheese Retailers 2022: Forest Deli, Coleford

COMMUNITY SPIRIT



While a love of cheese runs throughout pretty much all independent fine food retailers, for Coleford's Forest Deli it truly is at the centre of what they do. Owned and run by husband-and-wife team Simon and Debbie Jones, the shop is centred around the cheese counter.

The deli's cheese offering is the pride and joy of co-owner Simon – the in-house expert on all things cheese – and his passion for sampling local produce is the driving force behind their impressively wide range. "A lack of quality cheese locally and a passion for tasty local food and drink led us to take the plunge, and we haven't stopped building on a desire to offer the widest range of local produce and something a little bit different for the community since," says co-owner Debbie.

Debbie's love of cooking and appreciation for artisan producers rounds out the shop's offering; a trained chef, she makes all of the homemade items for the deli including sausage rolls, quiche, scotch eggs, soup and cakes.

"Everything we do and select for the shop is done with thought and care," Debbie says, "and we provide a personal touch throughout. The cheese counter is at the heart of the shop, and we pride ourselves on providing an extensive range and variety of cheeses to suit all tastes and budgets."

A smart approach to fine food retail has stood Forest Deli in very good stead thus far, and the team is excited to continue the evolution for the new year. "We anticipate a much more blended approach of in-store retail and online shopping, with some significant website improvements already under development," she adds.

The deli's cheese offering will continue to evolve too, "with new cheeses, featuring new small producers but always presented with our Forest Deli customer service, and a variety of cheese-based events featuring highly on the to do list." The team isn't resting on its laurels when it comes to opportunities such as the growing market for visitors. "As more and more UK visitors are discovering the Forest of Dean, we will be offering bespoke services for day trippers and self-catering visitors."

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



Futura Foods launches new Italian cheese range

The team behind the Greek and Cypriot brand YAMAAS!, Futura Foods, has ventured into Italian cheese with a new range named RAGAZZI!, an Italian phrase used to address a group of familiar people. With a focus on provenance and quality, the RAGAZZI! range features premium Italian classics such as Parmigiano Reggiano DOP in both wedge and grated formats, a creamy Mozzarella ball and bite-sized pearls, as well as a classic hard cheese shaker for adding finishing touches to Italian-inspired dishes. The new cheese products come from carefully selected partner dairies across Italy, each with an unrivalled passion for their craft and years of experience.



NEWS IN BRIEF

CHEESE GIN LAUNCHES ON THE MARKET

Gin exploded in popularity over the past few years, with fruity, floral and herbal varieties covering the shelves. But a new era of gin is here – savoury gin. Launched this summer, Audemus Umami Gin's key ingredient is a 30-month-old Parmesan, which is steeped in alcohol. The full list of ingredients is a secret, but it also features Italian capers and offers a briny, salty, ripe twang which evokes the classic Italian cheese.

WORLD'S FIRST CHEESE CONVEYOR BELT OPENS

Pick & Cheese, the world's first cheese conveyor belt, has opened at London's Seven Dials Market, offering a moveable feast of artisanal cheeses — all made in the UK. The idea behind the innovative new restaurant was to make British cheese more accessible and fun, and to champion local produce. "The novelty of it entices people, and it gets them to try the cheeses and then actually take an interest in them," said founder Mathew Carver.



"Carbon neutral cheese"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

After the Science of Artisan Cheese Conference I decided to travel from Bucks to Carlisle and meet Carolyn and Leonie Fairbairn from Thornby Moor. This lovely dairy is set in the heart of the Solway Plain, looking out over the Northern Fells of the Lake District. The dairy is housed within the outbuildings of the old Crofton Hall Estate near Thursby, eight miles west of Carlisle.

The reason for my journey was meeting Leonie, daughter of Carolyn Faibairn, at the bi-annual SAC conference. During the course we split into a small field group of cheesemakers, including Leonie, Andrew Hatten and Simon Jones to name a few, and we were then directed to various patches of grass on Jamie Montgomery's Estate. I was in the minority as a cheesemonger and was super thrilled to be part of this amazing learning experience given by some of the UKs top professors and scientists.

The professor handed me a piece of earth that had been carefully dug out by the exceptional cheesemaker Andrew Hatten. The purpose was to help understand how earth should be, its connection with invertebrates and herbal leys. Leonie was clearly in her element and the subject matter allowed us to debate at length the virtues of good soil management and why we need to act now to save the planet.

Save the planet? I hear you think... Farmers all over the world are quickly learning to use the soil wisely to grow healthy crops. Finally, there are now incentives to help drive this momentous change in how we approach farming. For far too long farmers have been given bad press for carbon emissions. Do farmers hold the key to storing carbon monoxide and giving the world another chance? Yes, they do...

This is why I travelled hundreds of miles to meet two inspirational ladies that are at one with their product. Their cheese is handmade and the milk is exceptional. Carolyn Fairbairn is 80 years old and continues to make cheese daily with no signs of slowing down. At Thornby Moor Dairy they only make 20 tonnes of cheese a year, making it a micro cheesemaker. The rare Dairy Shorthorn cows, chosen for their exceptional milk and tolerance for the sometimes harsh Cumbrian landscape, are only testament to how hard the dairy farmers and Fairbairns work to make a genuine and totally delicious product. Their connection with the land, animals and cheesemaking is inspirational.

The thing that struck me is that this is how Carolyn and Leonie have always made their product. They could have easily stood at COP26 and given a damn good presentation on how to protect the land's diversity by, for example, allowing the dung beetles to continue to thrive on healthy waste from well grown, no till, pasture fed livestock.

We need to really consider where we source produce to line our shelves. In the not-too-distant future we will be seeing carbon neutral labelling on our food produce. As a cheesemonger it is my duty to only sell produce from farms that are achieving this. There are so many brilliant cheesemakers, cheese farmers and dairy farmers in the UK, and thankfully recognition is being given for carbon neutral farming, with an incentive (of course). Despite this world saving method of farming to omit greenhouse gases, there has always been those in touch with our land. These cheesemakers need to be celebrated. If you have not tried Thornby Moor Dairy's cheese yet, do it now.

"We need to really consider where we source produce to line our shelves. In the not-too-distant future we will be seeing carbon neutral labelling on our food produce. As a cheesemonger it is my duty to only sell produce from farms that are achieving this. Thankfully recognition is being given for carbon neutral farming"

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The Life & Soul of the Pantry



AN APPETITE FOR APPLES

It's as easy as apple pie to revitalise the shelves and boost your cheese sales says Sally-Jayne Wright

Apples are the inspiration behind many new food and drink launches in 2022 (consumer trend forecaster, WGSN) and that's been the case for two years now. Think Starbucks Crisp Apple Macchiato, Captain Morgan Sliced Apple Rum and Bailey's Apple Pie Liqueur. While chains such as Wetherspoon's fly the flag with British Bramley Apple Pie on their dessert menu, chefs give retro puddings a modern twist, viz Ottolenghi's Miso Apple Charlotte.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE TREND?

- Seasonality. There's evidence consumers are more likely to try a new product if it features seasonal flavours
- Health
- Comfort in uncertain times
- Awareness we need to boost our food security. Consumer and retailer sentiment towards UK products is probably as high as it has ever been (agri-food expert John Giles in *Fresh Produce Journal*)

WE'VE ALWAYS STOCKED GALAS AND BRAEBURNS...

It's time to be more adventurous. There are 2,200 different species of British apple recorded at Brogdale Farm, home of the National Fruit Collection in Faversham, Kent. Yet only 40% of the apples sold at supermarkets are British. This is an opportunity for indies to display their knowledge of heritage varieties and wow cheese-lovers with clever pairings.

Ali Cooper, executive chair of the national trade body, British Apples & Pears, says, "Try the 30-40 varieties grown commercially in the UK such as Magic Star, Early Windsor and Kissabel. Thanks to modern technology you can get British apples year-round, not just in the traditional season of September to February. You can even get British grown Jazz and Pink Lady apples now thanks to hard work by tree-breeders."

I READ SOMEWHERE THAT NEARLY HALF OF UK HOUSEHOLDS BUY CIDER.

Yes, and as we're drinking less but better quality, so crafted and premium apple cider categories have gained market share. We were very impressed with a sample of Sandford Reserve, 7.4%, from Sandford Orchards, Crediton, Devon.

HOW CAN WE USE APPLES TO SELL MORE CHEESE?

Could you introduce a British apple-and-cheese pairing of the month? Perhaps match sweet, tangy Red Windsors with crumbly white Cheshire. Buy apples little and often and turn unsold fruit into soups and smoothies. Daylesford Organic sell their own apple and chilli chutney, crumbles and apple crumble cake. At London's La Fromagerie cheese shop, they plan to co-host a ticketed October tasting event with The Newt, a Somerset cider producer. They'll pair British and French cheeses with half a dozen ciders.

OUR CUSTOMERS CARE ABOUT THE PLANET. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT FOR THEM?

10 percent of the profits from One Gin's award-winning Crisp Apple gin are funding clean water projects in the world's poorest communities. When you've finished the gin, the empty bottle becomes a stylish water carafe. The makers of Avallen Calvados claim they are 'bee positive' and even the labels are made from recycled apples.

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE MOST OF THE APPLE TREND?

- Tie social media content and in-store promotions to National Apple Day (21st October), and the Bramley Apple Festival (29th October)
- Tempt health-conscious brunchers with single orchard, cold-pressed apple juice
- Consider meal deals – a fresh apple or apple drink with a roast pork or cheese sandwich, Ploughman's or pork pie
- Pedal-powered juicers create in-store theatre
- Get kids involved at half term with toffee apple-making workshops

CHRISTMAS IS COMING. WHAT FRUITY GIFTS CAN I STOCK?

Last year, we gifted Irish Black Butter from Northern Ireland; it won three Great Taste Award stars in 2019 and includes treacle, Armagh Bramley apple, Armagh cider and spices. It's so moreish spooned straight from the jar it may never make it to the cheeseboard or get used as a glaze

> "This is an opportunity for indies to display their knowledge of heritage varieties and wow cheese-lovers with clever pairings"

for ham. The presents we would like to receive include: a jar of Rosebud Preserves smoky and piquant Smoked Apple Butter; a bottle of Burren Balsamics' Bramley Apple Infused Vinegar; and a packet of Suki Tea's very pretty, loose-leaf Apple Loves Mint fruit tea.

WHAT NO- AND LO-ALCOHOL APPLE DRINKS CAN YOU RECOMMEND?

Have you considered hard seltzers (carbonated water combined with alcohol)? We like Bodega Bay Apple, Ginger & Acai, and Percival and Co Apple & Mint Hard Tonic, both in cans and 4% proof. Drynks Unlimited's Smashed 0% Cider in cans is properly brewed, smells of alcohol and has a proper head on it. Another option is Sassy's new 0% organic cidre as sold at Harvey Nichols and launched in January 2022.

WILL THE TREND LAST?

Yes, because going forward, consumers have plenty to feel anxious about and the familiarity of seasonal ingredients is soothing. Apples represent both simplicity and versatility; time-honoured recipes can be refreshed with such voguish flavours as Lotus Biscoff, maple bacon, jalapeno chilli and blood orange. Where drinks are concerned, as cider becomes more premium it is increasingly being seen as a quality and more affordable meal accompaniment than wine (*Westons Cider Report 2022*) and as households cut back, they may well make the swap.

CIDER IS **INCREASINGLY** SEEN AS A MORE **AFFORDABLE** MEAL **ACCOMPANIMENT** THAN **WINE**

(WESTONS CIDER REPORT 2022)



The Life & Soul of the Pantry

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PUTTING BRITISH CHEESE ON THE MAP

With the 'Buy British' movement gaining steam, we explore why this presents an opportunity for speciality cheese businesses and how they can cash in

COMMENTATORS



OLI SMITH
THE BRISTOL CHEESEMONGER



OWEN DAVIES
TY CAW



STEPHEN FLEMING
GEORGE & JOSEPH



JEN GRIMSTONE-JONES
THE PANGBOURNE CHEESE SHOP



SUNIT MEHTA
ROWCLIFFE

It's been a difficult few years for cheesemongers up and down the country. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many businesses to shut their doors in 2020, Brexit brought layers of red tape in 2021, and the cost-of-living crisis is wreaking havoc on the economy and budgets this year.

But indies are putting British cheese on the map in 2022, by championing their local artisanal cheesemakers and cashing in on increased demand for domestically produced food.

Rising consumer interest

British cheese is not new by any means, and in the last 50 years the sector has seen a resurgence. But it has been over the past few years that consumer interest in sourcing cheese from local makers and swapping their European favourites for British alternatives has soared.

As Stephen Fleming, owner of George & Joseph, explains, "Our focus from when we started 10 years ago was on Yorkshire and then British-produced cheeses. We've seen over that time a real increase in interest, combined with an influx of new British cheeses coming onto the market."

This is something Jen Grimstone-Jones, co-owner of Cheese Etc., The Pangbourne Cheese Shop, has also noticed. "We have seen a huge increase in our British cheeses over the last few years. When we took over the shop in 2015 our counter was almost 50:50 British to Continental but now it is much nearer to 70:30.

"I think British cheese has become so much more varied over the last few years and the quality is outstanding. It's easy to promote something which tastes great! Campaigns like the British Cheese Weekender have also highlighted the wonderful cheeses we produce here in the UK, and I think the British public have become much more aware of where their food comes from."

But what has caused consumers to turn to British cheese? For Owen Davies, managing director of Ty Caws, "There are a few key changes that have helped shape the British cheese industry as we see it today, including an increase in better quality British cheese being made. Historic British cheesemakers have developed and perfected techniques, whilst we've also seen an increase in new cheesemakers bringing with a great variety of new British cheese to enjoy.

> "I think British cheese has become so much more varied over the last few years and the quality is outstanding"



"Support through organisations such as the Academy of Cheese and awards such as the British Cheese Awards and the World Cheese Awards have helped boost awareness and profile of British cheese. Additionally, British cheesemakers have taken to self-promotion and have helped boost their own awareness within the consumer market; many have direct customer experience and appreciate the need for good marketing."

For Oli Smith, owner of The Bristol Cheesemonger, the biggest impact on British cheese sales over the last few years was caused by the pandemic. He explains, "Despite the challenges, both in production and route to market, a herculean effort was made to promote and support British cheese and many producers had some of the biggest sales figures they'd ever seen. As a result, I think a huge number of people have been tasting high-quality British cheese for the first time and have absolutely loved it.

"The cost-of-living crisis is going to be devastating for people personally, which is of course the most important priority, but it's also going to be a massive challenge for small businesses like ours, and the people we buy cheese from.

"We have always prided ourselves on being accessible to everybody, but now that is starting to come under pressure."

The Brexit effect

Brexit has caused havoc for many cheesemongers importing European cheeses, with delays, shortages and extra red tape resulting from the break from the EU. But while it made filling shelves and display cabinets with French classics and Spanish delights more difficult, it gave British cheese the opportunity to shine brighter than ever.

For Stephen, "Brexit has – and still does – affected the flow of Continental cheeses into the UK. The availability of some Continental lines is much more unpredictable than it was pre-Brexit.

"We've been fortunate in that we've always been able to offer British alternatives to many Continental styles, so I would say





> Find small, brilliant producers and support the diversity and growth of British cheeses

in some cases that has increased sales of those products." Jen is all too familiar with these hurdles. "In the first few months after Brexit, our Continental cheeses were taking longer to get to us and so people switched to more of the British cheeses as we had a reliable stock. The supply of French cheeses is now more consistent but most of our customers have stuck with the British alternatives."

The idea of becoming independent has also led to a national desire to produce and buy more of our own food. As Sunit Mehta, managing director at Rowliffe, explains, "Following Brexit, there is a strong consumer movement to support local, and this extends to choosing British over imported. Consumers' preference to buy 'British' shows in the demand that we see in the product ranges that are being produced and the requests from our retail customers for such products."

But it seems that for the most part, fine food shoppers are passionate about British produce, no matter where they stand on politics. Oli tells *Speciality Food*, "Bristol was a very pro-EU town, but it is a city that is absolutely passionate about sustainability and supporting local producers. Our customers love buying local and British cheeses but no more so because of Brexit.

"Once in a while, we'll have a customer who tells us they no longer buy French cheese because of the politics of the negotiations but that is very much the exception. The biggest impact Brexit has had is the increase in costs to our producers, even before the cost-of-living crisis."

The local appeal

When it comes to stocking British cheeses, indies should remember that local produce carries a certain appeal. As Jen explains, "People want to support local first and then British, which is just so fantastic. We saw this trend before Brexit and it has continued at pace since."

This focus on localism is also felt by Oli, who tells *Speciality Food*, "Two of the most frequently asked questions in our shop are: 'What are your most local cheeses?' and 'What do you have that I can't buy anywhere else?'.

"Our biggest selling cheeses are therefore the ones where we have the closest relationship with the producer: our own hand selected Westcombe Cheddar, our Sparkenhoe Blue, (for example) as well as those really small production cheeses that are made within 45 minutes or so of the shop: Baronet, The Wandering Ewe and so on."

Stocking hyper-local cheeses also gives indies the advantage over the multiples. As Owen explains, "British cheese can bring so much interest into any independent retailer and there are many British cheeses unavailable within the large retail market."

Jen adds, "Our local cheeses are always extremely popular and we sell a lot of them. I always tell our customers that if they are travelling elsewhere in the UK (and abroad) they should always seek out the local options as they might not get the chance to taste them elsewhere.

"Independent shops like ours are perfect outlets for small-scale British producers. A lot of cheesemakers can't make the quantity of cheese that the large supermarkets need to stock their shops and so the indies come into their own. We can also quickly adapt to the wants and needs of our customers, which larger chains can't easily do."

Upselling British

Oli recommends going all in on the localism angle when it comes to upselling British cheese. "Knowing the product and the producer really is so good for sales as well as for supporting British cheese.

"I would encourage all delis to find a few things that are made nearby and buy them directly from the producer. Be persistent in approaching them and go and visit them – a lot of producers are very happy supplying directly to a local and enthusiastic shop!

"Get those cheeses front and centre on your displays, taste them out, talk to the customers about the producers. Because you're buying directly, you'll sell more of the cheese and make better margin on it than you would otherwise. Find small, brilliant producers and support the diversity and growth of British cheeses."

This is something Jen is also passionate about. She explains, "Know your cheese. Our customers want to know the stories behind the cheeses, they love the fact that we often source direct from the cheesemakers so we know the journey the cheese has taken from producer to our counter."

Knowing your cheese also comes with the benefit of being able to host quality tastings that will best showcase the products in your counter. According to Owen, "Sampling helps. It creates interest and is a talking point – it draws attention to the cheese selection and we've found that since introducing it post-pandemic, it's helped boost sales. Clear labelling and staff training on the key characteristics and stories of each cheese helps with consumer confidence and in turn, spending."

Jen concludes, "Let customers taste the cheese and it will sell itself, but don't forget to make your display look enticing. After all, people visit an independent cheese shop to buy cheese so they're already looking to buy from you!"



TOP SELLING BRITISH CHEESES

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



OWEN DAVIES, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TY CAWS IN CARDIFF

Our top-selling British cheeses include Hafod Organic Cheddar, Gorwydd Caerphilly, Baron Bigod, Trefaldwyn Blue, English Pecorino, Rosary and Sinodun Hill.



STEPHEN FLEMING, OWNER OF GEORGE & JOSEPH IN LEEDS

Best-selling British cheeses at George & Joseph include Baron Bigod, Tunworth, Dorstone, Colston Bassett, Kirkham's Lancashire and Dale End Cheddar – they taste amazing!



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

Barkham Blue is probably our best-selling blue, with Colston Bassett Blue Stilton PDO coming a very close second. Baron Bigod easily outsells our French Brie, and we sell 11 different types of Cheddar because it is the style of cheese that people ask for the most.





5 MINUTES WITH

SUNIT MEHTA, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF ROWCLIFFE



HOW HAS CONSUMER INTEREST IN BRITISH CHEESE CHANGED RECENTLY?

In the last few years, numerous new and existing British products have developed to mirror the well-known and much-loved European-style cheeses, such as Brie, Camembert, Feta, Halloumi and Morbier, resulting in an innovation-driven larger range offering more variety of British-produced cheese.

The premium quality of these products has encouraged those consumers who prefer to purchase British over imported to switch from their long-standing favourites to a local equivalent.

WHY DOES BRITISH CHEESE OFFER AN EXCITING OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIES?

Through the drive for supporting local, and also the movement of storytelling, the British cheese industry is really pinned on the artisan heritage of the producer, the farm, and most importantly the way the cheese is made.

This is really the reason consumers choose a product – they want to feel that they are part of that story, and this is often the reason why a consumer will buy one product over the other and become brand loyal to a product. Fine food shoppers are looking for cheese and fine foods which match their love for food. They will be encouraged to engage more with something they can relate to, being British.

HOW CAN INDIES ENSURE THEY ARE STOCKING THE BEST OF BRITISH CHEESE?

By following industry social media, fine food retailers will be exposed to the latest new developments. Industry events drive retail customer interest which then filters down to the producers and wholesalers.

Retailers and wholesalers are continuously following new consumer and flavour trends, with this guiding the development of the products consumers are asking for.

The industry also runs a calendar filled with awards such as the British Cheese Awards, International Cheese & Dairy Awards etc., and consumers are able to attend sections of these events and also participate through social media.

STOCK CHECK



SHEPHERDS PURSE YORKSHIRE BLUE

A mild and creamy blue cheese made with milk from proud Yorkshire cows.

shepherdspurse.co.uk



CAWS CENARTH CHEESE PERL WEN

A glorious and unique cross between a traditional Brie and a Caerffili.

cawscenarth.co.uk



CLEMENCY HALL VICTORIOUS VINTAGE WAXED TRUCKLE

Award-winning Vintage Cheddar aged for 18 months.

rowcliffe.co.uk



CAWS TEIFI CHEESE TEIFI HALLOUMI

An organic Halloumi, great served grilled, fried or barbecued.

teificheese.co.uk



BUTLERS FARMHOUSE CHEESES BLACKSTICKS BLUE

An eyecatching and versatile blue cheese handmade in Lancashire.

butlerscheeses.co.uk



GODMINSTER HEART SHAPED VINTAGE ORGANIC CHEDDAR

A deliciously smooth and creamy award-winning organic cheese.

godminster.com





COMMENTATORS



KRU MISTRY
TASTESMITHS



MATT WHELAN
FIELDFARE



ED FOY
PRESS



ALICE PILKINGTON
MINTEL



RUBY BELL
BYRUBY



AMANDA ARGENT
SOUPOLOGIE



THE RISE OF READY MEALS

From a good-value meal solution to a taste of indulgence, today's ready meal market is serving up just what today's shopper wants

While the food industry continues to be shaped by the impacts of Covid-19, the meal solution sector is relishing the opportunity to satisfy a newly-grown customer base with a fresh appetite for quality.

Treating ourselves at home is one of the enduring effects of the pandemic, and as many purse strings are tightened as a result of the cost-of-living crisis so affordable luxuries such as quality meal solutions take hold in the nation's shopping baskets.

"We think that meal solutions have always been judged on three factors – speed/convenience, cost and quality," begins Kru Mistry, head of operations at Tastesmiths. "British consumers want something that is quick and easy to prepare, is equivalent or cheaper than a takeaway, and tastes great. Whilst these have always been the criteria for meal solutions, we believe that the emphasis on each is always changing. This is dictated more recently by Covid, the cost-of-living crisis, sustainable living, as well as the increased use of social media."

A considered solution

Working from home, another long-term effect of Covid-19, also feeds into demand for ready meals with fine food credentials. "Traditionally, convenience and cost have trumped quality in the meal solution space. However, the legacy of Covid has meant that hybrid working has become the norm, resulting in people utilising the time saved by not commuting to work to do other things, including cooking," Kru says. "And the cost-of-living crisis and increased focus on sustainability means that people are more aware than before about budgeting for spend (including food) and reducing food waste."

"With many incomes feeling squeezed in 2022/2023, shoppers are looking to replace the big treats such as holidays or luxury items with smaller, everyday treats. Premium ready to cook meals or foods can offer just such an everyday treat by delivering an affordable alternative to dining out or takeaways," agrees Matt Whelan, managing director of Fieldfare.

While not a purveyor of ready meals per se, Fieldfare's offering certainly complements the meal solution sector so has experienced first-hand the changing tide of consumer needs. "One of the big and ongoing factors from our perspective is the significant increase in one and two person households that we have seen over the past decade or so," explains Matt. "What we do very well is the complete meal solution, and single portioned pre-prepared foods and loose foods, such those offered by Fieldfare, allow smaller households more choice, particularly when we consider fragmented diets within the UK household." With many pre-prepared meals and ingredients designed to feed multiple mouths, it can be tricky to cater to smaller households – despite the fact that the number of two-person households is increasing. "It is hard to cook for just one or even two people, and loose and individually portioned foods offer shoppers more control over the quantities they need to buy and prepare and helps them to reduce food and packaging waste."

Considering the growing number of British consumers opting for plant-based lifestyles or following restricted diets, supplying your customer base with a varied range of single-portion – or self-serve – meal options is a smart move. "The UK's household dynamics keep changing and fragmentation of dietary preferences within the UK household is becoming more prevalent. In the UK household, we may find one or two people who have very different requirements or tastes and this is where the flexibility of Fieldfare's offer can offer a solution. We are putting the consumer in control by giving them the ability to choose what they want and exactly how much they need."

"Changing dietary choices has meant that more customers are adopting a flexitarian diet, or choosing 'no meat' days," agrees Kru. Flexibility is key here. "Consumers, but in particular these smaller households, want more flexibility," continues Matt. "They want to have a range of options to choose from, in particular when it comes to dietary preferences, sustainable options including reduced packaging and flexibility on portion sizes or how much they need to buy."

Of course, while there are plenty of indulgent options out there, soup is renowned for its health-giving properties. Often packed full of vegetables, it's a go-to for shoppers looking to up their nutrient uptake while not breaking the bank. "One of the key drivers influencing the desire for high quality meal solutions is the wellness trend, with consumers ever more conscious of their health and diet," explains Ed Foy, co-founder of PRESS. "As a result, they're actively seeking out convenient products that cater to their nutritional needs. This also overlaps with a desire to eat a more plant-based diet – a trend which is at an all-time high."

"Making healthy ingredients



> British consumers want something that is quick and easy to prepare, is equivalent or cheaper than a takeaway, and tastes great

visible will help the category respond to the predicted long-term focus on health, whilst interest in shelf-stable, vegetable-based ready meals points to an opportunity for the segment to tap into the increasingly significant flexitarian trend," agrees Alice Pilkington, food and drink research analyst at Mintel.

A considered solution

Sustainability is also an important factor for stockists to consider when creating their ready meal line, as shoppers become more conscious than ever about how their choices affect the world around them, with Alice stating that "providing greater transparency on production can also build trust."

"As consumers become more aware of how their personal consumption and shopping habits affect the environment, they are beginning to assess the impact of the brands they buy most frequently. As a result, sustainability is becoming a key driver for customers," continues Ed.

"We source the highest quality fruit and veg from G.A.P. Global certified farms, including the 'wonky' ones, to ensure we deliver consistent, quality products that are safe, ethically sourced and set the standard for environmentally conscious farming practices."

"I do think people are beginning to care more about what they are consuming, as well as wanting to know where their food has come from," agrees Ruby Bell, co-founder at ByRuby. "There are a lot of poor-quality convenient food options out there, which is why we try and differentiate ourselves from your traditional 'ready meal' by being transparent about what goes into our meals and where we source our meat and ingredients. We are striving to bridge that gap between enjoying the convenience of a pre-made meal without having to feel guilty or suspicious about what you are putting into your body."

Minimising food waste has become a hot topic for conscious consumers, and soup is bound to be more popular than ever as we move into the colder months and the depths of a cost-of-living crisis. "Generally, of course, soup is a great way of using up spare vegetables at home – so soup is the perfect recipe for reducing food waste at home," explains Amanda Argent, founder of Soupologie. "It was thinking about food waste that prompted us to create Souper Cubes. Our frozen cubes of ready to heat and eat soups mean that consumers use exactly what they need with the remainder staying in the freezer. This eliminates food waste in the shape of half used cartons, pots or tins of soup. And being frozen, we are able to use eco-friendly, home compostable packaging for our Souper Cubes."

With the cost-of-living crisis beginning to bite, convenient meal solutions that offer savings are going to be critical to many households. "By eliminating food waste, a food product immediately becomes cheaper," explains Amanda. "The amount of food that is wasted generally in the UK is breathtaking. Anything we can do, as a food producer, to eliminate food waste stops us, as a nation, from literally throwing money away."

Budget-friendly luxury

Indulgence also plays a part in the British consumer's purchase of ready meals and meal solutions, with many seeing such meals as an opportunity to enjoy meals that they would not ordinarily cook for themselves at home, either due to time constraints, skill level or lifestyle choice. Being lower in price than the vast majority of restaurant meals and takeaway options means that ready meals are often seen as a more affordable way to eat chef-prepared meals. Indeed, according to Mintel's *Ready Meals and Ready-To-Cook Foods Market Report 2022*, 63% of UK adults state that they purchase ready meals as an alternative to having a takeaway, and the trend is predicted to gain momentum over the next few months.

"Budget and quality are also considerations with more premium options often serving as a treat meal and others serving as everyday options," explains Matt. "By offering loose products, Fieldfare gives shoppers more flexibility and control over what they put in their basket. Ultimately it helps them to avoid waste and to manage their budgets better, which is particularly important in the current climate. Through our individual portions, people are also able to reward themselves with affordable little treats such as our delicious individual desserts and cakes, or frozen breakfast pastries for a delicious treat breakfast on the weekend!"

We've all indulged in an Indian takeaway or two (or more), so it'll be no surprise to know that they have long held the top or second spot for most popular takeaway option in Britain. Meal solutions, such as those offered by Tastesmiths, make enjoying restaurant-quality international meals at home quicker, cheaper, and more manageable than consumers may imagine. "Cooking Indian food can be a daunting experience," says Kru. "The sheer number of spices needed, with each ingredient normally only needed in small amounts and often hard to find, means that most people find it much more convenient opting for a takeaway instead." Meal solutions like Tastesmiths' take the fuss out of the equation. "We take the hard work out, and package everything in one place for our customers. All they need to do is add their choice of meat, fish or veg. Our kits only contain real food; this means no additives, preservatives, or natural colourings found in jars, and also no manufactured pastes. Whilst cooking from scratch does take longer than using pastes or jars, the easy-to-follow instructions make sure that customers know exactly what needs to be done, without being patronising and also leaving space for some creative flair."

By providing a product that not only takes a lot of the mess and time out of creating delicious international food but allows for a sense of accomplishment for the cook, Tastesmiths is onto a winning formula. "Most importantly, we believe cooking provides moments of mindfulness and relationship building for individuals and families," says Kru. "And the 'I made that' moment at the end when the meal is ready to eat is unbeatable."

A convenient future

From the growing appreciation for quality food and drink to the sustainability question, there are plenty of opportunities for independent fine food retailers and the producers who partner with them to capitalise on ready meals and meal solutions. "We are seeing three key trends happening in the meal solution segment," explains Kru. "Firstly, there is a move towards using fresh ingredients and eating real food rather than processed or manufactured products. Customers want a more involved experience with food (rather than putting something straight into the microwave). They want to be able to feel, smell, touch food, and know exactly what's in their meal. Secondly, with increasingly varied diets, customers are looking for solutions that will cater for friends and all members of the family, and maintain the shared eating experience rather than having people feel 'left out'. Thirdly, there is a need to increase sustainability by reducing/eliminating waste – both food and packaging. Companies need to minimise packaging (especially non-recyclable), and make sure portion sizes are well measured for customers. The former is an ongoing process for us – we're not perfect yet, but we're making steps to get there."

> Making healthy ingredients visible will help the category respond to the predicted long-term focus on health, whilst interest in shelf-stable, vegetable-based ready meals points to an opportunity for the segment to tap into the increasingly significant flexitarian trend

The future looks bright for the frozen food sector too – great news for meal solutions and the customers who enjoy them. "There is still room for the frozen market to grow. As shoppers continue to discover the benefits of frozen, including the naturally longer shelf life and opportunity to try new dishes and flavours, there is the opportunity for the sector to gain a bigger share of the ready meal market." Key to *Speciality Food* readers cashing in on this opportunity is offering a carefully balanced blend of quality and convenience. "By offering more flexibility and choice, plus being uncompromising on quality, Fieldfare believes that there is also a substantial opportunity to develop the sector within the fine and speciality foods market," says Matt.





COMMENTATORS



CHARLES AND RUTH SIMPSON
SIMPSON'S WINE ESTATE

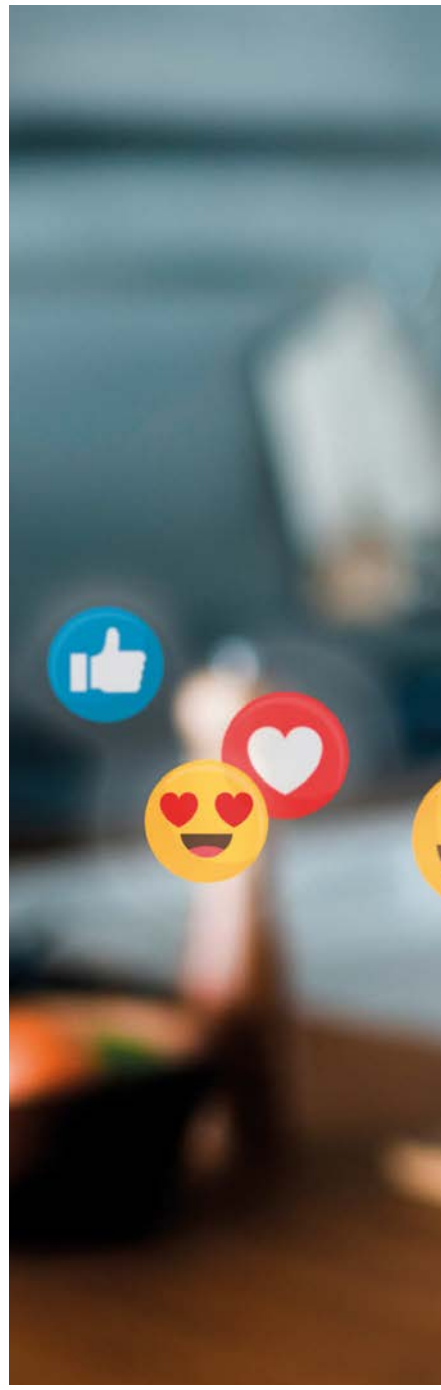


JACKIE WILKS
TERLINGHAM WINES



JONICA FOX
FOX & FOX





GROWING YOUR ONLINE AUDIENCE

Samantha Priestley explores how indies can grow their digital reach without sacrificing their local USP

It might seem like a contradiction in terms, to talk about growing your online audience locally. After all, isn't the point of an online presence to attract customers from further afield? But really, for most indie food and drink businesses, that's just not practical. Sure, you might find some customers are travelling from far and wide to find you, but the bulk of your business will still go to those who live locally to you. So, what does it mean to grow your local online audience?

For head of marketing at Sessions Food Hall, Shannon Butler, it's about stretching the idea of social media to fit into other online tools.

"The most effective platform for us for a local audience, both for people who live in the area and are visiting, is treating our Google Business Page as a social media platform. We regularly add new photos, publish events natively and update menu items. We also do paid targeted social ads in the local area. We send out an after-visit email asking for Google reviews. Our Shelter Hall page gets upwards of 400,000 views a month and our photos are viewed up to 250k times a month compared to similar business who get around 90k."

> "We have increasingly been factoring video content on our socials as this format keeps growing in popularity"

Those are quite some numbers. But the truth is, it's a lot of work and it takes up a lot of time. Running a small business is tough enough without the added pressure of keeping up with the online world, surely? But for Robi Lambie, founder and co-owner of Cairngorm Coffee Rosters in Edinburgh, it's both essential and hugely rewarding.

"Harris Grant, co-owner, and I are staunch believers that running a business in 2022 requires you to treat yourself as 50% a content creator or media company. To this end, we do prioritise making videos and planning marketing as much as we can and it probably takes up at least a day a week of our time. In addition to this, we currently have retainers with three different agencies who help us create content. Two of these are one-man bands who have created fantastic pieces of video for us and really understand what we're trying to achieve."

For Robi, the key is to view growing your online audience as an integral part of your business, as important as any other area of work, and it's vital to not view the time needed for this as a waste.

"Marketing your business online seems unavoidable in 2022. The first place anyone now looks to finds out about the food we serve or the coffee we work with is our Instagram, and it feels like the majority of our customers want to understand the value of their money before they part with it."

For John Sinclair, owner of Craigies Farm Shop, Deli & Café, there simply wasn't time to keep up with everything himself, but that was never a reason to not push forward with building an online audience. "We have just hired someone in a dedicated digital marketing role, so that goes some way to highlighting how dedicated we are to this side of the business. We also have the help of an agency to manage our website and media presence. It is a huge focus for us, and it has paid off with our online followings – we have over 45,000 followers on Facebook and over 10,000 followers on Instagram."

Spreading the word

Food and drink businesses can think of their online shop in exactly the same way as they view their physical shop. Loyal customers are already visiting, but no one can rest easy on that alone, those passers-by have to be tempted to come inside too.

"Inevitably, we will always have our content viewed more so by the audience that are engaged followers of what we're doing," says Robi. "However, we've used competitions where entrants are asked to share with their audience to enter, and sponsored adverts on some platforms to further this reach. It's a funny dynamic to put yourself out there on social media in that regard as you aren't always viewed by someone who has bought into, and understands, what you are trying to achieve."

Robi knows his on-site customers are his online customers. Businesses are simply communicating with these people more than ever before, and as social media is sharable, the word can spread so much faster than ever before. For John, it works in the same word-of-mouth way as locals chatting on the school run.

"We've had many instances of people coming along to visit us after seeing our content online. It's brilliant to be able to reach so many people in this way, and it's a massive help when people share our posts or leave a review on TripAdvisor, for example. Often, you'll see people tag their friends in our posts with a comment like 'this is the place I was telling you about', or 'we have to go here' and that always brings a smile to our faces."

Shannon Butler has found it's a case of the two worlds being seamless in 2022. Loyal customers can be rewarded for that loyalty, and with the rise of app-based ordering at your table, a pandemic tool that's here to stay, the majority of customers will be fully connected to your business after just one in-person visit.

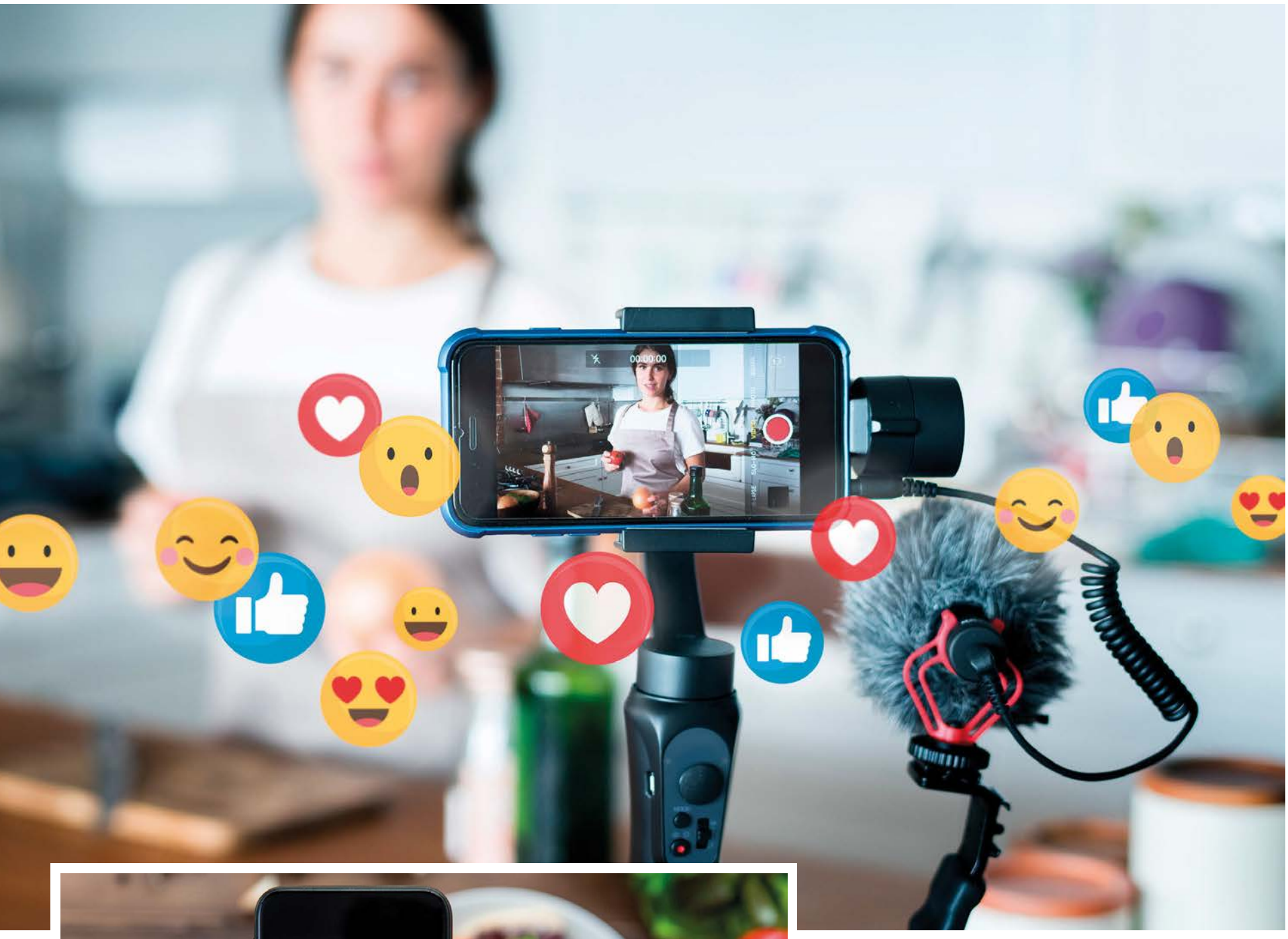
"More valuable than our social media accounts, which lots of customers use to window shop before they visit rather than follow, is our email database. As all of our ordering is done either via our web-based ordering platform or our app, we've built a strong database of

> "We've had many instances of people coming along to visit us after seeing our content online"

followers who are predominately local. We announce new launches, events etc to this audience first and give them priority for booking."

For Shannon, building the online audience starts before the physical outlet is open. It can be seen in the same way as promoting a movie or album before the release date. That buzz every business is looking for can be built and anticipation can be created, bringing your business a ready-made audience.

"Launching the new venue, setting up the Google business page is one of the first things we do. We put the opening date and regularly post images etc in the lead up to launch. On soft launch night, we have wooden QR codes that will be on every table asking all attendees to leave a review before they leave," she says.





Getting to know your audience

Knowing who your local online audience is, and what they want to see and engage with online, might not be as easy as it sounds. Robi has found the only way to know is to test the waters.

"Mostly our more serious content hasn't had the uptick that the fun videos have. We've tried some educational pieces to teach viewers about coffee and how to make it, but there's already such a wealth of information on the topic online and showcased by established content creators, so it makes it a hard one to really make viral."

It's a good point. There is so much information available online in 2022, most regular users of social media are looking for something that stands out.

"I think it's important to show a variety of different qualities of content," says Robi. "Often our local supporters will be most interested in an iPhone video of us in the shop just talking about our plans for the weekend. It can oftentimes come across more genuine and therefore more engaging."

For John Sinclair, it's a double-sided coin. He's found online activity can be both educational and fun. It can drive customers to his business and it can simply make someone smile, which, arguably, can still drive customers to the business.

"Facebook advertising has been key for us in reaching new local audiences and generating traffic to our online shop. But overall, our social media and other online activities are all about building a brand and supplying something of use to our customers – whether that's a photo of a pygmy goat to brighten their day or a recipe they can save for later. This kind of connection can't be measured in sales."

> "Our social media and other online activities are all about building a brand and supplying something of use to our customers – whether that's a photo of a pygmy goat to brighten their day or a recipe they can save for later"

The TikTok effect

The online world is constantly shifting and as we're more than halfway through 2022, it's a safe bet that something new will come along in 2023. But for now, the platform everyone is hopping onto is TikTok. But is it a useful social media tool for food and drink businesses? We asked John if he's tried it yet.

"Not yet, but it is something we are considering adding to our plan. We feel our content would be really suited to that platform. Everybody likes cute farmyard animals. We have increasingly been factoring video content on our socials as this format keeps growing in popularity."

Robi and the team at Cairngorm were always keen to get in there early with this new online platform, even if did prove challenging at first.

"It has taken us a bit of time to understand what the audience on TikTok are looking for. We still haven't smashed through the viral wall there, but we are trying anyway. We recently took onboard a guy 10 years my younger to help us create the content that people seemingly want to see over there."

Engaging with your online audience is a constant learning experience, but for Robi it's important to keep it fun.

"When we launched our coffee box packaging we did a spoof of Steve Jobs announcing the launch of the iPhone."

That launch was a great success. Once you know your locals well enough, you know exactly what they'll respond to, and it's all growth from there.



FINAL CALL

I am writing this column today as the country is in a period of mourning for the loss of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II who passed away at the age of 96, after 70 years on the throne.

Dozens of fine food retailers and producers have shared their memories of her reign and expressed their condolences to the Royal Family, while images of Green Park and Buckingham Palace covered in flowers have filled our screens.

But while the Crown coronates its new King, SMEs are thinking about their energy bills. Liz Truss announced her plans to help businesses get through the winter at the start of September, and while it intends to protect them from extortionate price hikes, many are concerned that the proposed support doesn't go far enough for the most vulnerable.

With price caps now fixed at £2,500 retailers and shoppers alike can breathe a small sigh of relief, but there will certainly still be an air of hesitation on the high street.

In more positive news, the fine food industry came together for Speciality & Fine Food Fair in September. The atmosphere was buzzing for the two-day event, and everyone I spoke with was so pleased to be back networking, tasting and finding inspiration in person with one another again.

On a personal note, it was my first time attending the show, and it was fantastic to be immersed in the fine food industry and put a face to the names of many producers and retailers I have interacted with over the past few months.

But I was far from the only newcomer in attendance. There were plenty of fresh names and brand-new launches on the stands this year, and the discovery zone was full of innovation, hinting at an exciting 2023.

As the nights draw in, making personal connections with your customers and checking in to see how they are coping with the doom and gloom in the news is more important than ever. Because even with the busiest season of the year about to unfold, everyone needs a little kindness in their life.

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
DANIEL KNIGHTLEY, FOUNDER OF EPIC OATS



WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
I would be flying fast jets in the RAF.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?
My very first job was my own car wash service on my road when I was about 13 years old.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
I am inspired by innovation; particularly in aviation, space and motorsport. Elon Musk is naturally an inspiration of mine as well as Tony Robbins who has great ideas about self-development and Richard Branson.

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?
Working in a bar. It just wasn't for me!

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?
My favourite part of running Epic Oats is watching it grow day by day, just knowing how much potential it has.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
My least favourite part of it is probably how slow and arduous the process is.

HOW ABOUT THE FOOD INDUSTRY?
My favourite thing about working in food is being a part of an industry which has the power to make a lot of positive changes in society, for people's health and also for the environment.
And my least favourite, well I guess this industry can feel precarious as the consumer mood and interest is consistently changing so it can be a challenge to keep on top of that!

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?
Well for starters, it would have to be a range of dim sum, I am a big lover of Chinese food.
The main course would be a variety of Italian food and dessert... well as long as it was from Zuma, the best Japanese restaurant I've ever been to, I would be very happy.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?
Never give up, never surrender!

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
Tofu is a bit weird to me. I'm not overly fond of the taste or texture.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?
Richard Branson's 'Business Stripped Bare'.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Oooh, I'm going to have to go with savoury. Much more variety, I think.

BE CONNECTED



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TRIED & TESTED



HEARTH YERBA MATE PASSION FRUIT

With natural energy drinks growing in popularity, this passion fruit flavoured Yerba Mate is bang on trend. The herbal infusion is originally from the rainforests of South America and is famed for its energising, focused feeling. Sweetened with real fruit juice, Hearth provides a fruity alternative to traditional coffee and its associated caffeine crashes, and unlike most energy drinks, it is still rather than sparkling. A delicious drink to keep summer alive throughout the autumn months!
drinkhearth.com



HONESTLY TASTY BREE

Plant-based products are gaining traction, and one sector in particular that has exploded recently is vegan cheese. Crafted and matured in small batches at a plant-based creamery in North London, this thick and mellow soft-ripened 'Bree' cheese offers a creamy texture paired with subtle earthy tones. Instead of dairy, it pairs almonds with flavours of miso and truffle and works perfectly on a cracker with a hearty dollop of chutney.
honestlytasty.co.uk

TAKING THE PEA CHEESY & ONION



Hailing from Cambridgeshire, Taking the Pea has transformed the humble marrowfat pea into a deliciously crunchy, flavourful snack that you won't want to put down. These cheese and onion flavoured crunchy balls of goodness are actually vegan-friendly and an amazing source of vitamin A, vitamin C, folate, thiamine (B1), iron and phosphorus. With more consumers looking for innovative snacking ideas, these peas are definitely on trend.
takingthepea.com

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Jean Dalport, executive chef at Restaurant Interlude



Michelin-starred Restaurant Interlude is set within the historic woodland gardens of Leonardslee Estate in Horsham. With a seasonally changing menu of up to 21 courses, Interlude is committed to providing guests with an opportunity to interact with nature and eat from the land resulting in a memorable gastronomic journey. Our unique cuisine is built on a respect for our surroundings, local ingredients and flavours of our heritage that bring the gardens to life in every dish.

The set menus draw inspiration from the 240-acres of Grade I listed Leonardslee gardens, using foraged or purposefully grown produce and working with local farmers and producers that adhere to the same organic principles as us.

As a chef, local produce will always inspire my work and has been a passion of mine from a young age; to see what's grown around us, know its direct source and be able to form direct long-lasting relationships with the farmers and suppliers. I want to be able to create exquisite food that has a story behind it, takes inspiration from where it comes from and provokes emotion for those that taste it.

We work with various producers, farmers and suppliers that contribute to our unique culinary journey. I'd like to highlight Trenchmore Farm, where Andrew Knowles and his team farm for flavour and do it sustainability. Better yet, they are located just a stone's throw away from Leonardslee.

Andrew and his team have a passion for harvesting produce in a virtuous circle, allowing them to improve the soils and continue to grow delicious food. They offer dry-aged beef from their slow grown Sussex crossed Wagyu cattle, cider from their traditional cider apple orchard and heritage wheat.

J Cocoa Chocolate Maker is a multi-award-winning chocolate maker, who ethically sources and sustainably crafts beans to bars in Hassocks, West Sussex, with a zero-waste policy. The chocolate is made from the finest cocoa beans from around the world, as James trades directly with farmers to ensure they receive a true premium for their crops of heritage heirloom cocoa.

We also work with Sussex Saffron farm in Mayfield. I am over the moon to be able to source saffron locally from a team dedicated to producing high-quality food rooted in natural, sustainable and ethical practices. They have made a commitment to use organic and regenerative farming techniques to help restore and reinvigorate their land and they do not use pesticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizer or artificial irrigation systems.

Sussex Saffron provides us with delicate local flowers and saffron with an abundance of flavour, giving us something fun to play around with in the kitchen at Interlude Restaurant.

> "As a chef, local produce will always inspire my work and has been a passion of mine from a young age"

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Garofalo



GETTING COSY WITH ITALIAN CUISINE THIS AUTUMN

As the colder nights draw in, independent retailers can cash in on comforting dishes inspired by Italian cuisine

While Italian cuisine may conjure up images of pastel-coloured houses along azure seas, bustling markets with summer fruits and vegetables, Aperol spritzes being enjoyed on sun-trap piazzas and windows full of rows of gelato, it also caters to cosy season.

In fact, autumn is the perfect time for independents to spark a passion for Italian cuisine with the latest and greatest products. Reshuffling your shelves can help bring richer sauces and tinned and jarred products back to the fore.

As the weather turns, your customers will be looking for cosier, autumnal flavours, like umami truffle shavings, creamy carbonara or rich venison ragù.

Sourcing locally foraged mushrooms and other seasonal veg grown in the UK will also help customers add a local British twist to their favourite Italian dishes. For particularly hands-on customers, why not try selling cooking kits complete with everything they need to craft their own comforting pasta dinner from scratch, such as Italian 00 flour and semolina, a pasta maker and ravioli stamps?

And for the more time conscious, take a fresh look at your dried pastas and risottos as well as flavour-packed, stir-in sauces to ensure your shop offers something different to the multiples.

As fewer people spend on eating out this autumn to save their disposable income, they will be looking to recreate restaurant-quality dishes at home, so make sure your shelves are stocked to the nines with these.

Autumn is a great time to fall in love with Italian cuisine, and as customers look for comfort in food as a result of the worry caused by the cost-of-living crisis, giving them a gentle prod towards cosy and rich fine food products can make all the difference this year.

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



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