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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the November/December issue of *Speciality Food* – our final outing of 2024.

What a year it's been. From my own perspective, I came back from maternity leave to find all manner of new products and brands in the industry – shaking it up with their innovation, as SMEs do best – and I think we can all agree that this year has been a great one for food lovers.

The great news for all of us is that the appetite for great food is as keen as ever as 2024 comes to a close and 2025 beckons... but we can't rest on our laurels. A cynic could see the constant new demands from consumers a double-edged sword, but I see them as a multi-faceted opportunity. Not only does this ever-changing landscape bring waves of innovation and new products to delight customers, but it means that independent retailers can't stand still – and nor should they want to, with the plethora of delicious innovation on offer.

It's been a pleasure to report the news stories, trends, opinions, sector updates and more to you this year, and I look forward to continuing *Speciality Food*'s mission to inform and delight in 2025 and beyond.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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Revealed: The UK's most popular regional foods

It's well-known amongst fine food retailers that local sells – *Speciality Food* finds out why that's the case, and discovers what you should stock on your shelves or cafe

Whether you prepare them fresh for your deli counter, catch customers' eyes in your café, or simply sell ready-made products on shelf, tapping into consumers' favourite British delicacies is a sure-fire way to boost sales as a fine food retailer.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Brits believe their hometown has the best regional cuisine in the UK, while 89% said they like to enjoy food from around the country, found a survey of 2,000 people by social network Playsee.

The top five regional delicacies according to the survey are:

- Yorkshire pudding
- Cheddar
- Scottish shortbread
- Cornish pasties
- Bakewell tarts

Other regional favourites included Whitby's Scotch egg, Melton Mowbray's famous pork pie and Welsh rarebit.

Further down the list were less well-known favourites, such as Stottie bread from Newcastle, Banbury cake from Oxfordshire, and Stargazy pie, which originated in Mousehole, Cornwall.

HOW IMPORTANT IS REGIONAL CUISINE FOR FINE FOOD RETAILERS?

As a speciality food retailer, stocking local producers and food products can seem like a no-brainer, but it's worth considering how and why you stock these products to ensure your offering stands out.

"We are very much a business that 'does what it says on the tin' and sell a lot of produce that's made in Norfolk," Mark Kacary, managing director of Norfolk Deli, tells Speciality Food.

"However, I think it's far too easy to compartmentalise things like this," he adds. "For example, if we were in London would we try and specialise in products made in London? Maybe, but probably not, as we would seek to be more cosmopolitan to attract and reflect the type of people shopping there."

It comes back to knowing your niche as a retailer in your local area. "Our niche is Norfolk produce. We see ourselves in many instances as the bridge between a farmer's market and a supermarket for many small local producers," Mark continues.

"We also have to differentiate ourselves from the supermarkets in the small Victorian town we trade in, and the way to do that is to focus on small artisan producers. However, it is very easy to fall down the trap of becoming like every other deli/speciality food retailer by stocking all the things you find in speciality wholesaler catalogues."

How do fine food retailers stand out from the crowd? "I think one of the key elements when stocking produce is to look at where you are and who your customers are, and for us this is relatively simple," Mark says. "Because we are located in a seaside resort in one of the country's tourist hotspots, we find that 80-plus % of our footfall comes from visitors to the town.

"If you understand who your customers are, then it is easier to understand what they are looking for. There are three magic words we insist all our local suppliers have on their packaging and that is 'Made in Norfolk'," he explains.

"We are not in Cornwall, so not too surprisingly we get very little demand for pasties. Similarly, our 'Made in Norfolk' cookies would outsell Scottish shortbread five to one. We do not sell any alcoholic products that are not made in Norfolk, and that includes wines, beers, ciders, and spirits," Mark says.

Because showcasing the best Norfolk produce is a key element of the Norfolk Deli's business model, focusing in on hyper-local products is a must. Other retailers, however, might find better success with selling local favourites from a wider remit, or even specialising in importing European fare depending on their customer base.

SUPPORTING LOCAL

The Playsee survey also found the vast majority of consumers agree that "independent restaurants and cafés contribute to the community in a positive way by making the area unique and elevating local offerings".

Of those surveyed, 35 % admitted they could do more to support their local independent restaurants and shops, and one in 10 Brits said they wished they had supported a local pub or restaurant more before it shut down.

"Local businesses bring a wealth of gems to neighbourhoods and communities, and supporting these businesses is key to enriching life where we live," said Veronica Lin, head of user experiences at Playsee. "It's great to see from the research that so many Brits see the value in supporting local businesses and are actively eating more locally since the pandemic and admit that we could all do our part to help them more."

When it comes to eating out, Brits also tend to eat out at their favourite local restaurants on average four times per month, according to the survey.

Londoners topped the list of those eating out locally on average 5.2 times a month, with Stoke-on-Trent visiting independent, local restaurants the least, on average 2.8 times monthly. A fifth (20 %) of Brits eat out more locally now than they did pre-pandemic.

R

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"Panto season"



JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES

I have recently been reading that the traditional pantomime, which is somewhat unique to the UK, is not only surviving the cost-of-living crisis but in many places actually flourishing with bookings encouragingly up in recent times. Are there lessons for us speciality food retailers to learn from this unusual phenomenon?

We all know how important December is to our annual profits. After 52 years it is still the yearly highlight for us at Partridges in terms of sales. Our customer count has rebounded well following Covid and our sales are still reasonably robust compared to pre-pandemic.

Similarly in 2023, according to *Stage* magazine, pantomimes were apparently flourishing and they are still actually considered to be the lifeblood of the industry in many places.

Good pantomimes and good speciality food shops do have some things in common. For example, the Christmas narrative, elaborate scenery, a good cast of characters, some element of slapstick, may I add, and also audience participation unrivalled in other productions throughout the year. But they also have another common element – the sheer physical hard work necessary, day in day out to keep the show on the road. As with the panto audience, customer gratification is the key goal.

One of the most serious complaints we receive from loyal customers is that they cannot find what they are looking for. In truth we must lose a fair amount of custom by frustrating sales in this way. The problem is that Christmas deliveries start arriving in September and need to be accommodated appropriately. Preferably not Christmas puddings by the front door. This causes a lot of confusion to regular customers and I who embark on David Attenborough-style excursions to look for cranberry jelly etcetera. Rarely people shop the whole shop but target different areas such as deli, wines, American section or condiments.

However, our goal is to make it as easy as possible for people to get what they want for their stock up trips (large orders), fill in trips (medium sized orders) and top up trips (single items in short supply), so signage and sensible shelf stacking are vital.

The art of shelf stacking is often overlooked but there is an art to it; eyelevel sells so much more than higher and lower on a shelf, and product placement of related purchases is very beneficial.

So much for the importance of the nuts and bolts, in the end for us it is about providing not just convenience but also distraction at Christmas. Distractions can include Halloween displays in the early days of the season followed by Thanksgiving suggestions in the middle, and a sprinkling of tastings and activities throughout.

The Christmas lights switch on ceremony in mid-November will provide the slapstick element, where we have wine samplings and food tastings, fine food market stalls and this year the public distilling our own gin – Kings Road Gin – al fresco and in public (hopefully). Screens can entertain and help us with many things, but you still can't beat human interaction in theatres and speciality food shops alike. If anyone says, "no it isn't the case" we would reply "Oh yes it is." And let's hope for many encores to come.

With best wishes for Christmas and a peaceful 2025.

> "Screens can entertain and help us with many things, but you still can't beat human interaction in theatres and speciality shops alike"



Have you been making the most of Halloween?

Apparently Brits spent a whopping £1 billion on Halloween last year, positioning it as a critical retailing period, thought to rival even Christmas in terms of adding value to sales.

Although the autumn trading period might seem like a distant memory as we gear up for the December rush, now's the time to start planning for 2025, say experts, especially if Halloween is an occasion you've downplayed in the past.

There are myriad ways, they say, to up the ante next year, from investing in autumnal theming and bringing cosy touches to your on-site cafe menu, to growing PYO pumpkin patches, and even investing in adult 'scare' events.

Farm shops especially are capitalising on the British appetite for ghoulishly-themed days out. The success of these attractions speaks for itself according to those who run them. Geoff Baron of Canalside Farm Shop in Staffordshire says they added pumpkins to their offering nearly 10 years ago. To date, October is now the business's second-best month overall annually.

"We started doing it ultimately because our year seemed to end when the kids went back to school in September, and we kicked along into Christmas, then things picked up again in spring the following year," Geoff says. "We had space, and saw how other people had been able to extend their sales year into deep in autumn just by having this extra experience, so we gave it a go."

The additional activity was "definitely worth it" Geoff adds. "Our 3D maize maze field has become a real family attraction. It basically takes everything that works for us in summer, and translocates that into autumn."

Secretts of Milford in Surrey also 'goes big' at Halloween, with an enormous amount of effort going into planning. The retailer's first Halloween experience was completely unplanned, though. In 2009, when a wholesale customer pulled out of an order for 1,000 pumpkins, the team needed to think quick on their feet. "Not wanting to waste them we offered free tickets to the local community to come and pick their own," says events manager Stacey Greaves.

"It turned out to be a huge success, and we realised the potential for a family-friendly event that went beyond just picking pumpkins."

This year Secretts added themed walkways and trails, fancy dress competitions, activities for children, and had more than 200,000 pumpkins (in 12 varieties) to pick. One of the oldest handmade wooden carousels was also on site, while visitors dining at the farm shop tucked into pumpkin cake, soup or curry.

"It's been a significant boost to our business," Stacey says of Halloween. "Our customers enjoy the festive atmosphere, purchasing pumpkins and seasonal produce, and indulging in our delightful treats. It's also a great support for our farm shop, which sees increased visitation during the week, along with all of the other independent businesses situated on-site. The farm shop serves as an extension of Pumpkin Week, with big displays of pumpkins outside, and plenty of Halloween-themed treats inside."

Secretts, says Stacey, has seen the same families return every year for more than a decade, enjoying the activities with their now-teenagers or grown-up children in tow. "It's really rewarding to see the same faces. We love to see how important Pumpkin Week has become to people. It makes all the months of planning and hard work that comes before thoroughly worth it!"

Her advice for getting it right?

- Look to evolve, but never forget your core values. For us, it's offering a great day out at an affordable price, with lots of activities to keep everyone entertained.
- Think carefully about food, and make sure the offering is wide enough to cater for all tastes and dietary needs.
- Consider sets and backdrops. Everyone is looking for that great Instagram moment. Our huge pumpkin fields and fun Halloween-themed sets are a big part of our success.



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17 essential Christmas tips for retailers

Experts from delis, farm shops and garden centres across the UK share their experiences and advice to help make your festive selling season a success

Laura Roberts
Laura's Larder

- Christmas is the time for customisable hampers. Gone are the days of rigid, unchanging hampers. Customers now revel in choice and the ability to tailor gifts to their loved ones' tastes. Ensure you have a diverse range of items to cater for all types of shoppers – from gourmet treats and fine wines, to artisanal condiments and festive snacks. Having a variety will allow customers to build the perfect hamper for their loved ones.

- Many shoppers are seeking products with minimal packaging, and Christmas is a time when non-eco-friendly packaging can really go overboard. Including eco-friendly wrapping options and sustainable product choices could be a significant draw.

- Experiential gifts are gaining popularity. Cater for that with vouchers for experiences like wine tasting sessions or other events you might host.

Stefano Cuomo
Macknade

- If you have space, consider product pop-ups. There may be some lines you don't want to stock (esoteric, higher price point, niche) but which could provide good animation for the customer experience. Adopt a model whereby the producer can come in with stock, do tastings, sell through your tills, and then take away all remaining stock and invoice for what was sold. This helps with the customer experience, creates marketing opportunity, de-risks the shopkeeper by not having stock left on the shelf, gives valuable insight to the producer, builds a relationship.

Nicole Ewer-Woodley
The Goat Shed

- Make yourself aware of what your customers are experiencing during the Christmas period and understand the ways in which your business can appeal to them and use this across your messaging. They could, for example, be hosting Christmas and looking for a quick and easy way to make sure they have everything needed for Christmas Day lunch. Our solution is an order form which allows them to pre-order, avoid the busy supermarkets and collect with confidence knowing that they have everything that they need to host the most delicious Christmas.

- Use your social accounts and create content that relates to your customers. Have fun during this time of year, showcasing your team and your seasonal offerings. We're very proud of our social engagement and take a lot of inspiration from bigger chains such as M&S who create fun in-store content with their teams.

Mel Wythe, Secretts

- Careful and meticulous planning is key. We start liaising with producers in June and we like to buy in early to avoid a last-minute rush. We buy in bigger/bulk products too so our customers can stock up on the core things without having to do repeat visits - an essential if you have a table of 20 to feed at Christmas!

Lawrie Chandler
Bison Hill

- We encourage passers-by who are interested but not acting on their purchase to take a photo of an A-board where we have with the products displayed. It's better than a business card because it's on their photo reel, which may prompt them to visit and buy when they scroll through their photos.



Food wholesalers urged to "Buy British"

Love British Food has written to a number of wholesale industry leaders to urge them to add a British food category to their operations.

The letter states that while there is a growing appetite from consumers and the foodservice industry for more British-made food on menus, there is a "blockage" caused by supply chain logistics.

The letter called upon wholesalers to establish "Buy British" categories to simplify the procurement process, boost domestic economic growth, lower environmental impact by reducing carbon emissions, and promoting Britain's cultural food heritage.

> "As we navigate this period of transition, one thing is clear: the decisions made in these early days of Labour's tenure will shape the future of British agriculture for years to come. The stakes are high, but so too is the opportunity for meaningful change"
>
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How to make your food photography stand out in the crowd

Posting on social media is a daily task in retail, and getting it right can reap huge rewards. Professional food photographer Jane Burkinshaw explains what you can do to up your game

It's a competitive world out there. For your offering to stand out, you absolutely must have images that make people's mouths water. Perhaps your marketing budget stretches to a few professional shots for big launches, but it simply isn't practical to use a pro for the regular stream of photos you need to feed the hungry beast that is social media.

Great news. You are not biting off more than you can chew by doing your own food photography. Your phone camera is more than capable of producing stunning images – and so are you! Armed with these top tips for photographing food and products with your phone, you'll soon be snapping shots that have 'social sizzle'.



TELL A STORY

Before you even start setting up your shot, decide on a theme or simple story that will engage the viewer and get them to imagine themselves preparing or eating the food. It can be a very simple story such as a tomato being prepared, which suggests a tasty chutney is being freshly made with juicy tomatoes.

INVEST IN BACKDROPS

Use photography backdrops to help tell the story. This way, it doesn't matter if you don't happen to have a rustic farmhouse table or distressed metal surface. You can create the look using wipe clean, vinyl backdrops.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

It's very easy to get carried away with lovely props and lose sight of the fact that the food should be the hero of the shot, and everything else is simply the supporting act. Remember that less is often more.

USE A TRIPOD

The main reason for using a tripod isn't to keep the phone steady, but to hold it in the same place while you arrange the items in your shot. You'll discover that there can be a lot of faffing about with the food and props, and it makes it much easier if the phone is in a consistent position. You don't need to spend a fortune on a tripod, just make sure it's sturdy enough to hold the phone in place. As a lot of food photos are taken from above, it's handy to get a tripod that also has a horizontal arm.

HAVE A DRESS REHEARSAL

If you're photographing plates in your cafe or restaurant, start with empty dishes, before the food is even prepared, and play around with the position of them until you're happy. Only then should you add the food, with the hot (or frozen) dishes at the last moment.

USE NATURAL DAYLIGHT

You can get beautiful results using natural light. You just need to set up the shot next to a window, but out of direct sunlight. Position yourself to the left or right of the window, so that the food is lit from the side. Sidelight shows off textures and also creates gentle shadows.

For more food photography tips, check out the full feature on specialityfoodmagazine.com





Appetite grows for international flavours

Recent research by HRA Global and Rochester PR Group has found that 80% of British consumers are keen to see a greater variety of international foods on shelves.

According to the study, 90% of shoppers are keen to experience new flavours, while 92% state that they consider their dining experience to be improved if it contains international tastes.

The research also showed that consumers are highly likely to purchase new-to-them international foods, with 73% "likely to buy".

80% of respondents stated that they buy international foods regularly – either weekly or bi-weekly.

Hamish Renton, managing director of HRA Global, said, "This research reinforces what we've been seeing on the ground – a strong appetite for international flavours and a growing openness to try new products from global markets."

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"Functional food vs food"



OLLIE LLOYD
ADVISOR

From the statistics, you would think that Britain was suddenly on a health drive. According to recent research, 60% of adults believe that artificial sweeteners do long-term health damage (Kantar), 70% are avoiding UPFs (Mintel), and yet 26% of the UK are obese. The good news is that, once again, the food industry has the answer, and it's functional foods, so we can all sit back and relax.

The industry is buzzing with talk about gut health and products with added benefits. Suddenly, we have new products that will undo the wrongs of bad food and unhealthy lifestyles. Over the last decade, trends born in the gym are suddenly being promoted to people who are not running marathons or trying to bench press 100 kg. Just because those of us aged over 40 are exercising more doesn't mean we need foodstuff designed for endurance athletes. Products scream out "added protein." Whilst some players in this area are doing things right, many are not – anyone for "high protein bolognese?"

There is a more straightforward solution for those who love food and cooking. Isn't good food just a question of buying and cooking well? Shouldn't we all aspire to buy food grown well, lovingly cooked, and eaten at mealtimes? We should celebrate food without any packaging; if it does have packaging, it should be recyclable and have a sensible list of ingredients. We should celebrate producers and brands that are trying to find the right ways to create the food we eat without turning to mad science. That doesn't mean that all processed foods are bad; this is a complex area. Many items include processes like stone ground flour, cold-pressed oil or fermented dairy products. The key for all of us is to be mindful of what we buy and avoid things we can't make in our kitchen. If we need more of a specific vitamin or ingredient, we should seek natural ways to get it into our diets. This can't work in all cases, but it can work more than we think.

As we enter another new year, attention briefly turns to being healthier, trying to lose weight, and living a better life. Retailers and brands should think responsibly about how to capitalise on these moments. So, can I suggest we go back to basics and celebrate the simple things in life?

Let's celebrate making bread from scratch. It only takes flour, yeast, salt, water, oil, and some time. As a post-lockdown convert to bread making, it really is worth the effort, and those retailers who sell quality flour should encourage their consumers to get their hands dirty and start kneading (or fire up the KitchenAid, as I do)!

Let's embrace gut health by making pickles and kimchi rather than buying products claiming gut health credentials. If you get them right, I have found that kimchi adds crunch, colour, and a real flavour hit. Many great independent brands offer convenience in this area, like the Crooked Pickle, Eaten Alive and The Cultured Collective. Or, if you are feeling adventurous, have a large jar to hand, some cabbage, a few ingredients like garlic, ginger, fish sauce, spice, and some vegan food, and you are good to go. Chopped up, it makes the most amazing base for a cheese sandwich or kimcheese sandwich, if you will.

Let's engage with some of the more sane trends on TikTok, like "the cucumber guy" (AKA logagm), who has over 6 million followers. Heed his call to action that sometimes, one just needs to eat a whole cucumber. He is right, as there isn't anything as satisfying as smashed cucumber served with soy sauce, salt, sesame seeds and some chilli if you want. Or you can go rogue and mix sliced cucumber with some crab, mayonnaise, chilli and spread it on toast.

If we want to get healthy in 2025 and make farmers, producers, and those producing genuinely functional foods have a better year than '24 then let's all embrace eating and cooking well. Consumers need hints and tips; this is where brands and retailers come in. Work out what recipe will get your target consumer cooking with your product and SHOUT it from the rooftops. Plaster it on your packs. Create QR codes that link to simple step-by-step recipe guides. Retailers can offer any number of recipe cards and demos if they have the right space. But just remember that with most meals being prepared in under 30 minutes in the UK, you would do well to keep it simple.

> "Isn't good food just a question of buying and cooking well?"

Selling the new wave of sugar-free food and drink

Low and no-added-sugar food and drink are moving out of the health food store and into the mainstream thanks to HFSS rules. *Speciality Food* asks the experts how to stock and sell these products

With tighter regulations for food and drink products that are high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) now in effect, the landscape for healthier food and drink options is changing. No longer are sugar-free products restricted to health food stores or free-from aisles – now, they're in high demand across the board.

BRANDS AND RETAILERS ARE ADAPTING TO HFSS

Since HFSS rules were introduced, retailers and manufacturers have responded by changing their approach to health and product reformulation.

"Many brands have chosen to reformulate existing products to abide by new restrictions, while other brands have developed NPD that are compliant with the new rules and healthier," says Emily Keogh, founder of Palm PR, an agency that has supported several food and drink brands to understand the new rules.

"For example, products with less or no added sugars are more common now than ever before, while the rise of functional foods with added health benefits such as fibre, gut health and immunity support have also continued to enter the market," Emily says. And she only expects this trend to continue as more brands and consumers become savvier with healthy ingredients.

Indeed, IGD surveyed members of its Industry Nutrition Strategy group in April 2023 and found that 44% of retailers and manufacturers had already responded to HFSS rules with reformulation or new product development. While reformulation is undoubtedly challenging, big brands were achieving reductions in sugar even in traditionally indulgent categories, like cake and pizza, IGD found.

The snacking and confectionery categories have been through "huge changes" recently, Emily agreed. Mars made waves when it announced a lower-sugar, protein Snickers bar, for example.

While some of the key bans on promotions have been delayed until 2025, Jon Walsh, Bio&Me co-founder and CEO, says major supermarkets have still "gone further and acted responsibly," for example by avoiding multi-buy promotions on HFSS products.

All the retailers surveyed by IGD had made changes to their store layouts, while in-store signage







and packaging changes had also been made.

Emily says brands have also started adjusting their marketing strategies towards health-focused messaging. In fact, they're even building on the demand for healthier products to bolster conversations with buyers. "The Groovy Food Company, for example, recently launched its best-selling Date Syrup into Waitrose nationwide following increasing demand for natural sweeteners and alternatives to sugar and artificial sweeteners."

HOW CONSUMER DEMAND FOR SUGAR-FREE IS CHANGING

Decisions to reformulate were also driven by a desire to improve public health, hit business targets and meet new consumer demand for healthier food and drink, IGD's survey found.

Products affected by the HFSS legislation accounted for £18bn of the food and drink market, representing 16% of all sales, according to Kantar. And Sally Ball, head of Kantar Worldpanel's Nutrition Service, wrote last year that a gradual shift was beginning towards healthier options. For example, in a 12-week period in 2023, Kantar noted a steady movement of £82m away from products within the HFSS categories, with £34.4m of this moving to healthier, non-HFSS alternatives.

"What I'm hearing anecdotally is that these modifications are starting to drive changes in consumer behaviour, which is tremendous news," Jon agrees, although he adds that he hasn't yet seen enough specific data to back this up.

The increased availability of non-HFSS products in stores is catching the attention of shoppers who claim to be health-conscious across all age groups, Kantar found. Even amidst the cost-of-living crisis, spending on non-HFSS (ie, healthier) products outpaced that of HFSS products during a 12-week period in 2023, when compared to the previous year.

"Consumers are seeking clearer labelling when shopping for healthier snacking options," Emily says. More and more consumers are checking the back of packs and ingredients lists when choosing products, and this has aligned with the growing awareness of ultra-processed foods.

Sakshi Chhabra Mittal, founder of health-focused meal plan maker Foodhak, agrees that consumers are more aware than ever of what goes into their food. "Whether it's social media trends about the back of packaging or customers speaking directly with brands to learn more about the products available. For example, our own Foodhak customers contact us regularly to learn more about our food, and we're seeing a huge increase in engagement around nutrition."

"Due to this behaviour," Emily adds, "brands are not only reformulating products to reduce the number of additives but are also making on-pack health messaging clearer for consumers."

WHAT'S NEW IN SUGAR-FREE SNACKING?

Kantar's research revealed that savoury snacks adapted to the HFSS rules quickly, with the healthier savoury snacks market attracting spending that was once directed towards sweet HFSS products. In particular, these products were seen to be appealing to the older demographic.

But despite NPD and reformulations in the sweet snacking category, Jon says sugar is still a "huge problem" that has persisted for years.

Convenience remains a priority in snacks, Emily says, and many consumers are seeking on-the-go or easy-to-prepare products with strong health credentials. Bio&Me has developed new flapjack bars that contain 5-6% naturally occurring sugars, which aim to fill the gap for sweet, naturally low-sugar snacks. "Bars are typically laden with added sugars, including popular bars marked as 'healthier'," Jon says.

Sakshi agrees that "a lot of popular protein bars are low-calorie and high in protein but are high in sugar and fat, undermining any health benefits".

And could 'healthwashing' be the next big watchword? Some brands, Jon says, are leaning on marketing rather than reformulations, leading to misinformation for the consumer. "There are some leading brands on the market that project a healthy, wholesome image, but that actually contain over 29% sugar per bar," he explains.

"It's almost as though some brands aren't being transparent about the fact they contain added sugars. We've seen brands using exotic-sounding names on ingredients lists such as 'coconut sugar' and 'brown rice syrup' to disguise that the products contain added sugars." According to the science, he says that irrespective of the source, these sugars are still treated like standard sugar in our bodies.

HOW THE DRINKS MARKET HAS CHANGED SINCE HFSS

Sugary drinks were an obvious target of HFSS rules, but the change in legislation has occurred alongside an explosion in healthier beverage options.

The rising tide of new start-ups offering healthier and more sophisticated choices for consumers is resulting in a more diverse range of products appearing on retailers' shelves, says Ashley Verma, founder of Bizzi Drinks.

As a maker of collagen cold brew and matcha drinks, Ashley notes that retailers are "faster to engage in conversation with start-ups, ensuring that the offerings on the shelves are no longer the same old choices. This shift is creating a dynamic and innovative marketplace where healthier options can thrive."

In particular, the functional drinks sector, a market that IBISWorld says is worth £1.4bn in the UK and rising, is seeing an incredible amount of innovation. From gut-friendly sodas to natural energy drinks and CBD-infused beverages, there's a huge swathe of interesting, new drinks for independent retailers to choose from that are lower in sugar.

Ashley says Bizzi Drinks' products aim to appeal to customers by combining convenience, wellness and affordability for "today's fast-paced world".

HOW TO SELL SUGAR-FREE PRODUCTS

Whether driven by HFSS rules, consumer demands or a combination of both, low and no-sugar food and drink is an area that fine food retailers should be catering to in their shops.

As always for speciality retailers, taste is paramount – and Jon says consumers also want products that taste delicious while having no added sugars.

"For fine food retailers," he says, "the good news is that 'no added sugar' products now taste as good as the 'with sugar' ones. The old paradigm that healthy products taste 'rubbish' has been well and truly smashed."

Many brands have worked hard to overcome challenges in taste in low and no sugar products by innovating with naturally sweet flavouring agents, like dates and monk fruit.

"Really healthy, natural products taste delicious," Jon says. "Our conversations with consumers when we're out-and-about sampling, has shown this time and time again."

How else can shop owners capture the attention of health-curious consumers? "Firstly, retailers should capitalise on impulse buying by adjusting end of aisle and point of sale positions to focus on healthier items," Emily says. Foodhak's Sakshi agrees that stocking convenience products that have added health benefits is a must as consumers look for products they can "easily incorporate in their daily lives".

And if you have a loyalty scheme, Emily suggests incorporating purchases of healthier items, "such as offering additional loyalty points when a specific healthier product is purchased".

With so many new brands popping up and shouting about the benefits of little-known ingredients, collaborations can be useful to build consumers' knowledge. In-store sampling, cooking demonstrations and educational campaigns, as well as engaging on social media with brands, can not only help you form relationships with suppliers, Bizzi Drinks' Ashley says, but also builds trust with consumers about the ever-growing sugar-free category.



Take stock with our new food and drink round-up

Good Guys Bakehouse extend range with Paprika variant

Good Guys Bakehouse, a challenger brand within the snacking biscuit sector, has added Paprika option to its range.

Made with paprika, chilli powder and a touch of cheese, the new Good Guys Paprika Biscuit Melts join Black Pepper and Cheddar varieties.



Steve Monk, founder of Good Guys Bakehouse, said, "What we've created with our Biscuit Melts is completely unique to the category. They're biscuits designed for snacking, being crispier, lighter, and more moreish than anything else on the shelf. A new generation of shoppers are heading to the savoury biscuits aisle looking for healthier, tastier, more snackable options, and as a brand we're delivering this. Made for 'sofa grazing' without the guilt, our New Paprika Melts are baked with paprika, chilli powder, a touch of real cheese and absolutely no palm oil, resulting in a biscuit that not only tastes real, but is lower in fat and calories too. As a brand, we're breaking the boundary between biscuits and snacks, creating new occasions for the category, which is really exciting."

goodguysbakehouse.co.uk

Masago Superfood Porridge enters market

The ancient East African breakfast Masago Porridge, traditionally served by guides hiking Mount Kilimanjaro, is now available in the UK market.

This nutrient-rich porridge is made using sorghum, chia seeds, flaxseeds, almonds and cashews, and contains eight plant-based prebiotics to help rebuild the gut microbiome. The porridge is also gluten-free and organic.



Mahad Mohamed, director of Masago Porridge, said, "We're excited to launch Masago Sorghum Superfood Porridge, a gut loving, organic breakfast made from ancient superfoods. Perfect for anyone seeking a more sustainable, gluten-free breakfast option that's been fuelling mornings for generations."

masagoporridge.com



Freja releases Instant Bone Broth

Bone broth experts Freja have launched their nutrient-packed bone broths in a new format which is ideal for cooking.

Designed to be used as an alternative to conventional stock cubes, which are often ultra processed, Instant Bone Broth is clean-label and provides high levels of protein and collagen to any meal.

The sachets can also be added to hot water for a hot broth to drink.

Ed Armitage, co-founder of Freja, said, "We know that today's consumer is looking for natural products with ingredients that you can pronounce, with appropriate levels of nutrition. The stock cube category is emblematic of everything that's wrong with our food today. Traditional stocks and broths, which are some of the most nutritionally dense and complete foods around, have been replaced by little cubes of ultra-processed rubbish with almost no nutritional value. Other food categories have had their 'better for you' moments, but nothing has really changed in the stock cube aisle for 30 years, and the clean eating, functional food buyer is completely excluded from the category. We aim to change that with our Instant Bone Broth, offering a convenient and affordable alternative that not only tastes better, but provides significant nutritional value. The products have taken 2 years to develop, and mark an exciting new step as we continue on our mission to nourish the world with bone broth."

frejafoods.com





Alcohol-free vanilla extract launched by LittlePod

Founder of the Campaign for Real Vanilla, LittlePod, has released an alcohol-free alternative to conventional vanilla paste.



The new innovation, several years in the making, was originally produced as a specialist product for the Middle East market but the rising demand from British consumers has led the business to launch the product domestically too.

The paste – sold in a recyclable aluminium tube – is equivalent to 20 vanilla pods, including seeds, and offers a lower-sugar alternative to other vanilla pastes on the market. Larger formats are available for foodservice.

Janet Sawyer MBE BEM, managing director and founder of LittlePod, said, "Our new alcohol-free vanilla paste has been a long time in the making. We first set out to develop an alcohol-free vanilla paste for the Middle East, but customers in the UK and elsewhere have also expressed an interest and we have responded to that demand. Our original natural vanilla paste in a tube is our bestselling product and that isn't going to change. But an increasing number of consumers, both at home and abroad, are seeking an alcohol-free alternative and we are delighted to be able to meet that need.

"This has been a challenging project, and it has taken much time and effort to perfect the process. We are so pleased with the end result – another innovative and unique product that makes using real vanilla easier for all, without comprising on the quality."

littlepod.co.uk

Biona unveils new healthy breads

Biona has announced three new additions to its bakery range, including a ready-to-eat option and two bake-at-home variants.

The new items are a sliced Power Protein Bread, a twin-pack of Rustic Sourdough Baguettes, and a four-pack of Oat Topped Wholemeal Rolls.

The new products have been designed to cater to diverse taste preferences and provide high levels of fibre and protein. They are also suitable for vegans and made with sourdough.

The Power Protein bread is ready to be eaten, while the baguettes and rolls can be baked in 4-6 minutes, making them a suitable option for time-poor consumers looking for freshly baked bread.

Carmen Ferguson, brand manager at Biona's parent company Windmill Organics, said, "With over three million UK consumers actively avoiding UPF, clean-label products are clearly on the rise, and these latest bakery launches align perfectly with this trend, offering simple, organic, minimally processed bread alternatives that still deliver on taste and texture. In a market saturated with ultra-processed bread options, our organic breads are all free from chemical pesticides or artificial additives making them a wholesome and nutritious alternative. Between 2023-2024, Biona has enjoyed growth of 183% within breads category sales, so we're confident these latest additions should help consolidate this positive momentum."



biona.co.uk

Farm-to-table tea comes to UK

A tea estate committed to revolutionising the tea supply chain is bringing a selection of loose leaf and bagged tea to the British fine food scene.

Devagiri is on a mission to source and produce their teas in a way that ensures fairness, sustainability and exceptional quality from farm to cup by drastically shortening the supply chain and enhancing the lives of tea-producing communities.

The range includes Vanilla, Cinnamon, Cardamom Chai, Earl Grey and Breakfast teas.

Roshana Gammampila, owner of Devagiri Teas, said "We are thrilled to bring our range of quality, ethical Devagiri Teas to the UK market and to prove that by implementing transparent, direct supply chains we can help tea producers escape poverty without changing the retail price."

devagiri-teas.com



Hot new pasta sauce hits UK shelves

Pasta sauce brand The Saucerer has partnered with Tom's Pasta, a destination restaurant in East London, to produce a new stir-in pasta sauce.



The new limited-edition sauce brings together Calabrian chilies and hot honey for a moreish hit of spice that offers a quick and convenient meal solution.

The latest launch joins Plant-based Chorizo & Smoky Red Pepper Pasta Sauce, Roasted Aubergine and Spicy Harissa Pasta Sauce and Wild Mushroom & Truffle Pesto in The Saucerer's range.

Tim Hillgarth, founder of The Saucerer, said, "This Calabrian chilli and hot honey pasta sauce is bold, spicy and perfect for weeknight dinners. We developed it in partnership with Tom Hayden, founder of Hackney institution Tom's Pasta, and it's not only delicious but bang on trend with its hit of spice thanks to hot honey."

thesaucerer.co.uk

Cox & Co release hot chocolate spoons

Cox & Co have launched hot chocolate spoons crafted from single origin Columbian cacao to cater for the demand for luxurious hot drinks this winter.



There are three flavours in the range: Miso & Caramel, Mint and Single Origin (Plain Chocolate).

Made using 60% cacao, the spoons provide a well-balanced combination of bitter coffee and rich caramel sweetness and are vegan-friendly.

Gavin Cox, founder of Cox & Co, said, "We are excited to be launching our new range of Hot Chocolate Spoons, just in time for the winter season ahead. These offer consumers the perfect stocking filler or gifting idea for Christmas, or just a warming treat during the colder months. Crafted from the finest cacao from Colombia's Luker Chocolate estate, our hot chocolate spoons have been made with care and sustainability in mind for ethical chocolate you can feel good about enjoying."

coxandcocacao.com









FESTIVE FOOD AND DRINK INSPIRATION FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION

Look to Europe for a wide range of gourmet food and drink to delight your customers

With the head of a UK supermarket claiming that consumers are purchasing more expensive products instead of dining out, this Christmas provides a significant opportunity for specialist retailers and delis to promote and upsell higher-end products.

The UK's national food and drink retailers have already revealed some of their Christmas gourmet delights, many of which take inspiration from Europe, albeit with a twist. Seafood and Chorizo Shells, Sweet Spiced Gammon with Citrus Glaze and Panettone Crumb, and Golden Limoncello Stollen Bites, are among the products made with ingredients from the European Union (EU).

It is easy to see why these products are finding their way into product development when the EU provides such a wide variety of flavours, textures, and high-quality ingredients. The EU's 'More Than Only Food & Drink' campaign offers plenty of inspiration for retailers and wholesalers looking to update their festive range this year. The campaign aims to strengthen awareness of the merits associated with EU food and beverage products, namely safety, quality, authenticity and sustainability.

Quality and great taste from the EU is assured

The success of European products in the Great Taste Awards, the world's largest and most trusted food and drink accreditation scheme, is testament to the passion and craftsmanship of EU producers and why they should be front of mind for festive ranges.

This year a product from Greece was once again crowned supreme champion, with Authentiko Cretan Honey following the success of Greek Galotyri PDO cheese in the 2023 awards. In fact, 16 food items from Greece received three Great Taste stars and 17 products from Italy were awarded three stars, highlighting the quality that retailers can source to elevate their festive offering.

From aperitifs and wine pairings to succulent meats, charcuterie, several thousand cheeses, and hundreds of sweet desserts, the EU's Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) quality schemes , which are applied to products across the member states, also mean that authenticity is assured.

Special something for the sharing board

According to GlobalData, sharing platters and tapas constitute a 32% share among all UK restaurant types, and with the right advice and product range, there's great potential to help shoppers recreate these experiences in their homes.

The EU produces 14.5 million tonnes of cured meats with hundreds of products to provide something special for the festive sharing board. Whilst Spanish Dehesa de Extremadura PDO (Ibérico ham) and Italian Prosciutto di Parma PDO are widely known, those seeking something truly different could look further north and east. Bulgarian Gornooryahovski Sudzhuk PGI, is a succulent salami made only from the beef of well-fed cattle. Austrian Gailtaler Speck PGI is characterised by a rich, salty flavour and a well-pronounced aroma of smoked meat, this Carinthian delicacy is typically enjoyed as an appetiser making it another great addition to the grazing board. Meanwhile, Slovenia's Šebreljski želodec PGI is greatly influenced by the region's climate as well as the traditional method of preserving the meat which is cold-smoked for a couple of days, and left to mature between two wooden boards for about 3-5 months.



Capitalise on the UK's taste for Continental Cheeses

The EU produces thousands of varieties of cheese encompassing soft, hard, rind-washed and blue; using milk from cows, sheep, goats and buffalo. More than 250 varieties of cheeses are also registered as protected designations of origin (PDO) or protected geographical indications (PGI) .

According to Tesco, sales of continental cheeses have seen a surge in the past 18 months with sales of the supermarket's French Triple Crème Brie up by 100%, followed by Ossau-Iraty PDO up by 80%. Whilst French cheeses dominate in popularity, Tesco's Gouda Holland PGI from the Netherlands also saw sales increase by 60%.

> “There is truth in the adage 'what grows together goes together' so look at offering a goat's cheese such as Crottin de Chavignol PDO with a Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc or Chenin Blanc”







The EU's protected traditional and regional dairy products, extend far beyond the likes of French Roquefort PDO, Italian Parmigiano Reggiano PDO and Spanish Queso Manchego PDO. As with cured meats, there are longstanding and highly respected examples of cheeses the length and breadth of the continent.

Kalathaki Limnou PDO is a soft creamy brined cheese from Greece, Lithuania's Lietuviškas varškės sūris PGI has milky, smoky flavours that pair well with jam and honey.

The diverse characteristics of cheese come from the milk and production techniques used. Croatia's Paški sir PDO is produced from a unique breed of sheep known for their intensely salty milk, whilst Austrian Tiroler Bergkäse PDO is characterised by its powerful, fully aromatic taste from cows that graze on Alpine pastures. Danish Danablu PGI is often referred to as the country's equivalent to Italy's Gorgonzola PDO and Sörmlands Ädel PGI from Sweden has tangy, salty flavours expected of blue cheese.

According to Patrick McGuigan, cheese writer and educator and advisor to the 'More Than Only Food & Drink' campaign, "Vacherin du Haut-Doubs PDO from France has become a really popular Christmas treat". He adds, "10 years ago few people in the UK had heard of the cheese, but the start of its production season (Vacherin PDO is only made in winter) is now eagerly awaited by Brits. As a festive treat, truffled cheeses are also popular, such as truffled brie, Canestrato di Moliterno PGI and truffled sheep's milk cheeses from Spain."

Top tips for upselling

For Patrick, cheeses also provide a great opportunity to cross sell products from other ranges. He suggests allowing customers to taste the cheeses and tell the back story through clever merchandising and promotions, whilst thinking about matching with other EU products.

Patrick explains, "If someone is buying Queso Manchego PDO for Christmas, it naturally goes well with Oloroso Sherry, Rioja, quince and Spanish olive oil crackers. Camembert de Normandie PDO is great with Normandy cider or Calvados. Smoked Irish cheddar pairs well with Irish whiskey PGI, or try Roquefort with Sauternes PDO, a French sweet wine, and French walnuts. There is truth in the adage 'what grows together goes together' so look at offering a goat's cheese such as Crottin de Chavignol PDO with a Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc or Chenin Blanc."

Patrick also believes there will be a good market for baking cheeses, such as Camembert, Vacherin PDO and Brie. He adds, "Blues are king at Christmas with softer more mellow blues like Gorgonzola PDO, Cambozola and Bleu d'Auvergne PDO taking some market share away from Stilton. Sweet nutty cheeses, such as Comté PDO, are also really popular because they work well on cheeseboards, but also melt well."

Wines to toast the festive season

Neil McAndrew, advisor to the EU's 'More Than Only Food & Drink Campaign' and a wine industry professional of 30 years standing, expects French, Italian and Spanish wines to be the best performing this Christmas, with Cava PDO, Crémant, Champagne PDO and Prosecco PDO, likely to have strong sales.

"Whilst still relatively small, the growth of natural wines cannot be underestimated, and Petillant Naturel, (naturally sparkling wines made using techniques that predate the times of the traditional method) offer a fresh opportunity for bringing in the New Year," he explains.

According to Neil retailers planning to capitalise on the consumer's desire to 'treat' themselves at Christmas, should stock up on wines in the £15-£20 price bracket but ensure that consumers understand the story behind the bottle. He says, "Shelf-talkers and imagery highlighting the grape variety, characteristics of the terroir and suggesting food matches can help the shopper to demystify the labels. The classics from Rioja, Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône Valley are popular gift choices due to the perceived quality of wines from the regions."

> "The classics from Rioja, Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône Valley are popular gift choices due to the perceived quality of wines from the regions"

Regardless of the grape, size or location of the vineyard, with full traceability from vineyard to bottle, retailers can be confident of high standards and authenticity.

Classic European bakes transformed to tantalise British tastes

The scale of the EU confectionery market is considerable, estimated at €63.9 billion in 2024. It is expected to reach €83.84 billion by 2030. Thanks to its varied cultures, climates and history, the 27 Member States offer a wide spectrum of popular baked goods and sweets, often made with techniques and processes that have been perfected over hundreds of years.

With consumers tastes becoming more global, last year many retailers moved away from the traditional Christmas pudding with some neglecting the pudding altogether in favour of Italy's Panettone, the classic Italian sweet bread.

Simon Atkins, a professional with more than 35 years' experience in the UK and EU bakery industry and advisor on the baked goods category for the 'More Than Only Food & Drink' campaign identifies a trend for updating classic European recipes for British tastes.

Simon explains, "The variations of Panettone are 'mind blowing' and compliments the UK's ability to take a classic and make it our own, with a range of sizes, shapes, flavours and even vegan variations appearing on shelves."

Simon adds, "Speculoos (more well known as Biscoff), has performed well throughout 2024 and is also set to be a strong flavour for the Christmas season thanks to its warming spices of cinnamon and nutmeg.

"For those looking beyond the obvious, Dutch Ontbijtkoek spiced cake in its traditional tins will be popular in bakery gifting , along with Nordic spiced and seeded biscuits such as Pepparkakor Swedish ginger thins."

Stollen, a Christmas classic from Germany, is becoming a staple on British shelves and Simon believes that it will soon make way for the Panettone treatment, with multiple shapes and flavours on the way. However, for the original and quite possibly the best, Germany's Dresdner Christstollen PGI have been carefully baked and perfected for more than 500 years. Germany's Lebkuchen are also proving popular amongst British buyers with Nürnberger Lebkuchen PGI the most authentic option. Other festive treats include Vánoční Cukrovi - iced shortbreads from Czechia and Hungary's Beigli - sweetened bread rolls filled with walnuts, poppy seeds and a variety of sweet fillings.

When it comes to fillings, Pistacchio Verde di Bronte PDO are Sicilian pistachios known as "green gold" thanks to their unique, aromatic and full flavour. The nuts are used to make a number of products, including Crema di Pistacchio con "Pistacchio Verdie di Bronte PDO" that can be spread on bread or toast and added to yoghurts for an indulgent breakfast or used as a garnish or a rich addition to cakes and pastries.

A chocolate that stood the test of time

As with cheese and wine, knowledge of provenance and techniques is key to introducing shoppers to new products and few continents can compete with the EU for the history and provenance of its produce. Even when it comes to something as universally produced and consumed as chocolate.

Italy's Cioccolato di Modica PGI (chocolate of Modica) was the first chocolate to receive the PGI accreditation and also the first PGI product to be given a digital passport. First recorded in the 1700s, the chocolate can only be made with cocoa and sugar using a cold-working process when ingredients are never heated above 50°C. This method keeps the sugar crystals whole and gives the chocolate its unique grainy texture. Once melted other natural ingredients such as salt, pistachios and ginger can be added. The chocolate is often found in some of Italy's favourite Panettone brands.

Christmas shopping for a better world

The EU is leading the way in sustainable food production. With an ethos that sustainability is about meeting the world's needs of today and tomorrow, by creating systems that allow us to live well and within the limits of our planet, the EU has committed to ambitious, long-term environmental and climate goals.

This transition towards a sustainable model has already yielded results and across the Member States we are already seeing positive improvements both at a national and pan-European level. Greenhouse gas emissions from the EU farm sector have been reduced by 32% since 1990 and the EU's organic farmland grew by 5% in 2022.

With a commitment to sustainable practices, safety, quality and authenticity guaranteed, the EU gives British retailers the opportunity to offer the indulgence of Christmas with a better conscience this year.

For more information about the EU's More Than Only Food & Drink campaign, visit: enjoy-its-from-europe.campaign.europa.eu/united-kingdom/en

> "The variations of Panettone are 'mind blowing' and compliments the UK's ability to take a classic and make it our own, with a range of sizes, shapes, flavours and even vegan variations appearing on shelves"

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FLAVOURED BUTTERS

Compound butters have captured the imaginations of home cooks. How can retailers cash in on the trend?

Cheese used to be the most attractive offering in the dairy aisle – its myriad flavour profiles, origins and stories giving consumers a reason to point their trollies towards the chillers.

While cheese will never go out of fashion, it's been joined in dairy recently by a steady flow of innovative niche products which are stopping shoppers in their tracks, and delivering greater dwell time in this space for retailers. From gut-friendly kefir to healthful yoghurts and raw milk, the category is opening up like never before.

A product starting to make its mark is flavoured (or compound) butter – fresh, British butter whipped or churned with sweet or savoury inclusions – with both speciality retail and multiples (including M&S and Waitrose) taking stock of the category.

WHY IS FLAVOURED BUTTER TAKING OFF?

According to Statista, butter's revenue in the UK stands at $1.43 billion this year, with the market expected to grow annually by 2.65% to 2029. Those leading the charge in this field say the reasons for its growing popularity are threefold. Firstly, it's competing against oil, with sunflower and olive oil prices remaining high. Secondly, more shoppers are moving away from seed oils, seeking less processed fats for cooking and baking. And, thirdly, these 'taste bombs' are a way to up the ante in the kitchen, bringing new life and dimension to a variety of dishes with very little effort required. Oh, and who could forget the butter board trend?

WHAT'S RESONATING WITH CUSTOMERS?

"More consumers are now seeking sustainable, unprocessed and British-born dairy products – meaning lower food miles – to incorporate into their everyday diets," says Toby Hopkinson, CEO and co-founder of All Things Butter.

"We believe that people are moving back to the way they used to shop," adds Sarah Stokes of The Yorkshire Kitchen. "If you're buying local produce that contains ingredients you can pronounce, from people who know the names of the animals, then you are all but guaranteeing a vast improvement in quality, health benefits, environmental impact, animal welfare and local economy."

Consumer knowledge of all of the above, Sarah adds, is improving all the time and, "we're now at a threshold where convenience and price are no longer an adequate trade-off for them." Couple this with the demand for 'newness' across many areas of food and drink, says Sarah, and flavoured butters fit the bill.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT FLAVOURED BUTTER?

"First and foremost the flavour has to have the right amount of intensity," says Tony Ho, founder of Sublime Butter. "Too strong and it will be overpowering when served with bread or rested on protein. Too mild and it won't hold up to the cooking process. You can achieve the right balance with high-quality ingredients and the correct amount of acidity."

He advises retailers to be wary of cheaper flavoured butters which may rely on oils, oil suspensions and artificial flavourings in their formulations. "This will give you a short, simple spike of flavour that disappears from the palate very quickly – and it'll go unnoticed if you try to cook with it."

Look for a high percentage of milk solids, which will make a difference to how the butter tastes. "Our butter is made using grass-fed British dairy and runs at almost 82% butterfat for a rich, decadent mouthfeel that cheaper alternatives simply can't match."

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO USE FLAVOURED BUTTER?

There are endless ways for consumers to use flavoured butters in their cooking, either as an ingredient to give a background note, or as a featured hero flavour. Producers say the joy of these products is the way they bring complexity and depth to a meal, without the need for multiple ingredients or lengthy preparation.

As well as smothering them on toast and crumpets, compound butters will make steak, chicken or fish sing, can boost the base of a roux in the beginnings of a sauce, or be tucked into bakes, from cakes, to enriched breads.

WHY SHOULD YOU BE STOCKING FLAVOURED BUTTERS?

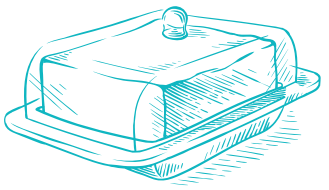
Simply put, explains Sarah, they sell well. "Compound, whipped butters have a buzz around them in the industry. Top chefs have them on their menus, and quality farm shops have them in their chillers." Butter is a staple, says Sarah, and shoppers are just now realising the "health benefits of using quality butter as opposed to chemically extracted oils from some exotic seed".

Research shows that, due to cost-of-living pressures and the impact of inflation, more UK consumers are cooking restaurant quality food at home to save money, adds Toby. "Similarly, we've seen a significant move away from ultra processed foods," the brand says. "In February 2024, 12.8 million shoppers changed their diets due to UPF fears, and 48% of shoppers now think butter is healthier than spreads."

Awareness of, and demand for, flavoured butter is at an all-time high, says Tony, adding that this, coupled with the fact the products are "insanely easy to upsell" makes them a 'no brainer' for specialist retailers. "If you're paying £90 for an incredible forerib of beef, what's another fiver to add an award-winning basting butter to take it to the next level?"

ARE THERE ANY ARTISAN BRANDS TO BE AWARE OF?

The majority of compound and flavoured butter businesses have sprung from the speciality field. Products we've enjoyed this year include The Yorkshire Kitchen's ambient jars of Cinnamon & Honey Butter, which make everything they touch taste like warm cinnamon buns, and All Things Butter's Garlic & Herb variety, bringing a refreshing, tongue-teasing twist to the classic with its pops of lemon juice and mint oil.



THE UK BUTTER MARKET IS EXPECTED TO GROW ANNUALLY BY 2.65% TO 202

SOURCE: STATISTA

> "More consumers are now seeking sustainable, unprocessed and British-born dairy products – meaning lower food miles – to incorporate into their everyday diets"
>
> **TOBY HOPKINSON, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, ALL THINGS BUTTER**



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JOIN THE GLOBAL FOOD AND DRINK COMMUNITY AT IFE 2025

The show, part of Food, Drink & Hospitality Week, returns to Excel London on 17th to 19th March, 2025

For more than 45 years, IFE has been a must-attend for senior decision-makers across the food and drink industry, and is an invaluable sourcing opportunity for countless buyers and procurement professionals in addition to providing insights into future trends and product innovations.

Adrian Boswell, buyer at Selfridges, says of the 2024 edition, "This year's IFE was a great experience. Offering an impressive array of innovative products and trends that left me inspired and equipped to elevate my company's offerings. The diversity of exhibitors and products showcased the full spectrum of the food industry.

"There were excellent networking opportunities, allowing me to connect with industry leaders. Most importantly, IFE 2024 provided invaluable insights into emerging trends and equipped me with the knowledge to stay ahead in a competitive market."

With more than 1,500 exhibitors taking part each year, and over 30,000 industry professionals visiting the show, IFE is an unrivalled platform for growing brand exposure and making personal connections with senior decision makers. Eighty per cent of the event's attendees have senior purchasing authority, representing more than £32 billion in combined buying power, and providing a direct path into new markets and relationships to accelerate business growth.

The show is also host to the World Food Innovation Awards in partnership with FoodBev Media, recognising excellence in international food and drink across a diverse range of categories, from low and no and artisan products, to innovations in packaging design, marketing and sustainability.

International opportunities for food and drink producers

In addition to facilitating invaluable connections with UK food and drink buyers, IFE is also a key launchpad for producers into thriving international markets. The show attracts visitors and exhibitors from over 105 countries, providing the perfect platform for businesses considering exporting their products or expanding their global footprint.

Exhibiting at IFE allows producers to connect with buyers, suppliers, and potential partners from across the world, enabling them to gain insights into new markets and seize fresh opportunities.

Greg Hardam, export manager at DJ&A, highlights the value of the 2024 edition. "The quality of networking at IFE was exceptional. We connected with key industry players, including potential clients and partners. These interactions opened doors to promising business prospects and collaborations."

The show's Exporters Hub also features a comprehensive programme of content designed to support the import and export of food and drink, with past speakers including representatives from the Department of Business & Trade and the Food & Drink Exporters Association.

The Startup Market

IFE's Startup Market is a dynamic section of the exhibition that offers an incredible opportunity for emerging food and drink businesses. Specifically dedicated to companies that have been trading for less than two years, the Startup Market is the perfect launching pad for innovative brands looking to make a name





for themselves in a competitive industry.

This area provides a curated space where buyers seeking fresh, groundbreaking products can easily connect with exciting new companies and entrepreneurs. For startups, the exposure is invaluable, offering the chance to showcase their offerings directly to key decision makers in retail, hospitality, and wholesale distribution.

The Startup Market is an ideal platform for forging new relationships, building brand awareness, and gathering crucial feedback that can help refine products and strategies. By participating, fledgling businesses can position themselves as innovative leaders early on, paving the way for rapid growth and future success in the food and drink industry.

New Products Tasting Theatre

A popular feature each year is the New Products Tasting Theatre, where leading industry buyers can discover and sample quality new products. Participants in the Startup Market have the opportunity to pitch their new-to-market products and brands live to an engaged audience of buyers and industry professionals, while larger brands can invest in hour-long takeovers of the theatre to showcase their full range and provide additional sampling to visitors at the show.

Fourteen dedicated show sections

IFE has a range of show sections dedicated to specific show categories, with areas for Frozen Food, Speciality Food, Vegan & Plant-Based, Bakery & Confectionery and much more.

Emily Williams, managing director at Novo Farina, an exhibitor in the show's Vegan & Plant-Based Section, commented on the 2024 edition. "IFE has been our most successful exhibition to date. A highly worthwhile three days of premium-quality industry exposure, generating new opportunities and networking."

Darren Cheshire, a buyer for International Procurement & Logistics Ltd (Part of ASDA), adds, "I was impressed by the level of innovation we saw as we walked through the show. Our focus was on nuts, dried fruit and cereals and we have already begun discussions with several of the producers we met at the show. We definitely found the trip to IFE worthwhile."







Each section at IFE is carefully curated to represent the latest trends and demands within its category. Whether exhibitors are introducing cutting-edge frozen meals, indulgent confectioneries, or craft bakery products, IFE's dedicated show sections ensure that brands are positioned in front of the most relevant audiences.

The Frozen Food and Speciality Food sections remain standout features of the show, with the invaluable support of associations such as the British Frozen Food Federation and media partners such as *Speciality Food Magazine*.

With increasing consumer interest in premium frozen products and the need for convenience without sacrificing quality, IFE provides a platform for companies to showcase their latest innovations. These sections have become a launchpad for brands looking to captivate buyers with their creative offerings.

IFE is also delighted to be continuing its partnership with the Fresh Produce Consortium, which saw the launch of a new Fresh Produce Section at the 2024 edition of the show.

> "IFE has been our most successful exhibition to date. A worthwhile three days of premium-quality industry exposure"
>
> **DARREN CHESHIRE, BUYER, INTERNATIONAL PROCUREMENT & LOGISTICS LTD**

Federico Dellafiore, event manager for IFE, says, "The Fresh Produce Section has been a fantastic addition to IFE, providing a gateway for a thriving sector to connect with buyers at the show and further expanding the diversity of producers and suppliers that buyers can meet during their visit. We're delighted to be continuing our collaboration with the Fresh Produce Consortium into 2025 and beyond!"

Nigel Jenney, CEO of the Fresh Produce Consortium, adds, "It was truly exhilarating to witness the buzz around the Fresh Produce Section at IFE 2024. The level of engagement and interest from attendees was nothing short of outstanding. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all our amazing exhibitors and sponsors who made the event such a hit. Their contributions have been instrumental in showcasing the vitality and innovation within our industry."

An expanded drinks section for 2025

Next year, the drinks offering at IFE will be bigger, bolder, and more diverse than ever before. With a special focus on both on-trade and off-trade markets, Drinks at Food, Drink & Hospitality Week will showcase an eclectic mix of products, ranging from traditional categories such as beer, wine, and spirits to the rising stars of the beverage world, including no and low-alcohol options, pre-mixed cocktails, energy drinks, and health-focused beverages.

Located alongside The Pub Show, also part of Food, Drink & Hospitality Week, the drinks section will benefit from a wide range of buyers seeking out the very latest products and innovations in the drinks sector.

John Blackley, commercial manager for Food, Drink & Hospitality Week, explains, "The expansion of Drinks at Food, Drink & Hospitality Week for 2025 reflects the increasing demand for innovation in the beverage industry.

"Our goal is to create a space where exhibitors can not only showcase their products but also engage in meaningful, face-to-face interactions with buyers, wholesalers, and hospitality leaders."

In response to the growing interest in premium spirits and craft cocktails, IFE will debut an exciting new feature, The Spirits Experience, for 2025. This exclusive area offers leading spirit brands the chance to take over one of four dedicated bars, showcasing their products through live tastings and interactive demonstrations.

Aimed at both on-trade and off-trade buyers, The Spirits Experience promises to be a highlight of the drinks section. Each brand will have the opportunity to engage with key buyers in a highly personalised setting, helping to elevate their profile and leave a lasting impression. From artisan gins to bold new international whiskies, this is a unique platform for spirits brands to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

IFE unveils esteemed line-up of Ambassadors

New for 2025's edition of the show, IFE has revealed a line-up of industry icons as ambassadors for the event, steering its direction and seminar programme and promoting the event to their audiences.

"We are thrilled to have such an esteemed group of ambassadors on board for Food, Drink & Hospitality



> "The expansion of Drinks at Food, Drink & Hospitality Week for 2025 reflects the increasing demand for innovation in the beverage industry"
>
> **JOHN BLACKLEY, COMMERCIAL MANAGER, FOOD, DRINK & HOSPITALITY WEEK**

Week 2025," comments Food, Drink & Hospitality Week portfolio director Philippa Christer. "Their expertise and commitment to their sectors will be crucial in making the event a success, and we look forward to their contributions in driving the conversation forward on the future of food, drink, and hospitality."

Ambassadors unveiled for IFE 2025 include Andy Richardson, chair of the Food & Drink Council, Stefano Cuomo, CEO of Macknade Fine Foods, and James Bielby, CEO of the Federation of Wholesale Distributors.

Richardson comments, "As a passionate supporter of the industry, I'm delighted to be an ambassador for IFE, which provides focus and energy for a vital sector of the British economy."

Join the product development community at IFE Manufacturing

IFE Manufacturing, part of Food, Drink & Hospitality Week, takes place alongside IFE on, welcoming brand owners, retailers and manufacturers who are on the hunt to find solutions to help improve their existing product line or launch new products into their ranges.

This year's event will see the return of the IFE Manufacturing Ingredients Awards, in association with the Institute of Food Science & Technology, for their second year. The awards were launched at 2024's show and celebrate excellence in new technologies, sustainability, solutions for nutritious foods and new ingredients.

IFE Manufacturing event manager, Federico Dellafiore, says, "The launch of the IFE Manufacturing Ingredients Awards in 2024 was a huge success, giving innovative startups and trailblazers in food science a chance to be recognised and to have their hard work and dedication validated by a judging panel of respected industry leaders.

"Next year's awards will be even bigger and better, with new categories like 'Innovative Solutions for Nutritious Foods' and a new category for an overall winner to be recognised with 'Innovation of the Year'."

Deborah Kendale, business development director at IFST, adds,"IFST is delighted to partner again in 2025 with IFE Manufacturing to showcase and celebrate the pioneering ingredient innovators driving improvements in food manufacturing.

"In 2024 we saw a highly successful launch of the awards with a great number of high-quality entries across the five initial judging categories. We can't wait to see what ingredients producers have been working on to produce exciting innovative and sustainable products to enhance nutrition and food quality."

A new addition to IFE Manufacturing for 2025 is the Ingredients Table, which will be a hive of activity as buyers sample and experience some of the most exciting ingredients on the market.

A curated selection of 10 innovative ingredients products, the Ingredients Table will enable exhibitors already taking part in the event to apply to be features and benefit from additional exposure and sampling opportunities the event.

Get in touch with the IFE team now to secure your position at one of the industry's most exciting and informative trade events.

NEED TO KNOW

IFE and IFE Manufacturing take place as part of Food, Drink & Hospitality Week on 17th to 19th March 2025 at Excel London. **To find out more about everything happening next year, and to enquire about exhibiting, visit ife.co.uk**

AN **INTERNATIONAL** FLAVOUR



IFE is a fantastic place for exhibitors from across the world to showcase the best of their nations' food and drink, and for retailers to meet and understand global flavours and trends. The USA will host its own area at the event in 2025. Alexandra Baych, agricultural attache for the USDA shares insight into the country's market.

Renowned for its landscapes and cultural diversity, the United States offers an impressive array of food and drink products, including regional snacks, health-conscious snacks, and seafood like Alaskan salmon and succulent shrimp, showcasing the country's extensive coastline.

The American palate is adventurous, with the continual use of new flavors and unique recipes. Fresh fruits and vegetables and dried fruit and nuts promote healthy eating as nutritious dish additions or snacks.

Speciality drinks showcase American production creativity. From craft beers and boutique wines to innovative non-alcoholic beverages and smoothies, the variety is endless. High-end speciality items, including sauces, gourmet cheeses, and handcrafted chocolates, appeal to those seeking indulgence or unique culinary experiences.

The United States is a food and beverage trendsetter, with innovative products and ingredients. In 2023, the top speciality food products were crisps, snacks, and pretzels, followed by cheese and plant-based cheeses. The beverage sector is shifting towards non-alcoholic single-serve options, with consumers seeking energy drinks and functional waters with natural ingredients and exciting flavors.

Sustainability and ethical production practices are gaining traction in the US food industry, like the United Kingdom, with cell-based meat and seafood becoming popular as consumers seek alternatives that align with their values. Meanwhile, flavour trends are evolving, with peach emerging as a favourite in a wide array of products, from condiments to baked goods.

Spicy food products are always popular, and while Sriracha has maintained its popularity, Calabrian chilli peppers are the newest craze. They have an appealing flavour that works well in a variety of dishes, including pasta sauces and hot sauces.

Another unique flavor is Tajin, a seasoning combining dried chilli peppers, lime, and sea salt that adds a blend of sweetness, saltiness, and mild spice to various dishes.

Tahini is a further popular ingredient, with cities like New York, San Francisco, and Philadelphia using it in milkshakes, coffees, and pastries, indicating its potential to become a mainstream flavour in upcoming months.

Social media platforms play an influential role in shaping culinary trends, driving consumers' desires for new flavours and ingredients. This phenomenon has amplified several products, including the popularity of hot sauces and condiments, which American and British consumers favour.

The United States has a huge amount of diversity, making American cuisine a vibrant field of exploration and innovation.





Continue the feasting with our pick of this year's most delicious Boxing Day indulgences

1 FAIRFIELDS FARM CRISPS
MAPLE GLAZED HAM CRISPS

It's impossible to eat just one of these crisps. They're crunchy, smoky and sweet, with hints of spice that wrap you in a cosy, wintry feeling. Gluten-free, plant-based and made from field to pack at the Strathern family's independent potato farm, the sharing delights are wrapped in eye-catchingly festive packaging that sparkles on the shelf, and on the table.

fairfieldsfarmcrisps.co.uk

2 ATKINS & POTTS
DINE IN LEMON MAYONNAISE AND WASABI MAYONNAISE

Enliven your Boxing Day spreads with these two zingy twists on classic mayonnaise. DINE IN Lemon Mayonnaise comes to life with lemon zest, juice and oil – guaranteed to liven up leftover turkey – while DINE IN Wasabi Mayonnaise's spicy kick makes it the perfect partner for smoked fish and seafood.

atkinsandpotts.co.uk

3 ATKINS & POTTS
MANGO & LIME COULIS AND RASPBERRY COULIS

These versatile coulis are a failsafe way to add a burst of flavour to all manner of desserts at any time of year. Drizzle them over ice cream and cheesecakes, whip them into yoghurt to make an easy smoothie, or add a splash to your favourite cocktails to add a fruity twist to your Boxing Day spread.

atkinsandpotts.co.uk



4 SOUTH CAERNARFON CREAMERIES
DRAGON HANDCRAFTED

Each Dragon product is made to a bespoke recipe, and matured to perfection over a number of months within original Welsh slate mining caverns, specially converted into cheese caves. The Handcrafted Cavern Aged selection includes Cheddar and Welsh Red, both delicious additions to any Boxing Day cheeseboard.
dragonwales.co.uk

5 GOOD GUYS BAKEHOUSE
BISCUIT MELTS

Good Guys Bakehouse is putting the 'good' into savoury biscuits with its moreish, crispy, wafer light Biscuit Melts. Available in Cheddar, Peppered, and Paprika, they're made with generous helpings of real Cheddar, chilli powder, black pepper and spices, baked to perfection to lock in the flavour. The result are biscuits that not only taste real, but are lower in fat and calories too.
goodguysbakehouse.co.uk

6 THORRINGTON MILL
BACCHUS 2022

Intense and aromatic with aromas of spice, spring blossom and citrus zest, this wine is perfect for spcial occasions. On the palate it's generous and full as a result of a small neutral barrel fermented component in the blend. The well-balanced acidity is supported by flavours of green apple, grapefruit and crushed ginger leading to a clean and refreshing finish.
thorringtonmill.co.uk

7 LAMBERTZ
CHOCOLATE DIPPED LEBKUKHEN STARS

For a cosy taste of Christmas not much can beat traditional Lebkukhen, but this delicious version dipped in dark chocolate is a winner. With a warming hit of cinnamon and moreish texture, and extra special thanks to a hit of chocolate, this new take on a classic German Christmas sweet treat is sure to be popular with your family and guests this Christmas season.
holleysfinefoods.com

PARMIGIANO REGGIANO

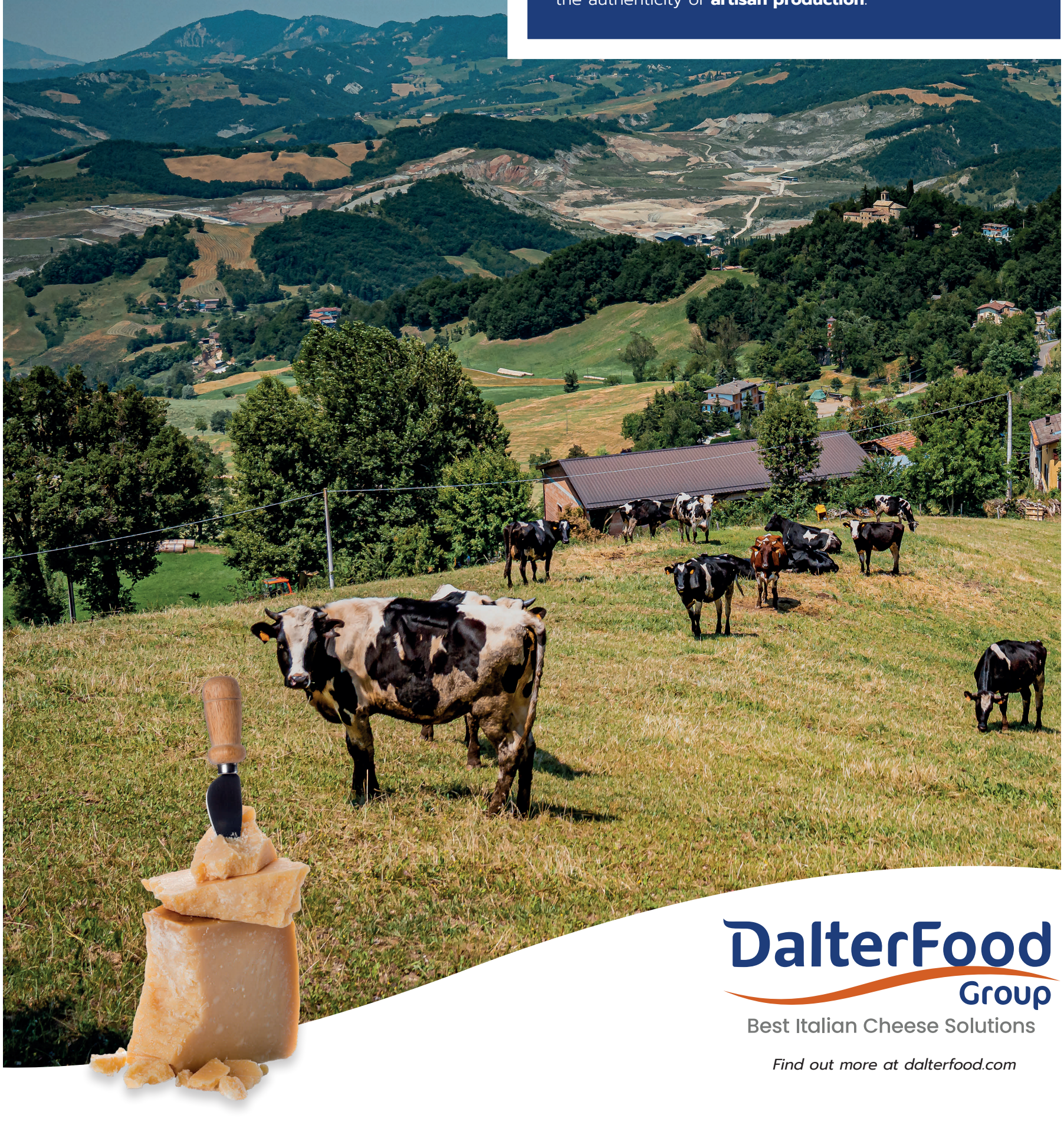
TERRITORY PROJECT PARMIGIANO REGGIANO MOUNTAIN PRODUCT

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FRAGRANT, FLAVOURFUL, MOUNTAIN.

IT IS PARMIGIANO REGGIANO FROM OUR CHEESE FACTORIES

A **superior-quality**, long-matured cheese comes from our mountain cheese factories.
It is **mountain Parmigiano Reggiano** with a deep straw-yellow colour that stands out for its bold flavour and marked fragrance. Coming from milk of cows living in observance of **animal welfare**, our Parmigiano Reggiano is a certified **mountain product** and preserves the authenticity of **artisan production**.



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COMMENTATORS



WINETTE WINSTON
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CLARA CARDILLO
COTSWOLD CARDILLO



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JUST GOURMET FOODS



SALLY ASSINDER
GAROFALO



RITA BRUGNOLI
BE TRUFFLE



STEFANO CUOMO
MACKNADE



EAT LA DOLCE VITA

British shoppers have long been enamoured with Italian food. We speak to experts to uncover why that is – and how to cater for their evolving demands

A wide range of Italian foods have become part of the culinary lexicon in the UK, with many recipes forming part of consumers' weekly meal rotation. Various pasta dishes, such as those with ragu and carbonara sauces – in truth, often made with recipes that have been tweaked beyond that which an Italian would recognise – are now considered staple dishes which even novice home cooks consider themselves able to rustle up, but there is plenty for foodies and the retailers who serve them to explore beyond this. From regional specialities to fine food twists on well-known ingredients, Italian cuisine offers ample opportunity to delve into artisanal products and their stories.

This popularity shows no sign of waning. "The appetite for Italian food in the UK is not only growing, it's becoming more discerning," begins Winette Winston, director at Seggiano. "British consumers are increasingly seeking out authentic, high-quality Italian products as they move away from mass-produced options. There's a rising appreciation for the provenance, craftsmanship, and deep-rooted traditions that come with true Italian cuisine, and we've seen this reflected in the demand for our artisanal products."

While a number of traditional Italian products – dried pasta and tomato sauces, for example – are ubiquitous on supermarket shelves, that's not to say that UK shoppers aren't looking for higher quality examples that demonstrate the key tenets of fine food. "British consumers are sophisticated in their tastes and expectations of Italian food," continues Winette. "Quality, provenance, and story are at the forefront—people want to know where their food comes from, who made it, and how it was produced. Attractive packaging also plays a role, as it often serves as the first introduction to a product, but it's the authenticity and craftsmanship behind the packaging that truly resonates. Seggiano's approach, with its focus on organic ingredients and traditional production methods, aligns perfectly with these desires."

A delicious fusion

Italian cuisine might be familiar with British palates now, but that hasn't long been the case. In fact, the parents – not to mention grandparents – of *Speciality Food* readers are unlikely to have come across ingredients, such as pasta, which are ubiquitous in 2024. Terroni, located in Clerkenwell, was the UK's first delicatessen and opened by Italians in 1878, yet it was largely frequented by Italians who had emigrated from their homeland. Slowly but surely, London hosted more Italian delis – the original Lina Stores opened in 1944 – and the renowned specialist retailer Valvona & Crolla opened its Edinburgh doors in 1934 to the delight of contemporary and current food lovers. These destination retailers offered an exciting, artisanal taste of Italy for discerning customers, and independent retailers continue to walk that path – setting themselves apart from the supermarkets' range of ingredients that have become price-slashed and commoditized for the mainstream by offering foods that are of higher quality, more delicious, and



have a clear-cut connection with their origins.

A recent addition to the fold is Cotswold Cardillo, a producer of authentic Italian foods made using ingredients sourced locally in the Cotswolds, in doing so brilliantly blending the Italian and British food scenes. Having this dual-sided approach means that the team knows what Brits want from Italian food – and how to give it to them. "British consumers seek a combination of familiarity, comfort, and authenticity from Italian food, while also being open to new culinary experiences," begins Clara Cardillo, director. "My family and I aim to meet these desires by offering high-quality Italian dishes rooted in tradition, but with a modern touch. Customers appreciate the comfort of familiar, hearty meals that evoke the warmth of family gatherings, while also wanting food that is easy to prepare and nourishing. At the same time, there is a growing interest in provenance – knowing that the ingredients are authentic and sourced with care, ensuring that the flavours truly sing of Italy.

Providing a fusion of traditional Italian flavours – courtesy of their beloved Nonna Pippi – with locally-sourced Cotswolds ingredients, the 2024-launched range is the perfect fusion of excellent British produce and authentic Italian flavour. "The appetite for Italian food in the UK is consistently strong, with a growing appreciation for authentic flavours that are made locally. There is a particular demand for Italian cuisine that combines traditional recipes with fresh, high-quality ingredients, and this is where our range truly stands out. By blending Nonna Pippi's cherished Italian recipes with exceptional produce from the Cotswolds, we offer a unique fusion of Italian authenticity and local craftsmanship. The UK market is eager for Italian food made here, especially when it delivers the vibrant, authentic flavours that truly embody the essence of Italy."





The value of connection

One of the things Italian food is best loved for is its preservation of culinary traditions, techniques and flavour. A pesto served in Puglia will be different to one served in Genoa, and families across Southern Italy will have differing – closely guarded – iterations on a great ragu for spaghetti. These regional variations offer ample opportunities for fine food retailers, who can satisfy their customers' appetites for provenance by sharing the stories behind their range of Italian food and drink.

"The British have had a long-standing love for Italian food and we are seeing an evolution in understanding of the nuances of Italian ingredients and their connection to the geography of the country," says Gianfranco Perri, CEO of Just Gourmet Foods, a specialist importer and distributor of Italian artisanal brands. "More retailers are looking to ensure that, like wine, that they have olive oil from different varietals and regions of Italy."

As much as there is plenty for food-loving consumers to relish, there's a lot for adventurous retailers to explore too. "The understanding of how different sauces might be used with different pasta is well-evolved but when this is taken to a deeper level of understanding regional specialities and how even basic recipes can fundamentally differ from town to town, it opens up a world of discovery and learning which we are excited to share," Gianfranco continues.

Italian food is no longer simply a convenient option, agrees Winette – "people are moving beyond pizza and pasta to explore regional specialities and unique flavours, and value authenticity and traceability."

Many of Just Gourmet Foods' brands are from multi-generational, family-built businesses, producing recipes which have been handed down and perfected over generations, and their stories can be a selling point for fine food retailers. *Speciality Food* readers know all too well the value of 'selling the story', and while this might be more straightforward when selling a local product, Italian food brings with it a romanticism and inherent sense of quality that foodie shoppers love – both as a result of attractive packaging and its story.

This sense of quality inherent in the artisanal Italian products entering the UK market is something which independent fine food retailers can capitalise on. "There is certainly a perception of luxury associated with authentic Italian food in the UK, especially when it comes to products with a clear provenance and artisanal heritage," says Winette. Sharing the stories behind the products being sold is key to amplifying the sense of quality and increasing sales. "Independent fine food retailers can tap into this by highlighting the stories behind the products they sell – emphasizing the artisanal production methods, the passion of the producers, and the exclusivity of small-batch offerings." Winette suggests creating in-store experiences, such as tastings or cooking demonstrations, to further enhance the sense of luxury and deepen customer engagement with the products.

"We see our wide and growing customer base as testament to the desire in the UK for high quality Italian products and, more specifically, a connection to real producers," continues Gianfranco. "We know that retailers use us to offer deeper choice for their customers in a market dominated by some large Italian brands. Our retailers value us for the provenance we offer as well as the clear quality that has customers returning. Due to the thoughtful presentation of our brands, we also see a willingness to pay a bit more for a product which sits beautifully on-shelf – or on the kitchen counter – while also delivering on provenance and flavour."



Getting pasta right

As Gianfranco suggests, pasta offers a perfect example of a product which has become commonplace in the UK, and so – just like in Italy – supermarket shelves are filled with cheaply-made varieties, but there are plenty of high quality options available for retailers to stock. It might have a simple ingredients list, but pasta can be a highly varied product as a result of the quality of the wheat used to make it as well as the production methods. "Not all pasta is created equally!," says Sally Assinder of Garofalo. "Dry pasta is made with only two ingredients: wheat and water. Quality pasta is made exclusively from durum wheat which is milled to obtain a semolina with a courser grain than soft wheat flour. To make Garofalo pasta we select the best grains in the world that meet specific quality criteria for gluten, protein level, colour and optimal taste. The semolina we use is largely made using Desert Durum wheat from Arizona, considered one of the best in the world for its high protein content. The water we use to make Garofalo pasta is local spring water known for its purity and mineral content which contributes to the unique flavour and texture of the pasta."

Garofalo is a highly regarded producer of pasta across the UK and beyond, and its long history is at the heart of the quality of its range. "Generations of knowledge, talent and pride are concentrated in Gragnano, the pasta capital of Italy and home to Garofalo pasta since 1789," says Sally. "Over 200 years of experience are a huge advantage in the production of our pasta."

Indeed, Garofalo's love of pasta informs the level of expertise seen throughout the business. "Garofalo lives and breathes pasta with an owner whose family has been in pasta for generations and who is personally involved in the selection of the durum wheat, a culinary gourmet production director who fully understands what makes great pasta, and a team of workers who are both passionate and knowledgeable about the product. Garofalo's pasta quality is unmistakeable, and the product speaks for itself, the base of this is our dedication to excellence and our desire to make good food an exact science without losing the knowledge of the pasta makers."

As all foodies know, investing in good quality pasta can make a significant difference to the final dish, both in terms of flavour and texture. Al dente – to the tooth – is the optimum texture once cooked, and the use of bronze dies during the extrusion process helps sauces cling to the pasta more effectively. If high quality ingredients are used, there's no need for complicated recipes. "High quality pasta cooked correctly speaks for itself," says Sally. "One of the most loved recipes in Italy is Spaghetti Aglio e Olio which simply combines pasta with garlic, olive oil and chilli to create a simple yet delicious dish, but only if high quality pasta is used."

Truffle is another product familiar to UK shoppers but worthy of a fresh approach, and a new brand – Be Truffle – has been launched to refresh the British shopper's approach towards this luxurious product. "The truffle market in the UK has traditionally been focused on targeting the more affluent consumer, with a clear interest in luxury and indulgence," begins Rita Brugnoli, sales director. "Be Truffle has been launched to introduce the exciting world of truffles to a wider, younger audience, taking truffle consumption out of the realms of exclusive fine dining."

Even amongst products with such a clear association with luxury and tradition, there is a hunger among consumers for innovation and Be Truffle has a wide range of products – including truffle ketchup, teriyaki sauce and chilli oil – that allow

> "So long as we make an effort to explain to our customers why our Italian items – for example olive oil – are more expensive than the basic alternatives they can get at the supermarket, we get the opportunity to share the producers' story and bring an authentic taste of Italy to our audience"



consumers to experiment with the flavour of truffle across their varied repertoire. "There is strong interest in the wide range of innovative products which enable consumers to experience the wonderful taste and aroma of truffles in a condiment/sauce format that they are familiar with using," says Rita. "In addition, the eye-catching, bright packaging and humorous graphics create great shelf-shout and allow our products to really stand out from the crowd. Be Truffle is essentially targeting all foodies, but in particular, the branding and 'truffle take' on a number of British favourite condiments and sauces is likely to attract a more contemporary audience than those typically buying into the truffle category."

Stefano Cuomo, CEO of Macknade, agrees that a modern approach to traditional Italian cuisine is helping to bring recognition and understanding to a wider audience. "Mortadella is an example of an Italian food which historically has never been popular in the UK – in fact, it's been likened to Spam – but this is changing, partly as a result of it becoming increasingly visible on social media," he says. "It was my father's favourite sandwich filling, and has long been highly prized in Bologna, but British shoppers weren't sure what to do with it until now. These days, people are sharing videos of them using it in recipes – as a topping for pizza, to pair with Burrata and pistachio as a starter and so on – so there's now a level of education that wasn't there before. This is just one example of how our more connected world is increasing the understanding of Italian cuisine."

Social media may bring people into speciality stores to pick up hitherto unfamiliar Italian foods, but when they are there it is up to the retailer to seal the deal. "Pricing is hugely important – we try to offer an 'entry point' price to bring in customers who are perhaps more used to paying less for a commodity product, so that they can experience something better and be educated around why that offers good value, plus a mid-level price point and high level," says Stefano. "Nobody is going to use the high level product for everything, it's more of a special occasion purchase, but so long as we make an effort to explain to our customers why our Italian items – for example olive oil – are more expensive than the basic alternatives they can get at the supermarket, we get the opportunity to share the producers' story and bring an authentic taste of Italy to our audience. If our customers know the broader narratives behind the food they're eating they'll appreciate it even more. It's our job as storytellers to bring the narrative of these superb products to our audience."

> "The appetite for Italian food in the UK is not only growing, it's becoming more discerning"

STOCK CHECK



GAROFALO TRADITIONAL PARCHMENT-WRAPPED LONG SPAGHETTI

Extra-long spaghetti made using classic durum wheat pasta dough, attractively wrapped in parchment.

pasta-garofalo.com



IL BORGO DEL BALSAMICO TRADITIONAL BALSAMIC VINEGAR OF REGGIO EMILIA

This DOP Gold Label balsamic is made only with grapes from the Reggia Emilia region, and produced and aged to strict regulations.

justgourmetfoods.co.uk



SEGGIANO ROASTED ARTICHOKE HEARTS IN EVOO

Seggiano's artichokes are considered some of the most exquisite in the world. Once roasted over volcano rock, the hearts are preserved in extra virgin olive oil.

seggiano.com



WILDFARMED PIZZA FLOUR

A high protein flour that delivers the stretchy, puffy dough needed for perfect pizza. Made with grain from Wildfarmed partner farms who use regenerative, nature-friendly methods.

wildfarmed.co.uk



HOW TO SELL CHRISTMAS

It's the most wonderful time of the year, so we've gathered expert tips on how to make this festive season one to remember



MARK KACARY, OWNER OF THE NORFOLK DELI

There are many ways in which a business can set itself up for Christmas sales. One very traditional method/way is to introduce an area where anything and everything that looks, sounds and tastes like Christmas is located. It's a great way to decorate the store (or that section at least) and to give it 100% Christmas.
Do you start playing Christmas music in October? We don't but that's simply so that we remain sane enough to tackle Christmas proper in the last two weeks before Christmas.

It should be always remembered that people will spend much of October just taking a look at what you have although some people will start their Christmas shopping early so it's important to make it look good. However, we also believe that to be successful and to know what you should stock you should get to know your surrounding area and what competition you have.

I will always remember that in our first year we went Christmas mad! We bought anything and everything that you would pair with Christmas. We forgot that we were in a small town shared with two mid-sized supermarkets and two convenience stores. Suffice to say the size of the sale of Christmas goodies in January was excessive. Understand what makes you different and play to that to differentiate yourself for Christmas. Is it that you create magnificent gift hampers? Is it (like us) that your main selection of products are made locally and therefore not available in the supermarkets which means that they are unique and therefore special?

Do not be afraid to shout out as loud as you can what it is that you are doing for Christmas. Is it a special Christmas shopping evening? Arrange one for your VIP customers those who are regular shoppers and make them feel special – provide a little mulled wine and mince pies on the evening. Hold tasting events such as cheese tasting for cheeses which will be that little bit extra special on the Christmas cheeseboard. For wine tastings, spirits tastings and so on, invite producers in to promote their products.

Ensure that you are using as many social media platforms as you are comfortable with. You will be amazed how many people you wouldn't expect to be using Instagram or Facebook actually follow you. Do you have an email subscribers list? Tell them what you are doing/selling. Start the habit of a weekly email. Make it fun, make it quirky – stand out from the crowd!



ANDY SWINSCOE
OWNER OF COURTYARD DAIRY

- Promote Wensleydale (Or Lancashire) and Christmas Cake – you can get that extra sale on top of the cheeseboard and it creates a talking point.
- Don't forget truffled products – Truffled Baron is brilliant and we make it front and centre at Christmas; it just flies out (whereas the rest of the year it can struggle).
- Get click and collect orders in now; and at the pickup station/area have some ready prepared 'Grab n Go' bits customers can easily add on without having to queue for the main cheese counter – e.g. crackers/chutneys/truffled Brie



KARIM SALAMA
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF E-INNOVATE

Probably the most effective approach for holiday marketing is to weave storytelling into your products - consumers want to connect emotionally during festive times. Consider creating bundles that tell a story – like artisan cheese selections with pairing suggestions, alongside cards that share heartfelt anecdotes about family gatherings at Christmas.

When setting up displays, aim to engage all the senses – not just sight. Use rich colours like deep greens and warm reds to evoke the season's spirit. Don't forget about scent; the aroma of cinnamon, cloves, or freshly baked bread can draw customers in. Think of iconic displays, like those at Selfridges, which do more than showcase products – they create memorable experiences.

Outstanding customer service is essential during the festive period. If you need to hire seasonal staff, make sure they're well-trained to embody the festive spirit. Enhance the shopping experience by making queues more enjoyable – consider offering mince pies or mulled wine. You might even implement a "festive concierge" service, where an assistant helps with gift wrapping, product suggestions, and delivery options, making the shopping process smoother.



ALISON WRIGHT
FOUNDER OF FITZBILLIES

We love to create something worth visiting with our windows, and for us that means a combination of our brand's story and heavily featuring our key products. At our Trumpington Street store, we have a wonderful big window dating from 1920, so making it tell our story is really important. We also use the tables in the restaurant and coffee shops as a location to display our Christmas brochure and product samples, so that customers know they can order via the website or buy our products to take home.

Top tips for giving good customer service at Christmas?

- Encourage customers to order early to make it as stress-free as possible.
- Have well-trained and happy staff - service with a smile goes a long way.
- Ensure stock can be replenished on counters easily and quickly throughout the day.
- Train your staff to upsell, sales are key at this time of year.
- Make sure you have tested any new processes or systems well ahead of the busy period.

How to cope with busy periods?

- Planning is key to Christmas and one that the whole business has bought into.
- Try and get ahead with email marketing and core messages for social media to take the pressure off.
- Know your last posting dates early so that you can keep customers informed.
- Weekly updates on the plan so everyone stays on track and objectives are achieved.
- Plan for sickness – it always happens, so having a plan to cover for staff members just makes sense.
- Remember to breathe and take



LAURA ROBERTS
OWNER OF LAURA'S LARDER

Classic comforts

Time-honoured favourites like mince pies, rich chocolates, and seasonal cheeses are always crowd-pleasers. We focus on stocking high-quality versions of these, from panettone to fine wines and indulgent treats, ensuring they feel both familiar and luxurious.

Stocking fillers with a twist

Eye-catching stocking fillers are essential. We look for playful, unique items—from artisanal chocolates to festive-themed goodies—that make perfect quick gifts. These are front and centre in our displays, ready to catch the eye of those last-minute shoppers.

Events and experiences

We're all about creating experiences, so our wine tasting



events run throughout the festive season. They give customers something a bit different, while boosting foot traffic in-store. We also offer gift cards for our store or for our events, which make perfect presents for those hard-to-buy-for friends and family.

Custom hampers

Our customisable hampers are a big hit, letting customers handpick their own mix of festive favourites and modern, artisanal treats. This adds a personal, thoughtful touch, making each gift feel one-of-a-kind.

Merchandising and promotions

In-store, we create cosy, festive displays that highlight our best-selling items. On social media, we showcase gift ideas, share behind-the-scenes Christmas prep, and use stories to push limited-time offers, creating excitement and urgency.

Upselling thoughtfully

Our team knows that Christmas is all about thoughtful gifting, so we focus on subtle upselling. Whether it's suggesting a gift card or a chutney to go with that cheese, it's about adding value rather than going for a hard sell.

Christmas at Laura's Larder is all about that sweet spot between comforting traditions and exciting discoveries. Our goal is to make sure each customer finds something special to make their festive season shine.

a moment otherwise, it gets a little crazy. We always say, "It's just cake!"



HELENA WRIGHT
MARKETING AND NPD DIRECTOR AT JACKSONS, OWNER OF LOTTIE SHAW'S

"During the busy festive period, it's so important to select partners who understand your challenges and work through them with you. We've always been passionate about is shelf life and ensuring food doesn't go to waste. Lottie Shaw's products were created to have a naturally long shelf life, with many of our best-selling items having a minimum shelf life of between three and five months. At Christmas, we take this one step further, adding a festive sleeve to our boxes and tins to help drive festive sales, rather than completely transitioning to festive packaging. It creates a really effective seasonal display item and the sleeve can simply be removed if required. We're also able to react to last minute orders by baking right up until Christmas, which has always proven popular with our customers who experience that last minute rush."



TOM JAUNCEY
CEO AT NAUTILUS MARKETING

During the Christmas period, it's all about creating that festive feeling when you're selling food. One of the biggest things you can do is make your displays and packaging as Christmassy as possible – people are drawn to the holiday vibe, and it helps make your products stand out. Adding some festive decorations around your display or offering holiday-themed packaging can really grab attention.

On the promotion side, limited-time offers or holiday bundles work really well. For example, offering a "buy two, get one free" deal or bundling popular items together at a discount can encourage customers to spend more. Shoppers are always looking for a good deal, especially during the holidays. When it comes to customer service, this is where you can really make an impact. Christmas shopping can be stressful, so having a team that's friendly, helpful, and quick can make all the difference. Little touches like offering gift-wrapping or making the checkout process fast and smooth go a long way in leaving a positive impression.

STOCK CHECK



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COTTAGE DELIGHT CRAFTED ALE SELECTION
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seggiano.com



"Christmas Cheese"



JAMES GRANT
NO2 POUND STREET

Ho here we are again, Christmas just around the corner and fingers crossed so are lots of consumers. Here's hoping that the interest rates are more favourable for the spenders, leading to a jolly good time for all.

There is still only a fraction of restaurants, pubs and hotels that sell handmade artisan cheese. I don't mean the waxed truckles that you find at so called artisan food festivals, I am talking about those exceptional handmade masterpieces of soft, crumbly, smelly, stretchy and hard styles of cheese made from a single dairy herd that are cared for ethically and produce simply brilliant milk.

Encouraging your customers to choose a plate of hand-made artisan cheese from single herd provenance that dine on rich pastures is going to take a little bit of work.

As a good cheesemonger the back stories of such mighty cheeses are of paramount importance. Letting the consumer know about the breed of animal, its rich diet and about the cheesemakers and their peculiar and wonderful idiosyncrasies is great fun. This amount of information genuinely sells the cheese. Of course, the sample is the cherry on top. The monger knows the cheese well, and the last part of the script is for the consumer to test out the goods – and boom... "I'll have 200 grams please", along with a big cheesy grin.

When you are choosing your board for Christmas, why not choose a handmade selection from a local cheesemonger or a good wholesale cheesemonger. Try to avoid the larger food wholesalers who may carry good cheese but are limited and often do not know about the actual product or even how to look after it.

Get the cheesemongers to come in and talk to the team. I delight in doing this and seeing the reaction of the chefs and front of house team when they taste these glorious creations. Your staff will take on board the stories about how the recipe was founded, where it is made, who makes it, why it tastes like it does etc.

Some of you reading this are already on board and actively selling exceptional cheese selections. I am confident that this decision to list and recommend such cheeses is mostly because of a cheesemonger's recommendation or possibly your own superb passion for brilliant cheese.

I am sure that you would all like to increase your sales this Christmas season. Perhaps your parties can be swayed to have an extra course of cheese or even a small board per table to finish and enhance their Christmas meal. If you can invest some quality time to train and introduce your staff to real handmade artisan cheese, I know that you will see the benefit.

After coming back from Lancashire and helping to host The People's Cheese – Heritage Edition it was made even more clear to me that we have some seriously exceptional territorial cheese in the UK. Heritage cheese is a group of cheese made exclusively in the counties and territories throughout the British Isles. The Heritage cheeses to look out for this Christmas are Cheshire, Lancashire, Gloucester, Caerffili, Leicester, Stilton, Dunlop, Cheddar and Wensleydale. Why buy these? Well, it is because they are totally different to the mass-produced same-name offerings in the supermarkets. These cheeses are a totally different breed, the flavour profile is immense, the cheese holds moisture, and it looks great. These cheeses truly represent their regions and the flavour shines through. Simply, if you're putting on a cheeseboard this year in your business or at home, celebrate home grown British handmade and shout about them as much as you can!

The heritage cheeses to recommend this Christmas are: Bourne's Cheshire, Cropwell Bishop Stilton, Keen's Mature Cheddar, Dunlop Dairy – Dunlop Cheese, Caws Cenarth – Caerffili, Crumps Gloucester, Sparkenhoe Red Leicester, Stonebeck Wensleydale and my absolute favourite Mrs Kirkham's Lancashire. Try Lancashire with Eccles cakes – super yummy.

> "Encourage your customers to choose a plate of hand-made artisan cheese from single-herd provenance that dine on rich pastures"

Exciting induction for cheesemonger



Two-time winner of Affineur of the Year, Perry Wakeman, has recently joined the cheese Hall of Fame, having been welcomed into the prestigious Guilde Internationale des Fromagers.

It's a significant milestone for the chief of cheese at Rennet & Rind, who is a staunch supporter of the British artisan food scene and known within the industry for championing cheesemakers, while pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved in nurturing, maturing and selling cheese.

Perry joins fellow Brits Charlie Turnball and Jenny Linford in the Guilde – a global community of cheese masters and experts dedicated to upholding the traditions and heritage of speciality cheese.

It's considered an exclusive 'club', open only to those who have made significant contributions to the industry – a testament to Perry's work, palate and skill. The honour cements Perry's position as one of the UK's leading cheese experts as he continues on his mission to share incredible cheeses with food lovers.

Somerset Cheddar named People's Choice winner



Keen's Extra Mature Cheddar has been voted 'People's Choice' during the online finale of a 'cheese battle' organised by The Real Cheese Project.

Following the success of 2023's Great British & Irish Cheddar Challenge, this year was the Heritage Edition of the tasting event, with the final streamed live from Mrs Kirkham's Cheese in Lancashire, compered by The Real Cheese Project co-founder James Grant of No2 Pound Street, and cheese lover and comedian Marcus Brigstocke.

Keen's Extra Mature Cheddar was tasted by online viewers alongside Blue Stilton from Cropwell Bishop Creamery, Mrs Bourne's Cheshire Cheese and Thelma's Original Caerffili from Caws Cenarth, with the heritage of each cheese explained by the maker, and detailed tasting notes and observations provided on the night by guests including Jane Quicke from Quicke's and Lucy Cufflin from Chiswick Cheese Market.

Two rounds of public voting at Chiswick Cheese Market preceded the event, which began with 40 entrants, across nine categories, whittled down by tasters to the four finalists.

This latest accolade for the Keen family reflects the enduring popularity of traditional artisan Cheddar. The Keens have been producing cheese at Moorhayes Farm in Somerset since 1899, continuing to use raw milk from their 250-strong herd of Friesian cows, taking their Extra Mature Cheddar to 18 months for a moist texture and full-bodied flavour with onion notes and a defined tang.

White Lake Cheese release smoked cheese



Cheesemakers White Lake Cheese have announced the release of their latest cheese – a flavourful twist on an award-winner.

Smo'King of the Castle is a gently oat smoked version of their award-winning King of the Castle cheese – a semi hard goats' Caerphilly-style cheese which is based on an old family recipe and is made using unpasteurised milk sourced from Bagborough Farm, near Shepton Mallet, Somerset, on which White Lake Cheese is based. White Lake Cheese has experimented with creating a smoked cheese for a long period of time, and has found that King of the Castle is the perfect partner for a gentle, moreish smoked flavour.

Smo'King of the Castle has a nutty flavour and a sumptuous caramel colour that develops during the smoking process.

Young Cheesemonger of the Year finalists revealed

The Academy of Cheese has revealed its shortlist for Young Cheesemonger of the Year 2024.

Australian entrants Mia Crouch of Supercheese in Victoria and Lily Jenkins of Hill Street in Tasmania will join British finalists Daniel Iliev (Paxton & Whitfield), Orla Jackson (Neal's Yard Dairy), Dominic Jones (Rennet & Rind), and Jack Welch (The Pangbourne Cheese Shop) in Viseu, Portugal on Friday, 15th November, when the overall winner will be announced at the World Cheese Awards.

They will go head-to-head across five rounds including Perfect Pairing, a quick-fire Q&A testing their general cheese knowledge, and a fast-paced cut and wrap challenge at the event, sponsored by Peter's Yard and the Guild of Fine Food.

In addition to taking the title, the winner will receive a trophy, a BOSKA professional cheesemonger tool set, a feature in *Fine Food Digest*, and secure a place on the Academy of Cheese Level Two Member Certification course. They will also be invited to judge at the World Cheese Awards in 2025.

Established to promote cheese knowledge and provide career development within the industry, the Academy of Cheese aims to build greater respect for the industry, with Young Cheesemonger of the Year showcasing the skill, knowledge and talent of its members.


VICTORIA DUNTHORNE, VICTORIA'S CHEESES

Cheese dreams realised for duo

Two cheese lovers and foodies have finally achieved their dreams of opening their own shops dedicated to showcasing British produce.

At the end of summer Louise Bagnall opened Cheese! Louise in Alton, while Victoria Dunthorne has just opened Victoria's Cheese in Ely.

Cheese! Louise is an expansion of Louise's existing refill business, Fill Up, following the expansion of the space, taking on additional footage last November.

Louise spent nearly a year researching and learning before opening the cheese counter, spending time training with expert Emma Young and discovering the fundamentals of cheesemongery at Mons Formation. "I needed to learn more than loving cheese and eating it," she said. "As soon as I did that, it felt like the right move."

In line with the Fill Up ethos, Louise has dedicated her selection to British-made cheeses, focusing on small makers, and helping to educate customers about the joys of artisan food. Already the business has created a buzz on the high street. "It's the first speciality cheesemonger the town has ever had, as far as I know," Louise said. "The food scene is growing here, and all the businesses share a similar ethos and want to help each other. Our opening day was absolutely flat out. People seemed really happy to have something like this on the doorstep!"

Her favourite cheeses of the moment are Stichelton, Teifi Mature by Caws Teifi, and, more recently, Mrs Bourne's Cheshire. "It's just one of those delicate, subtle cheeses. It's creamy and buttery, and you can really taste the milk," she said.

Over in Ely, Victoria has welcomed customers into Victoria's Cheeses – her own shop, at last, following years of helping other retailers set up and stock their counters alongside operating an online cheese business.

"When this shop became available, it was too good an opportunity to miss," she said of the building, formerly a chocolate shop.

"It was the ancient bone crypt for Ely Cathedral and it looks very ecclesiastical. I've got two small tables at the front for people who want to sit with a cheeseboard and wine, a church pew, and chapel chairs – I'm trying to create that feel with a touch of 70s caravan thrown in! I love the beautiful stone archway and crypted ceiling and archway. It's a dream," Victoria added.

The shop will sell largely British, but also some Continental, cheeses, alongside a small selection of accompaniments, from the familiar (chutney) to the quirky (dark chocolate), bread from a local micro bakery, plus English wines, with Victoria having gained exclusivity with a vineyard in nearby Norfolk.

"The cheese will also mostly be smaller producers. The kind of things you won't find in the supermarket. An example is Becky Enefer who makes sheep's milk cheeses. She's got a hard variety similar to a young Pecorino, and a soft cheese in the style of a Brie. It's just delicious. Also, I went to Cumbria on holiday this year and got really excited about bringing the cheeses I found there to the shop, because often they don't make it down here. Torpenhow is one of those. What a lovely farm and family. Their Darling Howe Brie is sensational!"

There's a huge appetite for specialist cheese retailers right now, Victoria adds, saying a recent market she attended to drum up business for the shop saw her selling out of everything within hours. "There's a brilliant food scene here, and it's a great spot at the moment for anyone interested in artisan food and drink. I'm so excited to be a part of it all."



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SOURCING CHEESE

Three experienced cheesemongers share their tips on getting the very best stock onto your counters

Whether you're just setting up a cheese counter in your deli, opening your own cheese shop or simply perfecting your selection, Daniel Williams of Godfrey C Williams & Son says the best way to start stocking cheese is by thinking about the focus of your cheese counter. "What do you want to be known for? Do you want your range to just feature locally made cheeses? A wider range of British artisan cheeses? Or a range based on British and Continental bestsellers?" Once you've hammered this out, you'll have a better idea of which cheeses you want to source.

While it may sound simple, Daniel reminds us to be wary of getting carried away with ordering more of a cheese than you'll be able to sell. "Source cheese based on the requirements of your business," he says. "There's no point in sourcing a whole wheel of Comté if you're unlikely to sell it all before the expiry date, or if it takes up a disproportionate amount of your budget. Instead, source manageable and cost-effective cheese sizes that suit the size of your business and customer base."

Jen Grimstone-Jones of Cheese Etc, The Pangbourne Cheese Shop in Reading, agrees. "If you meet a cheesemaker at an event and fall in love with their cheese, always ask how they would get it to you. A wholesaler will let you buy a few kilograms or half a dozen small cheeses to introduce to customers to see how they go, whereas a cheesemaker might want to ship 50 units to you. Will you be able to sell that much of one cheese? And where are you going to keep the stock?"

Starting small is a great way to test the waters with a cheese your customers are unfamiliar with. "In general, when we source a new cheese, we will trial in one of our outlets," explains Kevin Sheridan of Sheridans Cheesemongers. "Oftentimes samples received do not reflect accurately the cheeses that will arrive. In addition, farmhouse cheeses by their nature change through the seasons; by trialling a cheese in one outlet we can assess these changes and know the impact before we decide to allow the cheeses a full listing. Of course, no matter what we think of a cheese, the only real test is our customers. We have often sourced what we believed to be a great cheese and then our customers have disagreed!"

Selecting the best

When choosing a quality artisan cheese, Kevin says the basic criteria are always the same. "We look for cheeses that are first and foremost of great quality or show potential to become great. This is a simple process and involves tasting the cheese. This may sound obvious, but it is surprising how many retailers don't use this as the first step in selection," he says.

Jen agrees that flavour is paramount. "The most important thing for us and our customers is quality and flavour. Whatever the age of cheese, it has to have a depth of flavour. Even mild, creamy Brie-style cheeses need to have something about them that gets your tastebuds wanting more," she says. And taste-testing is always important, whether it's a new cheese or one you've ordered dozens of times. "The majority of our cheeses are from small, artisan producers, but even so quality is not always guaranteed so we try every cheese every time we get a new batch."

Consider the full cost

In addition to taste, price plays a part in cheesemongers' decisions about whether to stock a particular cheese. "We have to be sure that our customers will receive value for the cheese they purchase. Value does not mean cheap, but that the price reflects the quality of the product and that it is comparable to similar cheeses," Kevin says.

"We have to cater for all tastes and budgets," Jen adds, "so we try to make sure that we have a good range of mild to strong cheeses, soft to hard. For me, the price is then the least vital but still an important consideration."

Logistics also factor into the value a cheese presents to a cheesemonger, especially when EU importing rules are still a moveable feast post-Brexit.

"There may be a wonderful cheese at a good price somewhere in Europe, but unless we can get it to our warehouse in a cost-effective manner then it is of no use," Kevin says. "As many cheeses have a short shelf life or change considerably as they continue to mature over time, frequency of purchase is really important."

Building relationships

Working with wholesalers can be a great way for cheesemongers to develop their expertise and try new, trusted makers, but it's also important for retailers to work directly with cheesemakers in order to build relationships and trust with the people behind the cheeses they know and love. "A direct relationship with the producer may create opportunities that can't be found elsewhere," Daniel explains. This could take the form of farm or dairy tours, cheeses that aren't available through wholesalers and special offers.

"Cheesemakers deserve to be rewarded for making their amazing delights, and I'd rather buy direct, where possible, so I know that the money is going straight back to the producer," Jen adds. She is often travelling the country meeting new cheesemakers and revisiting existing suppliers and believes any relationship must be built on respect and communication. "The cheese world is a small, but wonderfully friendly industry to work in. I'd always prefer to meet people face-to-face, at least initially, to begin a working relationship. It's then often easier to talk on the phone or email," she adds.

"The relationship between ourselves and our cheese producers is central to our whole operation and ethos," Kevin agrees. "We look to build long-term sustainable relationships with our producers; this partnership ensures that we understand the farms and the artisans who produce our cheeses, and that our producers understand ourselves and our customers."

While Kevin even says he tries to form a direct relationship with cheesemakers even when he is working through a partner wholesaler, for instance with European producers, Daniel stresses that these bonds are particularly useful when formed with local cheesemakers. Indeed, stronger relationships will only enhance cheesemongers' knowledge about the cheeses in their area, and further afield, so they can better answer customers' questions and sell their cheeses.

> "Of course, no matter what we think of a cheese, the only real test is our customers"

PETER'S YARD
NEW OREGANO & OLIVE OIL SOURDOUGH CRACKERS
EXCLUSIVE TO SPECIALITY & FOODSERVICE


SINGING THE BLUES

Bold and dynamic, blue cheese is a deli counter essential. *Speciality Food* finds out from cheesemakers and cheese experts why its appeal endures, and how it's being marketed to a whole new generation of cheese lovers



COMMENTATORS



PATRICK MCGUIGAN
CHEESE EXPERT



PRIYA TAYLOR
CLAWSON FARMS



CAROLINE BELL
SHEPHERDS PURSE

To compose a cheeseboard or grazing table without blue cheese would be akin to removing the melody from the lyrics of a song.

Rippled with undulating threads of slate, cerulean or cobolt blue veining, and alternating in variety from meltingly dense, crumbly and saline sweet to fudgy, intense and piquant, it is the backbone of any good cheese counter.

Although it's known to be one of the oldest cheeses in the world (discovered as a 'happy accident' as Penicillium bacteria wove its way through resting curds kept in damp, humid conditions) blues are far from being relics of the past.

Today's artisan makers, both in Britain and across the world, are championing their makes to ever younger audiences, devising campaigns and formats that appeal to multiple generations, ensuring the love of blue cheese continues to flourish.

Why is blue cheese so important?

When consumers are compiling their cheeseboards, they're looking for variety – texturally, visually and from a flavour perspective too, says leading cheese and dairy expert Patrick McGuigan, advisor to the EU's 'More Than Only Food and Drink' campaign. And blue cheese strikes the right chord across each of these profiles.

"It's no secret that blue cheese can be a bit divisive, which is why it is important for retailers to educate customers to show them the variety available, and how the flavours differ dependent on how and where they are produced," Patrick adds.

"For example, Roquefort PDO from the South of France is made of sheep's milk. It is spicy and salty, with a fondant-like texture, whilst Gorgonzola Dolce PDO from Italy is soft, creamy and mild, with a fruity, boozy flavour."

The point of a cheeseboard, Patrick adds, is to bring something for everyone to the table, "and this is very much the case with blue cheese".

The best of British

Storytelling and romance are ingrained within British artisan dairies, and it's these stories, told at the counter, which can captivate and entice shoppers to try... and buy.

One of the most compelling stories is of origin, especially if there is a PDO attached to a product, as in the case of Stilton. Being able to explain the lineage and personality of a cheese is an evocative thing says Priya Taylor of Clawson Farms. "Blue Stilton holds a great amount of history for Britain. Truly iconic, it can only be made to strict regulations in the counties of Leicestershire,

> "It's no secret that blue cheese can be a bit divisive, which is why it is important for retailers to educate customers to show them the variety of blue cheese that is available"
>
> **PATRICK MCGUIGAN, CHEESE EXPERT**



A **PERFECT MATCH**



Jessica Summer, founder of Mouse & Grape, selects her favourite varieties of blue cheese alongside pairings she adores

The real beauty of blue cheese is its variety. You can go from mild options like a semi-hard French Fourme d'Ambert or Bavarian Cambozola to stronger blue cheeses like semi-soft and crumbly English Stilton, Roquefort, or the intensely spicy Spanish Cabrales, all of which can be crumbled into soups, added to salads, or paired with honeycomb or jamón.

For me, Gorgonzola Dolce PDO is a standout blue cheese because it's equally as fruity and sweet as it is creamy, salty, tangy, and mouldy. It's wonderfully versatile – perfect with cured meats, fresh, dried or pickled fruit or vegetables, and even alongside seafood. I've had Gorgonzola Dolce in butternut squash pasta, on sandwiches, as ice cream in a cone, and even paired with dark chocolate, infused with truffles and drizzled with honey. The possibilities are endless, and that's just one blue cheese variety!

When it comes to wine, the range of blue cheese's strengths, textures and milk varieties opens up so many pairing opportunities. I often recommend contrasting flavours like a salty Gorgonzola Piccante with a sweet sparkling Moscato. Alternatively, go for complementary flavours, such as a bold Monastrell with an equally bold Picón apéritif. And don't forget about rosé, especially those wines with longer skin contact or pronounced red fruit flavours. They can pair beautifully with creamy blue cheeses, making the flavours sing. A sparkling rosé Champagne with a salty blue cheese, for example, can be a magical combination.

Pairing blue cheese is a delicate art, but when it works, it creates an exquisite flavour explosion.



> "Stilton's not just for Christmas. We want to put it front and centre of consumers' everyday lives. For them to use it not just on cheeseboards, but in their favourite meals too"
>
> **PRIYA TAYLOR, CLAWSON FARMS**

Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. This protection ensures the cheese remains authentic to Britain, a little like Champagne is to France."

Clawson Farm's PDO Blue Stilton is cared for at every stage, adds Priya. That begins with sourcing the highest welfare milk from its 30 member farms daily, continuing along the making journey and into the maturing rooms, where the cheeses are hand turned, graded and selected.

Stilton's lesser known, but award-winning cousin, Blue Shropshire, is another cheese Priya feels artisan retailers should have in their wheelhouse. "It's mild, mellow, creamy and versatile," she says. "But so many blue cheese lovers have never tried it. We think it's a great option to stock as an entry point into blue cheese. In the counter its bright golden, orange hue sparks curiosity and attention. It's an award-winner too. Our Clawson Farms Blue Shropshire won Supreme Champion at the International Cheese and Dairy Awards in 2022 for its exceptional taste."

Continental clout

There will always be a place for Stilton in the hearts of British cheese lovers, Patrick agrees, but while they champion UK-made dairy, cheesemongers should also recognise the popularity of European cheeses and continue to offer choice.

Roquefort PDO and Gorgonzola PDO lead the pack as far as Continental favourites are concerned, but "there are lots of options from across the EU that are still very much under the radar, and winter is the perfect time to expand your offering and stock some different varieties," Patrick suggests.

"Spain has a lot of quite spicy, powerful blues that are produced in the Northwest of the country. These include Cabrales PDO which is made from raw cow's, ewe's and goats' milk, from herds and flocks grazing in the mountainous regions. It has an intense flavour and a dense texture.

"Queso de Valdeón PGI is wrapped in sycamore or maple leaves, has a strong, robust taste, and looks fantastic on a cheeseboard. Another great Spanish blue is Picón Bejes-Tresviso PDO which is made in the in the mountains of Cantabria at 900 metres above sea level.

"Closer to home, Cashel Blue from Ireland is a European-style cheese which is very approachable."

Hooking new blue lovers

Staunch supporters of blue cheese won't require much nudging to try new, or perhaps more potent, varieties, but pulling the less adventurous of cheese lovers over the line can take a bit of work.

One school of thought for priming their tastebuds is discovering their 'cheese tolerance level'. The bolder the better. If a customer enjoys a nibble of powerful vintage Cheddar, or a sharp sliver of aged Parmesan while sampling, next offer them a bite of something mild, creamy and buttery from the blue wheelhouse, with a familiar, sweet accompaniment such as a drizzle of honey, or a smidge of date chutney. Side stepping from a savoury, umami 'appetiser' into the blue realm is less of a shock to the senses than leaping from a young creamy cheese. Cornish Blue and Nantwich Blue are good bets, as, says Patrick, is Gorgonzola Dolce PDO. "It is very creamy, so offers quite a good entry level option."

"There can be some uncertainty around blue cheese," Patrick continues. "Some people may have tried a very strong variety in the past and have been put off altogether. The best way to sell cheese is to give people the chance to try it. People may have misconceptions, but the reality of eating is quite different."

Although blue cheese is a winner throughout the year, its association with Christmas cannot be avoided, and Patrick thinks the festivities can be another way to attract consumers to give it a go for the first time. It's the perfect season for "showcasing what can pair well with blue cheese, from Panettone and fruited cakes and breads to Port PDO and Madeira Wine PDO. Anything with a bit of sweetness is very good.

"Sparkling wines such as Champagne PDO, Cava PDO, Prosecco PDO and Cremant are great matches for blue cheese as they cut through the richness," Patrick continues.

Clawson Farms extended its reach to newer blue cheese customers by launching its 1912 Artisan Stilton in 2022 – the name a nod to the year the business was founded by its farmer members. "Stilton's not just for Christmas," says Priya. "We want to put it front and centre of consumers' everyday lives. For them to use it not just on cheeseboards, but in their favourite meals too."

Clawson Farms has been making Stilton for generations, using only the best quality milk from its sustainably-run member farms, each based within 30 miles of the dairy. Its 1912 brand represents "our heritage in cheesemaking," Priya says proudly.



"What sets it apart is its excellence in taste. It has been triple graded by our master cheesemakers and is cut into a unique fan wedge, packaged perfectly with an easy-to-open film. We created it to inspire and drive a younger audience of affluent foodies to enjoy Stilton differently – that's why there are a whole host of recipes and inspirations available on our websites and socials. Influencers are increasingly showing off our blue cheese too."

It's not just Clawson Farms that's reaping the benefits of a new audience for blue cheese. Caroline Bell, managing director at Shepherds Purse, says young people are seeking out products that not only taste great, but add nutritional value to their lives. Artisan blue cheese fits the bill neatly, being made with natural ingredients, and tapping into the growing interest in fermented and gut-friendly food. Younger consumers "want to make good choices for both their health and the planet," Caroline explains. "With its rich flavour and a strong nutrient profile, speciality blue cheese is a perfect way to quickly elevate everyday dishes while offering the benefits of a whole, minimally processed food that has been enjoyed by humans for thousands of years," she continues.

Showing how easily blue cheese can add depth to cooking is a must for the modern cheesemaker and cheesemonger, Caroline adds. "For example, a few crumbles over a salad instantly adds creaminess and complexity without the need for extra dressings. Creamy blue cheese can be stirred into warm pasta, folded into a sandwich, or melted over vegetables and meat, transforming a basic dish into something more indulgent with minimal effort. It's a perfect ingredient for those who want to eat well but don't have time to prepare complicated meals."

Ease of use isn't the only selling point, though. Caroline says values can make a big impact, especially if they align with consumers and their beliefs. Reaching a younger demographic requires "an agile, message-driven approach that engages them on their terms, using visual and rich social media content".

Continually driving forward those messages that matter to them across all channels, from branding to marketing, is absolutely key.

"There's a core of young people who care deeply about authenticity,

wanting to know where their food comes from and who is behind it," Caroline continues. "In contrast to ultra processed foods with global supply chains, speciality blue cheese, with its short supply chain and artisanal methods, offers an authentic food experience that's rooted in tradition and community."

Younger consumers "do appreciate this craftsmanship," Caroline thinks. "The artistry, care, passion and precision needed to produce a quality blue cheese comes through in the experience of the product. By showcasing these factors in engaging ways, the speciality cheese sector can inspire the loyalty of, and create new champions for, this wonderful cheese category."

How to sell more blue cheese

There's, of course, no magic wand in retail. But there are lots of initiatives retailers can take to boost sales. "I think it's always important to talk to people about how blue cheese can be used in recipes," says Patrick, echoing the thoughts of Priya and Caroline. "It can be used in lots of different dishes to avoid waste."

Tell shoppers how they can use blue cheese as a seasoning, Patrick adds, tapping into its salty, peppery nature. Or explain how they can "mix it with butter to create a creamy blue cheese sauce that works wonderfully with steak".

Sampling is a must, Priya says. "Customers love to try before they buy, and if they enjoy delicious-tasting cheese, together with learning about its journey to the shop, they're more likely to buy it.

"Bring in some pairing ideas too. Or prepare some mini canapes using blue cheese to hand out. Those are both effective, as is handing out recipe cards to encourage shoppers to use blue cheese differently."

MAKING LEFTOVERS MATTER

If you have a cafe or restaurant offering on site, or operate a kitchen, whipping up your own deli goods, blue cheese offcuts (from facing up or products close to end of date) can be transformed in myriad ways... adding value, reducing waste, and ringing additional revenue through the till.

Why not try:

- Making potted Stilton. A delicious upsell to produce just before Christmas. Blend half Stilton to unsalted butter, adding a couple of spoonfuls of booze (think Port, brandy or whisky) per 200g of cheese. Dried cranberries or snippets of rosemary are nice finishing touches. Sell in individual ramekins or scoop from a large pot.
- Baking batches of blue cheese biscuits. Drier, crumbly edges of cheese might not have the texture customers desire, but they still taste superb tumbled into a shortbread recipe and cut into festive shapes ready for gifting.
- Bring a festive feel to your onsite eatery by adding the faced off pieces of Stilton to mac and cheese, or even beef stews and casseroles to bolster their flavour.

> "In contrast to ultra processed foods with global supply chains, speciality blue cheese, with its short supply chain and artisanal methods, offers an authentic food experience that's rooted in tradition and community"
>
> **CAROLINE BELL, SHEPHERDS PURSE**

2024 SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE STOCK CHECK



SHEPHERDS PURSE ORGANIC YORKSHIRE BLUE

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shepherdspurse.co.uk



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AMBIENT ADVENTURES

A well-stocked storecupboard is the foundation for home cooks' culinary exploration, so choose your range wisely

COMMENTATORS



JUSTIN BURBAGE
RH AMAR



TIM HILLGARTH
THE SAUCERER



CARMEN FERGUSON
WINDMILL ORGANIC



BARNES EDWARDS
THE GARLIC FARM



MARK KACARY
THE NORFOLK DELI

A well-stocked pantry must be the most valuable resource in any home cook's kitchen. Its contents ranging from everyday essentials such as oils, salt and pepper to spices, seasonings and flavour-packed pastes that can transform a dish in moments, the storecupboard is a one-stop-shop when it comes to making homemade dishes sing.

The magic of storecupboard products lie in their ability to be simultaneously comforting and exciting, offering everything you need to whip up a delicious dish for loved ones as well as the adventure of trying punchy new flavours. Fancy Italian-inspired pasta with a rich sundried tomato, red pepper and oregano sauce? On the table in 20 minutes thanks to your pantry. Or a spicy, peanutty ramen full of Eastern promise? See you in 10.

Convenience is the name of the game. Flavour-packed seasonings and pre-chopped garlic, ginger and chillies allow customers to rustle up all manner of dishes without spending valuable time on prep, and pastes promising full-on flavours all in one place mean that shoppers can experiment with adventurous foods – as well as family favourites – in far less time than if they had to chop, grind and whizz each ingredient themselves.

An evolving menu

Of course, a sector so wide-ranging is constantly changing shape, and with a decades-long history RH Amar has long been a go-to for retailers seeking high quality storecupboard stockers. "RH Amar was founded almost 80 years ago, and during that time storecupboard ingredients have changed so much but yet there also remains much reassuring familiarity," begins Justin Burbage, commercial director. "There are still the much-loved storecupboard stalwarts, the workhorses we rely on daily, but they now share the space with an ever-changing roster of exciting trend-led ingredients."

The storecupboard is an exciting place to be, says Justin. "We've seen the storecupboard transform from the poor relation to star player in the kitchen, with shoppers' eyes opened to the quality, variety and innovation that exists."

The recognition from fine food consumers that it's worth investing in better ingredients, as well as the constant innovation within ambient products, has benefited the fine food sector. "There's been significant premiumisation, with consumers opting for higher-end brands, like Mutti, for staples such as tinned tomatoes. The breadth of the category has also expanded, helped by kitchen design trends where pantries and storecupboards have been given more space, helping to boost the category's appeal and growth," says Justin.

An appetite for new tastes

With younger customers increasingly using social media as a resource for meal ideas, and inspiration from around the world abound, the plethora of ambient pastes and seasonings on offer in the UK is allowing customers to expand their culinary portfolio with minimal effort. Gochuchang, a red pepper paste popular in Korean cuisine, is now a pretty familiar item on ingredients lists despite being relatively unheard of just a few short years ago – its rise no doubt aided for the social media trend for Korean food, particularly sweet and spicy gochuchang-smothered chicken wings.

"Social media has provided a world-wide view into delicious ingredients which we are lucky enough to be able to supply," says Justin. "It has also helped bring in a younger demographic to the speciality food space, who appreciate how these ingredients offer both quality and flexibility and allow them to experiment with global flavours."

Delicious convenience

"In 2024, fine food shoppers are seeking more than just convenience – they want products that align with their values and offer a gourmet experience. This means a focus on sustainability, transparency in sourcing, and an emphasis on health-conscious ingredients without sacrificing flavour," says Tim Hillgarth, founder of The Saucerer, a brand of premium stir-in pasta sauces.

Traditionally, ready-made pasta sauces have been largely the preserve of supermarkets, with big brands taking up all the space on shelves with largely unexciting lines. Thankfully, the fine food sector is now forging its own path, with innovative brands like The Saucerer bringing high quality and punchy flavour to indies. "Being a stir-in brand, luxury convenience is what we're about. Our range is designed for foodies who seek quality, creativity and bold flavours."

The range is versatile, too – another tick for inventive but time-poor shoppers. "We like to go beyond pasta," says Tim. "Our chorizo sauce goes well on a focaccia with goats' cheese, hot honey and basil for example. Meanwhile, our aubergine and harissa goes well if you dollop it into your baked egg."



Value in more ways than one

With many products offering long shelf lives, versatility and multiple uses per unit, the storecupboard offers value for money and it's important to provide customers with a considered balance of practicality and innovation, all at a justifiable price. "It's essential to get the storecupboard basics right," agrees Justin. "Consumers want value, but they understand that it's



SPECIALITY FOOD



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not just about price, value is also delivered through exceptional quality. Shoppers are seeking top-tier staples, whether it's tinned tomatoes or pasta, that offer value through the quality and taste they deliver."

"Kitchen ingredients need to work hard to justify their place on the kitchen shelf and this is where this category really comes into its own as so many storecupboard products can be used across many different dishes and occasions, but we need to work hard to communicate this," Justin continues.

"In these challenging times the country has been going through, traditional storecupboard items like canned foods, in particular canned beans and pulses have become even more appealing to consumers as they are cost efficient, have longer shelf lives, limit wastage and align with demand for natural plant-based protein sources," says Carmen Ferguson, brand manager at Biona's parent company Windmill Organic. "Consumers also now increasingly understand that they can buy healthier food that meets their needs in canned formats too."

Storecupboards as a tool for change

Food waste is a huge topic across the industry, and the storecupboard provides an opportunity to minimise your customers' production of it. "With eyes on food waste, the storecupboard can present a less risky purchase with less potential wastage, and shoppers appreciate the flexibility that its longer shelf life brings to meal-planning," says Justin.

The power of storecupboard items to reduce food waste is also recognised by Barnes Edwards, director at The Garlic Farm. "What we all need to be doing is eating actual food, but all too often we end up with tired vegetables at the back of the fridge. What storecupboard items do brilliantly is to bring them back to life, but it takes intensely flavoured, carefully prepared products to do that – if something is filled with ingredients you can't pronounce, the flavour won't be as strong so you'll need to use more of it. By stocking up on good quality, flavour-packed storecupboard ingredients you can not only use less but also encourage the consumption of fresh food. That's how we approach our storecupboard range; each item is a vehicle for eating more straight out of the ground real food."

A beautiful stock or olive oil can bring an otherwise uninspiring dish to life, but also to be considered is the environmental cost behind the scenes. "Ambient foods are packaged and transported, so they naturally have an impact on the environment," says Barnes. "This means it's even more important for *Speciality Food* readers to work with suppliers who pay attention to the impact they're having on our planet, and who produce their ranges with care in terms of quality and the use of real ingredients, as opposed to those who produce food as a commodity and ship it halfway around the world.

"An item with a modest reach and supply chain is likely to be closer to people and to be attuned to the community impact of its ingredients," continues Barnes. "It's a question of these things coming together to produce an item which is full of flavour and nutrients, and doing its job in terms of supporting a sustainable food industry."

Ultimately, says Barnes, by investing in quality storecupboard items you are investing all the way back to the field. "You might not be able to taste it in isolation, but you are affecting a whole ecosystem."

RETAILER INSIGHT

Mark Kacary, owner of The Norfolk Deli, talks us through his must-stock storecupboard items



The number one essential in a shop like ours is that the majority of products we sell have three magic words on them "made in Norfolk". We are a local producer supporting business, and to ensure that we have or can find a local Norfolk producer in just about every area of food and drink production is very important to us. However, in terms of what are our best-selling store cupboard essentials... Rapeseed oils may sound a tad boring, but we are always selling out of rapeseed oils, chilli oils etc etc. Local chutneys and jams are always big in terms of what our customers are always spending money on. In terms of trends, we have noticed an increase in the amount of chilli, sauces and jams we've been selling as well as the newer trend of hot honeys. These were very popular during the summer and we'll be looking with interest whether this continues into and through the winter months.

STOCK CHECK



RANDOM HARVEST AUSTRALIAN TRUFFLE HOT SAUCE

A perfectly balanced blend of heat from chilli with the earthy flavour of Australian truffles.

cotswold-fayre.co.uk



HAWKSHEAD RELISH HOT GARLIC PICKLE

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hawksheadrelish.com



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DELICIOUS DELI-GRADE FOODS





DARING TO DIVERSIFY

‘WE RUN THE 18TH OLDEST BUSINESS IN THE WORLD’

As part of our ongoing series shining a light on Britain’s most unique farm shops, delis and food halls, *Speciality Food* is at Otterton Mill

On any given day, Chris Wright leaps out of bed and finds himself immersed in a slice of British history. He might while away the hours at his farm shop in the grounds of 14th Century Powderham Castle near Exeter. Or overseeing flour production at the Otterton Mill estate 25 minutes away – the 18th oldest business in the world.

Running operations at the two sites, Chris says, is a privilege he hasn’t taken for granted since he and his wife Carol first dipped their toes in the retail arena, becoming tenants at Otterton in 2015.

Found off a sleepy lane in East Devon, the site is home to the working mill, a bakery, an arts and crafts centre, a cafe and a farm shop, and hosts regular outdoor events in summer.

“Milling here is recorded in the Domesday Book,” says Chris, who adds milling would have taken place at Otterton well before that. “And we mill in exactly the same way today. I love it. My office is over 500 years old!”

It’s a popular place, Otterton. Cherished by locals and tourists alike. That’s what drew Chris, who had a long background in tourism, in. Taking on the challenge of this site felt like, he says, a natural progression at an opportune time. “Another business we were running at was winding down – and who wouldn’t have a business like this?”

The family’s mantra from the start has been to approach the farm shop and its satellite operations gently. The farm shop was rebuilt three years ago after they managed to secure some European funding to improve the facilities but, other than that, Otterton has had just a few small ‘adjustments’ that make a big impact.

Chris is acutely aware he is purely a custodian of this place. “When we’re talking about thousands of years, our tenure is nothing. We have to view this as our little bit of time at this site.”

While the previous owners had taken a step back from operations, Chris and his family were keen to get ‘stuck in’ from day one, with a truly hands-on approach.

“When we arrived we wanted to become part of the team and to gain their trust as much as anything else. The first thing they let me do in the kitchen was cut some butter,” he laughs.

TURNING THE WHEELS OF HISTORY

Otterton’s ancient watermill is a precious part of the site, and still operates today, producing excellent quality, nutrient-rich stoneground flour which finds its way into the bakery, shop and cafe.

“We have a farmer we work with in West Bexington on the Jurassic Coast,” says Chris. “He grows an ancient grain that we supplement with a higher protein grain we buy locally. We mix the two to give us the flour that we want. It’s very distinctive. The rest of our flour comes from an organic producer.”

They’re quite a romantic thing, watermills. And Otterton’s attracts quite a crowd thanks to its historic importance. Visitors are welcome to wander around the outside of the mill on a self-guided walk of the site, with volunteers drafted in twice a month on milling days when the wheels crank into action.

“It’s wonderful to see,” says Chris, who adds that shoppers and on-site diners can’t get enough of goodies made using the flour and skilfully crafted in the bakery. There are loaves of granary, wholemeal, spelt, white and sourdough bread. Speciality loaves such as a Spanish bread infused with olive oil are available too, alongside quirky bakes such as crab-shaped buns.

That’s not to mention the hundreds of scones which leave the ovens each day, or a delightful line-up of traybakes and cakes, from carrot cake and brownies to traditional Devon cider apple cake, and Coast Path Cake – a very rich fruit cake infused with Otterton’s own beer.



“We get hammered at Christmas and Easter. We have to make thousands of mince pies and handmade hot cross buns to keep up with demand,” Chris adds.

ADDING VALUE

When the Wrights landed at Otterton, the farm shop sold little more than a few eggs and other bits and pieces. Once rebuilt, they knew bringing it back to life would require a lot of work. And now “you can buy pretty much everything here. Everything fights for its space,” Chris says, working on the premise that ‘more is more’ in retail.

An abundance of stock, and packing the shelves regularly, has made the farm shop a more reliable stopping point for local people especially, who know they can pop in not just for bread, but for milk, eggs, cheese, meat and more. Though Chris has been careful to avoid mimicking what the local community shop has to offer.

“Our key lines, apart from our bread, are our own sausage rolls and quiches. And we can’t make enough Scotch eggs to keep up! There are cakes from the bakery. Cornish Sea Salt makes fudge for us. And we have a fair bit of deli items and alcohol.” This includes Otterton’s own gin – OMG – made using the mill’s wheat, and plants foraged in the grounds.

With space limited, Chris says it’s important to consider what gets its moment in the spotlight in the farm shop. But adds smaller retailers like himself shouldn’t be afraid to take a punt on something new. “Price points are important, but you can’t beat yourself up if you make a mistake











and something doesn't sell. This market is great for new suppliers, and we need to champion then and give them a try."

If you happen to be lucky enough to have your own bakery or cafe, cross-promotion is key to success as well. "One thing we do is, there's loads of different chutney and jam people, and some are very generic and available in lots of farm shops. We try to have ones that are, perhaps, more specific to Devon, and we use a lot of them in our cafe. So, if you had a beef sandwich today, it would come with some form of red onion marmalade. If you like that, you can buy it in the shop, and also buy the bread and the butter!"

A DESTINATION FOR DINING

Otterton's cafe is a big draw – helped by the fact it has awards under its belt. The menu is based around local, fresh produce, and taps into what is coming out of the bakery – something customers hugely appreciate.

"Bread is baked in the morning at 4am (about 70 to 80 loaves a day) and they have it in the kitchen to use from 9.30am when we open. The meat comes from our own butchery at Powderham, fish is from Brixham, coffee is from a guy two miles down the stream. We're very much a destination and, for our footprint, we are very very busy. On a good day we will do 200 covers at lunch and lots of cream teas in the afternoon. If you make a good scone you can't go wrong!"

RETAINING CUSTOMERS

Chris is keenly aware Otterton's location is 'off the beaten track', so once customers are on-site, retaining them, increasing dwell time and buying opportunities, is crucial to the business's ongoing success.

"We're a small place, easily missed from the road," he says. "But if you come in off the road you'll see a lot is going on. It's a bit of a hidden gem. We've got a good reputation locally and a very strong following. Lots of people who live in the village, when they have friends and family down, will come to the mill." When you operate in a rural spot you have to keep "working on that reputation and making it somewhere people want to come back to."

Chris brings international musicians, many of them from the States, to Devon during the summer for a series of incredibly popular outdoor gigs which have a defined impact on footfall.

Having an art gallery and craft centre is a boom, too. "They are a major part of our business and not a small operation," he explains. "We have at least 150 artists in there, selling everything from bracelets and paintings to ceramics. It's a good reason to come here, because it's not stuff you'll be able to buy on the internet. A lot of it comes from the local area and the wider South-West, and our customers love that."

> "When we're talking about thousands of years, our tenure is nothing. We have to view this as our little bit of time at this site"

Getting people in the door is, "hard work, building on what we do year-on-year". And you must be consistent for success, Chris stresses. "Some days you'll think, 'we probably didn't make a lot of money today', but you have to be open and be consistent, and build that reliability in the back of people's minds. They need to know they can come here and we'll be open, come rain or shine."

REIGNING AT THE CASTLE

Powderham castle is more than 600 years old. The current resident earl's ancestors were involved in the French Revolution. It's a phenomenal estate, with a farm shop, country stores and other outlets. And it's proved the perfect location for the Wright family to share their experience, having taken on the farm shop and its bistro in 2023.

"We happened to be out having coffee over there and for whatever reason, I looked on social media to see it had become available," Chris says. "At the time I was probably looking for more of a challenge. It's a fantastic site with huge potential."

Just a short drive from Otterton, Powderham shares a rich and varied history with the mill location, but has a very different dynamic in terms of customer base. While Otterton is almost hidden, Powderham enjoys a key location off a main road, and attracts droves of ready-made customers, visiting for weddings, mediaeval weekends, jousting events and to hear the dulcet tones of acts such as Tom Jones.

"It had taken a bit of a hit in the six months prior to completion of sale," Chris admits. "We wanted to rebuild it as another visitor destination, and for it to have a positive reflection of the castle. We've worked in a bit of what we do at Otterton, and the bistro was rather complex in its operation, so we've simplified that too. We're getting great feedback."

Running both sites allows the teams to put best practice into action across them, is fantastic for cross-promotion, and works from a supply chain point of view too. Meat from Powderham's butchery counter (including the estate's fallow deer) is dropped at Otterton, while Otterton's bread, bakes, savouries and cakes are delighting diners and shoppers at Powderham.

There has been the opportunity for staff to crossover locations as well. "We have people that work in both sites," explains Chris. "That gives us the opportunity to see what works and what doesn't, to share ideas, and to have the same approach across them."

Running both sites isn't phasing Chris, who says he is excited and relishes everything they do. The only challenge, as throughout the industry, is staffing. "Hospitality has taken a hit in the last few years. It's a constant thing," he says. "But I'm still glad we took the decision to do this last year, and I have to remind myself that we haven't had it a year yet. We need to be a little more patient managing our expectations!"



FINAL CALL

As 2024 comes to a close it's a perfect opportunity to reflect on the year that's past, and the delicious changes we've seen within the speciality sector. It really truly is a moveable feast, and we never fail to be impressed by the nimble, agile, innovative approach of both producers and retailers as they continually update, improve and react to bring consumers 'the next big thing'.

In the next edition of *Speciality Food* we'll be letting you in on the trends you need to watch in 2025, working alongside experts across categories and industries to deliver the 'need to know' products to make room for (once the business of Christmas and New Year are out of the way, of course).For now, let's remind ourselves of what whet shoppers' appetites this year.

First up, we cannot forget the enduring appeal of 'swicy' food - the irresistible combination of sweet and spicy that's had mouths watering up and down the UK. Hot honey has undoubtedly been the star attraction, filling baskets from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth, and being used almost ubiquitously now in restaurants, cafes and street food settings. We don't think it's going anywhere in 2025.

Sticking with spice, the three cuisines that have resonated most in speciality retail this year are Asian, Middle Eastern and Mexican. We (and analysts) predict flavours from these parts of the world will be even more heightened across the coming months, as consumers dig deep, searching for regional, authentic, intriguing products and formats designed for simplicity and ease of use. Meanwhile, Asia dominates in condiments as a wave of hungry foodtrepreneurs have swept in to freshen up this offering with truffle-infused teriyaki, chilli crisp oils, peanut rayu, and hyper-regional pastes and spice mixes.

Finally, health has been at the forefront of everyone's minds. Manufacturers have reacted to HFSS regulations with new formulations of existing products and investment in NPD. And customers, more conscious of their health and wellbeing (especially gut health), are responding well, seeking functional, natural alternatives to their favourite drinks and snacks.

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

5 MINUTES WITH

CARL CLARKE, PARTNER AT SHELFLIFE



WHAT INSPIRES YOU?
Interacting with inspiring founders, individuals, and brands who are genuinely solving problems and making a meaningful impact is incredibly motivating. London, in every way, consciously and subconsciously, fuels my creative spirit. Working alongside my partners is a continuous journey of learning, and the most rewarding part is witnessing the joy our work brings to thousands of people every day.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?
I am genuinely passionate about all forms of creativity – it's what truly lights me up. My superpower is the ability to future gaze and feel what the world genuinely needs. This guides my work on a daily basis. Collaborating with talented co-founders, other creatives, brands and contributing to the creation part of the journey is not only fulfilling but also a rich source of learning and growth for me. Despite chronic ADHD, I have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and particularly love the learning and strategic aspects integral to every project. Ultimately, my deepest joy lies in the making of things visually captivating that relate to current culture and, above all, cool.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?
Looking at P&Ls & mind-boggling financial forecasts. Basically, all the adult stuff!

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF UK FOOD RETAIL
The future of UK food retail is constantly evolving, bringing both challenges and excitement. Adapting to post-pandemic consumer behaviours, meeting the demand for transparent supply chains, and the emergence of entertainer-led brands, all while striving for more convenience, quality, and value. These are exciting times for brands that really want to change the game....

TEA OR COFFEE?
Tea, I'm Irish, we LOVE tea for any occasion. Notably Barry's Tea, world's greatest.

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO/WORK MANTRA OR ETHOS?
Fail Fast, Fall Forward – don't be scared of failure, there's no such thing. You either win or you learn then you just go again with all those lessons. Einstein said, "Logic will get you from A to B but imagination with get you everywhere..."

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
Whale vomit... don't try this at home alone, kids.

FAVOURITE BOOK?
The Tso of Pooh – Tso is the ancient practice of just being. Pooh Bear has got this locked down.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?
Sweet every time.



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TASTE DIRECT ★ 2025 ★



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Are you a Producer?

We are looking for ten companies to offer a product sample to our readership. Get in touch for more details and costs.

Are you a Retailer?

Look out in our January/February Issue for the opportunity to sample new product ranges.

For more information contact:
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TRIED & TESTED

COX & CO BLOOD ORANGE CRUNCH BAR

Those who know me well know that a) I love chocolate, b) I love chocolate with crunch, and c) I can't get enough of blood orange, so when this bar landed in the *Speciality Food* offices I couldn't have been more excited to sample. The flavour doesn't disappoint; at once rich and zesty, smooth and crunchy from cocoa nibs, it's perfectly balanced and moreish. Not to mention, Cox & Co are proudly sustainability-minded, so chocolate lovers can indulge deliciously while comfortable in the knowledge that their purchase is helping to make a difference.



coxandcocacao.com

DEVAGIRI CARDAMOM CHAI TEA

I'm a huge fan of hot drinks year-round – not a single day goes by without at least one (or three) cups of tea or coffee – but when the cold weather hits I start to crave something even more cosy... a touch of spice, perhaps. Devagiri's Cardamom Chai Tea is warming in more ways than one. Firstly, it is perfectly flavoured with aromatic cardamom, my favourite spice which rarely gets the spotlight it deserves. Secondly, the team at Devagiri – a Sri Lankan tea estate – are passionate about revolutionising the tea industry to the benefit of people and planet. Does good and tastes good – what's not to love?



devagiriteas.com

RWEENA CHICKPEA GRANOLA

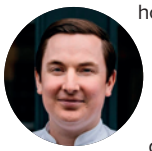
Try as I might, I don't always find healthy foods to be as delicious as conventionally indulgent ones. Don't get me wrong, I'm always attracted to functionality, health credentials and clean labels, but it takes something really special to tempt my taste buds – which is why I was intrigued by Rweena's Vegan Chickpea Granola. High in fibre and grain-free, plus genuinely tasty and in a fun new format, they're my new go-to snack. The chocolate and coconut flavour is delicious, but the gentle spicing of The Original (almonds, seeds and sultanas) gets my vote.



rweena.com

THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Dean Banks, chef & restauranteur, owner of Dean Banks Group



For almost two decades now, La rowing up in a small fishing town on the coast of Scotland best known for the 'Arbroath Smokie' – a traditional fire-smoked haddock – set the scene for my culinary passion from a young age. From the age of 15, the proximity to the sea and its treasures sparked a desire to learn how to get the most from it that brought me to Rick Stein's flagship, The Seafood Restaurant. Even since then, I've carried a strong belief in locality that has followed me throughout my career, and eventually back to Scotland.

Exceptional local suppliers are our key to success, providing a standard of freshness and quality that we could not achieve through importing products. The one-to-one relationships we create with producers are extremely important. For us, they allow our suppliers to understand our business and its needs, ensuring the products are perfect for each dish and how we prepare it. For them, the relationship means a consistent source of income and visibility within the Scottish market that so rarely gets to make use of its' own exports. When we trust a source to provide the best ingredients the day they were harvested, caught, or butchered, it makes life easier knowing that our dishes are going to be up to our full standard and enjoyed by our guests.

While we use these relationships to enhance our dishes and guest experience, supporting small, the added benefit is the positive impact these partnerships have on the regional economy. Working with independent producers allows us to reinvest into our community, creating sustainable job opportunities, or even just providing income for a sole artisan – like our honey supplier in Dollar, who produces the honey which we use in desserts within our pub, The Forager. They bring a delicious local flair to our desserts, and in return we support their hives.

With these relationships comes a benefit to the climate as well – not only are we cutting down our carbon footprint by sourcing locally, but we provide our suppliers a steady source of income that means they don't have to resort to shipping overseas.

Using local produce allows us bring our guests on a journey through Scotland with every meal, creating a memorable experience that creates an investment with the land and sea that surrounds our restaurants, and an understanding of the individuals who make what we do possible. For example, the lobster we're known for within our St Andrews seafood restaurants, Haar and the seafood shack at Dune, comes directly from our own lobsterman, Tommy Yule, a young lad who has taken over his father's position in the fishing fleet of Arbroath Harbour bringing the family tradition into a new generation.

Our commitment to sustainability and local sourcing carries through every aspect of our restaurants, from the building materials to the crockery and the food itself.

To build relationships with these suppliers means to build innovation, maintain local identity, and share the best and freshest flavours with all our guests.

PARTNER CONTENT

Garofalo



THE SPIRIT OF GENEROSITY

It's time to be inspired by Italy's welcoming attitude

If you've ever sat at a table with Italians, you'll know that it's warm with the sense of family and generosity. Arms are outstretched, welcoming you into the fold to enjoy the feast – and however simple and rustic the dishes at hand are, this seasoning of comradery makes any meal into an occasion. No wonder Italian meals can stretch on for hours at a time; quite unlike the 'al desko' lunches Brits are infamous for.

The good news is that independent fine food retailers can recreate this sense of togetherness both in their stores and beyond – by selling with a sense of generosity, and inspiring your customers to take that sense of warm hospitality home with them, you can make a sale into much more than a simple transaction.

Step one is openness and connection when it comes to creating a sense of famiglia – two things that *Speciality Food* readers do so well – and while limited manpower can make this a challenge, it doesn't need to make it impossible to offer customers a comfortable experience. When customers step through the door, an open acknowledgement goes a long way, and having a member of the team within a customer's eyeline will let them know that help is available if required. Service with a smile is an old adage, but that's not to say that it doesn't have value in the 21st Century; if you're looking to add Dolce Vita vibes to your business, it's important to communicate and connect.

Step two is adding a sense of generosity to the proceedings, and note: this doesn't need to come at a large cost. Simple, good value – and high quality – ingredients piled generously will attract and invite customers to partake, in the same way that platters filled with mounds of sauce-slicked pasta, curls of Prosciutto di Parma and bowls of creamy Mozzarella will be relished by many. Think in-season fruit and vegetables and simple ambient ingredients.

We can all learn from the Italian attitude towards hospitality, and in a realm where customer service sits so naturally with excellent food, fine food retailers are perfectly positioned to take a seat at the table.



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