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The needs of your customers are changing. Are you ready for summer?

As many restrictions continue, along with the inability to eat out, consumers are rethinking what to buy and where to shop. The warm weather in May created an explosion in demand for products used for barbecue events and picnics like never before. The good news is, research suggests that this trend is set to continue throughout the summer as people travel less, seek social time with family and friends and continue to shop locally. This is potentially a game changer for independent retailers.

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EDITOR'S LETTER



Welcome to the July/
August issue of
Speciality Food.

It's been a challenging few months for us all, with wide-reaching impacts few could have envisaged and prepared for, but the chink of light within the fine food industry is now starting to shine through the gloom.

Many businesses are finding that their 'new normal' brings with it challenges they feel unprepared for, while some are relishing the necessity to redefine how they work and what they stand for. For this issue we spoke to professionals across the hard-hit cheese industry to uncover their Covid experiences and plans for the future. You can read our findings in The Future of Cheese on page 24.

We also look at how independent retailers can start preparing for the Christmas period – a time more important than ever – on page 12, and share plenty of other stocking suggestions and retail advice throughout the magazine.

Until next time, stay well.

HOLLY SHACKLETON | EDITOR
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Retailers, brands and distributors have been adapting left, right and centre since the beginning of lockdown in March, and whilst flexibility and innovation will still be valuable, coupling this with going back to the roots of indie retail could prove to be the perfect marriage.

"Covid has brought both challenges and opportunities to our industry, says Nikki Castley from Dunfermline-based distributor, Cress Co. "It has not necessarily come down to survival of the fittest, but rather how quickly independents have needed to adapt and change in order to continue trading during these strange times. Christmas, unlike so many events, won't be cancelled or postponed this year, and we all need to be prepared."

The Christmas period typically sees a higher basket spend for food retailers, and even though we are heading closer to recession, many companies and retailers are still optimistic. After all, Christmas is a special time of year, and amidst this global pandemic, consumers are seeking out those small moments of escapism, comfort and the occasional treat, key messages that could help boost sales.

Many businesses are already preparing for the busy festive period, despite the uncertainty around what type of restrictions and social distancing measures will be in place closer to the time. So what will a Covid-19 Christmas look like?

Rob Copley, chair of the Farm Retail Association (FRA) and owner of Farmer Copley's Farm Shop in Pontefract, is emphatic that "Christmas is going to be big," and this, combined with ongoing Covid restrictions, is presenting him with both an opportunity and a worry. "When people have to pull their belts in, as they are now, they tend to let them out at Christmas," he predicts. "I anticipate that this year many people will be eager to spend on Christmas luxury. Our greatest challenge will be managing the

Speciality food retailers prepare for an omnichannel Christmas

The Christmas season is set to look a lot different this year – and independents are keen to let customers know that it's business as usual, but with enhanced benefits

crowds as we're anticipating a very busy time throughout November and December and controlling numbers with social distancing in place will have an impact on how well we trade."

Tapping into customers' desires

While some retailers may have previously relied on high Christmas footfall, Covid-19 restrictions have seen many pivot their sales strategy by offering click-and-collect, call-and-collect and online delivery options. These same services will prove essential in helping retailers cater to customers who may still be unable or unwilling to shop in-store closer to Christmas, and in deflecting a high volume of customers visiting stores with social distancing measures in place.

"We launched our click-and-collect using WooCommerce during the crisis and we will continue with offering a full-blown service," continues Rob Copley. "We'll add an extra day of collection for Christmas orders, with two-hour timed slots. We'll also be promoting our online ordering and deliveries. We don't anticipate that we'll have any difficulty in fulfillment with stock, and we'll be bringing in half a dozen or so extra staff to deal with extra demand. To help spread footfall we will be extending our opening hours,

and offering special Christmas shopping evenings with Prosecco for the loyal customers who belong to our VIP programme."

As a working farm, Morton's Family Farm has been operating as normal throughout the lockdown, placing chicks ready for Christmas deliveries. "Customers are being urged to order early to guarantee a delivery slot," says Rob Morton. "I recommend retailers speak with a courier company soon, as there will be a huge demand for delivery slots this year and generally they give priority to year-round customers. We already operate an e-commerce website where customers can order either a meat box or our range of free-range turkeys at Christmas. Sending fresh produce does have its complications so packaging is key, as is keeping the customer informed at all times."

Omnichannel strategies

According to the latest statistics from Kantar Worldpanel the huge increase in home deliveries meant nearly one in five British households bought over the internet in the month to mid-June, totalling 5.7 million shoppers. It's clear that e-commerce will still play a key role in everything from buying groceries for Christmas dinner to shopping for gifts for foodies.

Speaking from his own

experience during lockdown, Lord Newborough, owner of Rhug Estate, has seen a huge surge in online shopping and home deliveries of his organic meat and farm shop products. He says, "As we are now coming out of lockdown we can start to concentrate on the normal calendar to our business and that includes preparing for Christmas customers. We usually see a small proportion of our organic turkeys and geese sold online, but we're already planning for this to increase this year and looking to how we can maximise the increased demand in online customers to shop with us in the run-up to Christmas."

"Our Rhug Organic Boxes have been highly successful in tempting new customers during lockdown, including speciality boxes such as BBQ essentials, luxury steaks collection and roasting joints, which not only include our award-winning meat but all the farm shop essentials to accompany them, including cooking sauces, gravy and, of course, beer and wine."

"We are now looking at how we can entice both our new and old organic turkey and geese customers to continue to shop with us in the run up to Christmas. We've always been keen to meet our customers by encouraging them to visit our farm shop to collect their turkey, but I think this will be more difficult than

ever this winter thanks to Covid-19. We are currently creating an improved online shop to be launched in August, so our customers will find ordering and arranging home delivery even easier than before."

Standing out from the crowd

Marketing and communications are always important at this time of year, given the competitive nature of the season. It's important to keep customers informed about any key dates such as when you will begin selling festive products and deadlines for placing orders for the big day. Digital channels such as newsletters, emails and social media will also play a big role in engaging customers to find out what they want this year, as well as promoting products and gifts for the season. And, of course, selling USPs to consumers encourages them to support independents rather than reverting to supermarkets.

Emphasising positive messages is vital. "An unexpected positive from lockdown, and one where we've managed to gain an advantage over mainstream supermarkets, is the consumers' realisation that the environment they live in has been able to breath better with less pollution and environmental damage," adds Lord Newborough. "Customers are converting to organic as a healthier way of living and, of course, a more sustainable way to manage the land. Long may this continue as lockdown restrictions are eased and we're all allowed to travel further afield again. In relation to Christmas I hope more turkey lovers will convert to an organic bird."

One key takeaway from lockdown has been the importance of being flexible. With so much still unknown, it's worth planning for several eventualities and rolling out different strategies to mimic various scenarios. Stay in touch with your customers and focus on doing what you do best as a business.

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“Is our café a hero or a villain?”



**JOHN SHEPHERD
PARTRIDGES**

My first article for *Speciality Food* was five years ago in 2015 and since then we have experienced three general elections (amazingly), the Queen's 90th birthday, a major Royal Wedding, Brexit and several weather extremes. However, nothing even remotely compares to the effect of Covid-19 on our businesses.

Talk about the new normal, the learning curve has looped the loop literally and the current pandemic has knocked the socks off all other challenges.

The lucky part is that as food retailers we have been able to keep trading each day, albeit with less customers than ever before, but the average spending of each one has risen which helps a lot.

And recalling (from my own lockdown experience) the song from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, “From the ashes of disaster grow the roses of success,” we have had the opportunity to have a long hard look at what we are doing in the shop. And the result is that there could be one notable casualty – the café, at least in its current form.

In my own mind I have often struggled with whether to regard the café as a hero or villain. Admittedly it brings in between 10-20% of sales revenue depending on the weather, and some customers swear by it. On the

other hand it seriously increases wage costs, raises a lot of service issues and some customers swear at it. The question remains how can we improve it without losing its benefits?

When well managed and in good weather I am sure the answer to running an in-store café is a resounding thumbs up, but managing two parallel and often competing retail activities profitably under one roof is not as easy as it looks.

I know several deli owners who have franchised their cafes out or reduced them significantly. However, without the major upheaval of the past few months I confess I would not ever have considered taking these steps. However, since Covid-19 not a single customer has bemoaned the closure and reduction in scale of the café – especially since we opened our take away section at the front door.

The retail world is comprehensively moving in the direction of experiential shopping – the aim being to find the retail version of the Holy Grail: increasing in-store dwell times. So as customers are continually requiring a more engaging and memorable experience, to remove a café would surely put that in jeopardy? In the Covid-19 era the answer probably lies somewhere in the middle of two concepts. Having a popular café and drinks counter but removing the formal catering elements with fewer tables in less confined spaces.

This has incidentally been my 50th Article for *Speciality Food*. I am very grateful to the esteemed publication and Editor for allowing me to bear the soul of the shop in print for so long. Best wishes to all through these still difficult times.

New Trade and Agriculture Commission could protect food standards post Brexit

After millions petitioned to protect British farmers amidst ongoing trade deals, the Government has agreed to set up a Trade and Agriculture Commission.

As negotiations continue, the commission will advise ministers on the UK's approach to post-Brexit trade agreements. It comes after months of campaigning by farmers and agricultural unions across the UK, including the NFU, whose food standards petition attracted over one million signatures.

The Government's handling of trade deals has been scrutinised for weeks as fears over food safety standards intensified. Farmers as well as consumers voiced concerns over an influx of cheap, poor-quality imports that would threaten the UK's food standards and put British farmers' livelihoods at risk.

Announcing the new commission, International Trade Secretary Liz Truss wrote to NFU

president Minette Batters, claiming the decision came about following “positive discussions” with four of the country's biggest farming unions: NFU, NFU Scotland, NFU Cymru and Ulster Farmers' Union.

Speaking about the commission, Batters said: “I am very pleased that the government is taking concrete action to address the challenges of safeguarding our high food and farming standards by agreeing to set up a Trade and Agriculture Commission, something we first called for over 18 months ago. This is a hugely important development.

“We look forward to working with the Government and other stakeholders in the days ahead on the Commission's terms of reference, to ensure that its work is genuinely valuable. In particular, it will be vital that Parliament is able to properly consider the Commission's recommendations and can ensure the Government implements them effectively.

“The NFU will continue to scrutinise the progress of trade

negotiations with the USA and other countries over the coming months outside of the work of the Commission so that our future trade deals work for British farmers and consumers, and believe it is vital that Parliament is provided a strengthened role in this regard as well.”

Speaking to SF after the announcement, NFU spokesperson Mike Thomas said: “Shoppers have shown a desire to know the provenance of their food. While affordability remains a key purchase driver, most consumers are interested in traceability and buying local. This publicity is a great opportunity for independent retailers to communicate clearly the origin of products to customers while supporting British producers in ensuring their product has a market. Knowing the products you are selling and engaging in effective promotion can help to attract and maintain a loyal and wide customer base that will spread the positive story of British producers.”

“ This publicity is a great opportunity for independent retailers to communicate clearly the origin of products to customers while supporting British producers in ensuring their product has a market ”

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“It’s time to go left field rather than safety-first”



CHARLES CAMPION

As the pandemic grinds onwards, food and drink plays a larger and larger role in our day to day life. After decades when the mantra has been that we all eat more fresh food and only shop for the next day or two – the new normal now is for one mega weekly shop and the order of the lockdown day is a crawling supermarket trolley groaning under a burden of stock-piled toilet rolls.

Shopping has got more difficult; try taking a mistaken turn in the social distancing layout – the other customers can be very snitty. The kind of food we buy has changed – frozen is good, so is pickled, tinned, dried, fermented, bulk packs, and those tins of anchovies destined for the back of the cupboard. No wonder tastes are changing; bring on the spicy food.

When the SAS set off on their secret missions, it is said that tucked into each ration is a small bottle of diabolically hot chilli sauce. Spice is one way to make bland food palatable. A couple of decades may have passed but television’s *Goodness Gracious Me* is still fondly remembered for the “Going out for an English” sketch. A valuable insight into the British love of chilli, and it may just be that spice is already playing a part in broadening our horizons.

It may be a standing joke but there is something spooky about the year-long availability of hot cross buns. Once they were a

Good Friday and Easter Week treat – after which wait for next year – today they are a year-round staple. This summer M&S has brought back one of their own speciality hot cross buns: Chilli & Cheese. What could be better proof of the nation’s growing infatuation with chilli?

Come adversity and there is always mention that we were never healthier than during the war time years when strict rationing prevailed. Alongside powdered egg, the example of healthy cooking quoted most often is Woolton Pie. Lord Woolton was in charge of healthy eating during the second world war and his pie contained mashed potato, cauliflower, oatmeal, carrot and spring onion. Formidable and (by the by) suitable for veggies and vegans.

As chilli gets a welcome boost should we also be looking at other strong and pungent flavours to transform lockdown dull dishes. Here are some ways to add a little kick to potentially dull recipes. Horseradish – the freshly grated root that makes the eyes water and the nose stream. Sichuan pepper – a small bud (not pepper at all but pungent enough to numb the lips). Mustard – hot English mustard powder, fiery and a great emulsifier. Wasabi – Japanese water plant goes head to head with horseradish. Long Peppers – eye-wateringly fierce. Cayenne pepper – a traditional favourite, Escoffier would have used this to add heat and colour. Pimenton – Spanish with smoky notes.

Food and cooking are always in a state of flux, even when there is no pandemic. Perhaps this is an opportunity to try stuff from left field rather than safety first – like a chilli hot cross bun perhaps? NPd folk should be all over this opportunity to add spice to everything.

“Shopping has got more difficult; try taking a mistaken turn in the new layout”

Google launches Covid support packages for UK SMEs

The US tech giant has launched an initiative to upskill one million small British businesses by the end of 2021 to help them survive the coronavirus pandemic by boosting their online performance.

Through its Open for Business scheme, Google will offer products, tools and services to businesses, particularly those that rely on in-person interactions, like pubs, restaurants and shops, which have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis.

The company will offer SMEs and charities 10,000 hours of free one-on-one support over the next 12 months in partnership with the government’s Digital Boost campaign. Google will also make £25m worth of advertising credits and grants available to small business, government agencies and non-governmental organisations.

The ultimate goal is making small businesses easier to find online. Throughout the pandemic consumers have shown increasing support for their local businesses, but without a strong online presence that support could falter. Google cited research by Ipsos that found 90% of respondents visited a business if it had shared images on Google Search and Google Maps, while 90% also said they’re more likely to interact with a business if they have a phone number listed on the internet.

“Local businesses are the lifeblood of our communities,” said Ronan

Harris, Google managing director, UK. “Like millions up and down the country, we want to help small businesses both survive and thrive.”

“Through this programme we’re aiming to upskill SMEs and charities by helping them adapt to operating in a post-lockdown environment. Despite the ongoing uncertainty, we want to show that having an online presence can have a transformative impact on offline businesses.”

Chancellor Rishi Sunak welcomed the news, saying: “Our small businesses form the backbone of the British economy, fuelling growth and creating jobs in communities across the country. This has been a difficult time for them, and that’s why I am delighted that today Google have announced this plan to help small businesses recover from the crisis.”

New report sets out recovery scenarios for food sector

The coronavirus pandemic has led to a huge shift in consumer behaviour, and now a new report seeks to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on the UK food and drink market while setting four possible scenarios for the future.

The *Eating In Vs Dining Out* report has been produced by IGD Retail Analysis in collaboration with foodservice consultant Peter Backman, and aims to help companies in the food retail and foodservice sectors to plan for the future. It comes after lockdown led to the closure of all non-essential shops, pubs, restaurants and cafes, which led to a dramatic change in consumer habits and spend.

In 2019, UK consumers spent £200bn on food and drink, 36% of which was spent in foodservice outlets and 64% in retail. However, the ongoing pandemic has affected this balance.

Whilst the future is still uncertain as restrictions continue to ease and businesses slowly go ‘back to normal’, IGD’s report lays out four potential

scenarios that address two main variables: the potential path of the virus and the performance of the economy.

The first hypothetical scenario – The Great Reset – is the least impactful, and sees food and drink consumption largely undertaken at home. Retail sales would remain high but flatten out as lockdown lifts and people begin eating out. Safety and hygiene would have a higher value for consumers as they decide where to eat or drink. Eating out would also return to 2019 levels.

The second hypothetical scenario – Decade of Drift – sees the economy taking longer to recover, having a great financial impact on households and businesses. Companies “accelerate cost-cutting and efficiency programmes to demonstrate value to consumers”, which leads to lower levels of product development. Whilst demand for eating out is high, many are unable to afford it.

Technical Isolation, the third

scenario, sees the virus drive a technical response by both businesses and consumers, where shopping online is seen as the safest option. Businesses divert investment from stores, whilst eating out is also constrained. Stores and foodservice businesses that are unable to repurpose and adapt to online will close.

The final and most severe scenario – Globalisation Reversed – sees globalisation regress, which in turn places added pressure on supply chains. Supply chains will be rebuilt, ranges will become seasonal or disappear entirely. Deliveries and takeaway services become the only option for commercial foodservice owing to increased costs and operational difficulties.

In its report, IGD stressed the importance for the industry to prepare in order to better respond to events quickly and efficiently, advising that retailers should consider which changes in consumer behaviour will become permanent in order to identify solutions, whilst foodservice companies should re-write business plans that balance customer focus with practical operational issues.

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Specialist food shops attracting younger demographic

The UK's lockdown has caused a significant shift in how different age groups shop, presenting specialist food shops with a unique opportunity to expand their customer base, according to new research from IGD.

Specialist butchers, fishmongers and grocers have grown in popularity with younger shoppers, while older age groups have relied more on online services.

IGD's Shoppers of Our Time series found that nearly a quarter of 18 to 24 year olds said they had visited stores such as butchers, fishmongers and greengrocers in 2020, up from 20% in 2019. Meanwhile, shoppers over 55, who were the most frequent users of specialist stores before the lockdown, have decreased their usage from over a third (32%) to a quarter (25%), likely driven by social distancing concerns.

Dan Gillet, shopper insight manager at IGD, says: "Shopper behaviour has changed to an extent rarely ever seen. Some of these changes will present a unique opportunity for retailers across

the board to retain shoppers they traditionally wouldn't have – such as specialist stores to keep younger shoppers visiting, and general or online retailers to retain the older shopper base they have attracted during this time."

Online services were vital for older shoppers during lockdown, with more than half (55%) of those who shopped online saying that without the service they could not have got enough food and groceries during lockdown. Nearly two thirds of over-65s said the same.

The changing shopping landscape presents specialist shops with an opportunity to expand their customer base, as IGD's findings suggest these changes are here to stay. The research found 78% of all age groups visiting specialist stores more frequently said they would continue to do so in the future. For delis and farm shops looking to understand what an uncertain future holds, these changes in shopping habits are the first piece of the puzzle.

35% OF CONSUMERS ARE NOW BUYING LOCAL FOOD MORE OFTEN, IN PARTICULAR FROM FARM SHOPS AND LOCAL VEG BOX SCHEMES

35% OF RESPONDENTS ARE THROWING AWAY FOOD LESS OFTEN

26% ARE EATING MORE HEALTHILY NOW THAN PRE-LOCKDOWN

44% OF FAMILIES ARE NOW EATING TOGETHER MORE REGULARLY

SOURCE: FINDINGS FROM THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY'S ONGOING COVID-19 CONSUMER TRACKER, CONDUCTED BY ISOS MORI, INTO CONSUMER ATTITUDES, EXPERIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR IN RELATION TO FOOD AND DRINK IN ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN ISLAND.

"Small gains can go a long way"

As we all know, enforced social distancing has drastically changed everything about our old shopping habits and behaviours. All retailers are working out how to keep their staff safe, rearrange their floor space, how they serve customers and how to take payment. The key element is how to remain as profitable with less people coming through the door. This dilemma and the flexibility required to come up with innovative solutions reminds me of an old story about Pizza Express.

When life gives you lemons, what do you do? The old adage says you should make lemonade, but at Pizza Express waiters don't make lemonade they just serve it. They do have to slice them thinly for their client's gin or vodka, though. Well they used to. Company policy dictated that as the waiters had to make drinks, they also had to cut up the lemons. Drink preparation is for waiters, food preparation is for chefs.

Even then it was still hard to fill a restaurant, so efficiency and cost control are seen as essential to success. The guys at Pizza Express were keen to analyse their operations and look for key financial savings wherever they could. But what's that got to do with lemons? The problem with splitting drink and food preparation between types of staff led to incredible inefficiency. Knife-wielding pizza chefs are chopping things all the time and are dressed and trained accordingly. Waiters aren't. If you're laying tables, smoothing out napkins and polishing glasses, the lemon cutting interrupts your routine.

If you think about it, it must take at least 10 minutes, maybe more.



SUE NELSON

For a chef with his workspace prepared and his knife at the ready? Probably less than 30 seconds. By spotting this and simply having their chefs chop lemons instead, the restaurant chain made "significant financial savings." That was according to Pizza Express chief executive Richard Hodgson in an interview with the BBC back in 2015.

The pizza chain's idea is one that should speak to all business owners, particularly in this time of crisis – the concept of increasing staff efficiency wherever possible will help retailers desperate to improve the bottom line.

Remember this lemon story and while designing the new shopping environment forget how we used to do things and constantly question your processes and staff roles. How are retailers in other sectors redesigning their operations? Is there anything you could learn from them? Everybody, most especially those who are operational or client facing, should be encouraged to make suggestions for improvements or to try something new. Small gains in productivity or getting customers efficiently through the retail space can go a long way to help retailers survive in the new world of social distancing.

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NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

As shoppers take their first tentative steps into the 'new normal', here's how to give your customers what they want right now

Back to basics

We've seen a huge shift over the last few months in the way that businesses operate, from team structures to stock. So with lockdown slowly being lifted and many stores reopening, will independent retailers revert to pre-coronavirus operations, or is it worth going right back to the roots of independent retail?

"Change requires a lever, and the recent situation has made companies review what they are doing," Michael Boyle, managing director of Fresh Retail, tells us. "Many speciality retailers have grown into significant size operations, and with that came layers of management, red tape and a slight detour from what actually matters. This is a gift to step back as a business leader and think about why."

It's a fine balance, though. JP Then, founder of Slerp and Crosstown Collective, a collaboration of independent food suppliers in London, says it's also about being innovative: "I think now is the time for retailers to try something new," he says. "We've recently seen some non-essential businesses open for the first time in months, and understandably, much of the focus in communications has been that customers should expect

a new experience as businesses continue to adhere to Government guidelines. Customers are open to change, so now is the time to find a system that is efficient for your business operationally."

Taking time to reassess

The concept of going 'back to basics' is fairly open-ended, and many business owners will interpret it differently.

Edward Berry of The Flying Fork says the issue of stock is worth considering: "If you did diversify as an independent shop and started stocking basics – because, say, pasta was in shortage – do you stick with that or go back to independent origins, which is much more about provenance and local supply?"

Another key question is about your customers: "Because farm shops have scooped up a huge number of customers as supermarkets were out of stock, there's been a massive opportunity," Edward says. "The big challenge now is hanging onto new customers because, rest assured, supermarkets will fight back."

Here is where opportunity lies for independents: where consumers are beginning to mistrust the big multiples, small retailers now have the chance to shout even louder about what sets them apart, from

offering value for money and a personalised shopping experience, to strong communication and quality produce. By going back to the roots of independent fine food retail, many may also benefit from developing closer relationships with local producers and suppliers.

The customer journey

Communication and building trust with customers are increasingly important, as Michael explains: "Customers need to know that they can trust us to deliver what they want, safely. The changes people have made in a few short months to adapt to customer demand is fantastic; that's what makes the industry so interesting."

This customer journey is also a key factor in consumers choosing to shop with independent retailers, as Edward explains: "I hope people who have discovered independents will continue to support them. Multiples' supply chains have proven to be poor. Supermarkets have empty shelves, then you step outside and there's a market stall with more fruit and veg than they know what to do with. If a deli or farm shop goes back to their business plan and looks at USPs, and has found that their basket size and income has grown, they'd be foolish not to look at that as well. Quality still has

to be a big driver, too: that's where independents take the upper hand."

Are consumers' needs changing?

The coronavirus effect has led to a seismic shift in consumer behaviour over the last few months. But the very nature of the food industry is that demand is constantly evolving. So how can you adjust to meet demand post-Covid-19 while still staying true to your brand culture?

Putting customers first

Customers have always driven change in the industry, and it's often what leads to new products and services. But Covid-19 has certainly shed light on the importance of being able to adapt.

"In F&B, you can't not put customer behaviour front and centre of how you evolve your product, and the experience you're looking to provide," Joe Munns, CEO and founder of baking subscription service BakedIn, says. "What Covid-19 has done is show just how rapidly customer behaviour can change, which means you always need to be thinking that step ahead when it comes to adapting a product offer, how you redefine it, how you make it better, even how you tell a different story around it."

Being flexible throughout lockdown has been key for many retailers that adjusted to meet demand, and this could still be key moving forward as coronavirus changes consumer habits.

Arun Kapil, founder of Green Saffron, adds that coronavirus has led to many customers "pressing pause". What we're now seeing is people focused on the necessities, and seeking out comfort during a time that's still uncertain for many.

Customer needs

So what do customers really

“If a deli or farm shop goes back to their business plan and looks at USPs, and has found that their basket size and income has grown, they'd be foolish not to look at that as well”

want? Well, that's the million dollar question, as Arun says. "Reassurance, integrity, responsibility, the confidence to believe tempered with comfort, the need 'to let go' once in a while, and to be happy," Arun says. "How to inspire and deliver this in spades to our customers is the key. The extra time most have had has afforded the opportunity to question habits. How we interact with the planet, how we treat ourselves and one another has made many want to drive change. The challenge for brands and F&B establishments now is to find how to best cater to these new, reinvigorated needs."

That said, some needs will always stay the same, as Joe says. At the end of the day, customers essentially want a great product, great customer service and a trusted experience. Customers care more now about provenance and sustainability, too, so many brands and retailers may be looking to focus on ethically sourced and local products as much as possible.

Remember that your employees are a huge part of the customer journey, so their wants are also worth considering, Nick Coleman of Start-up Logistics says: "The future of work will have changed for good post-Covid-19, so for our head office team, having proven they can work remotely, we'll really be looking at what our workplace looks like in terms of flexibility and remote-working. Employees inform your brand's culture at every stage so it's always been a non-negotiable for us to get this right."

Stay engaged

Keeping in touch with your customer base is essential for identifying customer needs and informing future strategies.

"Creating brand advocacy from within our community is what has powered the growth of our subscription business," Joe says. "We have a Facebook group of over 5,000 super-active members, who share ideas, inspiration and support. We chat, poll and collaborate with our customers so they know they're truly part of the BakedIn brand and family. It's on the back of customer feedback that we developed the concept for our next major product launch."

Arun adds that staying engaged with partners and friends within the F&B community is equally as important. Monitor buying patterns and products or services being trialled. Even if this is in a different category than your own, it could be tweaked to fit your business.

“The extra time most have had has afforded the opportunity to question habits. How we interact with the planet, how we treat ourselves and one another has made many want to drive change. The challenge for brands and F&B establishments now is to find how to best cater to these new, reinvigorated needs”

SPOTLIGHT ON: AHMAD TEA

With a monumental shift towards health & wellness around the world, meet the family-owned UK tea company who understand that caring counts



Having earned a reputation as one of the finest tea brands in the world, it's fair to say that Ahmad Tea – the UK-based family-owned tea company – understands a thing or two about the power of a good brew.

Tea has the ability to bring people together, to comfort and unite, and in the 'new normal' we find ourselves in, this has never been more poignant.

A healthy shift

The advent of Covid-19 has created a monumental shift towards health and wellness around the world. Demand for functional food and drink is at an all-time high, according to *The Grocer's Functional Food & Drink Category Report, May 2020*, as consumers prioritise their wellbeing, from improving sleep to boosting energy.

Immunity in particular has taken the limelight. Interest in immune-boosting ingredients rose 66%

(source: *Tastewise Insights, March 2020*) in the month to mid-March, a trend that is set to continue as people strive to stay healthy and ward off illness.

A caring cuppa

The new Natural Benefits range from Ahmad Tea, a collection of herbal and green tea infusions with added vitamins and botanicals, has been specially crafted to meet this demand, supporting consumers in their quest to feel good and stay nourished.

As Dominic Marriott, tea taster at Ahmad Tea's UK HQ explains, "These are unprecedented times, with increased consumer desire to stay fit and healthy creating huge demand for wellness teas around the world. Factors such as rising stress and anxiety have meant consumers are looking for easy ways to stay nourished and feel good."

"Our new Natural Benefits blends



not only deliver the exceptional taste experience that consumers have come to expect from Ahmad Tea, but also give people a helping hand when it's needed most."

Boasting six all-natural premium blends from Immune – a blend of lemon, ginger and turmeric

with added Vitamin C to support the immune system, to Energy – grapefruit, mate and guarana seed with Vitamin B6 to reduce fatigue, or Sleep – chamomile, honey and lavender with passion flower to relax and unwind, the brand's innovative new range is created to care.

Marriott continues, "Our research found that the majority of consumers (64%, source: *Mintel Tea and other hot drinks report, July 2019*) are looking for hot drinks to meet different needs at different times of the day, so for us it was really important to create a range that supports people at all times of the day, whether they need a morning energy boost or an evening relaxer."

"Using our three generations of tea blending experience, we've worked hard to produce some really exciting, delicious flavour combinations using the highest quality natural fruit and herbal ingredients, with added fortifying vitamins and botanicals."

SPOTLIGHT ON SLEEP

With more than half the UK population struggling to sleep during lockdown (source: *Ipsos Mori, June 2020*) getting a good night's sleep is more vital than ever.

Created by top tea masters, the new Natural Benefits Sleep infusion from Ahmad Tea is a luxurious blend of flowers, honey and lemon balm to unwind and de-stress. 100% natural and caffeine-free, the infusion combines calming chamomile with fragrant lemon balm and soothing lavender and passion flowers for the perfect bedtime brew.

Kindness counts

Community is at the heart of Ahmad Tea's business philosophy. In fact, with every cup of tea made, the company's mission is to create positive change by bringing communities together. This means donating 20% of profits to charity – spreading kindness to people who need it most – from helping communities in Niger access clean water to funding the building of a fully equipped hospital in Sri Lanka.

6 NEW NATURAL BENEFITS BLENDS FROM AHMAD TEA

- **Immune:** Lemon, Ginger & Turmeric + Vitamin C
- **Energy:** Grapefruit, Mate & Guarana + Vitamin B6
- **Sleep:** Chamomile, Honey & Lavender + Passion Flower
- **Beauty:** Peach, Carob & Rose Petals + Aloe Vera
- **Slim:** Lemon, Mate & Matcha Green Tea + Zinc
- **Digest:** Sweet Mint & Fennel + Biotin



“Our new Natural Benefits blends not only deliver the exceptional taste experience that consumers have come to expect from Ahmad Tea, but also give people a helping hand when it's needed most”



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CHRISTMAS

IN THE TIME OF COVID

Keeping the festive spirit alive during a pandemic will be no mean feat, but SMEs are well placed to succeed

Summer is in full swing in the UK, but in the minds of fine food producers and retailers, Christmas bells are ringing. By mid-summer, early Christmas planning is typically well underway, but the uncertainty caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has thrown a spanner in the works for many small businesses. With questions around whether the nation will still be in some form of lockdown come winter and what social distancing measures will be in place, the only certainty is that the 2020 festive season is unlikely to resemble any other in recent memory.

Hitting the right tone

Whether the UK sees another spike in Covid-19 cases in the coming months or infection rates continue to fall, one change in shopping behaviour that will be here to stay is the tightening of purse strings. In April, the UK's first full month in lockdown, the economy shrank by 20% and the number of people claiming unemployment benefits shot up by 856,500 to a total of 2.1 million. A further nine million UK workers were having their wages paid by the government through the furlough scheme, which is due to end in October – meaning unemployment may rise further towards the end of the year.

Research by EY found that almost two-thirds of UK consumers expect a global recession, and over half believe that financial stability is years away. According to researchers at Kantar, shoppers will cope with this in different ways, with some opting for cheaper products and others simply buying less. Still, with consumers shifting their spending away from pubs and restaurants, the grocery segment is expected to benefit. Kantar's researchers predict the grocery market will grow 13% in 2020 compared with the previous year.

Despite this new frugal attitude, researchers believe consumers with financial flexibility will look for little ways to brighten their days amid the gloom of the pandemic, and many will still want a big Christmas blowout. "In the last financial crisis, we saw people treating themselves more at home. An in-home treat is still less expensive than a meal out (M&S Meals for Two benefitted from this). And 30% of UK respondents confessed to 'treating themselves more' during lockdown (Kantar COVID-19 Barometer)," says Rosie Hawkins, chief innovation officer at Kantar.

Paul Hargreaves, chief executive of Cotswold Fayre, adds that having traded through two deep recessions before, he's seen sales of speciality food actually rise in inverse proportion to recession.

"Clearly this recession will be deeper than both of these, but people still need to eat and will treat themselves with quality food this Christmas to cheer themselves up, especially as extended family gatherings have been scarce this year."

But while hopes for Christmas shoppers are undimmed, consumers' finances will undoubtedly be squeezed. Businesses must work hard to strike a balance between retaining their reputations for fine food and gifts and ensuring they don't alienate their customers.

Offering a broader range of price points so as not to exclude those with less money to spend is a good option, according

to Hayley Waters, marketing manager at Springvale Foods. "Allowing consumers to still buy fine chutneys for cheese but with the option of a lower priced range will show customers your thoughtful consideration and your adaptability to the new normal."

While marketing and adverts will need to bring some festive sparkle, Matt Botham, strategic insight director at Kantar, says that they should also promote value for money. Rosie adds: "Some of the Easter advertising fell short as it showed family gatherings that simply weren't feasible at the time. And some of the stores weren't able to offer delivery slots or didn't have a home delivery service at all, and so access to the store and their offers was difficult."

What's trending for Christmas 2020?

Fine food retailers may be wondering whether the changes in consumer shopping habits will translate into a taste for new and different products. "Traditional Christmas fayre, such as mince pies, Christmas cake, Christmas puddings and the like have been on the wane for the past three years, and I expect that people will continue to want new, innovative and quirky this Christmas too," says Paul. "I'm not sure they will want to be reminded that they didn't have a holiday in 2020!"


However Kantar's Matt says shops are likely to focus on good quality essentials rather than innovative and less-tested products. "But that doesn't mean there isn't an opportunity to excite shoppers with new festive lines," he adds.

Hayley, too, believes that a large proportion of shoppers will opt for the classics for their own tables. "Who doesn't love a classic Christmas pudding covered in lashings of brandy sauce? Or a cheese board piled high with savoury biscuits and a classic red onion chutney?"

But when it comes to food and drink gifting, she expects to see

demand for unique products. "I wouldn't recommend that retailers steer away from the classics, but agree that they should be incorporating some continental brands and unique UK products into their ranges that they may have overlooked in previous years."

As well as considering what their customers will be looking for, SMEs should take time to think about how food and drink will be consumed differently this year.

 Fiona Fitzpatrick, food and beverage growth consultant and host of the podcast Brand Growth Heroes, says:

"You might still be buying Christmas pudding, but you may be buying smaller ones because you know you're not going to have

everybody there for the day. And that might need a change in the packaging format, a change in price or a change in delivery methods."

This Christmas may also see a shift towards ambient and frozen products, such as frozen turkeys, as shoppers are likely to be heading to the shops less frequently. To prepare for these changes, Fiona suggests taking a step back to really consider what consumers are thinking, feeling

and doing at the moment. "Each SME should be asking themselves how will [their customers] be shopping differently based on the new context," Fiona says.

It's time for online to shine

An area that all shop owners must re-evaluate in the new retail landscape is online shopping and delivery. Research by Mintel revealed



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that in April 36% of Brits increased their online shopping, up from just 7% fewer than two months earlier. Mintel expects the online grocery market to grow by 33% in 2020 to reach an estimated value of £16.8 billion – a phenomenal rise following four consecutive years of slowing growth.

For specialist retailers, this means having an online shop is no longer optional. “Businesses that have done well over the past three months were those already set up for online. They had a headstart and will have been able to further adapt and improve their services. Many who weren’t online began offering options during lockdown but didn’t always have the skills to build a sustainable system,” says Lee Smith, global head of commerce at Kantar’s Insights Division.



FSB national chairman Mike Cherry said Covid-19 had caused one in six

small firms to increase their existing online presence or create a whole new one in order to stay afloat amid the lockdown. “Many were already offering services online, and others were looking to branch out, prior to March, so the pandemic has very much accelerated the move to digital.”

But the pandemic-influenced rise in online sales exposed huge flaws

in grocery e-commerce, with even Ocado failing to keep up with demand and having to stop accepting new customers altogether. “Even with Christmas aside, I think it’s a really important time for SMEs to review their [online] strategy,” says Fiona. “And that means revisiting your purpose and revisiting your vision for the business, which will have changed.”

At Christmas, in-store shopping is a nostalgic experience, but this year consumers may be physically unable to shop as they would like to. “The big Christmas shop as an event, with consumers making a day of it to go out and pick up festive supplies on the high street in one go may not be so easy this year if social distancing remains in place. This leaves the door open for retailers with well-established e-commerce operations who could capitalise on shoppers choosing to limit travel and buy online,” explains Matt at Kantar.

‘Tis the season to celebrate local

This year has thrown many challenges at small businesses, but there are reasons to be optimistic about the future. Lockdown life taught many consumers the importance of their local shops – whether that’s the friendly atmosphere and personal touch of a farm shop down the road or the unique selection available from a local butcher.

While overall consumer spending fell by 36.5% in April, according to Barclaycard, food and drink specialist stores proved to be a bright spot, with off-licences, greengrocers, independent convenience stores, butchers and bakeries seeing 37.7% growth. More than half of British consumers said the pandemic made them realise how much they value their local shops, and as a result they’re planning to spend more in local retailers. Specialist shops have also begun attracting a younger demographic according to research from IGD. Nearly a quarter of 18 to 24 year olds said they had visited their local butchers, fishmongers or greengrocers in 2020, up from 20% in 2019.

“The world has gone local,” says Rosie. “People care about their local businesses. If we make it convenient and easy for them to shop locally, they will.” And the trend that’s set to last. A YouGov poll commissioned by trade body Co-operatives UK said eight out of 10 consumers who shopped locally during the coronavirus lockdown intended to continue to do so more often once the crisis is over.

“Most farm shops, convenience stores and local fine food retailers have done amazing business during the pandemic,” Paul says. “They have provided a vital service to local communities, enabling people to shop quickly and safely, with many going the extra mile by offering free delivery to vulnerable people in their communities.”

Hayley believes it is essential that farm shops and fine food retailers continue to respond to this trend in the run up to Christmas. “By offering essential Christmas lines that consumers would have previously bought in the larger supermarkets, combined with a selection of more premium giftable lines and festive treats, this will allow for customer retention and repeat business throughout the Christmas shopping period.

“If SMEs continue to respond to customer demands and bring added value to the consumer shopping experience at Christmas, we are confident that their sales will flourish,” Hayley says.

As the UK’s lockdown lifts and restrictions such as the two-metre social distancing rule ease, businesses will have to learn to navigate a new normal. “After such a challenging year, the small business community is hoping that, by the time the Christmas season comes around, we are back to something more closely resembling normality,” says Mike Cherry.

While that is impossible to guarantee, whatever happens in the months to come SMEs can be confident that they are well-placed to respond to the changing landscape with agility and innovation. So let the Christmas 2020 planning begin.



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SWEET SOLACE

In 2020, consumers are seeking comfort in tradition and respite in health-giving spreads

While gasps could be heard across the UK as it was announced that, due to Covid-19's impact on the brewery industry, Marmite would be unable to supply large jars of the love-it-or-hate-it savoury spread, British residents took solace in sweet jams and spreads.

At the start of lockdown, products which were simple, classic and comforting were the order of the day. Food and drink which encouraged consumers to reminisce were popular – whether that be considered high or low brow – and shoppers' desire for down-to-earth activities such as gardening and walks in nature, and the products which exemplified these, was strong.

Elspeth Biltott, owner of Rosebud Preserves believes that the past few months of lockdown have led to a renewed appreciation of the simpler things in life. "Lockdown is a great leveler," she explains. "It has given us all time to slow down and think about simpler and arguably more important things in life. One of these is food which for many years had become no more than a convenient fuel." Home cooks old and new have rediscovered the necessary joy of utilising every last jar in the cupboard to create the culinary joy they otherwise would have experienced when dining out of home. "This period has allowed us to think of it as a great pleasure and has inspired those of us who have never, or rarely cooked, to 'have a go,'" she continues. "We have discovered how uplifting, satisfying and superior home cooked food really is."

Based in the beautiful North Yorkshire countryside, Rosebud

Preserves is synonymous with the kind of comforts consumers are looking for in their preserves; whether they're using them in cooking or baking, or spreading them on toast. Elspeth grew up with an appreciation for the value of wild and home grown ingredients – a realisation the British public is now coming to appreciate. "Rosebud's values are very much based around tradition and countryside themes, which I believe people have returned to for peace and solace throughout the current crisis," says Elspeth. Now with over 60 different types of quintessentially British preserves, Elspeth believes the range "reminds today's consumers of times past when families faced similar adversity and got through it."

Next to traditional comfort at the top of the consumer most-wanted list are health credentials – and if these can be supported by all-natural claims and provenance, all the better for the fine food shopper. At the Scottish Bee Company, the team produces a range of bee-related products including its unique Scottish Heather Honey, now classed as a superfood as a result of it being amongst the world's top manganese-containing food products and containing high levels of antioxidants. While consumer trust of expensive manuka honeys rises and falls according to headlines, science-led credentials and industry-approved assurances like those held by The Scottish Bee Company hold real value in today's marketplace.

Suzie Millar, co-founder of The Scottish Bee Company, said: "We're absolutely over the moon to be the first food product in the UK to have been awarded the new BSI Kitemark

TREND WATCH: NUT BUTTERS

Few could have failed to notice the meteoric rise in popularity of nut butters. Indeed sales figures currently stand at well over £100 million, no doubt aided by the current consumer passion for health. There are plenty on the market, from staple peanut and almond to naturally-flavoured and indulgent options, but keep an eye out for seed butters too – they could be the next big thing.

for Food Assurance" – evidence of the business's focus on doing things right.

"Provenance, purity, social responsibility and environmental sustainability is so important to us," continues Suzie, "and we wanted to assure our customers around the world that when they buy a jar of our 'Scottish heather honey', that's exactly what they're getting."

With supermarket shelves stacked high with poor quality, cheap and blended honeys, The Scottish Bee Company "worked really hard to make sure we have a high quality, strong provenance message to separate us from the obviously adulterated honeys that are on the market."

The consumer demand for quality, story, provenance and trustworthiness plays to the strengths of the independent fine food retailer, so promote these credentials within your products to satisfy this hunger now and maintain it throughout the 'new normal'.



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Lemons are sour, lemon zest is bitter. In a restaurant meal, bitter items might include: Campari spritzer, caramelised crust of sourdough dunked into peppery olive oil, 70% cocoa solids chocolate mousse, cheese with a bitter finish such as Cornish Kern, espresso and amaro (bitter) digestif to finish.

Bartenders love bitters and they enable drinks producers to create adult-tasting tipples for the rising number of teetotalers. Think of Seedlip's non-alcoholic Nogroni or Lyre's Italian Orange Campari-style spirit. Then there are exciting British launches inspired by our ongoing love of Italian flavours; Sacred Drinks Rosehip Cup Campari-style spirit and Cotswolds Distillery's new Amaro No. 1 whisky liqueur are two examples. As for home-grown inspiration, there's Rosebud Preserves Seville Orange Marmalade Gin Liqueur.

I'VE HEARD CONSUMERS ARE SWITCHING TO DARK CHOCOLATE IN DROVES.

You're right. There's a growing market for the 'dark milk' (no legal definition) category, where bitterness balances the sweetness and creaminess contributed by a little added sugar and milk.

Consumers are eating more between meals since the pandemic, and 43% of munchers regard a 70%-plus cocoa solids bar as a healthy snack. They are motivated by less added sugar and dark chocolate's powerful antioxidants and flavonoids.



A TASTE FOR BITTER

Let's stimulate sales as well as taste buds, says Sally-Jayne Wright

SORRY, I THINK MOST VERY HIGH COCOA SOLIDS CHOCOLATE TASTES AWFUL.

If you or your customers have been underwhelmed, get tasting. It was a revelation to Trend Watch to sample Amedei Toscano Black 90% dark chocolate. It leaves the mouth feeling clean and is very smooth and creamy considering the high cocoa percentage. Castronovo Chocolate 63% Sierra Nevada, an Academy of Chocolate Awards overall winner last year, is an excellent example of the dark milk genre.

Silvija Davidson, organiser of the Academy of Chocolate Awards says, "A great chocolate bar never worships at the altar of bitterness – it's there to reflect the nature of the bean, to prevent any sweetness and creaminess from cloying – in short, a sine qua non of a satisfying taste experience."

IS A TASTE FOR BITTER A SIGN WE'RE GROWING UP?

As we age, we lose taste buds so seek out foods that stimulate in ways we enjoy. Gourmets of any age seek novelty, which is not provided by sweet, salty ready meals and greens bred to be ever sweeter.

TALKING OF GREENS, WE'RE EATING MORE BITTER LEAVES LIKE KALE, AREN'T WE?

Clever marketing explains the rise of kale, but not the increased popularity of radicchio, frisee, chicory, endive, Brussels sprouts, mesclun mix, cardoons, white asparagus and turnips.

"We're selling stupid amounts of Trevisan radicchio this year," reports Dani Herreros, assistant manager of Hamish Johnston cheesemongers in London's Battersea.

Strong-tasting cime di rape,

rapini or broccoli di rape – variously translated as turnip tops or mustard greens – are addictive once tried.

WHY SHOULD I EAT TURNIP TOPS WHEN I CAN EAT STICKY TOFFEE PUDDING?

Boycott bitterness and you limit your flavour portfolio, as food lover and cook. You also miss the opportunity to balance sweet, rich foods with bitter ones and give your cooking depth and complexity. To experience the pleasurable stimulation of sharp, bitter, sweet and salt bouncing off each other, try a spoonful of Rosebud Preserves Seville Orange Marmalade on a Ritz cracker.

IS THERE ANOTHER REASON FOR THE BITTERNESS TREND?

Yes, health. Starting a meal with a salad of bitter leaves whets the appetite while a digestif aids efficient

“Health continues to be a priority and bitter foods have proven health benefits”

digestion; without it, we can't extract all the nutrients out of food.

I'VE HEARD THE PUNCHIER AN OLIVE OIL, THE GREATER THE CONCENTRATION OF POLYPHENOLS. IS THAT RIGHT?

Yes. Expert Judy Ridgway, co-author of *The Olive Oil Diet* advises: "Most strong olive oils are both bitter and peppery and it's a myth that the British don't like them."

She recommends, in the medium to strong category, De Carlo Terra di Bari DOP from Puglia imported by Peregrine Trading and Frantoi Cutrera Primo Organic Monte Ibilei from Sicily. Bravoleum Picual from Jaen Spain – imported by Mar de Olivos – is another worth trying.

HOW CAN WE MAKE THE 'BITTER' TREND WORK FOR SALES?

Stock foods people have enjoyed on holiday or in restaurants but can't get at Sainsbury's or Waitrose. Strong olive oil and cime di rape present great opportunities.

Remind customers of health benefits. Did you know the flavonoids in even decaffeinated coffee protect against heart disease and Type 2 diabetes?

Appeal to shoppers' pandemic wish to buy British. We love the amaro liqueur Londonio, and Dispense British Amaro by Asterley Bros.

WILL THIS TREND LAST?

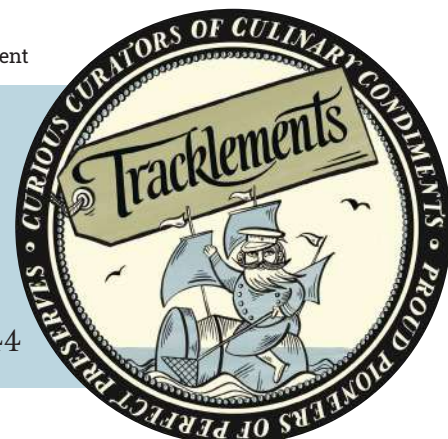
It's hard to predict anything at present. For example, the marmalade category is in decline but Rosebud report lively sales during the pandemic as older customers learn how to order online, food gifts are sent and consumers linger over breakfast.

What we do know is that people are drinking more cocktails, buying themselves more treats and experimenting more in the kitchen. When the next trip to New York or Rome feels very far away, a homemade Manhattan or a salad of griddled radicchio reminds us of holidays. Health continues to be a priority and bitter foods have proven health benefits.



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LIQUID ASSETS

WHY BRITISH SPIRITS ARE LOOKING ROBUST

The world of British spirits and mixers has never been more diverse. Natasha Lovell-Smith of *Great British Food* reports on a sector that continues to innovate despite challenges

The British spirit boom has undoubtedly been one of the biggest success stories for UK food and drink in the last five years. Record-breaking statistics speak for themselves: distilleries in the UK have more than doubled from 184 to at least 441 in 2019, massively aided by the so-called 'ginnaissance'. 80 new distilleries opened last year, up by 22%. And according to the Wine and Spirit Trade Association (WSTA)'s latest insights, over 83 million bottles of gin were sold in the UK during 2019, a market worth around £2.6 billion, with gin sales almost doubling in value in just two years.

Despite the impact of Covid-19 on the hospitality sector and sales of spirits, the British public have unsurprisingly embraced the trend for drinking at home with gusto. Latest reports from the WSTA show gin as the best-selling spirit for online shopping since March, and Fever-Tree reported strong off-trade sales of its premium mixers during lockdown, rising 24% in April.

The interest in British gin has also helped to fund new forays into spirit-making, with high-quality English and Welsh whisky and rums launched in recent times. "The gin market has become quite fragmented as it continually reinvents itself to stay interesting," says Paul Sullivan, head of sales and marketing at LBW Drinks Ltd, a producer that makes drinks under the Lyme Bay Winery and Jack Ratt brands. "But while demand is probably levelling out for gin, it

has introduced a lot more people to spirits, providing opportunities for other categories to grow, such as rum," he adds.

Has the gin bubble burst?

While demand for British gin is unlikely to continue to skyrocket at its current rate, the market is still enormous. Craft Gin Club, the UK's biggest gin subscription service with over 90,000 members, report a 70% increase in membership over the past year. "Elevating the at-home drinking experience has been our mission from day one and it's never resonated more with consumers," says John Burke, commercial director and co-founder. "With pubs and bars closed over lockdown we saw a big increase in demand from existing and new members. As a result, we've been selling the equivalent of one G&T every 1.5 seconds! As a trend, I think at-home drinking is here to stay. A lot of people discovered it as a necessity during lockdown, but I expect many will continue to enjoy drinks from the comfort of their own homes."

With new products being launched practically every month, where should retailers start when

putting their selections together? "Never sell anything you wouldn't drink yourself and always talk to your customers about their experience and how it can be improved. Our approach has always been to offer a curated experience. There are so many gin brands out there that it's become difficult for consumers to find quality spirits that they truly love, so it's up to you to guide them," adds John.

Storytelling in a bottle

Across the board, producers report local lines, especially those with a unique story, sell well in the regions they are made; luckily for retailers there are barely any corners of the UK without a craft distillery. Multi award-winning spirit makers The Orkney Gin Company use high quality hand-picked, home-grown and carefully-sourced seasonal ingredients "inspired by local traditions, folklore and the unique botanicals which would have been used in local family recipes for many generations," explains co-owner Gary Watt. The Orkney Gin Company is particularly renowned for its two seasonal gins: Johnsmas (meaning 'mid summer' in old Orcadian) and Mikkemas (a spiced, silky smooth autumnal gin inspired by harvest time).

Gary hopes the trend for shoppers to be more proactive in hunting down small local producers during lockdown will continue: "Due to the Covid crisis I have noticed consumers really looking for something made on a small scale.

prestigious awards, including Scottish Gin of the Year 2019 at the Scottish Gin Awards.

Mixers matter too

Another growth sector is canned and pre-made cocktails. Neil Boyd, UK managing director at Edinburgh Gin says: "The ready to drink category has seen huge growth in recent times, driven mainly by gin-based offerings. These ready-to-go and convenient options will only continue to grow while many people opt for socially distanced picnics in the park. In May we launched our Raspberry Gin Fizz, based on the ever-popular Raspberry Liqueur Gin Fizz cocktail. It's a beautifully sweet and easy to drink cocktail in a can, perfect for celebrations."

And with the new flux of quality gins to the market, demand for artisan mixers has inevitably followed. "We have also noticed a huge increase in flavours from the big players as well as new artisan companies popping up," says Mark at Billington's of Lenzie. "I would recommend gaining a good understanding and don't be tempted to list all the mixer flavours from all the manufacturers – unlike spirits they do have an expiry date."

Northern supermarket chain Booths recently introduced a whole new range of mixers across their stores. Soft drinks buyer Andrew McDermott says: "We have just carried out a full range review across 500 soft drinks, including 100 mixers, of which 40% will be brand new in-store." Exciting new lines include Jeffrey's, a small Cheshire supplier. "Rather than traditional mixers they have a range of hand crafted 200ml syrups which can be mixed with sparkling water or sodas to create your own tonic mixer."

He continues: "Whilst mixers for gin remains the biggest category, we are seeing growth on ginger mixers that work well with dark spirits. Health remains a key driver

“If the shop assistant really loves the product and knows their stuff it helps sales, so educate staff about your products, particularly the local ones”

local ones."

He continues: "Ensure you have a variety of fruity, juniper-led, herbal, spiced, floral and citrusy gins. It's always nice to get in some seasonal ones too, even if you're only ordering a few of each to gauge how they will sell. Most small producers are very happy to send small quantities of say 6-12 units, which is very handy for cash flow," he adds.

When it comes to sourcing local, some retailers are taking the next step by creating their own bespoke gins. Inspired by their shop's popular gin club, Mark and Sue Billington at Scottish deli Billington's of Lenzie developed Lenzie Gin – a London Dry made with botanicals inspired by the local landscape. "After exploring and researching the area we found that cranberry and bilberry both grow wild on local moss, so these become the leading botanicals in our gin," explains co-owner Mark Billington. The gin has gone on to win several

as we see more customers choose to move into 'lighter' options with reduced calories, zero calories and natural ingredients."

Rising rum

Although it has yet to reach the dizzy heights of gin, British-made rum is 'one to watch', according to Paul Sullivan at LBW. "Rum is growing in popularity and has huge potential as it is so versatile – it can be mixed with plenty of other drinks and is a great base in cocktails. It's also much more varied than gin and has more of a connoisseur market, much like whisky, as it can be aged."

Molasses is at the heart of rum-making. The sticky dark syrup can be made from sugar beet, but this European answer to the cane molasses of the Caribbean and southern states of the USA is reviled by all but the cattle it's fed to. Besides, rum isn't rum unless it uses the real deal: black treacle, as we Brits are more likely to call it, made

80 NEW
DISTILLERIES
OPENED IN 2019,
AN INCREASE
OF 20%

“As a trend, at-home drinking is here to stay. A lot of people discovered it as a necessity during lockdown, but I expect many will continue to enjoy drinks from the comfort of their own homes”

by boiling the sweet juice pressed from sugar cane.

For avid rum fan Darren Nugent it was the sight and smell of cane being crushed while on holiday in Cuba that set in motion a dream to build Northern Ireland's first rum still. Darren's Ion Distillery in County Tyrone opened in 2018. It sits on a

natural spring, which provides the water to dilute black strap molasses – the flavoursome yield of a third boil of the cane juice – shipped over from the Caribbean.

“We use the best quality molasses you can get, almost 70% pure sugar,” Darren explains. “It smells divine – of burnt toffee, maple and

coffee.” The distillery's name means ‘pure’ in Irish Gaelic, so quality of ingredients and integrity of process are a source of great pride. “The most important thing was to build a still with the sole purpose of making rum,” he explains. “It's not a general purpose still for making different types of spirit – it was built by hand, by us, to be a speciality rum still.”

Considering the complexity of making rum from scratch, many British distilleries – such as Lyme Bay Winery – opt to buy in Caribbean rum to age and flavour to their own specifications. “Most commercial spiced rums tend to be defined by an overpowering vanilla flavour. With our Lugger Rum we wanted to offer a full profile of spices instead and so we've aged Caribbean rum in bourbon-charred oak barrels in Devon before spicing it with nutmeg, orange-peel and cloves, as well as vanilla,” explains Paul Sullivan at LBW.

Stand out from the crowd

One of the more unusual spirits to enter the market is Orkney Distillery's intriguing Akvavit. “It's the first of its kind made in Scotland,” explains co-owner



Gary Watt. “Orkney used to belong to Scandinavia for many years, and Akvavit is a traditional Scandinavian drink which we came to love for its unique and complex caraway/dill flavour. We decided to take our experience in making gin to create an incredibly smooth caraway-led, zesty and herbaceous Akvavit. It's very special to us.”

But how to market such an unusual product? “I'd have to admit that it is a concept we are not so familiar with, as it's totally different from anything else,” continues

Mark. “We like to highlight that it is like a gin, but instead of juniper it is caraway-led. Although traditionally drunk alone or with a beer in the other hand, we also really enjoy it with tonic or ginger ale, so you can see how it would appeal to a drinker looking for something special.”

Paul Sullivan at LBW says POS explaining how more unusual spirits can be used is crucial. “It gives shoppers the confidence to buy a whole bottle. Finally, sell mixers and garnishes in close proximity to the spirit.”

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HOW TO: SELL CHEESE ONLINE

Quality produce, a strong service and communicating with customers are the ingredients needed to stand out from the crowd

With online sales soaring during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, many cheesemongers are making the essential pivot to selling their cheese offering online. When it comes to buying fine cheeses, and especially when it comes to trying

something new, the advantage for customers coming into the store is the opportunity to sample and discuss the various options. When it comes to selling online, people still need to feel that they have been armed with all the information needed to make the right choices

as well as experiencing top-notch service. So what are the key ingredients to clinching those sales?

Grab every opportunity

According to Matthew March-Smith, co-founder of online cheese destination Pong, it's essential that your website is able to convert at every opportunity. "If you're a retailer and you want a successful online shop, you must approach its build and marketing with a thorough understanding and strategy of it as a series of 'conversion' points," he explains.

"From the beginning of the customer journey, for example sitting on the sofa, at a laptop and entering 'order cheese delivery' into Google, all the way through to the text beside the 'Checkout Now' button at the end of the order process, every stage is an opportunity to convert or not convert a sale. The ranking in the search results and consequent traffic into relevant pages, your 'bounce rate'

from your landing page (how many customers simply take a look and leave), your prices and average order value, your basket abandonment rate and ultimately your eventual conversion rate; all of these together will have a huge impact on how successful your online shop is."

The customer journey is key

Keeping your customer in mind when it comes to the layout and inventory of products is also part of the process of being able to convert into sales. Keep bestsellers at the forefront and seasonal produce should be highlighted when appropriate. For example, during the Christmas selling season ensure that popular cheeses such as Bries and Stiltons are easy to find. Keep descriptions of cheeses clear and concise to avoid online shoppers feeling overwhelmed, but ensure that all important information remains.

Use your knowledge of ideal cheese companions to suggest perfect pairings that encourage upselling. The run up to Christmas is the ideal time to kick this into action and can provide the opportunity to recommend multiple accompaniments and added value items. For instance, push your selection of premium crackers at every opportunity – could you create a chance for people to size up for a good price? If selling wine and spirits is also in your remit then recommending cheese and alcohol pairings is also a great way to ensure that customers are getting everything they need in one fell swoop.

Communication, communication, communication

These days the online selling sphere is so much more than just having a website, and engaging with customers in as many ways as possible is the key to success. Unlike an in-store experience, customers are not able to ask questions off the cuff, so a FAQ section can answer popular questions as well as be a place for cutting and storing tips. If you have the resources, a live

TOP TIPS

"Selling on the internet is not just about going for the highest possible number; the real art to creating and growing a successful online business is managing the volumes of sales and their fulfilment at the same time. This is particularly pronounced when you're selling perishable products with a finite shelf life, such as cheese and stock management becomes critical to the success of the business."

**MATTHEW MARCH-SMITH,
CO-FOUNDER OF PONG**

chat option could also be a way to allow customers to be able to have questions answered quickly and efficiently in order to go ahead with their purchase.

Communication should still be continuing even after customers have paid for their order and left the website. Email marketing allows retailers to carry on letting customers know about new produce, special offers and even offer more information or background into the brands and producers that they stock. Stay focused on what needs to be gained from each newsletter or email correspondence and ensure that all content is relevant and adds value to current and potential shoppers.

Social media also comes under the selling cheese online umbrella, and allows retailers to add an extra personal touch to their services. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram offer the chance to showcase produce, recipe ideas and to connect with customers. Keeping the customer experience at the top of the list will ensure that setting up shop online is a success.

“From the beginning of the customer journey, for example sitting on the sofa, at a laptop and entering ‘order cheese delivery’ into Google, all the way through to the text beside the ‘Checkout Now’ button at the end of the order process, every stage is an opportunity to convert or not convert a sale”




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snowdoniachese.co.uk



2 SNOWDONIA CHEESE COMPANY TRUFFLE TROVE

Typically aged for 15 months, the Extra Mature Cheddar is perfectly enriched with delicate Black Summer Truffle (*Tuber aestivum* Vitt.) Perfect with Pinot Noir or Dry Sparkling White such as Champagne, and served with plain crackers or crusty sourdough bread.
snowdoniachese.co.uk



3 BELTON FARM RED FOX

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beltonfarm.co.uk



4 SHEPHERDS PURSE HARROGATE BLUE

Harrogate Blue has impressed on the world stage since its launch in 2012. Judged in the top 16 at the 2018 World Cheese Awards, it was described as "beautiful, creamy, buttery and moist, full bodied. Exceptional and moist, perfect cheese," by judge Victoria Urresti.
shepherdspurse.co.uk





5 DRAGON HANDCRAFTED RANGE

Dragon cheese has developed a new Handcrafted range. Working in collaboration with other Welsh companies they've launched a signature Cavern aged Cheddar infused with Penderyn Whisky plus Maple Wood-smoked and Halen Môn Sea Salt Cheddar varieties. sccwales.co.uk



6 ELITE IMPORTS MONTAGNOLO AFFINE

A creamy and soft blue cheese which is surface ripened. Made in Bavaria, the distinctive grey rind is edible and each cheese is tended by hand. Its flavour and texture is akin to triple-creme Brie, with a distinctive and slight piquant flavour associated with blue cheese. elite-imports-limited.co.uk



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A popular cheese from the western cantons of Switzerland, the award-winning Gruyère AOP is revered for its unique and delicious flavour. Made with raw milk sourced from a small cluster of dairy farmers in the region, which is transformed by master cheesemakers using customs shared throughout the generations. gruyere.com/en



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New retail perspectives from industry experts

Prestigious cheese awards moves to new venue for 2021



The International Cheese and Dairy Awards has announced a new venue and dates for its 2021 edition.

After a long association with Nantwich Agricultural Society that began in 1897, International Cheese and Dairy Show chairman Ian Luxton thanked the venue for its support throughout the event's history, during which time the awards has gone from strength to strength.

However, seeking a more sustainable venue that's weather-

proof and more economical, the awards organisers have made the decision to move to a new home.

The 2021 edition of the International Cheese and Dairy Awards will now be hosted at Staffordshire County Showground where there is a range of exhibition halls, conference suites and outdoor facilities.

The awards typically welcomes over 5,500 entries every year, and for 2021, organisers hope that will grow – though what impact Brexit will have remains to be seen.

Ian Luxton, chairman said, "The emphasis is on innovation, making sure we encompass market trends, become more light-footed, respond to changes in the industry and remain a relevant and credible competition so we can develop a sustainable platform and secure our future; I think we've set this plan in motion but there's always room for improvement. Having had a year off as well, we're using this time to make sure the awards are as good as they can be."

The International Cheese Accompaniment Awards, which started two years ago, is also returning: "That's very much something we want to grow because the consumer definitely wants to know what to eat with cheese, how to eat cheese – and that's a significant part of our future development."

As with previous years, next year's instalment will include a Trade Day and Show Days, hosted on 1st July, and 2nd and 3rd July, respectively. Historically, the awards have taken place later in the month. However, to avoid clashes with existing shows around the UK and internationally, the event has been moved to welcome more exhibitors and visitors as organisers aim to make the 2021 edition bigger and better.

Dairy farmers urged to speak up for fair contract terms

As the Government prepares to launch a consultation on dairy contracts, the NFU is urging farmers to speak up for a more effective dairy supply chain that offers fairer terms.

The long-awaited consultation follows two years of looking at the issue after a review of supply chain fairness by the Grocery Code Adjudicator revealed an uneven distribution of power within the dairy supply chain. Now, the NFU wants dairy farmers to engage with the consultation to ensure fairer terms are set up for the future.

"Dairy farmers want to place themselves in a more sustainable position for the long term and dairy contracts are at the heart of this," NFU dairy board chairman Michael Oakes said. "We want to see flexible and innovative regulation that not only delivers fair terms for farmers but an equitable balancing of risk between farmers and buyers."

"During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a significant number of cases where farmers have borne a disproportionate amount of the cost in the supply chain, as the risks within the market place were shunted down to farm level at an alarming pace."

"As we leave the EU, the UK dairy

market needs to be commercially focused, innovative and resilient in order to tackle the challenges and opportunities that the change will bring. At times when the market is under pressure, milk buyers often have the discretion to change contracts terms and pricing mechanisms, even to introduce retrospective penalties and price cuts without negotiation. A headline milk price is of no value whatsoever if a buyer has the sole right to change it at will. We need to be able to share risk along the supply chain much more effectively than we currently do. At the moment, there is no incentive for a milk buyer to look up the supply chain to manage their risk, as they know much of it can be managed by pushing the risk down to a farm level.

"The NFU has been working with all the UK farming unions to improve dairy contracts, and we will be consulting widely with our members to get a range of views that will form the basis of our submission to government. Farmers can contact us directly or respond to the consultation. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a better future for the UK dairy sector."

The consultation closes 15th September 2020.

SPECIALITY FOOD HAS PRODUCED A REPORT LOOKING AT THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE CHEESE INDUSTRY. TURN TO PAGE 24 TO READ THE FUTURE OF CHEESE REPORT.

British cheesemakers faced with ditching surplus stock

Dairy farmers and cheesemakers have been hit particularly hard during the coronavirus pandemic, and it seems that despite the onslaught of support for British producers, many cheesemakers are still facing the prospect of throwing away perfectly good cheese.

With the hospitality sector still closed and the majority of events cancelled, artisanal cheesemakers across the country will soon have to discard short shelf-life cheese unless a new market is found.

Companies such as the Cornish Cheese Co have lost a huge chunk of their business since lockdown began in March. For some producers, it's the result of the hospitality sector ceasing operation overnight, whilst for others, the closure of deli counters in major supermarkets has also had a detrimental impact.

Whilst British cheesemaker Wyke Farms said that Cheddar retail sales in the UK and Europe have increased 15% during lockdown, other varieties haven't been quite as lucky, with stilton sales dropping by 30%.

Producers of soft cheese have

been particularly affected given the short shelf life of the product. Some cheeses have also been frozen to be used later in foodservice products like pasties and pies, but even these are now reaching the end of their best-before date.

Throughout the pandemic, retailers large and small have been doing their bit to support British cheesemakers by helping them find new routes to market.

Such support, alongside national campaigns urging Brits to buy more locally produced cheese during lockdown, have been vital in keeping business going throughout the pandemic so far. What's more, several surveys have shown consumers' desire to purchase British produce over imported ones. But this slow increase in business will need to gain more traction as cheesemakers begin production again. Having witnessed a rise in Brits cooking from scratch, many industry bodies and producers are now focusing on encouraging people to cook with local cheeses to help shift produce and continue the growing trend for buying British.







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Changes to hardship scheme could impact hardest hit dairy farmers

Dairy farmers in the UK who've struggled amidst the pandemic could lose out on the Government's coronavirus dairy fund after Defra changed the qualifying criteria.

The UK's dairy industry was one of the hardest hit during COVID-19, so when the Government announced its 'hardship' scheme to provide financial support to dairy farmers back in May, it was welcome news. The fund meant English dairy farmers could apply for up to £10,000 in cash payments, receiving 70% of income lost during April and May, to allow them to continue operating and sustain their production without impacting animal welfare.

NFU's dairy board had been working closely with Defra to fine tune the scheme, which was originally announced on 6th May, and to offer more clarity to desperate farmers. After weeks of waiting for the scheme to come into effect, the industry was surprised by the

announcement of an apparent switch in the qualifying criteria when the Government recently released details of the fund.

According to the new details, eligible farmers who have lost more than 25% of their income over April and May owing to coronavirus disruptions will be eligible to access funding for those qualifying months, with no cap set on the number of farmers who can receive the support, or on the total funding available.

The fund was due to start paying out from 18th June. However, the amended criteria means that some farmers on split-price contracts could miss out, and the new criteria could impact farmers who acted responsibly in the wake of lockdown, and reined in milk production.

Speaking about the recent details, NFU dairy board chairman Michael Oakes said: "We welcomed the original announcement of the

package, and since then, the NFU has been talking to Defra about how the scheme could be delivered and the eligibility criteria that should govern it.

"Following the announcement we are seeking to understand the apparent switch from the scheme's eligibility based upon loss of income, now to pence per litre milk price and how that might have a bearing on the number of farmers able to apply. COVID-19 has caused widespread disturbance in the dairy market and there is a danger that the scheme will fall short of what the NFU, and many in the industry, had anticipated when we saw the announcement last month. As we improve our understanding of how the scheme is landing on farms, we will be seeking further discussions with ministers and officials."

Oakes has said that the union is seeking further clarification from Defra, and hopes the department will offer farmers the support they need.

Award-winning producer adds truffle cheese to the range

Snowdonia Cheese is extending its cheese offering with the launch of Truffle Trove™. Created with expertly graded and crafted Extra Mature Cheddar produced in North Wales, the cheese also features Black Summer truffles sourced from

the Italian region of Marche. This luxurious combination, kept in white wax, delivers a balanced flavour with undertones of wild mushroom, earthy hazelnut and notes of garlic.

The new cheese will be available from September.



"Whatever happens, plan for it"

I hear voices. This is not the indicator of a meltdown during lockdown, but rather an exploration of what goes on during my business planning. I'm not besieged by a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, it's just that the forces of expansion and prudence alternate somewhat.

I think of them in the context of two of the disciplines that I studied, and then worked at in my early working life: The Marketeer and The Accountant. Both have the same ultimate goal of nurturing a sustainable profitable business, but they come at that from slightly different directions. Nothing happens without the input of both.

As I write, lockdown is easing, and I've been talking with two new cheese retailers, both of whom launched this weekend. Each has looked long and hard at the potential market for their new ventures and has decided (independently) that the right time is right now. My inner marketeer loves the excitement of the broad range of variables in what some are already tired of calling 'the new normal'. Availability of cheeses, pricing forecasts, distribution channels and access to credit can no longer be taken for granted. There are great opportunities out there, and different ways of reaching customers and of fitting into their new routines. The recent hiatus in normal trading has given many the opportunity to look at reflecting on what works, what hasn't worked for a while, what just needs a fresh coat of paint and what new ideas are worth exploring.

The sleeping accountant within me recognises the validity of having used this time to consider, and to plan. Its voice reminds me



JUSTIN TUNSTALL

(patronisingly, I feel) that getting three quotes is best practice for the refurb and goes on, "What if...?" It's not necessarily a negative or pessimistic question. Considering how we might continue to ride a new wave of success is as vital as having a fallback plan if turnover is less than expected. Like sports team managers, small business owners need to know what substitutions they will make in case a cheese, wholesaler, producer or staff member isn't available, and also where they can find more space, stock, staff and working capital if things take off. Should lockdown return at some stage in the future, and the crowd isn't coming past the door for a while, that voice encourages me to plan for it. Plan for it now, and not in a panic during a future Government briefing. Whatever happens, a large proportion of the British public will always want their cheese feast at Christmas. It's our role to ensure that they're not disappointed and that our businesses get some of the action.

Best of luck to the two new cheese counters, and to the new mongers whose cutting and wrapping skills will be coming along in leaps and bounds as they help delight customers with the wonderful cheeses they've chosen to stock. Marketeer and Accountant can look on admiringly, knowing that whatever happens, there's a plan for it.

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THE FUTURE OF CHEESE

Speciality Food spoke exclusively with cheese makers and mongers, distributors and industry bodies to find out the impact of 2020 thus far – and what the future holds

COMMENTATORS



PETER ALVIS
ROYAL ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH
DAIRY FARMERS (RDBF)



DR. JUDITH BRYANS
DAIRY UK

THE NUMBER OF REGISTERED DAIRY PRODUCERS IN THE UK FELL FROM 35,741 IN 1995 TO 12,209 IN 2019, A 66% REDUCTION. A SURVEY BY AHDB IN APRIL THIS YEAR SUGGESTS THERE ARE ABOUT 8,380 DAIRY PRODUCERS IN GREAT BRITAIN

For an industry already negatively impacted by a number of factors ranging from Brexit to the rise of plant-based products, spring/summer 2020 will no doubt go down in history as one of the most challenging periods faced by dairy professionals around the world, but silver linings are emerging. Catherine Mead, chair of the Specialist Cheesemakers Association, sees a bright future for some of the opportunities forged in the fires of Covid-19. Online sales and box schemes have reached their potential during these troubled times, while connection of consumers through online tastings and talks have been smartly optimised by makers and mongers. Independent retailers – farm shops, delis, food halls and specialists – have pushed their way to the foreground of the retail landscape as experts and the likes of Jamie Oliver reinforce the ‘buy local, buy speciality’ message. Purchasing products from local suppliers is more popular than ever before, and the message that British food – as well as being produced to great standards – offers both diversity and choice is being shouted louder than ever. Catherine raises a glass to the artisan cheese sector, who through the Specialist Cheesemakers Association demonstrated their “collegiate and cohesive nature and worked superbly well together”.

A turbulent ride

While the Covid-19 pandemic has cut deeply into the dairy industry, it's not the only power at play affecting farmers in 2020. The year has been a “turbulent ride for dairy farmers,” says

Peter Alvis, chairman of the Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers (RDBF). “The pandemic has massively affected their livelihoods, cashflow and incomes, and added to that have been the weather woes from a dry spring and labour shortage issues which continue to be a concern with the introduction of a point-based immigration system from next year, as well as the impact a no-deal Brexit will have on export trade. There also continues to be a gradual decline in milk producer numbers in the UK due to a myriad of factors, including

unpredictable milk prices; Bovine TB, increasing input prices and labour shortages.”

Labour issues are a key concern for the RDBF. “Where there have been labour shortages because of Covid-19,” Peter explains, “even though a high percentage of the population has been furloughed/out of work there still has not been the willingness to work on farms. Dairy farms require highly skilled workers to uphold the high animal welfare and health standards we adhere to in the UK.” The introduction of the

points-based immigration system from next year will give priority to those with the ‘highest skills and greatest talents’, with dairy workers not falling into these categories. “This failure to recognize dairy workers will leave the UK dairy industry with a severe labour shortage with some of the largest dairy producers in the UK relying on skilled foreign labour,” responds Peter.

What's next?

“There will also be a move towards more resilience in the sector and

“ We would like to see a balanced [Brexit] deal that maintains access both ways for markets to ensure continued trade and does not impose tariffs at a level that requires either party to seek either markets or supply away from the current supply chain ”

PETER ALVIS, CHAIRMAN OF THE RDBF



A SURVEY BY RABDF IN 2016 FOUND OVER HALF OF RESPONDENTS EMPLOYED STAFF FROM OUTSIDE OF THE UK IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS – A 24% INCREASE ON 2014. ALMOST TWO-THIRDS SAID THIS WAS DUE TO INSUFFICIENT UK STAFF BEING AVAILABLE

improving farming productivity to make farmers more efficient," suggests Peter, "as well as concentrating on costs, planning, and tapping into other opportunities, such as diversification."

"In such extraordinary times, it's hard to say for sure how things will unfold," says Dr Judith Bryans, chief executive of Dairy UK, "Challenges still remain for the dairy sector; we're yet to fully appreciate the extent of the economic fallout from the crisis on the UK economy, we're also fast approaching the end of the implementation period with the EU and are yet to understand the full impact and opportunities this will bring, educating both the public and policy makers on the sustainability of our products and working towards Net Zero commitments, and we also have work to do promoting the health and nutrition of our products given Government's clear intention to take action on obesity."

An immense goodwill towards dairy

During the past few turbulent months, consumers have become more loyal to dairy products. "So far consumer data has shown us that during the Covid-19 crisis many have switched back to the more traditional foods they know and trust," Judith continues. "We've seen this for dairy products like milk and cheese, which has been helpful in offsetting the loss of out-of-home consumption. What this tells us is that despite some of the disruptors and negativity, consumers continue to have an immense fund of goodwill towards dairy, and as an industry it's this we need to nurture and galvanise."

"Looking to the future we can and should be positive and confident and tell the right story about dairy which addresses consumers perceptions on nutrition, sustainability and animal welfare, whilst providing the innovative products that maintain and refresh consumers."

THE GRASS ROOTS IMPACT

Connectivity, mutual-appreciation and innovation are welcome results of a challenging period for cheesemakers

After a positive 2019 and bumper Christmas for many in the cheese industry, the impact of Covid is still very much felt by the sector. A great number of cheesemakers have adapted their business in entirely unexpected ways, while some have taken the opportunity to jump ahead on initiatives previously languishing in their To Do pile. Some paused or entirely stopped production, hanging up their dairy hats for the foreseeable future. The strengths of the artisan cheese industry have come to the foreground during these testing times, their flexibility and adaptability, as well as proximity to the philosophies that more consumers than ever found desirable, proving to be their saving grace through these choppy waters.

Catherine Mead, chair of the Specialist Cheesemakers Association agrees that by considering the value of provenance – not least "the ability to track all

their raw ingredients" – continuing with the new adoption of online platforms, and recognising and maximizing the agility of smaller businesses, cheesemakers can steady their footing in the marketplace.

"The great thing about a small business like ours is that everyone is flexible," agrees Hugh Padfield of Bath Soft Cheese. "We all have to muck in to help each other out normally. That means that when the business really has to adapt to a changing world the team is happy to be flexible."

Dramatic impact

This flexible approach has meant that a number of cheesemakers were able to keep on carrying on, despite Covid having dramatic impact. "Parts of the business grew as a result of changes to the market, while others came to an abrupt halt – foodservice customers had to close and so their orders

COMMENTATORS



CATHERINE MEAD
SPECIALIST CHEESEMAKERS
ASSOCIATION



HUGH PADFIELD
BATH SOFT CHEESE



RORY STONE
HIGHLAND FINE CHEESE



MARY QUICKE
QUICKE'S



JULIE CHEYNEY
ST JUDE



ROSE GRIMOND
NETTLEBED CREAMERY



CAROLINE BELL
SHEPHERDS PURSE

“ The biggest success we've seen this year is the industry pulling together as a whole to try to overcome the huge issues we've so far faced and continuing to get food onto shelves. The sector has seen collaboration right across the supply chain and has been proactive in mobilising to meet the challenges it's faced; we've really taken the initiative wherever we reasonably could and I think that's a great reflection on us as a sector ”

DR JUDITH BRYANS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF DAIRY UK

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ceased, retailers rationalised their ranges and deli counters closed, impacting our traditional cut cheese sales. Our popular Visitor Centre, which attracts over 350,000 tourists a year, had to close overnight," says Sandra Bell of Wensleydale Creamery.

Rory Stone of Highland Fine Cheese experienced similarly sizeable challenges. "Our business trades on 70% food service, bits of cheese no less than half a kilo for deli counters and cheese boards, but with no one serving food we were facing catastrophe, redundancy, insolvency," he explains. However, the business's ecosystem stepped in: "luckily most of our customers were both innovative and entrepreneurial. Wholesalers who were left with a vastly reduced customer base but lots of vans, stock and drivers started doing home deliveries, and 'click and collect' along with some mail order work. Our farmers made every effort to help too, they dried off cows, went to multi suckling, left calves on and bought in orphaned lambs, anything to use up the spare milk because we had nowhere to put it."

In the West Country, Quicke's experienced "an immediate stop to the 40% of sales that go into food service," explains Mary Quicke. The business also saw a drop in deli counter sales, but a welcome increase in pre-pack sales and a "huge" increase in online – a 10-15% boost.

"My sales fell off the cliff," says Julie Cheyney, maker of St Jude. Her lone staff member, Blake, "was furloughed immediately and was away for six weeks. In the first three precarious weeks I stopped making cheese but instead spent time selling what I had in the ripening rooms." In time, tentatively, Julie began producing in small quantities, all the while "feeling more than anxious."

While some cheesemakers paused production – perhaps indefinitely – some stepped far out of their comfort zone in the name of business survival. "We've done things I never thought we'd do!" says Rose Grimond of Nettlebed Creamery. "I used to have a golden rule that we wouldn't sell milk or do deliveries, and during the coronavirus lockdown we have

set up a milk float delivery service providing whole, unhomogenised milk to local villages. As well as the milk float delivery service we also have The Cheese Hatch where we sell cheese from the building, like most French artisan cheese businesses. This has become hugely popular since lockdown and we have extended our range to include bottled milk and kefir."

Amongst this reangling of business was a need to radically rethink production processes. "We had to keep going as we had livestock and cheese that needed daily care but the business has changed dramatically," says Hugh Padfield of Bath Soft Cheese. "We changed the way we worked to make it less likely we'd catch the disease. We completed a risk assessment on all parts of the business. We split into different teams working on different days, created posters with key advice, provided PPE and set up wash stations by each entrance."

A new chapter for cheesemakers

The efforts of the artisan cheese sector are worth celebrating – and have shone the spotlight on the "interconnectivity" of the industry, says Caroline Bell of Shepherds Purse. "It's obvious in a way, and we all know our ecosystem, but this has illuminated how important it is to deeply understand where we each fit in the chain, and how we impact on each other." Shepherds Purse supported its struggling sheep milk farmers by accelerating the launch of its new-format Fettle cheese, which has been received well by retailers and customers alike. "If anything," she says, "[Covid-19] has accelerated plans and made us even more determined and committed."

Wensleydale Creamery took on the challenge of supplying the local community with local food and drink from a number of producers – including its own cheese – through a new mail order business, offering valuable doorstep delivery. Julie Cheyney of St Jude "cannot stress enough [her] admiration and appreciation for those cheesemongers and shops who reinvented themselves into online sellers". While investments such as e-commerce systems were not viable for her business, "I was relieved and delighted when they started asking me for more cheese. This was a positive moment, uplifting and feeling like we were in step, working to support each other," she says.

Hugh Padfield of Bath Soft Cheese also admires the ingenuity of the industry professionals around him: "Everyone's job has changed significantly, they have all risen to the challenge and made it happen," he says. Perhaps a result of this collective stepping-up, "incredibly, sales across the business have actually exceeded the same period last year."

“Relationships are already close in the cheesemaking world. But the crisis has meant that we’ve talked a lot more to many more of our suppliers and customers in a much more incisive yet also, dare I say it, emotional way. It’s brought even more humanity and transparency to business conversations, and relationships have deepened and strengthened as a result”

CAROLINE BELL, SHEPHERDS PURSE

ENTERING THE ‘NEW ERA’ OF SPECIALITY RETAIL

Establishments must look to reformed selling methods while simultaneously promoting the quality, connection and experience that they stand for

COMMENT



CLARE JACKSON
SLATE CHEESE



PATRICIA MICHELSON
LA FROMAGERIE

As cheesemakers and dairy farmers have faced unprecedented challenges in the wake of Covid-19, so too have retailers large and small. With some cheesemakers ceasing production,

at least temporarily, there was a pause on some cheeses coming into stores, and it was also necessary for retailers to invest in improving – or establishing – e-commerce capabilities. Some establishments with multiple arms to the business felt the effects in a myriad of ways. For example, Patricia Michelson of La Fromagerie heads up an eating-in element to the retail sites as well as a wholesale business: "a large slice of the whole business, without customers to take the stock held."

Footfall was suddenly a serious consideration, and in an area usually buzzing with potential customers – Bloomsbury, London – Patricia found that it was smartest to close the shop down entirely in the absence of local office workers and other shops nearby. Meanwhile,

in Suffolk, Clare Jackson of Slate Cheese found the start of lockdown "an exhausting and worrying whirlwind of change as we reacted to and processed the daily unfolding of this unprecedented situation." For a small business located in a tourist-heavy town suddenly experiencing much-reduced footfall, the impact was heavy but the business's focus was on the safety of its team and customers through "new risks and guidance to be addressed, and new procedures to be developed and implemented." Amongst the difficult weeks and months, the suddenly-smaller team remained passionate about its cause to support small-scale producers and celebrate great quality cheese, but the scars will be felt for a long

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“Our popular Visitor Centre, which attracts over 350,000 tourists a year, had to close overnight”

SANDRA BELL, WENSLEYDALE CREAMERY

time. "Whilst we feel positive and energetic in the short term, the severity of this crisis must never be forgotten in terms of the health of loved ones and the health of small businesses such as Slate on the British high street," says Clare.

Remodelling businesses

At La Fromagerie Patricia had "thought on her feet" as soon as word of the epidemic reached her and so the business was relatively prepared for the eventualities. "Since the end of January we had been setting aside funding for the worse case scenario to make sure we could cope, and also planning how to carry on the business," she says. Luckily this planning came off the back of a "very strong" Christmas, and landlords were open to discussions in March – before lockdown was announced in the UK on the 23rd. There was time to consider how the business wanted to be perceived when not offering its usual physical shopping experience. The business's sites were transformed into 'food hubs' offering a wider range of fresh produce, and the chef created new take-home dishes while the bakery and bread selection was slimmed down. La Fromagerie's online experience was boosted by online cheeseboard suggestions plus wine and drink pairings, and new customers have been attracted to shop with the business through refreshed social media content. Online sales have "doubled week on week", which was no doubt a relief when faced with

“Whilst we feel positive and energetic in the short term, the severity of this crisis must never be forgotten in terms of the health of loved ones and the health of small businesses such as Slate on the British high street”

CLARE JACKSON, SLATE CHEESE

stressful discussions around rent and Government loans; Patricia explains: "It was like starting the business all over again but in a new format. We are now looking at ourselves in a whole new light."

For James Rutter, operations director at Paxton & Whitfield, the multi-faceted nature of the business was significantly reduced almost overnight. "In March we pivoted from a retailer and wholesaler to predominantly an e-commerce focused business," he explains. The business decided to close its central London shop on Jermyn Street as well as its Bath and Stratford-upon-Avon sites "as it didn't make

financial sense to remain trading in those locations with reduced footfall." The local community surrounding Cale Street in Soho continued to be served, however, and similarly to other businesses Paxton & Whitfield saw impressive growth in its e-commerce channels.

Now that Paxton & Whitfield's retail sites are reopening, the business is reshaping the foundations of its operations to make it work for the 'new normal'. "We have re-configured the picking and packing lines, shops floors, offices and cheese rooms to find more space to serve customers and pack customers' orders safely," James says. "We have re-opened our flagship Jermyn Street shop with a different layout. As a result, we are limiting numbers of customers allowed into the shops and the number of staff allowed behind the counter. Further easing in social distancing will mean that we would be able to open up more areas of the shop and invite more customers in if we felt it safe and necessary to do so."

New opportunities

While cheese professionals of every ilk have developed new skills as a result of 'chipping in' in areas of the business they might not have been familiar with pre-Covid, at Paxton & Whitfield this change of pace has offered an opportunity for team members and the business alike. For example Jasmine Reeves, shop manager at the Stratford site, who spent time at the maturing rooms



SELLING THE STORY

"We know that local produce, provenance and personal connection are some of the reasons our customers come to us, in fact they are part of our brand," says James Rutter of Paxton & Whitfield. "We work closely with our suppliers and so know the provenance of the products we sell. Not only does it reassure customers but it is also good for customer service as the team can talk with engagement about the product that they are selling. We are always striving to be 'best in class' and this is one area that is extremely important to us. "Across our sites and sales channels, we are concentrating on developing deeper relationships with customers old and new, understanding their needs, and ensuring that they have a positive experiences whilst shopping with us. It is through this work that we will retain their business. It sounds really simple, but to get it right is a lifetime's work!"

“We are consulting and listening even more than usual, not just to our customers but also with our colleagues. This has been very positive, ensuring that all are invested in the decisions we make and can help shape our future. We’ve done a lot of communicating, listening and creating shared solutions”

JAMES RUTTER, PAXTON & WHITFIELD

and warehouse to cut cheese and prepare orders as a result of the shop being temporarily shuttered, and brought a customer-centric approach which proved invaluable to the business. "As a result, she has just accepted a new role as Paxton & Whitfield's quality manager and

is now focused on improving the quality of our products from receipt through to dispatch," says James. "There was little chance of this role existing pre-2020, not without the changes we have experienced within our business."

“As a business dedicated to farmhouse cheese we will always support and champion our artisan cheesemakers. They were hit hard, but they are bouncing back, and some have worked well in exploring the avenues such as online and farm-gate sales. You can make opportunities out of a crisis and I am always open to discussing these things and being part of initiatives to progressing ideas. If anything at all has come out of these last few months it is that we all work together and find ways to get through.

Collective thinking that is mutually beneficial for all”

PATRICIA MICHELSON, LA FROMAGERIE

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THE DISTRIBUTOR OUTLOOK

With many wholesalers pivoting their focus, today's outlook is very different to the one that was planned for

COMMENTATORS



SUNIT MEHTA
ROWCLIFFE



NIKKI PHILP
HARVEY & BROCKLESS



STUART GRANT
CURD & CURE



JASON HINDS
NEALS YARD DAIRY

As a portion of the cheese industry which supplies retail and foodservice alike, distributors and wholesalers are integral to the smooth running of the sector. After a successful festive period for many, the Covid-19 pandemic hit hard and, similarly to across the industry, pivots were needed in order to ensure survival. "In 24 hours the landscape changed," explains Sunit Mehta of Rowcliffe. The wholesaler "pulled out all the stops" to support its key independent retailer customer base, and its agility allowed the team to adapt to the changes in the marketplace. It is taking each day as it comes: "every day is a challenge. We make sure we are match ready and do not allow ourselves to second guess anything; we cannot rest on our laurels for the foreseeable future."

Evolving business models

For businesses for whom independent retail is a relatively

small portion of their business proposition, the impact of Covid was even more keenly felt. "Our business changed overnight with 90% of our business coming to an abrupt stop," explains Nikki Philp, purchasing director at Harvey & Brockless. "Even though we cover a diverse list of customers from all sectors, every one of our customers has been adversely affected by the crisis and many remain closed." As well as reducing overheads and maximising incoming funds, like other businesses, Harvey & Brockless acted quickly to offer a brand new straight-to-consumer format through its Battersea warehouse which is open seven days a week, as well as an e-commerce option selling the business's most popular products. "We have gone from doing 2-3 orders a day pre-Covid, to approximately 200 a day during the lockdown," says Nikki. "We have also reduced delivery days and vehicles, and have implemented further efficiencies in terms of the manufacturing/production side of the business," she continues, "restricting production days to minimise the cost implications and maximise safety measures that need to be in place as a result of Covid."

Catering to new demand

Stuart Grant, managing director at Curd & Cure, has seen his business's services called upon in a new way over the past few months in order to cater to the increased demand for pre-packed, retail-ready products. As well as diversifying the Curd & Cure range to include a greater range of products in this format, the business has been offering cutting services to the wide community of artisan dairies and cheesemakers, many of whom do not have facilities to cut in-house, in doing so "providing a link from producer to retailer at a time when it is essential that British cheese is reaching shelves throughout the country." This service has also allowed many makers who are new to retail to test the market – a valuable opportunity during this challenging time.

On the back of the campaign to support British cheesemakers, there has certainly been an uplift in the number of retailers and consumers looking to buy from smaller scale producers, which has seen us add further listings for British cheesemakers in our newly launched brochure

STUART GRANT, CURD & CURE

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NIKKI PHILP, HARVEY & BROCKLESS

What's next?

"Going forward, the biggest challenge is likely to be tracking and responding to buying habits as they change," says Curd & Cure's Stuart. "For the time being, retail-ready cheese is our top seller, but as more retailers re-open it will be interesting to see if this trend continues, or if consumers will prefer to go back to a deli-style setting, with a personal, face to face service where the requirement is for larger cuts of cheese."

"In terms of the market, we predict it will be the latter part of next year before we can start to see a positive

Every day is a challenge. We make sure we are match ready and do not allow ourselves to second guess anything; we cannot rest on our laurels for the foreseeable future

SUNIT MEHTA, ROWCLIFFE

turnaround," says Nikki at Harvey & Brockless. "It will take some time beyond that for all of our businesses to fully recover from the recessionary impact of the lockdown, and this is without knowing when or if there will be a second wave and how big it will be." "The optimism that we had at the start of the year is no longer there," says Jason Hinds of Neals Yard Dairy. "We're looking at a situation that businesses haven't seen since the 1950s. There are many touchpoints between now and the invaluable Christmas period which are going to be difficult but important to overcome. Consumer confidence and spending power are reduced, and although lockdown has been eased at this moment in time we are approaching the end of the beginning rather than the beginning of the end. A second wave, and another lockdown, later in the year would be

catastrophic." Of course, other factors play into the future of the cheese industry: "on 31st December of this year we have Brexit," says Jason, "so no doubt things will get even harder." The crisis has taught valuable lessons, however. "We've learned not to put all of our eggs in one basket; to diversify our routes to market. As a result of having to create new ways to get products to consumers we're going into a potential lockdown on a steadier footing than we had going into the first."

"90% OF A OUR BUSINESS CAME TO AN ABRUPT STOP"

NIKKI PHILP, HARVEY & BROCKLESS



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THE VIEW OVERSEAS

While the UK industry found ways to rebalance, so too did international cheese and dairy markets

Just as the past few months have reiterated the interconnectedness of British cheese and dairy market, it has made businesses which work with partners overseas and across borders rethink the way their relationships work – and the value they truly hold.

Strong relationships were key to the relatively smooth-running of La Fromagerie during the turbulent spring and summer of 2020. “We have been in business for 30 years and have very good, long standing relationships,” explains Patricia Michelson, founder of La Fromagerie. “As we get a lot of products and fresh produce from Europe, we had to contend with very limited transport from these countries, and in Italy especially certain areas and regions were not sending up to our depot in Milan. We had a two week hiatus where nothing was coming in and where we were finding solutions minute by minute. In February we made quick visits to transport hubs and some suppliers in Milan and Paris to sort out logistics. This was the big issue we needed to address, and also to make sure our suppliers and transport felt reassured they were going to be supported by us through the pandemic. I believe by us going to see them at the very early stage was really appreciated and I have to say that we benefited from this.”

For some international cheesemakers, it's vital that retailer support and relationships



are maintained during these challenging times. “We always try to support retailers, and in these uncertain times it is even more important,” says Helen Daysh of Le Gruyère AOP. Not least the experience and understanding of the end consumer. “We believe that enabling customers to taste our cheese is key, so we have invested in an outside branded portable gazebo and have 25g vacuum-packed pieces of Le Gruyère AOP to sample if this is appropriate. We welcome requests from retailers for future gazebo tasting dates and assistance with in-store tastings – as always, our samples and time would be free of charge to the retailers.”

UK and European relations

For Parisian cheesemongers COW, the biggest Covid-led shift was the almost immediate change in their customer base. “As we are located in

an affluent area of Paris, we found that a lot of consumers in the local area were moving out of the city to spend time in their houses in the country when the lockdown first took hold,” says Antoine Farge, co-owner. “There were also no tourists around as there usually would be, but we benefited from being one of the few retailers considered vital enough to be kept open as we were selling food – that meant that our customer base grew, therefore more people were buying and appreciating quality cheese.” Perhaps surprisingly, Antoine and his business partner Alexandre Renault found little difficulty in sourcing cheese from overseas territories including the UK, apart from where makers had temporarily ceased production.

The connections and interdependence between the UK and European dairy and cheese markets have been highlighted by the crisis, says Alexander Anton, secretary general of Euromilk. “The

“ The Covid-19 crisis was for sure the most impactful momentum for the EU (and global) cheese industry since the 2014 Russian ban ”

ALEXANDER ANTON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF EUROMILK

UK and the European lactosphere is completely interlinked with fully integrated supply chain. Let's hope that this will help to find a good solution for the future EU-UK dairy framework in our Brexit plans.”

“The authorities at both EU and national level have been reactive to our requests, including ‘green lanes’ for fresh products when borders were closed and flexibility in packaging, and have freed up 30 million Euros to open the PSA scheme for cheeses,” explains Alexander Anton, secretary general of Euromilk. “This support has really helped, but it's far from the 4 billion dollars given to the US dairy industry from their Government.”

The American experience

Despite this injection of funds, the US dairy industry is struggling to rebalance after the shock of the Covid-19 crisis. “Like many industries, the cheese industry is hurting and many small dairies and cheesemakers may not be able to weather this storm,” explains Amanda Parker, managing director of California's Cowgirl Creamery. “We're a scrappy bunch, so we're trying to find ways to support each other and act creatively, but we're depending on consumers to continue to buy American craft cheese and dairy now more than ever.” The growing industry is being more innovative than ever in its quest to educate the US cheese consumer: “There's a new grassroots organization called Victory Cheese who's trying to help the industry through awareness initiatives, collaborations, and victory cheese boxes (like our Good Neighbours box).”

The sudden change in shoppers' focus from bricks-and-mortar to online was also keenly felt in America. “Our shops were a major physical touchpoint for our business, so we had to quickly reimagine the Cowgirl experience in order to meet this change in shopping, says

COMMENTATORS



ANTOINE FARGE
COW



ALEXANDER ANTON
EUROMILK



AMANDA PARKER
COWGIRL CREAMERY

Amanda. “We worked hard to make sure people could still get their fill of cheese by setting up new platforms to fulfill local online orders for curbside pickup as well as a short-term home delivery service in the North Bay.” This swift pivot has long-lasting impact. “Looking to the future, we're assessing longer term changes to reflect the retail climate and shift in tourism – which will affect our retail locations – as well as shifting our own cheese formats to better serve our customers.”

“ Our export sales have remained positive, with notable growth in Asia (especially within the pre-pack category) ”

SANDRA BELL,
WENSLEYDALE CREAMERY

“ We have worked together with our international partners as a team, and such unknown territory meant supporting each other was the priority. We are all facing the same global situation. Briefing our international suppliers with local insight and market needs, innovating and moving fast have been key ”

SUNIT MEHTA, ROWCLIFFE

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Cole's Puddings

Cole's Puddings offers a wonderful range of Christmas puddings to suit all tastes and requirements. For example, the Classic Christmas Pudding, the Brandy, Port & Walnut Christmas Pudding (a round pudding wrapped in muslin), the Sing-a-Song-of-Sixpence Christmas Pudding (with a real sixpence) and the Gluten Free Christmas Pudding, which is also free from alcohol and nuts. We are also very proud to introduce our new Signature Christmas Pudding made with bourbon and ginger.

Established by A. J. Cole in 1939, Cole's Puddings continues to use its own recipes, the highest quality ingredients and artisan methods to produce the very finest puddings. We even bake our own bread for breadcrumbs and all our puddings are free from artificial colours and flavours. Our puddings are also suitable for vegetarians and, in many cases, vegans. 01799 531 053 sales@colespuddings.com
colespuddings.com



Hunter & Gather

Hunter & Gather are upgrading the much-loved condiment into a healthier option. How are they doing this? By cutting out any sugars, grains or poor-quality unhealthy fats and only using real, simple ingredients.

Their creamy, classic tasting avocado mayo is made in the UK with only four real ingredients – 100% cold-pressed avocado oil, British free-range eggs, apple cider vinegar and pink himalayan salt. No artificial thickeners, preservatives or chemicals in sight.

This award-winning and Great Taste 1-star gold mayo is a favourite among gluten-free, keto, low carb and diabetic customers, and those who want healthier swaps that are great tasting.

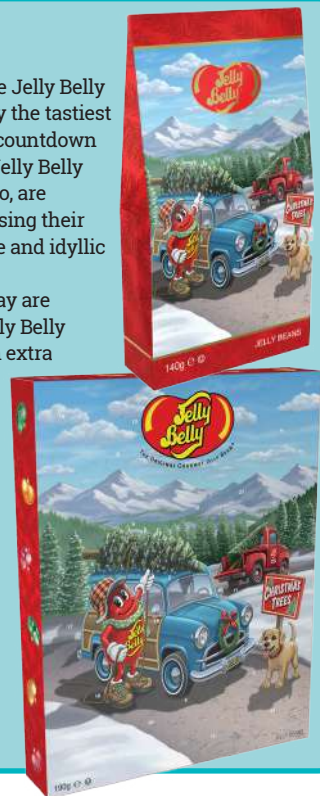
Hunter & Gather also include a plant-based 'Mayocado' in their mayo range as well as Chipotle & Lime and Garlic & Black Pepper options – all made with 100% avocado.

realfood@hunterandgatherfoods.com
hunterandgatherfoods.com

Jelly Belly

Always a huge bestseller, the Jelly Belly Advent Calendar is famously the tastiest way to celebrate the family countdown to Christmas. This year Mr Jelly Belly and his ever faithful dog Fido, are featured out and about choosing their perfect tree. It is the ultimate and idyllic seasonal scene.

Behind each numbered day are Pyramid Bags of popular Jelly Belly jelly bean flavours – with an extra special surprise behind the Christmas Eve window. A delightfully delicious treat for all ages. Generously proportioned, the box accommodates 24 x 10g Pyramid bags. The festive fun is extended to a beautifully embossed Jelly Belly Christmas Gable Box. The perfect gift. 01727 829 010
uksales@bestimports.co.uk
jellybelly.co.uk



The Real Olive Company

Specialising in organic, fresh olives and antipasti, we source our olives from trusted growers on the shores of the Mediterranean – real people who understand the unhurried rhythms of the olive tree.

From grove to table, every step we take retains each olive's natural goodness. We prepare, marinate and pack our olives using time-honoured recipes and cold-pressed oils so you can enjoy the freshest, most authentic olives bursting with Mediterranean sunshine.

Our purpose is to make life taste better by connecting people to the natural vitality of real food. This is why we strive to make a healthy choice taste great, by creating natural and sustainable food that can be enjoyed together, whilst nourishing mind, body and soil. In essence "Love life - Eat Real".

hello@therealolivecompany.co.uk therealolivecompany.co.uk



Tims Dairy

Looking to brighten up your Greek style yogurt category?

Tims Dairy has the perfect answer. Bright, fresh new standout branding for their core Greek style bio-live range has just taken to the shelves and promises a real uplift to your chilled category.

The range is uncompromisingly made for outstanding great taste, with fresh British milk and natural ingredients, and they have reduced the added sugar on the flavoured lines.

Made in the Chiltern Hills, the range includes Greek style Natural 500g and 200g, and Greek style Honey, Vanilla, Raspberry, Blackcurrant in 450g and 175g.

01494 541 890 sales@timsdairy.co.uk timsdairy.co.uk

Hawkshead Relish

Packed full of whole garlic cloves which have been gently cooked and with an array of spices, this is a delicious condiment to serve with a curry or tagine, but it really comes into its own as an ingredient. Squish the garlic and mix through mashed potato for a delicious garlic mash or mix with Mayo for a fabulous Garlic Mayo dip. You can use it as a base to make a quick and tasty curry which takes literally minutes to make – with sliced onions in a pan with a little oil, a couple of spoons of Hot Garlic Pickle and throw in some prawns, job done. If there was ever a store cupboard staple that you don't want to run out of, and spice and garlic are your thing, then this is the one.

01539 436 614 info@hawksheadrelish.com
hawksheadrelish.com



ChicP

ChicP creates a variety of unique and natural sustainable houmous from wonky fruit and vegetables.

The London-based brand is passionate about reducing food waste – it is committed to ensuring that 20-25% of its raw ingredients come from surplus over the course of every year, in effect supporting farmers (whose 'wonky' vegetables are rejected by supermarkets) as well as promoting food sustainability.

As well as being good for the planet, ChicP's products are high in protein and free from added sugar, dairy and gluten. Not only that, but they're made primarily from raw vegetables – one of the healthiest food options available.

Their flavours include Beetroot & Horseradish; Carrot, Ginger & Turmeric and Herby, each of which has a shelf life of 24 days. They will also be bringing out a limited edition line later this year.

07788474803 hannah@chicp.co.uk chicp.co.uk



The Raw Chocolate Pie Company

Based in Cornwall, it seemed natural to us to extend our range beyond our Raw Chocolate Pie into Raw Vegan Fudge.

We make six flavours of vegan fudge and two Raw Combo bars, combining our Raw Chocolate and Raw Fudge.

They are proving very popular and our Salted Caramel Fudge was awarded Silver at the 2018 Free From Awards. All the ingredients in our raw

chocolate and fudge are organic and Fairtrade and we aim for the highest quality. As well as dairy-free, our products are gluten-free, soya-free and contain no added refined sugar. Our aim is always to produce a product of integrity, lovingly handmade in Cornwall.

rawchocpie@gmail.com rawchocpie.co.uk



Burtree Puddings

Burtree Puddings make artisan puddings in small batches. Their range includes nine sticky puddings and three Christmas puddings, and all puddings are available in multiple sizes. The sticky puddings offer a minimum six week fridge shelf life and are suitable for the freezer too. They believe that quality ingredients are key to ensuring that all of their products delivers both in taste and texture, so they source local ingredients where possible including free-range eggs and double cream from their neighbouring organic farm. The range includes a Gluten Free Sticky Toffee and Gluten Free Christmas pudding (also dairy-free), and all the Christmas puddings are suitable for vegetarians.

01325 463 521 info@burtreepuddings.co.uk
burtreepuddings.co.uk



Foresta Dried Wild Mushrooms

With many people rediscovering the joy of home cooking, Foresta hand-picked dried wild mushrooms are a truly essential product for independent delis, farm shops and food halls.

There are four popular mushroom varieties in the Foresta range: Chanterelle, Shiitake, Porcini and Mixed Forest. Foresta dried wild mushrooms have a two year ambient shelf life and are 100% natural. The mushrooms are packed in 25g bags with 10 packs in a carton. Each carton contains a unique wood-effect tray that allows the mushrooms to be merchandised straight on to the retail shelf.

Foresta dried wild mushrooms are now available from Cotswold Fayre, Holleys Fine Foods, Infinity Food and Shire Foods of Norfolk.

01636 610 584 info@thefc.co.uk
forestamushrooms.co.uk



Mr Lee's Noodles

Mr Lee's Pure Foods, the award-winning company of gourmet instant noodles with absolutely no nasties and the finest ingredients, is introducing an option for businesses, caterers and the foodservice industry to provide quick, hot food options for their employees and clients.

The "Back to Work" Restart Scheme addresses the restricted availability of food options for employees coming back to work.

From only 36 cups to pallets of noodles, all at trade prices, Mr Lee's are able to fulfill all order sizes for you or your clients. FSDUs (cardboard display stands) can also be supplied for those, who do not have facilities to keep the noodles in the kitchen.

Suitable for most of the dietary needs incl. vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free and nut-free, Mr Lee's noodles are a great addition to every canteen and office kitchen.

01202 242 241 sales@mrleesnoodles.com
mrleesnoodles.com/uk/shop



Spirit of Aloha 65

Originally developed for the après-sea crowd, but now also bringing the sunshine in the winter to the après-ski crowd, our unique all-natural, vegan, 27% ABV spirit is refreshing and warming, complex yet smooth, amazing as a short drink over ice, a refreshing long-drink or a great cocktail and certainly like nothing you've ever tasted before! Spirit of Aloha 65 is a neutral grain spirit naturally infused with six fresh botanicals including pineapple, ginger and scotch bonnet chillies.

Aloha Hot Sauce

Spirit of Aloha 65 has chilli in it, so we set out to create a versatile and tasty top-quality sauce using all the same natural, fresh ingredients – minus the alcohol of course! "Sun on a Beach", like Spirit of Aloha 65, contains pineapple, ginger, scotch bonnet chilli and carefully selected herbs and spices, and it's vegan!

07903358815
aloha@aloha65.com
aloha65.com



Wilkin & Sons

For over a century Wilkin & Sons have been producing jams, preserves and condiments on their fruit farm based in Tiptree, Essex, and the iconic brand has now turned its hand to infused gins and vodkas inspired by their popular range of jarred products. The range includes classic fruit flavours such as English Damson Fruit Liqueur and English Rhubarb Fruit Liqueur, as well as treats for modern palates such as Chocolate Orange Vodka Liqueur and Salted Caramel Vodka Liqueur. The classic English Strawberry fruit liqueur offers bright, clean strawberry notes with a crisp background of juniper. It can be served straight over ice, with a favourite mixer for a fruity gin spritzer, or add a dash to prosecco for a strawberry royale.

tiptree.com



Jelly Belly

Things are heating up at Jelly Belly Candy Company. Meet BeanBoozled® Flaming Five™, the next evolution of the BeanBoozled brand. A new line of progressively hotter Jelly Belly® jelly bean flavours, challenging spicy food lovers to see just how hot they can really handle.

Fans know BeanBoozled is a game of risk, but Flaming Five is a whole new take on the game. BeanBoozled Flaming Five lets brave fans explore the world of spicy hot with five true-to-life flavours: Sriracha, Jalapeño, Cayenne, Habanero and Carolina Reaper. Each flavour is appropriately hot for its placement in this progressively spicy line up, from mild Sriracha leaving tasters with a light burn similar to the sauce to Carolina Reaper packing a major punch. Terrific for the Christmas giving season, available in a variety of packaging.

01727 829 010 uksales@bestimports.co.uk bestimports.co.uk

Shepherds Purse

In response to the coronavirus crisis Shepherds Purse created Fettle, a new format of their Feta-style cheese.

By bringing the launch forward from 2021, Shepherds Purse were able to take more milk from their struggling sheep milk farmers, and whilst they were taking a risk by launching a new product and making more cheese when their sales had been impacted by food-service closing, they knew that their farmers dairy business may not survive if they didn't do something.

The great news that the product has been well-received and the success is providing a life-line for the sheep dairy farmers. Fettle was launched on May 4th 2020 and is a creamy, delicious Mediterranean salad-style cheese. Made with 100% British sheep milk, Fettle has a meadowy sweetness that balances beautifully with sharp salty notes to deliver a rich experience – perfect for summer living, this cheese is beautiful on its own and versatile in recipes and quick lunches.

01845 587 220 info@shepherdspurse.co.uk shepherdspurse.co.uk



Seggiano/Lunaio

Launching for this year we have three special gift boxes available in limited quantities. Experience our Organic Oil and Vinegar box with the exceptional LUNAIO single estate organic olive oil alongside our best in class SEGGIANO organic balsamic vinegar:

- 1 x Organic Monocultivar Extra Virgin Olive Oil 250ml
- 1 x Organic IGP Mature 250ml

Also available:

Chocolate Lovers box – with all three of our luscious SEGGIANO organic cacao hazelnut spreads:

- 1 x Organic Smooth Dark Cacao Hazelnut Spread 200g
- 1 x Organic Crunchy Hazelnut Cacao Spread 200g
- 1 x Organic Smooth Hazelnut & Cacao Spread 200g

Balsamics for Cooks box – with our SEGGIANO balsamics to enhance the flavour and presentation of a multitude of dishes.

- 1 x Super Dense Fig Balsamic Glaze 250ml
- 1 x Organic White Balsamic Vinegar 250ml

0207 272 5588 sales@seggiano.com seggiano.com



Banhoek Chilli Oil

Handcrafted in the beautiful Banhoek Valley near Stellenbosch, Banhoek Chilli Oil is a handcrafted, premium grade, artisan chilli oil made from just two ingredients: the highest quality rapeseed oil and dried Thai Birdseye chillies. 100% natural, no preservatives.

Winner of a Great Taste 2019 award, this delicious, golden-hued oil delivers just the right level of spice. Whether your customers like their food fiery hot or just a tickle on the tongue, Banhoek Chilli Oil has been specifically created to complement a wide range of ingredients and consistently delivers that something special to stir fries, marinades, vegetarian and vegan cuisine, meat, fish, seafood, pasta, pizza, eggs – the only limit is your imagination!

ed@banhoekchillioil.co.uk banhoekchillioil.co.uk



Ranpak

Ranpak offers unique solutions to the food industry that harness the Power of Paper. Undoubtedly, the Ranpak paper solution is one of the greenest solutions on the insulated box market. Paper is biodegradable, recyclable and renewable in contrary to the plastic and EPS versions of thermal protection.

The WrapPak® Protector provides huge space saving opportunities by converting paper on-site and/or on-demand. Experience learns that the 'total cost of ownership', when applying one of the Ranpak thermal packaging solutions is beneficial for the users. The WrapPak® Protector converter offers you multiple production modes, for a wide variety of packaging pads. Ranpak offers several options to optimise and integrate the thermal packaging solution into the existing process.

uk.info@ranpak.com ranpak.com



The Foodies Larder & Blue Goose

From treating themselves to new brewing equipment, UK coffee lovers have embraced the challenge of brewing barista quality coffee at home as they settle into reduced access to cafés.

This new breed of cafetiere crafters and capsule connoisseurs have helped sales of our premium Café Saula Gran Espressos and our Blue Goose range of ethically sourced, speciality-grade coffees in eco coffee capsules and compostable bags truly surge.

Our repeat purchase rates mean they'll keep adding them to their baskets too, giving you a fantastic ongoing revenue stream. So work with us and benefit from this huge new audience looking for exceptional-tasting, ethically sourced and eco-friendly coffees. Organic • Ethically Sourced • Speciality-Grade Coffees • Plastic Free Eco Capsules • Whole Bean & Ground in Compostable Bags and Stunning Tins • Ethical Coffee Gifts

07795564211 hello@thefoodieslarder.com
thefoodieslarder.com/exceptional



Saintry Foods

Saintry divine desserts are a range of delicious frozen all-natural desserts; they are packed full of flavour, superior quality ingredients and nutrition for indulgence that you can feel good about!

Our delicious desserts are made in our vegan kitchen in Cambridge without artificial additives, preservatives, palm oil, dairy or animal products.

Inspired by the best of British ingredients, our range includes British Apple Tarts, Dark Chocolate Tarts, Sweet Almond and Raspberry Tarts and more. Our desserts are frozen in two individual portions per pack. Simply divine!

01223 667 524 hello@saintryfoods.com saintryfoods.com



BeeBee Wraps

Our handmade Beeswax food wraps are made from organic cotton infused with a formula of beeswax, rosin and organic jojoba oil. They are a plastic free, natural alternative to cling film that can be reused and composted, helping to reduce plastic pollution.

Designed to keep food fresher for longer because of the breathable seal the wraps create, our wraps are a planet friendly alternative to clingfilm and are zero waste

BeeBee Wraps are now also offering a fabulous vegan plant-based range (Leaf Wrap), a wax wrap just as good as the original but without the beeswax! Available in a variety of different sizes and an array of beautiful designs, as we believe the eco-friendly option should be fun and inspiring, not bland and boring!

01223 778 816 hello@beebeewraps.com beebeewraps.com



Double Dutch

The award-winning Double Dutch offers a unique range of tonic waters and mixers that are revolutionising the world of beverages.

With seven different products – Cucumber & Watermelon, Pomegranate & Basil, Cranberry Tonic, Indian Tonic, Skinny Tonic, Ginger Beer and Soda Water – each bottle of Double Dutch is made entirely in the UK using flavour pairing techniques to create delicious drinks with no artificial flavourings, colourings or preservatives.

The company only uses natural ingredients, blending them with the highest quality spring water from the North of England to create crisp, fresh and innovative mixers for refined palates. The drinks are also low in calories and only use natural sweeteners. doubledutchdrinks.com



Hiya

Say Hiya to Hiya the NEW handmade, wholesome, healthy snack bar. Hiya means "from the heart" which is exactly our philosophy!

We have taken care to ensure that everyone can enjoy Hiya snack bars, as not only are we vegan, gluten-free and all natural, but we are made to a traditional Indian recipe with lots of delicious seeds, plant protein from chickpeas and no unrefined sugars, additives or preservatives.

There are five exciting flavours inspired by Indian spices – Fennel, Ginger, Cardamom, Cinnamon and Cacao (a cheeky addition because we all love chocolate!)

Handmade with plenty of love from us to you. hello@hiya.life hiya.life

Summerdown Mint

We grow, harvest and distil our signature Black Mitcham peppermint on our farm in Hampshire – and have been doing so for over 25 years. Its refined, distinctive taste inspires our wonderfully refreshing range of chocolates, teas and treats.

The intense wave of mint that hits you as you open a box of our award winning chocolates or tea should transport you straight to the fields on our farm at Summerdown – a peppermint playground for peacocks, bees and butterflies. Black Mitcham is an extraordinary peppermint prized for its pure, bright character. It's a taste that had been all but lost to England, until we brought some back from America over three decades ago and began cultivating it ourselves. We now grow around 100 acres of Black Mitcham, transforming it into our own single-estate peppermint oil, so that we can share its unique qualities with mint-lovers across the world.

summerdownmint.com



TBOSA

Juan Valdez®, Colombia's No. 1 coffee brand is now available in the UK from TBOSA, The Best of South America. Stand out from your competitors and offer one of the world's best, high quality Colombian coffees in whole bean, ground, instant jars, instant sticks and the new innovative one cup ground coffee drip sachets. Single Origin, Organic and Decaf are available. Ideal for coffee retailers, coffee shops, hotels, delis and other retail establishments.

The amazing Café Quindío Colombian coffee and confectionery brand is now available from TBOSA! Gourmet coffees in whole bean, ground, instant and organic, alongside 100% real Café Quindío coffee infused cookies, meringues with macadamia nuts and blackcurrant jam. Unique and new to the UK, these products will make your store stand out from the rest.

tbosa.co.uk



BitesWeLove

Meet BitesWeLove's delicious and healthy nut-based snacks. BitesWeLove makes healthy snacking easy and delicious under the motto: little things to brighten your day.

We don't compromise on health or taste. Our bites are full of natural ingredients and come in bio-plastic portion packs for on the go. Healthy: always your daily dose of nuts and less than 200cal. Delicious: unique flavour combinations. Sustainable: biodegradable packaging. biteswelove.nl



Olina's Bakehouse

Olina's Bakehouse, producers of Double Baked Toasts & Wafer-Thin Wafers, have launched a new Seeded Flatbread.

As leading innovators of healthy and tasty crackers, the new Flatbreads are loaded with a blend of wholesome seeds. Rolled and baked crisp in small batches, these healthy snacks are wonderful with dips, toppings or perfect on their own!

Wheat-free, GMO-free, egg-free and vegan friendly, they are firmly aimed at the growing healthy snacking market. Now available in the UK from our network of speciality food distributors.

07771981420 gourmetfood.com.au



nu+cao

nu+cao is made from raw cacao, hemp seeds and coconut blossom nectar, and every vegan chocolate bar is packed full of antioxidants, meaning it's a feel good, healthy, low carb treat!

Each nu+cao is extremely low in sugar, 50% lower than other healthier alternatives. The nutritious hemp seeds mean that each bar is packed with protein, higher than the average at 14% per bar, making it an ideal pre or post gym snack. On top of all that, nu+cao contains no artificial additives such as preservatives; a naturally delicious snack that can be enjoyed at any time of the day.

nucao.de/english



Le Gruyère AOP

Made in western Switzerland, Gruyère AOP has been produced in the same way since 1115AD, using raw milk from cows fed on grass in summer and hay in winter. The skilled cheesemakers use 400 litres of fresh milk to make a single 35kg Gruyère AOP wheel. It is the only cheese that has won the title of Best Cheese in the World at the World Cheese Awards four times, which just goes to show how much work and skill is needed to create its unique and delicious flavour.

Gruyère AOP can be found with different maturities: the Classic is matured for six months and has a delicate, nutty, creamy flavour. The Reserve is matured for 10 months and has a drier, more grainy mouthfeel. Then you can find an older Gruyère AOP, 14 months or more, giving it a much stronger flavour. The age brings a difference in taste, but the recipe always stays the same. gruyere.com

LESSONS AFTER LOCKDOWN

Can innovative food independents hold onto some of their newly converted customers in a post-Covid world? Natasha Lovell-Smith of *Great British Food* meets the traders who have everything to play for

The Covid-crisis proved that – with the routine convenience of supermarkets taken away – shoppers will wholeheartedly embrace the reassurances of local produce, quality and personal connection that only independents can offer. Already well-versed in innovation and adaptability, farm shops, markets and delis were uniquely well placed to think on their feet when lockdown was implemented, stepping up instantly to serve their communities and capturing the loyalty of locals in the process.

Research conducted by Finder in the height of lockdown found that 41% of Brits were shopping in their local greengrocers, butchers and corner shops more often than usual during lockdown. Of 2,000 shoppers polled, 36% said they would continue to use their neighbourhood stores more frequently in the future as restrictions were lifted.

Unsurprisingly, the primary reason shoppers gave for visiting their local shops was to avoid the crowds in supermarkets and the queues outside them (54%). However, consumers also felt motivated to support local businesses during times of financial hardship, making this the second most popular reason (46%).

Commenting on the findings, Georgia-Rose Johnson, shopping expert at finder.com said: “The fact that local, independent shops experienced a boom in both demand and support during the lockdown played a vital role in keeping local economies alive. Local shops reminded communities of the value and convenience they bring, and it seems this is reciprocated by high numbers of shoppers who say they want to continue to support local businesses. The acid test will be when life settles back to normal.”

Serving communities

Indeed, will this new-found goodwill in the community continue as shoppers have more options? Karen Dear, director of operations at the Craft Bakers Association (CBA), which represents approximately 500 bakery businesses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, is hopeful. “The pandemic has seen many people rediscover the importance of community, and while craft bakeries and independent food retailers have always been a part of local communities, during lockdown we have heard about many new initiatives from members supporting their immediate area.”

She continues: “Many of our bakeries have raised money for local charities or hospitals, or donated food to those in need, whilst others have introduced delivery services that have been especially welcomed by those self isolating. Our independents have learnt that they can not only survive in the face of change and uncertainty, but excel. I believe many will take this new confidence, flexibility and skill in problem-solving into all aspects of their business moving forwards,” she adds.

Stories of success

The UK food sector may be facing a time of unprecedented uncertainty, but with great change comes great opportunity. London’s Borough Market is an interesting case study in a food business coping – even thriving – under lockdown; a particularly remarkable feat considering how much Borough’s traders rely on the tourism trade. Managing director Darren Henaghan has been pleasantly surprised to see how quickly all aspects of the market have adapted: “Pivoting” seems to be the word of 2020.



Changes that would normally have taken weeks, months or even years have been implemented overnight,” states Darren. For example, Borough Market’s hugely popular Cookbook Club quickly moved over to Zoom, as did Borough Talks, where a panel of experts regularly discuss important food topics. “Going virtual has opened our events up to a whole new audience, so this is definitely something we’ll continue with in the future.”

There have also been some positive changes on the market floor. “During the lockdown, Borough Market has felt like a very different place to the crowded, slightly chaotic melee you’re probably familiar with, filled with visitors from far and wide. Clear, orderly queues. People buying, not just browsing. Before, it was more of a spectacle, a sensory overload,” says Charles Tebbutt of nut stall Food and Forest, who admits to missing some of the old buzz.

But the change of pace created by the necessity of social distancing has brought with it a major benefit. Borough Market’s traders don’t just sell food; they also, each in their own way, tell stories – about regional cultures, production methods, sustainability and ethics – and those stories have found a bit more space to breathe. “The intense, crazy atmosphere of Borough Market on a normal Saturday afternoon wasn’t always conducive to having those conversations,” Charles explains.



“People now have a bit more time to listen, we have a bit of time to speak to them, and it’s nice to be able to showcase what we do.” Shoppers are still abiding by the market’s Come Shop Leave mantra, but the steadier pace means traders have the headspace to interact more during the course of the transaction, and their customers – starved of human contact – are keen to listen and engage. Charles has been able to talk about the types of nuts he stocks, about the concept of agroforestry, about the small-scale, sustainable producers his customers are helping to support.

Darren agrees: “Obviously things have been difficult for some of our traders, especially stalls selling hot food, but those offering staples like

meat, fish, bread and fresh veg have found that customers are actually buying more. Before, largely because of the crowds, people generally just bought one or two items, but now they’re doing a proper shop because they have more space to browse and chat with producers. Traders love it because they have more time to really talk about their food and offer advice and recommendations to shoppers.” Darren has found that visitors are actually happy to queue if it means they can get around without the crowds. “It’s certainly something to consider for the future,” he adds.

Leading with ethics

While many farm shops are understandably keeping their

“We want to make it easier for people to shop with us”

NIKKI STORRAR, MANAGER OF ARDROSS FARM SHOP IN FIFE

“We hadn’t anticipated how labour-intensive doing home deliveries and an order-and-collect service would be. Sadly we don’t have an online shop and we just didn’t have enough time in the day to get one up and running. We have definitely missed out there as I think an online shop would have increased our basket spend. As popular as the order-and-collect and home delivery service is, unless it’s very efficient it doesn’t make money. We will need to see what demand there is for it afterwards, and if it’s significant, try to make it run more efficiently. Lockdown has taught us that we really need to improve our online presence and make it as easy as possible for people to shop with us. We now have all the processes in place so if this happens again (I really hope not!), we can be up and running within hours.

“ This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for independents to really engage with consumers. You have their attention – it’s now up to you to prove why you’re different to the supermarkets in an easy-to-understand way ”



SADDLEBACK FARM SHOP

3 WAYS TO KEEP NEW CUSTOMERS ENGAGED

Best-selling hospitality author Joy Zarine gives her advice on retaining new customers as lockdown eases

- Strong customer communication and connection will be essential to riding out the financial storm ahead. Having a clear message of how your business is rising to the challenges will inspire customers to support you. Connecting with your customers either via social media, on your website or via local community forums, being the constant guide and supporting your customers in these times of crisis has been essential. As the country begins to reopen we should not stop telling our customers who we are and how we want to support their needs.

- Local shoppers can certainly be swayed to remain loyal to their local stores if the stores add a little creativity to their offering. Due to longer supply chains and logistics, many of the supermarkets cannot compete with the taste and freshness of a community store. Plus the long queues to access the supermarket don't seem to be ending anytime soon – so there is every opportunity for the local store to keep rising and keep shining.

- Food businesses opening from lockdown have a mission to reassure consumers they are safe spaces to be in – and this need cannot be exaggerated. After months of fear and uncertainty, now is the time to open with clear plans and clear communication to reassure everyone under your roof that they are safe and important too. Safety must be a priority, but the experience must also be exceptional.

Joy Zarine's new book, *Sales Through Service*, is out now.

“Local businesses should emphasise their uniqueness”

ROMILLA ARBER, OWNER OF HONESTY GROUP (WHICH INCLUDES SADDLEBACK FARM SHOP) IN BERKSHIRE

“On the first day of lockdown, the bottom fell out of the business. Turnover went from a reasonably healthy £180,000 pcm to virtually nothing. With 120 staff, rents, rates and suppliers to pay it was a very worrying few days. Once our main staff were furloughed, the management team began to look forensically at everything from the top to the bottom of the business, and we were all determined to make sure that once lockdown was eased we would be in a good position to face the challenges ahead. Over the past few months I've learned that no problem is insurmountable. Going forward I think local businesses need to emphasise their uniqueness – stand out from the crowd. I think local food is very important and that that message needs to be pushed.”

outgoings low, Macknade Food Hall in Faversham recently made the ambitious decision to launch a brand new fish butchery. It is the first retailer to team up with the Pesky Fish platform, whose pioneering technology guarantees super fresh British fish and seafood from sustainable sources, with 100% traceability from boat to plate. Despite the risks in expanding during such uncertain times, the team were keen to follow through with their plans for the new butchery as a long-term investment to boost their ethical ambitions. “It has taken us many years to identify a supply chain that supports our proud British fishing industry and whose ethos aligns with our own,” says Rosie Collins, marketing manager at Macknade.

Meanwhile, Rob Morton from Morton's Family Farm in Norwich says that it's never been more important to create and support 'localised' supply chains. “The pandemic has made it clear that we need to re-look at farming and the food chain and move the focus away from produce being as cheap as possible. We need to shift back to a more sustainable farming system with a focus on local, quality ingredients. Supporting our farms now will mean that we are in a much better position to deal with an issue like this, should it arise again.”

According to Darren Henaghan at Borough Market, the Covid crisis has provided a unique moment for retailers to educate consumers about the importance of shopping locally and sustainably. “I'd say this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for independents to really engage with consumers. You have their attention – it's now up to you to prove why you're different



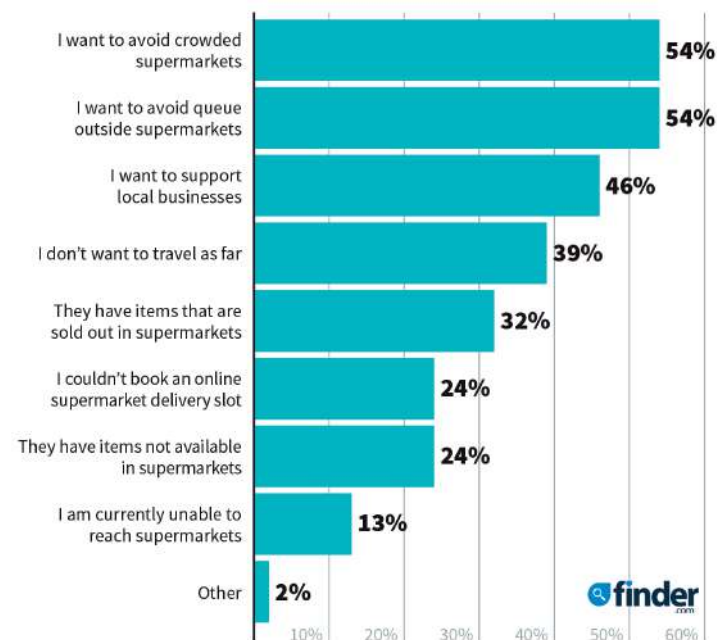
ARDROSS FARM SHOP

to the supermarkets in an easy-to-understand way. Explain why your food is more expensive, tell your story. Create a narrative. Be proactive. I find that customers want to do the right thing – it's just that sometimes those choices aren't obvious.”

With the boom in home baking and growing we've seen in 2020 so

far, food has certainly proven to be at the forefront of people's minds. “In a way we've rediscovered food. Seeing the work that goes into making a loaf of sourdough or growing 14 mangetout from seed gives shoppers a new appreciation for the food they buy. Retailers have a captive, engaged audience, now's the time to sell yourselves,” adds Darren.

REASONS UK SHOPPERS ARE USING THEIR LOCAL STORES MORE



ARDROSS FARM SHOP



THE NEW WAVE OF CONDIMENTS

Make your condiments selection sing with products that combine quality ingredients and the right blend of classic and modern flavours

Condiments provide that finishing touch and extra element of flavour to a multitude of dishes, and as such it's worth ensuring that your offering stands out with a selection of versatile products that offer maximum flavour.

So what's the key to creating the best possible offering whether your retail operation is bricks-and-mortar or online? Versatility is a key desire for consumers, a factor that has been particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown when many consumers have cooked more at home. Savvy shoppers are looking for condiments that will work with a variety of different dishes, from BBQ foods in the summer to roast dinners in the cooler months, so products that focus

on quality ingredients and flavour combinations are essential additions.

For Maria Whitehead, director at Hawkshead Relish, considering the various uses of the different condiments that the company produces is a priority at the

development stage. She says, "It is vital that all our condiments have multiple uses, so when we are developing a new flavour we think carefully about how it will be used and ideas for recipes and serving suggestions. For example, we are launching a few table sauces later this summer and we are currently trialling them in and with all sorts of dishes so that we know how best to market them and help our customers to get the best use from them. It is amazing how you can

convert a sauce into something else, for example you can use the Bloody Mary Ketchup as a base for the cocktail if you don't have celery or Worcester Sauce to hand, add Chilli Jam to a stir fry or sauce to perk it up, and Mango Chutney with Mayonnaise makes a great Coronation sauce."

The emphasis on versatility is echoed by Ian Butt, head of sales and marketing at Potts' Partnership, who adds, "Our range has been produced so that all of our condiments can be

enjoyed across many different meals and with multiple diets in mind, such as vegetarian and vegan. For instance, our Chilli Hot Horseradish is incredible on your Sunday roast beef but also adds a delicious fiery kick to a cheese sauce."

Classic meets 21st century

Comforting traditional condiments always have a place in British cupboards, from ketchup and mayonnaise to barbecue sauce. Guy Tullberg, MD at Tracklements, reveals that during the pandemic online orders of established classics saw a particular increase. "Comforting classics are certainly enjoying a moment; we all like the familiar in challenging times – as evidenced by sales of our Mustardy French Mayonnaise, Fresh Chilli Jam and Proper Tomato Ketchup," he explains. "However we're always impressed by the resourcefulness and creativity of our loyal customers as demonstrated by the different and adventurous ways they're using Tracklements."

PRODUCER PERSPECTIVE

Vicky McTaggart, marketing manager at Stokes Sauces, on what the brand brings to the condiments market

STOKES IS RENOWNED FOR THE QUALITY OF ITS INGREDIENTS AND NO-FILLER ATTITUDE – WHO DOES THIS APPEAL TO?

All consumers who appreciate quality food. It is essential to source the correct ingredients so that the product tastes amazing on every batch. The consumer will have confidence in the recognition that the Stokes brand is synonymous with a product that offers great tasting products.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT IN TODAY'S MARKETPLACE?

It's especially important today when there are so many things going on in the world that are placing an increasing burden on people. It is comforting to know that there are certain things you can rely on in a time when many things are changing, and to know that the Stokes brand is one of those constants.

WHY IS IT KEY FOR INDEPENDENT RETAILERS TO CHOOSE QUALITY CONDIMENTS AS OPPOSED TO CHEAPER, MASS-PRODUCED OPTIONS?

People today are being more selective as to how they spend their money, they need to know that what they buy is something they are going to enjoy and not be disappointed with. The consumer will associate a poor purchase with the retailer he bought it from as they expect the independent retailer to offer great quality products. The Stokes brand offers the retailer assurance that their customers will be excited by the Stokes range and will keep coming back as a regular customer.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR STOKES?

Keep doing what we do well – continue to be innovative, to constantly look for new ideas and keep the consumer interested, and if we can continue to achieve all of that the retailer will feel secure in the choice they made and can only benefit from what Stokes delivers to their business.



Instagram is alive with examples of how Tracklements are adding flavour to a multitude of different dishes and mealtimes."

Getting the balance between offering those classic, comforting flavours that everyone knows and loves and injecting some innovation into the market is one that has been considered by many brands. Tomato ketchup, for example, is a core staple of many households, and while it stands alone in its classic form, there is room for new flavour combinations to add a new twist. This concept is core to the 2 Fingers brand, which produces revamped versions of the classic tartare sauce. Founder Rick Panesar identified a gap in the market for a premium chunky tartare sauce, and his innovative flavours on offer include Creole and Wasabi. "The food scene and culture in the UK has been changing and evolving over the last 20 years or so. Before that it was in a state of inertia. As Brits, we have been known to be quite stuck in our ways and eating habits," he says. "Our new range of tartare sauces aims to revive the lost craft of tartare sauce, making it a well-respected, stand-alone condiment in its own right. Tartare sauce is a very versatile condiment and works well with Southern Fried Chicken, Tempura Vegetables and Samphire Pakoras, as well as an ingredient in a potato salad or slaw."

Healthy credentials

The recent emphasis on health and wellness in recent years has also led to an increased desire for healthier alternatives to classic condiments for many consumers. Keeping shelves stocked with products made using quality ingredients and no added sugar or preservatives ensures

that these needs are met. Hunter & Gather has an award-winning array of condiments, including its Avocado Oil Mayonnaise, that caters to people with a range of needs, including vegan, gluten-free, keto and paleo dietary requirements. Co-founder Amy Moring explains that consumers are becoming more aware of the ingredients used in products and are making more conscious choices. She says, "Consumers are starting to understand the impact poor quality fats have on their health, and with mayonnaise being mostly made from oil/fat, choosing a healthier oil such as avocado is key. We also avoid any sugars, chemical preservatives or unnecessary fillers or bulkers. This means we are suitable for multiple lifestyles, such as paleo and keto, which conventional mayonnaise is not. It's massively important for people to have choices; we live in a busy world and whilst many would love to be able to make fresh mayonnaise at home for their family, time does not allow. We provide a simple, homemade recipe that has no ingredients you cannot pronounce."

The brand recently added a plant-based mayonnaise option to the range, which Amy explains was created specifically with consumers with allergies at the forefront; "I personally am intolerant to egg yolk, so it seemed like a great idea to launch a top 14 allergen-free mayo, that also utilised real food ingredients and 100% avocado oil. I think for those that are intolerant or allergic to milk or eggs, the label 'plant-based' provides them a sense of confidence that a product will be suitable for them."

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

How to offer added value to fine food customers



"We know that consumers love recipe cards from their trusted specialist retailers which is why we've

invested in creating printable POS on trade.tracklements.co.uk/downloads, giving lots of uses for Tracklements. From cheese pairing ideas to recipe inspiration, we hope it's a great resource for our customers. We aim to make our trade website as helpful as possible for specialist retailers, to help them sell more condiments and make more money"

Guy Tullberg, MD at Tracklements

Hawkshead Relish has produced a cookbook featuring a variety of recipes using their products:



"We have had some lovely feedback from customers, saying that they have got creative using

condiments in their cooking. My whole point was that we all have these jars in our fridges and cupboards and they are treasure troves of taste and flavour, and incorporating a spoonful here and there into dishes can make all the difference"

Maria Whitehead, director at Hawkshead Relish

"It is vital that all our condiments have multiple uses, so when we are developing a new flavour we think carefully about how it will be used and ideas for recipes and serving suggestions"

MARIA WHITEHEAD, DIRECTOR, HAWKSHEAD RELISH



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mutinyfoods.com



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TALKING SHOP

We have all had different experiences within the fine food and drink sector when it comes to the impact of Covid-19. There have been business closures, redundancies and restrictions that have made work, in whatever capacity, a constant challenge. However even a crisis can be a catalyst for change for the better, and there has been a multitude of businesses and individuals stepping up to the plate and pivoting business plans to survive, and in some cases, thrive. Some have launched a new website, delivery service and even started something completely new. It's those companies that have had the ability to act quickly and throw positive energy into a new angle or venture that have ended up reaping the benefits in this situation.

The need to embrace the digital has shown many that far from being a 'maybe' it's a 'must-have' element for the future. It's been impressive to see the innovative ways that products and services are still being delivered within this digital realm, from virtual shows to selling online. It highlights that the food and drink industry is packed with entrepreneurial and creative spirit that can be used across different means and platforms, which is exciting to see. Have you shifted focus and seen positive feedback and results? Has the pandemic forced you to reconsider and it has been for the better? We want to continue promoting businesses that have succeeded during lockdown, so do get in touch and tell us about your experiences.

As restrictions start to lift, and while the pandemic is still very much a part of everyday life, the mind does start to turn towards the future and what it might hold for the industry. The recent *Eating In Vs Dining Out* report produced by IGD Retail Analysis in collaboration with foodservice consultant Peter Backman outlines possible scenarios for the future of the UK food and drink market, and stresses the importance for businesses to be prepared to react quickly. These hypothetical scenarios include The Great Reset, Decade of Drift, Technical Isolation and Globalisation Reversed.

Whatever the short and long-term future does hold for us all it's clear that the industry will never quite be the same again, but I for one am looking forward to seeing the new innovations, collaborations and fresh thinking that will come out on the other side.

We always want to hear the opinions of our readers – do you have a story to share, expertise to pass on or a comment to make? Get in touch with us via lucy.macdonald@aceville.co.uk.

BE CONNECTED

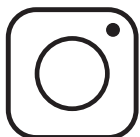
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5 MINUTES WITH... JAMES WRIGHT, CO-FOUNDER OF CHEERFUL BUDDHA

WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY?

Gardening, probably. I love surrounding myself with nature, and that's when I feel happiest.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?

Washing dishes at a local carvery restaurant that did 450 covers a night. Taught me to work hard, literally and metaphorically. Very different to what I do now.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU?

Seeing my son learn every day, and early mornings (both are related).

WHAT'S THE WORST JOB YOU'VE DONE?

Putting wood in a machine and watching it become two pieces of wood for eight hours a day. Although,



I did enjoy having plenty of time to ponder life! Maybe I'd have never been where I am now if I didn't have all that time to think.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF THE JOB?

Receiving people's feedback and positivity about our products – makes it all worthwhile.

AND YOUR LEAST FAVOURITE?

The rest of the team waiting for my video to reconnect on calls – happens every time!

TEA OR COFFEE?

Coffee, filtered, with Oatly Barista.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST SUPPER?

Sushi with a cold beer. Japanese food is so amazingly tasty and healthy. And, who doesn't like a cold beer!?

WHAT'S YOUR MOTTO?

Be good, be kind, be yourself.

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?

Camel jerky. Never again.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?

A Modern Way To Eat by Anna Jones.

SWEET OR SAVOURY?

I didn't have to think for long about this question – sweet.

SPECIALITY FOOD MAGAZINE

The next issue of
Speciality Food includes:

- Creating a Christmas Comeback
- Brand New: The Gallery
- Christmas Puddings & Fruit Cake
- Christmas Cheese
- Chutneys & Pickles
- Christmas Drinks

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TRIED & TESTED

THE REAL OLIVE COMPANY OLIVES

I've always loved olives, but having tried the range from The Real Olive Company it's become clear to me just how important freshness and quality is. The flavour within these olives is remarkable – and not just in the options infused with chilli, garlic, spices and all other delicious additions – but also in the simple Nocellara and Kalamata varieties. I've enjoyed the olives on their own, within watermelon and Feta salads, and Mediterranean-style pasta and rice dishes, and never has such a versatile product packed such a flavour punch.

therealolivecompany.co.uk



swapping my usual black tea with semi-skimmed to a Beauty, Energy, Immune, Slim, Digest or Sleep blend from Ahmad Tea? Delicious and containing natural ingredients with proven results, it's a great functional find.

ahmadtea.com



FORESTA FOOD DRIED MIXED FOREST MUSHROOMS

I have long been appreciative of the wonders of dried mushrooms. They're a simple, natural way to add flavourful richness to savoury dishes with minimal effort, and so I couldn't be happier to discover Foresta Food's hand-picked dried mixed forest mushrooms. They take just 30 minutes to rehydrate and enjoy in a huge array of dishes. Discard the leftover liquid at your peril: it's a delicious and ready-to-use stock.

theprogressivefoodcompany.co.uk



IN ASSOCIATION WITH



KEEPING STOCK OF PASTA SAUCES

Offering a range of premium ingredients and ready-made options will appeal to novice and experienced home cooks alike

Pasta sales have been through the roof since the start of lockdown, with all varieties of the Italian staple sought after in shops. The need to stay at home has prompted consumers to get out their saucepans and cook up hearty, comforting fare. Many are reaching out to their local independent retailers for quality pastas that can take dishes to the next level, and being able to offer a solid variety of different shapes and sizes to cater to those needs is ideal.

Alongside quality pasta comes the need for premium sauces. Those with more time on their hands at the present will be interested in creating delicious sauces from scratch, so stocking all the ingredients necessary is key. Offering great tomatoes, fresh as well as in jarred, canned and puree form, creates the base for a whole number of sauces such as classic Italian bolognese and ragu. Fresh herbs, fantastic olive oils and premium seasonings such as salt, pepper and chilli give shoppers the opportunity to experiment with natural ingredients for a whole host of tasty sauces. And, of course, cheese is a core ingredient not only to use within homemade sauces but also as a final garnish on top. Pesto alla Genovese requires bunches of basil, pine nuts and a hard cheese such as Parmigiano-Reggiano; pancetta, a hard cheese like Parmesan and eggs are essential for a carbonara, and a version of Aglio

e Olio takes things back to basics with just garlic and oil.

Stocking a range of ready-made sauces also allows shoppers with less time available for cooking from scratch to still be able to whip up a delicious pasta dish at home. Having a good selection of different tomato sauces as well as flavourful pestos and even white sauces for lasagne ensures that the essentials are covered. Keep in mind that there are different dietary requirements and allergy restrictions to consider, including vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free. Specific requirements does not have to mean limited choice, however, as there is a whole collection of sauces on the market today that feature natural ingredients. Why not also stock some gluten-free pasta and bread options for those customers? Increasing the number of quality options for different shopper needs will help you to become a one-stop shop when it comes to Italian dishes.

Are you passionate about Italian food and drink? Do you have a story, advice or comments on the topic? If so we would love to hear from you, so please get in touch via lucy.macdonald@aceville.co.uk.



THE INDEPENDENT SHOPPER

Chef Jake Finn has cooked at The Ritz and La Petite Maison



I have worked in some of London's best-loved restaurants in my time – Coya, The Ritz and La Petite Maison to name but a few.

Earlier this year, before any of us could have dreamed what was coming, I made plans to open my own restaurant. Simply called Lila, it was going to be a pretty neighbourhood restaurant, serving up Mediterranean cooking with lots of wood-fired cooking thrown into the mix.

The lockdown saw an end to that plan, sadly – for the time being, anyway. But in many ways, the lockdown has been a blessing in disguise. I quickly started thinking about ways I could still cook and bring in an income without having a working restaurant. I started cooking for friends and family, creating large batches of family food such as meatballs, hot smoked salmon, lasagnes, summer salads and prepared meat and fish for the BBQ.

It quickly took off and has become a real business for me. So I'm just the right person to talk about the value in investing in good, local businesses. I wouldn't have survived lockdown without the support of my local community and our high streets will really suffer if we lose them.

I grew up in north London and I've lived in Belsize Park for the past eight years. If you know north London, you'll know therefore that I am completely spoilt for choice. Pomona is a stunning little deli, fruit and veg shop. The service is second to none but the quality of the food is what shines. Handy tip: their freshly-squeezed orange juice is the best you'll ever taste, and it reminds me of holidays.

The Fields Beneath is a short walk down Prince of Wales Road and there you'll find one of the best artisan coffee shops in London, situated under Kentish Town West railway. The coffee is off-the-charts good and they are a real cornucopia of vegan food and snacks.

I cook a lot of meat and am a bit of a meat-lover, if truth be told. I only ever buy my meat from HG Walter; it's by far and away the best quality meat from rare breed farmers you can find in London. The service I get

when I order is second to none and the whole experience is a joy. It's still very much a family-run business and this shines through every part of the experience.

Getting the best quality fish can be a challenge when you're a small trader like me, but I use Capital Seafoods. They have plenty of daily boat catches and not only is the service I get impeccable but the fish is fresher than you could ever imagine. My hot smoked salmon dish tends to blow people away – my customers tell me they've never tasted fish so fresh and flavoursome.

Finally, one of life's true pleasures – cheese! For me, it's got to be Neal's Yard Dairy, based in Covent Garden. During lockdown they had a little pop-up at the Notting Hill Fish Shop which is just down the road from me, so I've been sneaking in way too much secret Cashel Blue... Anyone who knows Neal's Yard knows that you go for their enduring commitment to supporting the vibrant British cheese business, going to the ends of the earth to unearth the very best cheeses from these shores and beyond. They don't get enough recognition for the work they do.

If we don't use our small retailers, we will lose them. One of the amazing things about lockdown has been seeing people shop on their doorstep again, as supermarkets became so unappealing and hard to get into. Long may it last.

“One of the amazing things about lockdown has been seeing people shop on their doorstep again. Long may it last”



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