

# Recipes for success

Wales has a reputation for making great food and drink. **Jenny White** finds producers keen to stand out, innovate and tackle potential skills shortages

Wales makes about £7bn worth of food and drink in a year, but you wouldn't know that by looking at supermarket shelves. Robin Lawton, head chef at Venue Cymru in Llandudno, believes more could be made of the origins of Welsh produce: "While there are plenty of iconic product brands within Wales, I don't think we always make the most of pushing their Welsh provenance," he says.

Ruth Davies, owner of Swansea-based Cwm Farm Charcuterie Products, recommends flagging Welsh provenance on packaging – an approach that can increase appeal to international buyers. "I find a lot of overseas buyers now looking to source Welsh food and drink products," she says.

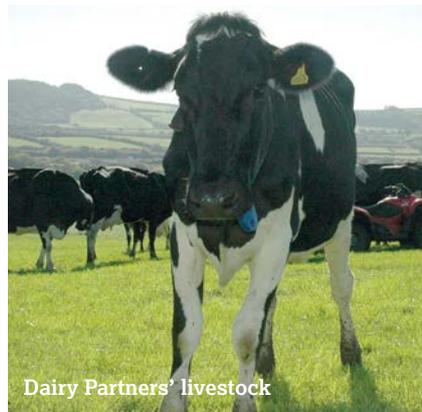
A Welsh Government report, the *Value of Welshness*, found in 2016 that 56 per cent of UK consumers thought Wales produced great food and drink, and that 80 per cent of consumers in Wales would prefer to buy Welsh products.

David Atkins, director of Llantisant-based Glamorgan Brewing, says: "We are seeking to convince customers that shopping locally doesn't only relate to Welsh lamb or cheese, but should be a factor in every purchase made."

Patently Welsh or not, a strong brand can help. Black Mountain Smokery in

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**Robin Lawton**



Dairy Partners' livestock

Crickhowell attributes part of its success to a canny rebrand in 2016. The smokery's Kate Hepplewhite says: "As an online retailer, our branding has to tell our story and convey our quality and provenance visually."

Swansea's Boss Brewing Company changed the look of its products in 2018, driven by the need to stand out in a crowded market. "The new branding boosted our brand awareness and growth hugely," says founder Sarah John. "It allowed us to create a distinct market identity."

Aber Falls Distillery in Gwynedd has launched a series of gins and liqueurs, and its first whisky will go on sale in 2020. Founder James Wright says: "It's important to have a healthy new product development pipeline to see what new trends are emerging and how you can adapt to that market."

Cwm Farm charcuterie's laverbread salami has drawn interest from the other side of the world. "We feel that producing unique and new products keeps us in a forever-growing market," says Davies.

But innovation isn't everything, says Boss Brewing's Sarah John, who will speak at the Retail Week Live event in March:



Sarah John

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"We are always innovating by bringing out new and interesting beers with unique flavours and unusual ingredients, but ultimately, my goal is for Boss to become a household name – a brand that people turn to because they can trust it and they feel confident that it will give them a good experience. I don't believe this comes from innovation – some of the biggest, most successful brands in food and drink have a trusted recipe that has stood the test of time. Innovation and brand loyalty don't necessarily go hand-in-hand."

Emma Jenkins of Cardiff-based EJ Catering sees the brewing industry as one of Wales' key strengths, with an increase in microbreweries driving diverse and creative results.

"Special rare breeds of lamb and beef are also on the increase, and this makes our job more interesting as chefs as we are able to offer a different product to our customers," she says.

# Food and drink

## SECTOR REPORT

Carl Andrew of Wrexham-based Farm and Fork says demand for quality produce is strong, with customers keen to know that meat producers care about animal welfare. The vegan sector is another growth area, as seen in the move by large retailers to introduce plant-based ranges.

Andy Richardson, chair of the Food and Drink Wales Industry Board, says: "This area is likely to grow, and producers should be looking to take advantage of opportunities it presents."

John adds that the "free from" market is also a growth area. "We developed a gluten-free beer last year," she says. "There is also increasing demand for low-alcohol and alcohol-free versions."

Finding and keeping staff is a key priority for Wales' food and drink industry. To tackle looming problems posed by an ageing workforce, difficulty in attracting and retaining talent, and uncertainties around future labour supplies post-Brexit, the Food and Drink Wales Industry Board has drawn up an industry-led skills strategy. Some producers have signed up to the Welsh Skills Pledge. Richardson says: "They will send company ambassadors into schools, host visits at their sites and promote career opportunities in their communities."



Some producers are grouping around clusters identified by the Welsh Government: fine food, seafood, export, high impact, drinks, honey and one dubbed "NutriWales". They meet to share ideas and discuss solutions to shared challenges.

Richardson's board has launched a drinks industry strategy, which identified collaborative working as a route to sustainable growth. He says: "Food and drink is a significant contributor to the Welsh economy and now more than ever, it is important that we ensure the industry is strong and robust to thrive in a post-Brexit world."

And Brexit looms large indeed. At Aber Falls, James Wright says: "It creates instability, in that people are not willing to commit. We are concentrating on international markets to keep the momentum going, while keeping an eye on what happens on our doorstep and in Europe."

For Farrah Boutia, founder of Moose Maple Butter, which is produced at Gower View Foods in Carmarthenshire, rising costs are an issue: "The cost of butter has been very volatile since the results of the referendum and we have no idea what to expect this year. Tariffs and taxes are all very uncertain too."

But leaving the EU could lead to more demand for some Welsh-made ingredients. Will Bennett, co-director of specialist mozzarella producer Dairy Partners, says: "For now, we know that using ingredients sourced from the UK keeps our reliance off import." At the same time, he adds: "We have a strong foothold in the export market, which is set to grow further in 2019."

Producers have plenty to go after locally, at a UK and international level, says Richardson: "Wales will never be the least cost manufacturer, but it can be a leader in provenance, food integrity and innovation." ■

## TOP FOOD PRODUCERS IN WALES

Rank	Company	Location	Activity	Turnover £m	Pre-tax profit £m	Year end
1	WYNNSTAY	Llansanffraid	Farm supplies	390.7	7.7	Oct 17
2	FINSBURY FOOD	Cardiff	Baker	303.6	4.5	Jun 18
3	DUNBIA (WALES)	Llanybydder	Meat products	135.9	1.3	Dec 17
4	SA BRAIN	Cardiff	Brewer, and wine and spirit merchants	123.3	(6.7)	Sep 17
5	CASTELL HOWELL FOODS	Llanelli	Food products wholesaler	115.4	3.7	Oct 17
6	GLOBAL FOODS	Cardiff	Cash and carry wholesaler	83.9	1.6	Apr 18
7	FEI FOODS	Swansea	Microwaveable food packs and snack pots	49.9	4.4	Dec 17
8	OP CHOCOLATE	Merthyr Tydfil	Chocolate coated wafers	48.3	1.3	Dec 17
9	TOMLINSON'S DAIRIES	Wrexham	Milk and cream	47.1	2.3	Mar 17
10	ASH MANOR CHEESE	Wrexham	Cheese products	44.3	0.8	Mar 17
11	KK FINE FOODS	Deeside	Frozen food	41.3	1.7	Dec 17
12	RADNOR HILLS MINERAL WATER	Knighton	Mineral water and soft drinks	40.2	4.5	May 17
13	FARMERS FRESH (WALES)	Wrexham	Meat products	32.8	0.7	Dec 16
14	HARLECH FOODSERVICE	Criccieth	Foodservice for caterers	30.4	0.1	Dec 17
15	ANNYALLA CHICKS (UK)	Wrexham	Broilers and egg hatching	30.3	2.7	Dec 16
16	HALO FOODS	Newport	Nuts and snacks	29.1	0.1	Dec 17
17	BURNS PET NUTRITION	Kidwelly	Pet food	24.4	3.4	Jul 17
18	CAMBRIAN PET FOODS	Llangadog	Pet food	22.3	3.1	Jun 17
19	ABERGAVERNNY FINE FOODS	Abergavenny	Cheese products	21.5	1.0	Mar 18
20	GREENCOAT	Monmouth	Animal feeds and supplements	15.4	2.5	Mar 18

Source: Insider research, Experian MIQ 2019