

# Overcoming hurdles by embracing change

As food wholesaler Valley Foods celebrates its 40th anniversary, general manager Martin Mitchell tells Emily Moore about the company's evolution over the past four decades and, in particular, during the past year

WHEN the Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed that 'everything changes and nothing stands still', his view was inspired by the natural world.

His words, however, apply equally strongly to the world of commerce where innovation and newness are at the forefront of any successful business.

One Jersey business encapsulating this spirit is Valley Foods which, having been established 40 years ago today, has undergone many changes over the past four decades – and perhaps none more so that in the past 12 months.

Originally founded by Matt Rogan on 15 April 1981 as a food wholesaler, the business was first conceived in response to the Island's booming tourism industry.

'Jersey in the 1980s had a huge number of hotels and restaurants, which meant the opportunity for wholesalers was tremendous. In fact, a number of businesses in this sector were established at that time,' explained the company's general manager Martin Mitchell. 'Valley Foods first opened with about 50 lines, the majority of which were dried foods and frozen goods.'

From that modest start at Springside, the company has expanded significantly, moving to La Solitude Farm in 2007 and now boasting a product range of over 5,400 lines – many of which would have been unheard of in Jersey 40 years ago – which are delivered to its customer base of hotels, cafés, supermarkets, nursing homes and bars.

'Our business is very much driven by trends in the food industry,' said Martin. 'Jersey has a tremendous choice of fantastic restaurants and, while many of the traditional French culinary influences remain, the wonderfully diverse range of hospitality staff coming into the Island means that there are constant tweaks to the food offer.'

'If you think back 30 years, Chinese cuisine was breaking into the market, then ten to 15 years ago, Thai restaurants started opening. Now sushi is becoming very popular and we are seeing more Asian influences coming through. At the same time, there is a growing demand for Romanian and Polish products so our stock range is tremendously diverse.'

Crucially, however, these globally-sourced items only account for a relatively small number of the company's overall stock lines as Valley Foods is proudly committed to supporting local producers.

'As a Genuine Jersey member ourselves, we are also passionate about working with as many local businesses as possible. From the bigger players such as Jersey Dairy, Homefields and La Mare Wine Estate to the smaller and newer providers such as The Chill Kitchen,

Royal Mash Vodka and Douet Farm, we want to give restaurateurs and householders access to these fantastic products and offer these growers and producers a platform to reach a wider customer base.'

The reference to householders is significant. Having started as a wholesale business, one of the key changes to the Valley Foods business model came 11 years ago when the company launched the Island's first full online supermarket.

The move coincided with the company's acquisition of Trinity Fine Foods, which also added a range of delicatessen items to the offer.

'At the time, we were supplying a lot of corner shops so we had all the products and we used to get phone calls from people asking if they could open an account with us. As the number of queries gradually increased, we realised that it would be easier to run the service online and so we set everything up and launched at a home show at Fort Regent in October 2010,' he said.

Valley Foods is also working in partnership with the Co-op UK and, in line with other supermarkets in Jersey, offers customers the full range of Co-op-branded products as well as a range of Genuine Jersey items, wines direct from the Rothschild Estates, fresh seafood from La Crete and fresh meat prepared by the team's in-house butchers.

'Our butchery offering is one of our key selling points; we consider our butchery facilities to be one of the best in the Island and we employ four full-time butchers,' said Martin. 'Across all areas of the food business, provenance is key and this is particularly important in butchery. We are delighted to work with Trinity Manor to supply Jersey beef to our customers. This is a fantastic-quality meat which, at most, has travelled four miles from the farm to our butcher.'

It is also a partnership with exemplifies the way in which Valley Foods operates.

'As an island, it is so important that we all support each other – and that's something which I think lockdown has brought into sharper focus than ever. One of the positives to emerge from the past year has been the way that businesses have worked together in such challenging circumstances,' said Martin.

That the year was challenging for Valley Foods is undeniable.

'We went from a business that was 90% wholesale and 10% retail to 10% wholesale and 90% retail. Our whole operation was turned completely on its head. Before lockdown, we had a lovely little supermarket operation, moving steadily along in the background, where any orders placed before 11am



were delivered on the same day. Then, all of a sudden, the demand went through the roof and we just couldn't keep up,' he added.

There began the 'hugely labour-intensive process' of adjusting to the new business model.

'Fulfilling retail orders is much more time-consuming than preparing wholesale deliveries, as you are dealing with so many small units. We went from 26 staff to 40 staff within a couple of weeks, working closely with our hospitality partners to give some of their employees work during the pandemic.'

With the team stretched, it was not unusual to see members of the sales team helping out in the butchery,

while company owner and managing director Andrew Clackett manned the forklift and Martin unloaded pallets and packed orders.

'It was a weird, strange time but, in a masochistic sort of way, we enjoyed it,' said Martin. 'While we could have buried our heads in the sand and taken advantage of the government's generous support packages, we decided not to do that and we hit the situation head-on. We were lucky enough to be in a position to do that. Unfortunately the majority of our hospitality customers weren't. I think we were probably the only food wholesaler to take that option and, while our decision led to some very long and tiring months – and the odd meltdown along the way – we all came

through the experience stronger and happier.'

Inevitably, the family-run company also emerged from lockdown looking very different.

'One of the biggest changes we made was to switch off our answerphones and implement a fully online service,' explained Martin. 'This means now that when a chef wants to place an order, he or she can go to the app where they will see the live stock holding, pricing and delivery options. While we had been planning to launch a fully automated system before the end of 2021, the pandemic brought this forward a year and it has been brilliant. Not only does it make the system more efficient for our customers but it has also enabled us to squeeze some of our prices.'

'We also went fully cashless and increased the size of our fleet to support the increased demand for home deliveries.'

Having made so many innovations during the past year, it is unsurprising that the team is now planning a period of consolidation – although this anniversary year will see further changes.

'We are just about to launch a new website and we are also continuing to develop both our product range – with a strong focus on vegan and free-from items – and our software to give consumers more information about the products,' said Martin. 'We are particularly focused at the

moment on giving people more information about the allergens and nutritional content of each item. In the future, I can see that when you order a dish in a restaurant, the full nutritional content of that dish will be itemised. As a business, we are pre-empting that.'

Another key area for the business is its people.

'We have a great team and, if

anything, the pandemic has brought us all closer together. Yes, there is a lot of pressure at times but we also have a lot of fun at work and our passion for what we do shines through. Many of our staff – some of whom have been with us for more than 30 years – are professional chefs and people who know the food game inside-out and are committed to delivering that quality. And, as lockdown proved, we are all willing



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