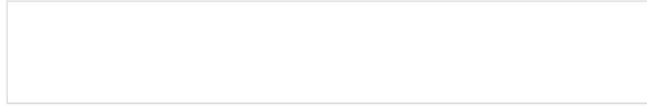


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Are we on the brink of a British food revolution?

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> A post-Covid landscape can offer a beacon of light for British independents and producers, but this will depend on their continued collaboration, innovation and adaptability says Charlotte Smith of [Great British Food](#)



Fast forward to Christmas 2020, and it's difficult not to imagine a busy end to a pivotal year for many local food retailers, who stepped up to serve their communities when lockdown was implemented in March. Farm shops that worked long hours to provide a safe and reliable service, delis that switched overnight to providing [home delivery](#), and independent cafe and restaurant owners who used initiative to provide takeaway services have now found an additional route to market, attracted new customers and captured the loyalty of their communities, not to mention helping local food producers to stay afloat.

There is already much speculation about what a post-pandemic food revolution might look like. The table was already set for change prior to Covid-19, with rising customer concerns over the environmental impact of production practices, import and supermarket waste and [fears over food standards following Brexit](#). As [parliament has been debating the Trade Bill](#) in the Commons through May, British producers and NGOs have pressed the government to focus on food security and to recognise the importance of British homegrown and home-produced food. In a letter addressed to Defra secretary George Eustice, the National Beef Association called for “vital strong frameworks to be put in place to protect Britain’s producers,” while highlighting that mid-pandemic food shortages were still being experienced due to high dependency of imports. The future for many British food producers hangs in the balance.

Support for independents

There is much cause for optimism, however. The pandemic itself has brought about an overwhelming [sense of community](#) and for the British food and drinks industry, this could translate into greater demand for locally-sourced products, benefitting small businesses in the months ahead. It has certainly revealed the fragility of our over-extended supply chains, which are sensitive to short-term shocks. Half of the UK's food now comes from abroad, including up to 90% of our fruit and vegetables. But panic-buying, which spread like wildfire across the developed world in March, reflected consumers' concerns about the vulnerability of supplies as the virus hit food production regions around the world, and supermarkets struggled to cope with the sudden, massive rise in trade.

In many ways, the pandemic exposed the limitations of supermarkets while highlighting the positives of localism. Despite the lockdown driving a massive growth in unique visitors to supermarket websites (Ocado.com +237%; Morrisons.com +250%, Similarweb), the key retailers could not meet this demand. Customers had to wait weeks for a home delivery slot - if they could even secure one - and Ocado was forced to suspend its app. With many popular pandemic items running out of stock and government warnings to stay indoors, disillusioned [shoppers turned to local independents and farm shops](#), which stepped up to the challenge in a matter of days, offering a safe, personalised service, online shopping, home delivery options, simple click-and-collect systems and drive-thrus.

This agile response to the crisis has resulted in continued trade and ultimately, won over new, enthusiastic fans for many independents. "[Customers never forget a business that took care of them](#) and supported them at a time when they needed it most, which is why great customer experience is key to business survival," points out Ian Kelsall, customer experience director with [insight6](#), who has been supporting members of [The Farm Retail Association](#) through recent trading challenges.

Rapid response

Many local farm shops and independents have reacted quickly and personally to customers' needs, linking up with local producers and offering more convenient and less complex options than grappling with an impersonal website to get a delivery slot, or joining long queues outside a supermarket only to find essentials out of stock. For Scottish deli [Bowhouse](#) in Fife, the forced cancellation of their popular Market Weekends, which used to draw crowds of 4,500, meant a [drastic rethink](#). Rosie Jack, marketing and events manager explains: "From the outset, Bowhouse had been created as a way of reworking local supply chains. We'd been so busy with the thriving markets that we had never found time to prioritise a local distribution route beyond this. By early April (around the time our next market would have taken place), we'd set up

Bowhouse Link. We chose the Open Food Network because it was a not-for-profit channel that feeds profits back into the development of the site.

“We were keen to start off on a small scale so we could be sure the system worked,” she continues. “Our first week’s trading we picked up 34 orders: all delivered. This rose to 75 in the second week and in our sixth week we have processed over 370 orders and enabled 18 small producers to continue to reach their customers. Going forward we’ll expand this, working with producers to develop mini hubs for collection/delivery to broaden our geographic reach.”

And consumer attitudes are shifting: according to a YouGov report for the [Food, Farming and Agricultural Commission](#), only 9% of British consumers want things to return back to normal after the outbreak is over. Over half (54%) hope they will make some changes to their own life and for the country as a whole to learn from the crisis. The rise in home working and home cooking, a heightened concern over health and a desire to maintain some of the positive environmental effects of lockdown on the planet are all areas which play into the hands of enlightened independents and local producers.

Adapting for the future

The next step for many small businesses, post-pandemic, will be to retain and improve new systems so they can continue to serve customers who have been engaged by a more user-friendly service and environmentally sound way of shopping. Ian Kelsall adds: “With so many businesses showing great tenacity, adaptability and innovation in the here and now, consideration must now be given to how sustainable these new ways of working are. If there is an appetite for customers to continue to shop this way, why would you remove the facilities (assuming they can be operated profitably going forward)? My guess is that the new easy way of doing business has maintained the loyalty of the regulars as well as attracting new customers, assuming the experience delivers the same levels of customer satisfaction.”

Rosie Jack is firmly in favour of sticking with her company’s new initiative. “The Bowhouse Link is something we’ll continue to expand beyond lockdown, adding new producers as we would at the Market Weekends. I really think that by demonstrating the quality of local produce, we’ll be able to change people’s buying habits so that they continue to shop in this way. Whereas our customers at the markets were a mixture of people, some of whom were coming along for the ‘day out’ aspect of it, our Bowhouse Link customers are undoubtedly those who are prioritising the quality of produce and looking for raw ingredients to cook with.”

As lockdown restrictions are relaxed incrementally around the UK, some consumers will undoubtedly return to shopping at supermarkets. But many others, who

appreciated superior produce and service from their local independents during lockdown, are likely to remain loyal, especially if some of the new initiatives such as online purchasing and home delivery remain in place. Farm shops and independent stores offering something different - and, crucially, better - will stand to benefit from the lessons learned during Covid-19. By using this moment to leverage their unique position in their communities, speciality retailers can make the most of this opportunity and thrive.

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Rosie Jack, markets & events manager at [Bowhouse](#) in Fife, on the impact Covid-19 has had on business

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