



Daniel Moore speaks with David Sherring, Technical Manager at food ingredient producers The Flavourworks, in Somerset, UK, to find out how the company is streamlining its processes to meet the demands of its customers

THE TASTE OF QUALITY



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ustainability has become a key focus for many food companies in recent years, as businesses continue to find ways to improve the appeal of their products for customers. Many consumers are increasingly looking for their weekly shop to reflect their ethical values, as well as meeting their expectations in terms of taste, cost and availability. There is growing demand for healthier foods and interesting flavour options, with more consumers referring to food information to find out more details about the ingredients that they wish to seek and avoid.

According to the International Food Information Council's (IFIC) *Food and Health Survey (2019)*, 63 per cent of respondents find it hard to know whether their food choices are environmentally sustainable. Nearly two-thirds of respondents highlighted that environmental sustainability would have a larger impact on their purchasing decisions for food and beverages if more information was publicly available to them.

"Consumers are starting to consider factors, such as the labelling of various product ingredients and attributes, along with production methods and food packaging," and are keen to find out and do more for the environment, notes the report. From their findings, IFIC predicts an increase in public concerns around the food system's role in tackling climate change – from agriculture production and food waste, to the transportation of goods.

In light of these trends, *Quality World* talks to The Flavourworks – a bespoke food ingredients supplier in Somerset, UK – about how the company is streamlining its processes to cater for trends and customer demand.

Company background

The Flavourworks (TFW) hit the ground running after setting up a butter processing facility in Gillingham, Dorset, UK, in 1989. Over the years, the organisation, which has an annual turnover of £15 million, has expanded its core line to include an eclectic range of bespoke sauces, marinades, crumbs, gravies, and garlic oils, which are supplied to over 100 food manufacturers in the UK and Ireland.

Today, the supplier operates from its Wincanton premises in Somerset, where 125 staff are tasked with ensuring that every flavour coming off the production lines is produced to the highest quality. With up to five lines launching each week, stringent processes are in place to make sure standards are maintained from sourcing the company's ingredients through to distribution.



"Many consumers are increasingly looking for their weekly shop to reflect their ethical values"

Quality structure

Speaking to *Quality World*, David Sherring, Technical Manager – better known by his work colleagues as the organisation's 'Professor of Flavourology' – shares how quality is structured within the business.

Days begin with daily 'wake-up meetings' first thing in the morning, says Sherring, which focus on immediate issues and assigning tasks to employees. "At The Flavourworks, we have a team of four quality assurance staff, who are responsible for verifying operational performance each day and supporting production on the shop floor as and when problems arise." Some of the day-to-day duties, Sherring notes, include calibrating equipment, taking samples and processing test results, root cause analysis, hygiene audits, verification of critical control points (CCPs) and fabrication inspections.

To carry out these processes effectively, staff have access to the quality management system (QMS), that has been developed around the ISO 9000 Quality management principles. This includes The Flavour Work's bespoke 'Cookbook' – which contains all the relevant documents for the company's quality processes – and its 'Chilli' database, used for capturing sales, production planning, monitoring stock levels, defining product processing instructions and expediting despatch".

The QMS also includes a cloud-based 'Agile Chilli' platform, designed to assist staff with TFW's supplier assurance management process. This system allows staff to obtain supplier information about hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP), food processing controls, ethical controls, seasonality, and more.

Sherring is in charge of reviewing the quality objectives and systems with other members of the senior management team. "Quality and metric achievements are evaluated regularly at monthly management meetings (or 'Saunas,' as we like to call them). The QMS is reviewed every six months at quality system reviews, which gives our directors and senior managers the opportunity to sit down and work out whether our management system is adding value to the business or if improvements need to be made." Quality and food safety-related performance is monitored more closely at two-month intervals, where the team will look at the food safety and quality metrics to make sure their processes and products 'tick all the boxes', before landing on the supermarket shelves.

Another feature of the QMS is the internal audits, which are scheduled "based on risk over a six-month period instead of 12", according to Sherring. "This is to ensure that the audit scheduling is responsive ▶

Offsetting carbon emissions

The Flavourworks achieved carbon neutral status through three international projects

The Flavourworks has been actively involved in offsetting its carbon footprint through several company-led projects around the world.

In February 2020, the organisation was awarded 'Carbon Neutral Status' by co2balance (co2balance.com) for offsetting 286 tons of carbon emissions through projects in Brazil, Uganda and Malawi.

Some of the work TFW supports includes the drilling of clean water boreholes and generating 180,000 litres of clean water for deprived communities in different parts of Africa. The organisation has also managed to save 100 tons of wood from being used over the next year.

TFW has appointed a 'green team', who are in charge of finding different ways to help the former improve its sustainability practices and energy use at its Wincanton site. One of the initiatives was switching to half-hourly meters for the company's gas and electricity usage. This has allowed TFW to review its energy use and to make further reductions.

Chris Ormrod, Managing Director (or Chief Flavourista) of The Flavourworks, said: "We are now offsetting our carbon emissions by investing in parts of Africa to help save the equivalent amount of carbon over there. These are powerful statistics and I'm very proud of them."

For more information on The Flavourwork's projects, visit: bit.ly/3ciogYE

to the needs of the business and accommodates changes, or quality performance issues as and when they come up.”

As part of the process, auditors are provided with an audit brief, detailing their objectives and the findings from previous inspections. Auditors check the status of previous audit findings, ensuring that these have been rectified since the last audit, as well as identifying and flagging up positive points and, if applicable, any serious issues with management on the day of the audit.

Regular internal auditor briefings are held to share experience, that help to improve auditing techniques, and provide more effective audits going forward.

Conforming to standards

TFW has been certified to the BRC Global Food Safety Standard for several years, and recently upgraded to the latest version (Issue 8), which went live earlier in 2019. In 2018, TFW received certification from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). RSPO is a not-for-profit organisation that has developed a set of criteria that producers and users of palm oil must conform to. Being RSPO-certified will help TFW to reduce the impact of palm oil cultivation on the environment.

The team looks to keep abreast of any standard revisions to ensure its QMS is able to accommodate these changes, while allowing the business to continue running at full efficiency.

Product portfolio

Over 900 products are created by the company each year for many types of foods, such as white meat, red meat, fish, pizzas and vegetables. Butter is still a company staple that is used to blend its herbs and spices together to produce the organisation’s extensive flavour portfolio. Crumbs, relishes, marinades, flavoured oils, rubs and sauces are supplied in bulk so the products can be portioned by the customers, who produce ‘own label’ products for supermarkets such as Tesco and Aldi. Some sauces are supplied in plastic pots with fried chicken, as a ready to eat meal option for consumers.

Following the demand for plant-based products, TFW recently launched its VeganWorks initiative, where the team is currently developing a range of new vegan products to “whet the appetites of its customers”. Plans are underway to create a new production facility, which will highlight crucial environmental targets. This includes using a vegan-approved energy supply and rainwater harvesting.

As with any new range, there are some risks to take into consideration. Sherring elaborates: “We’re currently producing a range of products that cater for our customers’ requirements. The ingredients that we are buying in for products include free from dairy, egg, fish and meat proteins, and we apply a risk-based approach when assuring supply of ingredients to our plant-based products to make sure there is no risk of contamination.” In addition, a vegan policy has been drafted to give the Flavourwork’s product development

team a “steer on the controls that they need to apply to make sure that the products they’re sending out as samples to customers are suitable for vegan or vegetarian use,” according to Sherring.

Meanwhile, TFW is keeping an eye on the development of the new standard ISO 23662 – Definitions and technical criteria for foods and food ingredients suitable for vegetarians or vegans and for labelling and claims – covering the production of vegan and vegetarian foods.

Another initiative that has recently gone live is the organisation’s ready to eat sauces. The ingredients for this line are processed and packed in a ‘high risk area’, and can be consumed immediately after production, says Sherring. This section contains features such as filtered air to remove microorganisms, a UV sanitiser to clean up packaging and other materials, and positive air pressure. In parallel with this, a similar concept is being rolled out that involves the development of a ‘high care area’ for ready to eat butter portions, which will be served with a range of meat, fish and vegetable dishes.

Work culture

A positive quality and food safety culture is another vital ingredient in the success of the business. Employees achieving merit are regularly commended for their efforts through TFW’s ‘Flavour of the month’ award, given to those who have exceeded both company and client expectations.

Other initiatives include the ‘Marinade’ – a weekly bulletin that goes out to staff to keep them up-to-date with the latest activities within the company – as well as staff briefings, surveys and one-to-ones, all of which have been instrumental in improving the quality and food safety culture across the organisation.

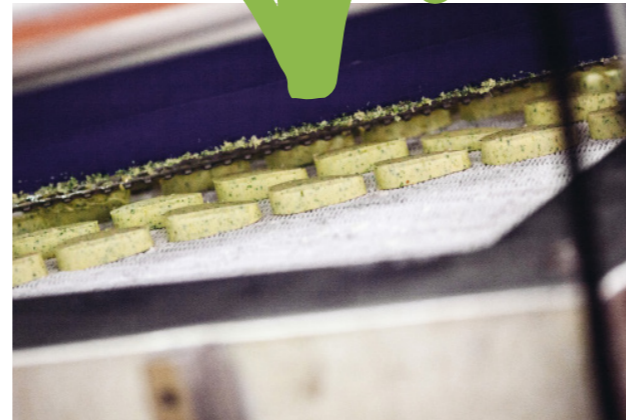
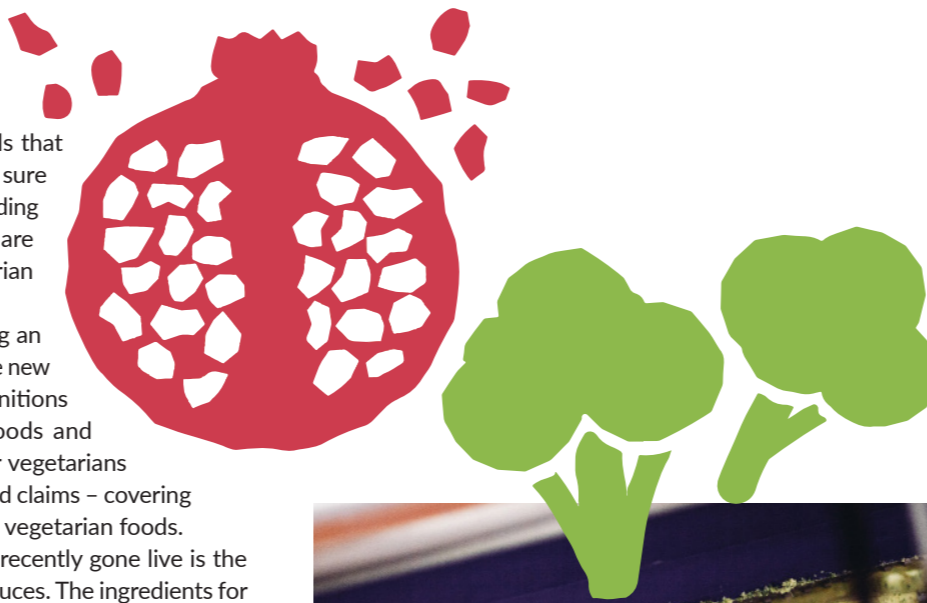
A fun and modern feel has been incorporated into the company through colourful imagery and motivational quotes displayed around the company’s canteen and various other areas in the building. Akin to Sherring’s job title of Professor of Flavourology, other staff have also been assigned quirky job titles. The ‘Flavourettes’, for example, are in charge of creating 10,000 to 12,000 samples each year, in the organisation’s dedicated kitchen space, which are sent out to tantalise the taste buds of prospective and existing customers.

Supply chain management

Sherring admits that although TFW has a “complex” supply chain, there are many steps being taken to keep risks and disruptions to a minimum.

He explains: “Food safety risks in the supply chain are evaluated using information that our suppliers send to us.

“We also need to concern ourselves with physical hazards that might arise in the supply chain, such as plastics and metals, as well as pits or stones found in fruits or other raw materials.”



“The market is always challenging, but our unique selling point is being flexible and adaptable, along with the fact that we are a very creative business”

The supplier assurance team are in regular contact with suppliers to ensure that the company is maintaining supply chain intelligence and being kept in the loop with any new and emerging food/market trends or challenges that could affect or add value to the business.

For Sherring’s team, one current challenge, in particular, is the coronavirus outbreak, which he says could affect supply chain continuity if it’s not dealt with effectively. “We’re in the process of gathering information from our suppliers in order to make informed risk-based decisions about whether there will be a supply chain continuity problem or not,” he explains.

The issue of modern slavery is also hot on the agenda when it comes to sourcing ingredients. Highlighting this as a concerning problem, Sherring says: “We don’t want to be associated with any modern slavery breaches that might arise in our supply chain nor do our customers. It’s imperative that we monitor where the ingredients originate from and also emerging modern slavery hot spots.”

He adds that the company uses the online Global Slavery Index application (bit.ly/2VBi5Jj) to monitor changes in modern slavery worldwide, which are reviewed on a monthly basis by TFW’s senior management team.

Future plans

The next steps for TFW include dealing with ‘uncertainties’ around Brexit, and how this could affect its tariffs and exports overseas. Sherring and his team are in the process of gathering more information from the government and industry contacts, so that the company can take appropriate action as required.

Despite the challenges ahead, it is business as usual for Sherring and his flavour experts, as they strive to continue remaining agile and competitive, with their finger on the pulse for new market trends. “The market is always evolving through manufacturers, which are often subject to mergers, acquisitions, takeovers, and pressures from the global economy as well. These can take their toll, resulting in some manufacturers closing down. Retailers also have a big part to play in making sure that food operations are and remain sustainable.”

Sherring concludes: “The market is always challenging, but our unique selling point is being flexible and adaptable, along with the fact that we are a very creative business. We don’t fall short of investing a lot of time and effort in developing new products to whet the appetites of our customers, and long may that continue.”