

Things are LOOKING UP!



After a tumultuous 12 months, we are looking confidently into the future for our sector, the entire food industry and Europe, says **Sebastian Emig**

LIFE can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Kierkegaard's words are on my mind a lot these days as we transition from 2020 to 2021. What have we learned from our fellow citizens, our sector, our politicians and ourselves? How can we use these lessons to prepare for a better future? If anything, recent months have delivered too many insights, too much data and too much information on so many aspects of our changing lives (from the Dalgona coffee craze to the "You are on mute" memes). I would like to focus on how the coronavirus pandemic shook up our relationship with food.

In March 2020, the world as we know it came to a halt. First regional and then national lockdowns arrived to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus, leading to many people panic buying and stockpiling everyday non-food and food products. The much-shared photos on social media of empty supermarket shelves created even more anxiety.

Panic-buying put retailers around the world under unprecedented strain and some supermarkets even had to limit the number of items that any one shopper could buy at one time. Some shops dedicated early shopping hours to senior citizens and healthcare workers to give them a better chance to access food safely, while online delivery services struggled to cope with demand. The introduction of border controls resulted in blocked transport routes and long queues at previously open borders. The international flow of seasonal farm workers (800,000 to 1 million per year) that usually arrives to harvest fruit and vegetables came to a grinding halt.

With catering services and restaurants closed and nearly everybody teleworking,

home-cooking became a must – with the exception of an occasional home delivery or take-away. Supermarket shelves emptied of flour as people rediscovered home-baking.

Sales of food products with a longer shelf life, such as canned and frozen foods or savoury snacks, shot up. The impossibility of meeting family and friends gave birth to simultaneous snacking during video meetings as a way to recreate evenings out in a virtual way. The upshot is that across Europe we have seen snacks sales increase by between 6 and 20% as peoples' homes became their world and they looked for new ways to replace previous social occasions or create new traditions with their family.

This evolution of new behaviours has brought fresh engagement and novel opportunities for brands to present themselves to consumers in a different way. In the future brands will not need to wait for the festivals and crowded city centres of the summer to interact with their audiences. Brands learned that it is less about the environment but more about occasions, social amplification, content and the people themselves. Consumers look to our industry to bring a small portion (pun intended) of excitement into their daily lives.

Some restaurants transitioned to a delivery-only model but that was not possible everywhere. Demand therefore fell off a cliff for some commodities, such as seafood or fries, which are consumed most often in restaurants.

As schools shut, children were left without school meals, while furloughed employees, those people made redundant, many self-employed people and employees of micro-companies suddenly found themselves facing food insecurity for the first time. Food banks struggled with the increasing demand.

On the other hand, there was a flurry

of creativity and solidarity. When restaurants and bars closed, some of them started cooking for homeless people or healthcare workers, donating to food banks and dishing out free meals. People took extra steps to look after their family, friends or neighbours, volunteering to shop for the vulnerable and elderly people living nearby. There were campaigns to recruit people made unemployed by the crisis to work on local farms and help bring food to peoples' tables. Some sectors of the food industry (such as spirits and brewing) switched their production from beverages to hand sanitisers, which were a rare commodity in the beginning of the crisis. Many more examples where companies and individuals in the food sector helped their communities can be found under FoodDrinkEurope's #FoodHeroes Twitter hashtag.

AIMING FOR A MORE RESILIENT FUTURE

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest global challenges of our age and has substantially changed the economy, politics and society. We must learn from our experiences and tackle the evident vulnerabilities that have been laid bare in the food system. In its new Farm to Fork strategy (F2F), the European Commission announced last May that it will propose a 'food contingency plan' in 2021, with the objective to ensure food supply and food security in the European Union. Meanwhile the European Commission's Joint Research Centre has launched a survey to monitor the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the EU's agricultural-food supply chain. The reasoning is that our reliance on long and complex supply chains and just-in-time delivery needs rethinking.

Increasing resilience could mean introducing shorter supply chains, thus creating a richer ecosystem of foods with more reliable and system-resistant alternatives for production, logistics and purchase. Local production and provision of 'critical' products might include not only healthcare equipment and medical supplies but also staple foods, which could have important implications for the cost of food. All this is at the heart of the F2F, which commits the European Commission to proposing a new 'legislative framework for sustainable food systems' in 2023.

So we all agree that we must strengthen the resilience of our food systems in response to the pandemic. But how else has our perception of the food industry changed during this time?

For a start, many people have become more acutely aware of the role that the agri-food sector and its employees play in ensuring food continuity, safety and security. Pictures of empty shelves have brought home to consumers how much they depend on a reliable food supply and how important the food's origin is. In other words, it has become even more obvious how

valuable safe food and the work of food producers is. We need a resilient agri-food sector, functional food chains and a crisis-proof food supply.

In a nutshell, the coronavirus crisis has highlighted the food chain's systemic importance and this increased appreciation of the agri-food industry and its products must be maintained and nurtured.

For the savoury snacks industry this means that we must continue to work on maintaining a positive image of every food and tackle initiatives that challenge and attack the permissibility of certain foods.

SNACKEX 2021

NETWORKING AND MAKING BUSINESS IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

2021 kicked off with extremely positive news about the launch of robust inoculation programmes world-wide. This is one reason that we are happy to inform our readers that SNACKEX will go ahead as planned on 16 and 17 June in Hamburg, Germany. We are confident that vaccination programme, along with more reliable track and trace systems, fast-testing infrastructure and a general increase in temperatures across Europe as summer arrives, will lead to a much more controllable environment than we faced in the first few months of the year. Together with the local public health authorities and Messe Hamburg, ESA has developed and implemented the safest business environment possible, with plenty of distance on the show floor, temperature testing and sanitising stations, one-way flow of traffic and so on, which should combine to ensure that business can safely be done face-to-face.

I can tell you that the show floor is nearly sold out and we are expecting many visitors from inside and outside of Europe that will make this show a success for your company.

Having started with Kierkegaard looking backwards, I want to close with some advice from Eleanor Roosevelt on how we can best look forward: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."



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