

# MARKET QUARTERLY

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Read how the market adds true value to its customer network







Welcome to the final issue of the Market newspaper of 2025; the issue that marks the end of our year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the opening of New Covent Garden Market.

As we have documented in these pages over the last 12 months, it's been a year full of emotion, as a series of events and occasions gave this great Market and the people who make it what it is the recognition they so richly deserve. The last of those events was a fantastic exhibition that showcased the photographs of Clive Bournsell and gave all of us the first opportunity to view his unique images of market life over the last 20 years.

The exhibition, which ran for four days after two well-attended preview events, summed up the entire anniversary year – delivering joy, pride, awe, laughter, tears and poignancy to the people who were able to visit. For anyone reading this who missed the chance to see the exhibition during its official run – you could still pop in and see the 480 photos, as they will be left on the walls of the atrium in the Food Exchange throughout November.

As well as all the latest news and views, inside this issue we share in the celebrations of County Supplies, which reaches the milestone of 20 years in business this month. During the summer, the firm became the first in a UK wholesale market to achieve EcoVadis certification as it continues to push sustainability boundaries and expand its customer base. Jason Linke, Director of another of the Market's leading lights The Menu Partners, tells us how his firm has adapted its offer to the changing UK pub food scene. We also feature two glowing customer testimonials from very different local retailers who rely on the fruit, veg and flower wholesalers here to keep them ahead of the game. And our latest delve into at the Mission Kitchen membership introduces you to Rye Lane Hot Sauce, another entrepreneurial story hoping to use the Market-based commercial kitchen as a springboard to wider commercial opportunity.

By the time the next issue comes around, the remaining sections of the original C and D blocks of the fruit and vegetable market will be in the early stages of demolition, bringing the curtain down on the last vestiges of the Buyers' Walk that was opened in November 1974 and has remained the wholesalers' home to this day. The end of the latest phase of the redevelopment of the Market will, in January, see the traders in C/D move to shiny, new homes in the new Buyers' Walk and bring the entire wholesaler community back together again under one, very long roof. As you might expect, we'll be celebrating that too – there will be an unveiling or two on January 9th, so look out for further information and invites.

One footnote: you will have noticed that our name has changed to *Market Quarterly*. Disappointingly, we were asked by the National Market Trades Federation to cease using the name Market Times, however we feel the new moniker accurately reflects the paper.

Enjoy the read – we'll see you again in 2026!

Tommy

Tommy Leighton, Market Press Officer



# Jo steps down from General Manager role

After 17 years of service to New Covent Garden Market, Jo Breare stepped down as General Manager of Covent Garden Market Authority (CGMA) at the end of October.

Jo began her career at the Market as Facilities Manager and worked her way up to the last five years spent as General Manager. During that time, she saw the Market commence its redevelopment and the enormous progress since then to being well on the way to the modern, fit-for-purpose and sustainable market of the future.

Her passion for the Market was evident to all and her morning walks will be much missed by the traders.

Everyone at CGMA wishes Jo the very best for the future. Covent Garden Tenants Association (CGTA) Chairman Gary Marshall echoed that sentiment and added: "Jo was extremely popular with all of the Market's tenants. Throughout her time here, whichever role she was

performing, Jo was always incredibly supportive of tenants; she understood how we operate and what we need to be competitive and make our businesses successful here.

"We knew that if there was a problem, Jo would do her very best to find a solution for us," added Gary. "She was an integral part of this unique community and particularly in her time as General Manager became an important listening ear for many and someone who all of us would call a friend.

"Personally, I thank Jo because every time CGTA held an event or a fundraising activity, she was one of the first people to put a hand up to support us. On behalf of everyone here though, her daily presence and her impact on our working lives will definitely be missed and we hope Jo enjoys further success and happiness in whatever she does next."

# Fresh success

Four companies from the Market made their mark at this year's FPC Fresh Awards.

County Supplies was a finalist in the Foodservice Supplier of the Year category, and Premier Foods Wholesale battled it out for Climate Champion of the Year, while one of the Flower Market's newest businesses, Ilobloom, and its oldest Porters Foliage were both finalists in the Wholesale Flower & Plant Supplier of the Year category.

These awards recognise the elite achievers in our industry and being a finalist is a huge achievement in itself. Congratulations to all of the NCGM firms who got their names up in lights – and of course to the winners of every category.

The Market as a whole was also recognised in the Marketing Campaign of the Year category, for the Discerning Diners campaign that had already scooped three national awards this year. So once again we are a key part of the cast at our industry's Oscars.



Above: Damian and Magda Waloch of floral finalist Ilo Bloom, at the FPC Fresh Awards





## Café chef to chart topping DJ

Most nights, you'll find Warren Peaty working hard as a chef at Tony's Cafe in the Fruit & Vegetable Market. By day though, the 55-year-old DJ swaps the bacon rolls for rolling beats and his latest track got him right to the top of the iTunes chart.

The track called My Loving is a collaboration with Birmingham based DJ/Producer Pig Snatchers.

Warren was a DJ when he was younger, but life and work took over and he let it lapse. "Out of the blue, my brother-in-law asked, 'do you want to play at my party?' I told him all my vinyl had gone, but he told me to get the tracks I wanted, put them on a stick and that was that. I got the bug again.

"I've talked to so many people with the same sort of story as me. They had left the music and then during the pandemic, they all started listening to the radio stations and stuff."

Not many of them can claim to be chart-toppers though. "Steve Wildcroft, aka Pig Snatchers, is a good friend," Warren said. "I DJ'd with him three years ago and we finally got in the studio." The duo has been back in the

studio again since, so expect more banging tunes to hit the charts soon.

Loads of radio plays and presenting, gigs and even boat party sets on the Thames had already begun to happen before the success of My Loving. "When I got back into it, I thought no one knows who I am," said Warren, who lives in Watford.

"But I put the big poster up for the boat party here in the Market and...we've had two sell-out boat parties, with six DJs and they were fantastic. I also got to play at Ministry of Sound, XOYO, Egg. And I've done another event, called Shindig. There's a lot more already booked in.

"Whatever I've done, I've always given it a hundred per cent. We work really hard here in the Market, and we don't get a social life in the week. So, when we do go out, we proper go out! Work hard, play hard. Definitely."

## Union Fleurs brings flower reps to London

An international group of flower industry representatives visited the Flower Market in September, as the first stop on a whistle-stop tour of the UK during the Union Fleurs Annual General Meeting.

Union Fleurs, the International Flower Trade Association, had put together an all-encompassing programme for their annual meeting in London; and began a fast-paced, two-day programme of activities by bringing delegates from Colombia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Ecuador, France, Morocco, Italy, Austria, the UK, Kenya, Belgium and Uganda to the UK's primary wholesale flower and plant market.

Wanda Goldwag OBE, Chair of Covent Garden Market Authority, welcomed the group and emphasised the integral role the Market plays in the UK supply chain. "We are always pleased to welcome industry colleagues from around the world to the Market," said Wanda. "It can



be difficult at a distance to realise exactly what our wholesalers do and the huge value they provide the industry. But without fail, when we have the opportunity to introduce our people, their incredible passion and knowledge, and of course the premium quality products that they sell, we see that lightbulb moment when it all becomes clear."

John Hardcastle of Bloomfields of London and Lara Richens of Green & Bloom both spoke to the group about the Market and their businesses, the opportunities and challenges the market faces and some of the common issues affecting the global industry.

Alejandro Martinez, Head of Ecuadorian flower export promotion body Expoflores, which represents more than 400 growers across Ecuador, said: "I was very impressed with what I saw at the Market. It's great to see that our wonderful Ecuadorian flowers are being sold in good volumes and popular with florists here in the UK."

## Chef Pierre showcases premium Premier partnership



Iconic chef Pierre Koffmann, who is one of the family team behind The Food Heroes, brought the British procurement and branding firm's famous food trucks to the UK's number one wholesale market in September.

Pierre was in the Market to greet people as The Food Heroes sampled and showcased a range of products sold and distributed exclusively at NCGM by Premier Foods Wholesale (PFW).

The Food Heroes works with celebrity chefs including multiple Michelin-starred culinary trailblazers Pierre and Marco Pierre White, to bring premium quality produce from farming families across Britain to market. It is the supplier behind the chef-driven Koffmann's and Marco Pierre White Retro brands of fresh and frozen potatoes, as well as a growing stable of vegetable brands that, with PFW's help, have taken the foodservice sector by storm in the last five years.

The food trucks that had spent the summer at festivals up and down the country were located outside PFW's units. As well as being able to try out the aforementioned brands, Market users were offered high-end chicken and chips, courtesy of Ginger Wings, and market-leading non-

alcoholic cocktails, from the Les Vergers Boiron range.

Pierre said: "Premier Foods Wholesale and New Covent Garden Market have played a very important role as we have built The Food Heroes quickly into a major player on the UK food scene.

"We wanted to show our gratitude to our partners and all of the customers across the UK's largest wholesale market for the part they have played in our journey to date and give them a flavour of what's still to come," added Pierre.

Jason Tanner, Founder of PFW & The Menu Partners, added: "Our business has expanded significantly in the last few years and our partnership with The Food Heroes has been central to that growth.

"The product they deliver is consistently the best around and gives our customers a level of reliability that keeps them coming back for more."



# Opening up cross-sector links



How to successfully navigate complex change was one of many discussion topics when 18 people from a cross-section of industry, retail and academia visited New Covent Garden Market (NCGM) recently.

Tagged ‘open learning’, the group’s walking tour was part of an ongoing series of on-site visits curated by Brixton not-for-profit First Hand, designed for professionals wanting to connect emerging ideas to real-world practice.

Twelve attendees were guided through both the original and new Market units, and NCGM’s award-winning waste recycling facility, pausing at each location to learn more and discuss, before moving to the Food Exchange’s Mission Kitchen where a further six attendees joined the group for a breakfast/discussion session.

“Our community of practice shares know-how that doesn’t sit in reports or curricula but in exchanges between real-world practices and disciplines,” explained Dee Halligan, First Hand’s Founding Director, who aims to demonstrate first-hand learning by visiting sites and speaking to experts about the challenges they face. “The visit to NCGM was a skills-focused walking tour offering a chance to explore with others and facilitate cross-sector connections.”

A major talking point was NCGM’s relationship with change, as it continues to successfully trade during a major redevelopment, as well as the relationships between businesses both inside and outside the Market. Representatives from a broad range of organisations included Lambeth Council, British Land and Manchester Metropolitan University, as well as luxury retailer Fortnum & Mason and food redistribution charity The Felix Project.

For Paul Micklethwaite, Research Lead for Design at Manchester School of Art and an expert at the Design Council, the tour opened up a previously hidden part of the capital. “I pass by on the train all the time and because the Market is such a nocturnal world it’s invisible to us. But it’s so important to the city and the wider economy,” he observed.

# Danny’s off to Flanders

Danny Jenkins of Covent Garden Supply Imports was the winner of a holiday-for-two to Flanders, as Belgian fruit and veg exporters treated Buyers’ Walk wholesalers and customers to a morning of fresh produce inspired delicacies.

Danny is pictured here receiving his prize from Anna Duginova, Export Advisor, VLAM, and Nele Van Avermaet, Promotion Manager, Fruits and Vegetables, VLAM, who brought a group of 14 exporter representatives to the Market to meet both existing and potential new customers.

Throughout the opening hours of Buyers’ Walk, a cargo bike packed with croissants, sandwiches and a Belgian chocolate fountain, into which to dip the country’s top-quality blackberries, blueberries and raspberries, was the centrepiece of a showcase that also featured a full range of products - everything from fresh tomatoes and berries to leeks, aubergines, chicory, courgettes, pears, apples, and bell peppers.



# Obituary

## Richard Emanuel

Richard Emanuel, who worked for both Optimus Fruit and Gilgrove in this Market, died recently, aged just 43.

Born at St Helier Hospital, on July 8th 1982, Richard grew up in Sutton and Tadworth and went to primary school in Belmont and The Ashcombe School, in Dorking. Never the academic, he particularly enjoyed playing football and along with his family, supported AFC Wimbledon.



Leaving school at 16, Richard took his first steps in the fruit business with Dave’s Bananas, a local retail and wholesale operation. After six months, he moved to Optimus Fruit and followed father Paul and cousin Philip and others who preceded them as members of what was already a multi-generational family of wholesalers in Covent Garden. Around six months later, he joined Philip at Gilgrove, which as a wholesaler and importer gave him a broader perspective on the industry that would stand him good stead over the next few years.

Richard left the Market in 2002 to work with Paul, who was running the Poupart office in Epsom. Philip joined them in 2004 and they enjoyed a very successful period supplying the UK’s wholesale markets – including NCGM - for the national firm.

Richard eventually moved on again, first to join Total Produce and then Fruesh, which later became Allfresch and had been his place of work for 12 years when he sadly died in Spain, on an exploratory mission for the business.

Andrew Sperling, MD at Allfresch, described Richard as a joy to work with and said he had never met someone so young with his range of abilities in the fruit trade. Richard excelled in both procurement and sales and had built up a global and loyal customer base. Having started out selling a few pallets of bananas in Surrey, he finished his career selling container loads of bananas and other exotic fruits to wholesalers in countries as far flung as Kuwait, Tibet and Iraq.

He had struggled with alcoholism for some time and Philip Emanuel said Andrew Sperling was fabulous in giving Richard hope at difficult times by ensuring his job was kept open for him until he recovered. His funeral was very well attended and the family has expressed their gratitude to everyone who has shown their love and respect for Richard since his passing. It has meant a lot to them.

Richard was not married, but leaves a son, Freddie, his mum and dad Pat and Paul, and his brother Tom.

May you rest in peace, Richard.

# Fresh Union launches cheeky fruit juices

A cheeky new cold-pressed juice brand has been launched at the Market, produced and bottled on-site with fruit entirely sourced from Buyers’ Walk.

FU We Make Juice is the result of a “passion project” for the team at Fresh Union and the firm has brought it to market in response to growing demand for fresh, locally made options.

The initial range includes lime, lemon, orange and apple juices, with pineapple joining the line-up shortly. Each one is produced in-house, reflecting the NCGM firm’s commitment to quality and authenticity.

All the juices are cold-pressed, contain no added sugar and are not-from-concentrate, explained Fresh Union’s Cherrie Murchison. “We’re really excited; we’ve developed and designed the product in-house. It is totally natural and very sweet,” she said.

“It’s very important for us to keep the freshness of the juices at the forefront,” she added. “We could have pressurised or heat-treated the product to increase its shelf life, but we found this affects the taste and quality, which to us is the most important thing. It only has a five-day shelf life, but the flavours we’ve created make it totally worth it. The bottles and the labels are all



sourced within the UK.”

Cherrie estimated that 60% of Fresh Union’s 400-strong customer base has already bought FU We Make Juice in its first month. “It looks pretty good on the bars and counters and it is very good for cocktails, so it has been welcomed. The feedback already from customers has been very positive. And there’s more to come, the team’s next step is to launch a collection of inspired juice cocktails in 250ml bottles, designed for fast casual dining.”

The juice launch is one part of a wider rebrand for Fresh Union, added Cherrie, who has developed the product and branding alongside Fresh Union Founders Robert Murchison and Oscar Gomes. “We’re trying to give our brand a new personality that reflects our chef customer base,” she said. “We want to have some fun with it, so it’s playful, cheeky and irreverent. Already we can see it has been making our customers laugh. Next up is a cheeky new, vibrant pink van wrap which we can’t wait to unleash on London’s streets.”

For more on these stories and to keep up-to-date with news from NCGM, scan the QR code





# Market life through the lens of our Clive

**An exhibition celebrating 20 years of unique images captured by photographer Clive Bournsell at New Covent Garden Market (NCGM) was attended by around 350 people at the end of September**



Entitled 'Wholesale Market Life Through The Lens of Clive Bournsell', the exhibition was held in the atrium of NCGM's Food Exchange building, which was transformed into a bright and inviting gallery space to exhibit Clive's work. A wide range of attendees from across the fresh produce and art worlds attended the retrospective over four days, to view 480 images that framed two decades of life and work across the Fruit and Vegetable and Flower Markets.

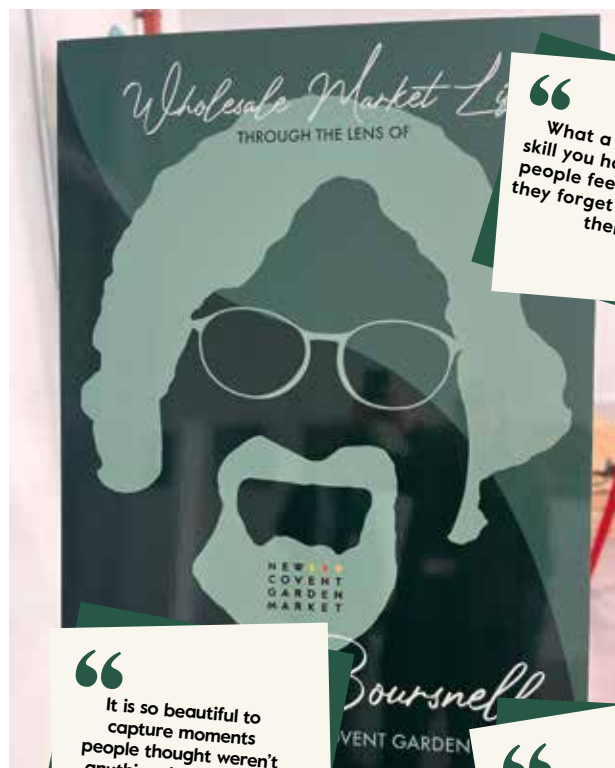
In a nod to the 50th anniversary celebrations, the exhibition featured 50 groups of four photos, based on a series of themes that captured the magic of the Market and the brilliance of Clive's photography. Every group featured images from the last 20 years, with one exception: the exhibition trail began with a black and white image of the final day of trading at the old Covent Garden, sitting atop three shots showing the first day of trading at New Covent Garden Market in November 1974.

A separate wall featured hundreds of Clive's portraits, highlighting faces from the Market's past and present. There were memories (good and bad!), and myriad emotions for the many Market people who came along. No-one went away empty handed, as a beautiful 68-page souvenir booklet featured every photo, and Mission Kitchen member Frankie's Brownies provided her delicacies, decorated with the avatar of Clive specially created for the occasion!

Asked to pinpoint his favourite aspect of the exhibition, Clive said that the people of NCGM take centre stage. "It was a wonderful feeling to see so many people enjoying and really studying my work," Clive said after hosting the exhibition across all four days, alongside the NCGM Communication team. "It was a turnaround for me - the people in the Market have been watching me taking photos for years and years and never been able to see them. Now they've seen my work - and perhaps seen themselves - in contemporary images that capture their daily working lives. They've really absorbed the images and it's been a real joy to be able to capture and showcase this work now rather than having to wait 50 years, when the images become more nostalgic."

Clive suspects future photography visits to the Market will be even easier now, and despite a near 60-year relationship with both Markets, the exhibition has convinced him that he must continue to add to his vast catalogue of work here. "It's made me realise there are parts of the Market that I still haven't photographed, the Post Office being a good example. Now I've had an invitation to visit from the Postmaster! Overall, the exhibition has greatly encouraged me to not give up yet and continue my visits for a little longer."

You'll always be welcome Clive - keep snapping!



"What a wonderful skill you have to make people feel so at ease they forget that you're there!"



"This is such a marvellous tribute to the Market and the people who make it what it is. Thanks Clive."

"It is so beautiful to capture moments people thought weren't anything, but to make them so much more with your clever eye. Keep capturing, Clive!"

"Capturing every moment, the important and non-important alike - the laughs, the connections and the history shine through these photos."



"These are wonderful photos that are such an important documentary record of New Covent Garden Market over time."

"Clive has captured the very essence of this market over the years. What a great show!"





# One sustainable step at a time

**As County Supplies celebrates its 20th anniversary this November, the family-run New Covent Garden Market (NCGM) based foodservice supplier has another reason to celebrate — earning a coveted Silver Medal Sustainability Rating from EcoVadis, the world's most trusted provider of business sustainability ratings**



The achievement places County Supplies among the top 15% of companies globally and the top 5% within the wholesale food and beverage sector. For the County Supplies team, this milestone is not just a recognition of progress, but a testament to 20 years of commitment to quality, responsibility and innovation.

## Solid foundations

Since the start in 2005, County Supplies has become a cornerstone of London's catering industry. The company sources, hand-picks and distributes more than 2,500 lines of fresh produce daily, supplying over 550 customers — from caterers and restaurants to hotels and production companies.

With a 70-strong team and more than 160 years of combined management experience, County Supplies is recognised for balancing traditional values with a forward-thinking approach. The company's ethos — *One Sustainable Step at a Time* — encapsulates its mission to balance business growth with social and environmental responsibility.

"We've grown, evolved and learnt a lot over the last 20 years, but at the heart of it, we're still the same — passionate about fresh produce, great service and the incredible County Supplies team who make it all happen," explains company Founder Robert Hurren.

County Supplies' consistent focus on excellence has not gone unnoticed. The company was a finalist in the Foodservice Supplier of the Year category at the recent 2025 FPC Fresh Awards, after winning the title in 2022 and being shortlisted again in 2023. These accolades highlight its reputation for service quality, reliability, and continuous improvement.

For Robert, the achievements reflect a simple principle:

"Service excellence is central to our ethos. We work closely with our customers to provide specialist sourcing, food safety management, and bespoke delivery solutions — while helping them make informed choices about seasonality, origin and sustainability."

This customer-focused approach is reinforced by the company's 'Best of British' Food Education Programme, an initiative designed to educate buyers about seasonal produce and promote local sourcing through monthly Market Reports, grower & customer interviews, farm visits, client tastings and a new online seasonal produce guide to align demand with availability.

## A milestone in sustainability

In September 2025, County Supplies achieved another significant milestone when it completed its first EcoVadis assessment, earning a Silver Medal for sustainability performance.

This rating places the business in the 92nd percentile globally, among more than 150,000 companies across 180 countries and 200 industry sectors. Notably, County Supplies scored within the top 5% for overall industry score, the top 3% for sustainable procurement, and the top 6% for both environmental management and ethics.

These results underscore the company's holistic approach to sustainability — from compostable packaging and food waste reduction to smarter energy use, responsible sourcing, and community engagement.

"To be rated this highly in our first ever assessment is a big step forward on our journey to make a positive impact — and it's a testament to our amazing team and partners," Robert says proudly. "Sustainability is not a trend for us —

it's embedded into our culture, operations, and long-term strategy."

The *One Sustainable Step at a Time* ethos underpins every part of its operations. The company's sustainability strategy is guided by measurable goals — including a commitment to reduce absolute Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions by 50.4% by 2032 — and supported by internationally recognised standards and certifications. The business holds BRCGS AA accreditation, operates under a rigorous HACCP Food Safety Management System, and proudly maintains Red Tractor and LEAF credentials. Its EcoVadis recognition now adds another respected benchmark to a growing list of sustainability achievements.

"We operate under rigorous sustainability policies that ensure high standards in traceability, quality and environmental responsibility," says Robert. "This is reinforced by responsible sourcing and a continuous commitment to developing our people."

Sustainable sourcing starts with responsible relationships and clear priorities," he adds. "We have always worked



hard to ensure that the produce we supply is not only high quality but also sourced in a way that supports ethical and environmentally sound practices.

"We now ask all suppliers to sign our Supplier Code of Conduct and complete an assessment questionnaire. We also actively seek out growers and producers who meet recognised standards such as GlobalGAP, RSPCA Assured, Soil Association, Red Tractor, FSC, Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and BRCGS.

"We put a strong focus on local and regional sourcing," Robert says. "Being based at New Covent Garden Market gives us the flexibility to work directly with trusted wholesalers who share our values. This allows us to balance quality, price and food miles, reducing the environmental impact of long-distance transportation."

Seasonality plays a big role too. "Thanks to our longstanding relationships at NCGM and beyond, our network of growers, producers, wholesalers and agents, we can source the best of what's in season, when it's at its peak. Our British Farmer Policy Statement supports this approach and helps ensure that we're making responsible choices based on what's available closer to home," he says.

"Finally, we work closely with our customers to plan ahead and offer guidance on seasonal availability. Through our



**Right:** Robert Hurren, who founded County Supplies in 2005, reflects on two decades of progress and looks ahead to sustainable success

‘Best of British’ Food Education Programme – including monthly Market Reports, online seasonal produce guide, grower & customer interviews, farm visits and client tastings – we align demand with what’s in season and readily available, to reduce over-ordering and help minimise waste at source.”

## Building a greener future

The County Supplies sustainability drive is also being supported by the ongoing redevelopment of NCGM.

The redevelopment programme will transform the 37-acre Market site into a modern, environmentally efficient hub for London’s fresh produce industry. County Supplies’ future 12,000-square-foot facility will incorporate a range of green building and operational innovations, including:

- Buildings designed to meet BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) sustainability standards
- Zero-to-landfill waste operations, supported by enhanced recycling and waste management systems, including composting and anaerobic digestion
- Installation of electric vehicle charging stations and creation of rewilded green spaces
- Community-focused initiatives such as the newly launched Green Travel Plan.

These initiatives align with County Supplies’ broader mission — to not only reduce its own environmental footprint but to lead by example within the UK’s wholesale food sector.



# Investors in people, processes and the supply chain

**Market Quarterly asked Robert to look back over the first two decades of County Supplies and assess how the company has evolved.**



## Committed to people and community

The company’s sustainability philosophy extends far beyond environmental goals to encompass social responsibility and ethical practice. As a London Living Wage accredited employer, it is dedicated to fair pay, employee development and creating a safe, inclusive and empowering workplace.

The business also engages actively with local communities, supporting education and food access initiatives. “Our success is built on people — our team, our growers, our customers and our community,” says Robert. “We’re proud to be part of London’s vibrant food scene and to play a role in making it more sustainable and equitable.”

## Forward thinking

Entering its third decade, the business shows no signs of slowing down. With a new warehouse on the horizon, an expanding customer base, and a growing list of sustainability credentials, it is poised to lead the way in responsible foodservice supply.

“We’ve achieved a lot over the past 20 years, but we know the journey doesn’t end here,” says Robert. “Sustainability, innovation and collaboration will define the next chapter of County Supplies. Our goal is simple: to ensure that great food and a greener planet always go hand in hand.”

“If I think back, County Supplies began with a deep-rooted connection to the world of fresh produce. My earliest memories are of Saturdays spent on my grandad and uncle’s fruit stall in Fulham, where I started helping out at just 10 years old. By the age of 12, I was cycling from Kingston to Fulham to set up the stall, waiting for the early-morning lorry loaded with fresh produce from New Covent Garden Market – the same market that would later play a central role in the County Supplies’ story.

At 20, I met Peter May – a close friend of my dad and a well-respected figure in the industry. Peter became both mentor and close friend to me. This friendship laid the foundations for County Supplies, which we co-founded in 2005. Although Peter sadly passed away in 2018, his influence continues to define the company’s values to this day.

When we started out, I could never have imagined the business would grow to the scale it is today. The past 10 years have brought huge changes – not just for us, but for the whole industry. What began as a small team of 18 has since grown into a company of nearly 70. Today, we serve as a trusted partner to London’s catering industry, top restaurants and prestigious kitchens with an ever-growing list of fresh produce.

Our original focus was quite straightforward: supply good quality produce reliably. That’s still at the core of what we do, but the way we go about it has evolved massively. Clients today expect much more – from traceability and environmental standards to year-round availability – and we’ve had to adapt quickly to meet that.

Climate change has had a major impact too – more unpredictable weather, shorter planning windows and greater pressure on growing conditions here and abroad. We’ve had to constantly evolve to keep up. So, while the fundamentals haven’t changed, the business has taken on a shape we couldn’t have predicted at the beginning.

Over the past 20 years, we have invested heavily in our processes, people and supply chain to meet the evolving needs and tastes of our customers. It’s now a 24/7 operation, working more closely with New Covent Garden Market wholesalers and directly with some of Britain’s leading growers.

Achieving an EcoVadis Silver Medal rating and becoming a London Living Wage employer this year were significant milestones. Being named a finalist for Foodservice Supplier of the Year at the 2025 FPC Fresh Awards – following our win in 2022 and shortlist in 2023 – was another proud moment.

What we take greatest pride in, however, is our continued growth and success. Our team has expanded by over 50% in the past three years – double pre-Covid levels. We continue to work with a range of innovative chefs and kitchens, from sourcing unique produce requests for brilliant Michelin-starred chefs and feeding the animals at London Zoo; to supplying major events such as the British Grand Prix and Ascot and making sure everyone is well fed on blockbuster film sets – where we’ve been known to feed a few famous faces along the way!

We’re proud to help feed London every day – supporting the chefs, caterers and kitchens that bring exceptional menus to life all year round.”



# The Menu Partners: helping to build stronger pub menus



The Menu Partners (TMP) has swiftly built a reputation as one of the UK's leading foodservice suppliers, working closely with more than 700 pubs – including groups like Young's and Fuller's – to create cost-effective, seasonal menus that excite chefs and customers and, importantly keep kitchens profitable. At the centre of this operation is Jason Linke, a man whose decades of experience in produce supply and deep understanding of chefs' needs have seen him become a trusted advisor to some of the best pub operators in the country

## A resilient and evolving sector

Jason is optimistic about the pub sector's future. While drinking habits have changed and running a pub has become more demanding, he believes pubs remain central to British culture. "People see pubs as a treat now, and expectations are higher," he adds. "The food offer has improved massively in the last decade. You've got Michelin-starred pub restaurants, and plenty of high-end operators who know their customers will pay a bit more for quality."

For TMP, the role is clear: to be a true partner, not just a supplier. That means understanding each pub's clientele, offering the right products at the right price, and providing the inspiration and support chefs need to deliver menus that are both commercially sound and exciting to eat.

## Why menu freedom matters

In Jason's view, pub groups tend to fall into two camps: those with a fixed, uniform menu across every site, and those that give chefs their creative freedom, albeit within agreed parameters.

"If you've got two pubs in the same group in the same neighbourhood with identical menus, you lose the repeat visit incentive. Young's lets chefs work with the same core ingredients but create their own dishes. That's what keeps the offer fresh – you can go into one Young's pub on Monday and find a totally different menu to another down the road on Wednesday."

TMP supports this by advising chefs on availability and pricing, often suggesting specials that make the most of peak-season produce. The result? Stronger menus, engaged chefs, and customers who keep coming back.

## Gastro strategists

Jason's relationship with the Young's pub group stretches back more than 15 years, beginning with his supply to the 30-site Geronimo Inns chain – widely recognised as one of the first true gastro pub groups. When Young's acquired Geronimo, they inherited not just the pubs, but a new way of thinking about food.

"At the time, Young's wasn't known for its food offering," Jason recalls. "It was the same menus across the chain, nothing that really stood out. But they liked what we were doing with Geronimo, so they gave us 10 pubs as a trial – and it grew from there."

That growth came from more than just delivering produce. Jason and his team worked with Young's to overhaul its purchasing system, moving from 900 free-choice listed products to a streamlined "larder" of 80–90 core lines – everyday essentials like chips, onions, and mushrooms – supplemented by seasonal lists.

The impact was immediate: fewer unavailable items, lower prices thanks to seasonal buying, better GP performance, and less waste.

## Seasonality and storytelling

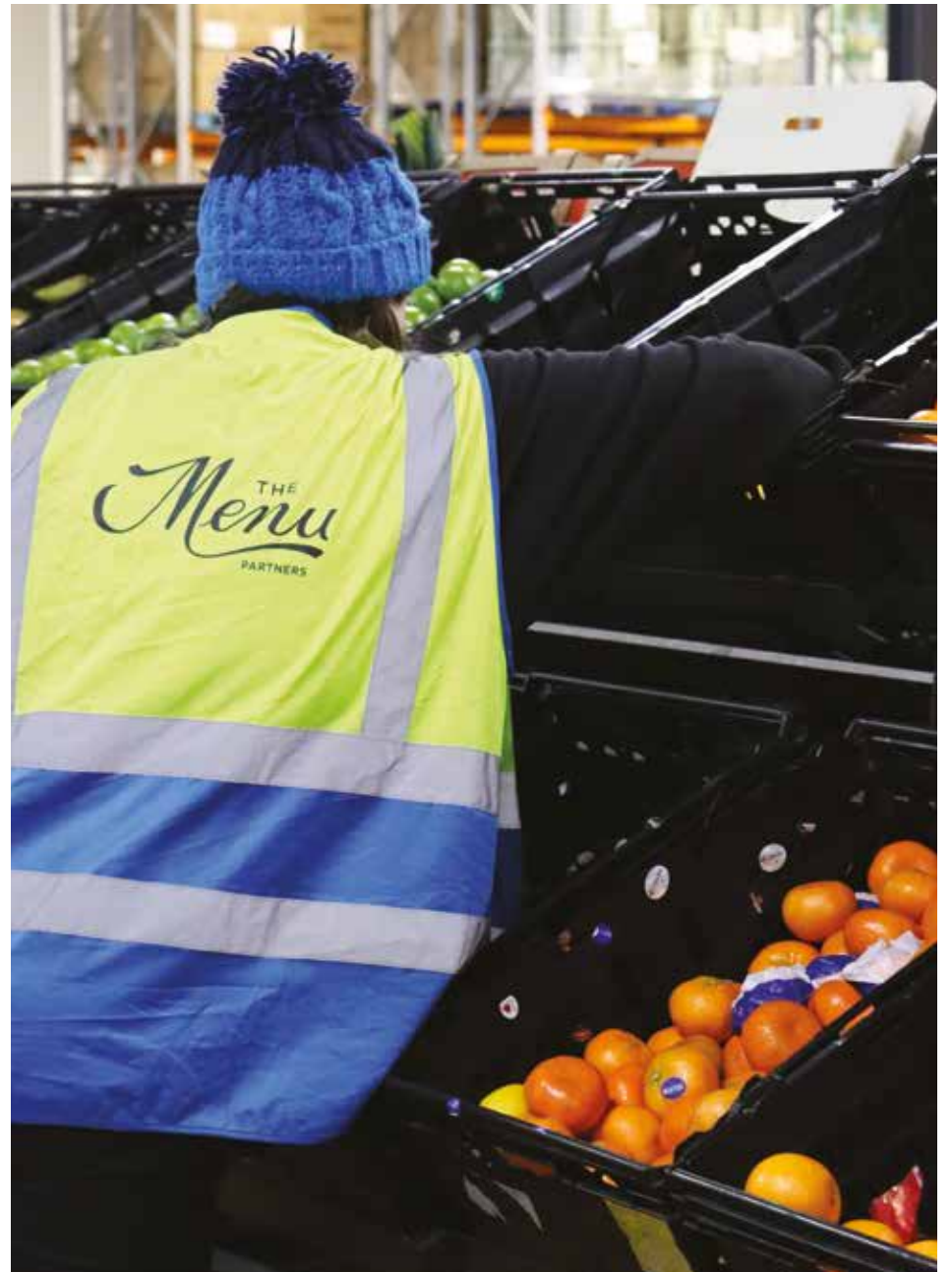
One of Jason's core beliefs is that pubs should champion British produce when it's in season – not just because it's cost-effective, but because it excites chefs and diners alike.

"We've brought seasonality back to some pub groups. Sure, you can buy imported strawberries in December, but should you? As a UK pub, why not highlight home-grown products? It keeps the menu fresh and connects people to where their food comes from."



**Pictured:** Jason's decades of experience have made him a go-to strategist for UK restaurant and pub groups; The Menu Partners fleet is to be spotted across southern England and increasingly further afield; and chefs are building their understanding of the supply chain with trips to meet the growers





“Chefs are excited when they see asparagus back on menus after six months without it. Diners are excited to eat it. Everyone wins when the menu moves with the seasons.”

To reinforce this position, TMP runs “Inspiration Days” where chefs visit growers like Barfoot’s of Botley or the Isle of Wight Tomato Company. They see production first-hand, hear the sustainability stories, taste products in the field, and return to their kitchens inspired.

Jason fronts these days in the field. “When chefs understand the challenges growers face – weather, yield, season length – they make better menu decisions. And when they hear about things like Isle of Wight Tomato Company generating 70% of the island’s energy, they want to share that story with diners,” he says.

## More than fresh produce

While fresh produce remains at the heart of TMP’s offer, the company has expanded its service to supply dry goods, dairy, meat, and frozen – replacing up to eight separate suppliers for some customers. That means fewer deliveries, a single invoice, and more streamlined ordering for busy pub managers.

While fresh remains king, Jason sees a growing role for frozen in professional kitchens, especially for consistency across large estates.

“There’ll always be a place for hand-cut chips,” he says as a for instance. “But if

you’ve got 260 sites, cooking and quality will vary. A high-end frozen chip, like the Koffmann’s range we supply, delivers the same result every time. And products like Marco Pierre White’s frozen spinach and Yorkshire peas are so good they’re used in Michelin-star kitchens.”

## Scale and selective growth

TMP now runs over 200 vehicles, delivering mainly at night to reduce congestion and emissions – though city restrictions often make routing a challenge. Around 80% of its pub supply comes directly from New Covent Garden Market, with turnover topping £300 million this year.

The group, which also includes Premier Foods Wholesale and Absolute Taste, serves everything from London pubs to the Falkland Islands, and from Michelin-starred dining rooms to major events like Formula 1 and The Open Golf.

TMP still supplies independents where it makes commercial sense, but the focus is on building deeper partnerships with key clients rather than chasing every new lead. “Instead of looking for constant new business, we ask: what more can we do for our existing customers?,” explains Jason. Growth is deliberate and sustainable. “We’re not rushing. We’re building a diverse customer base across all areas of hospitality,” he adds.

## Cost control without compromise

In today’s climate, pubs face rising wages, high alcohol duty, and increased energy costs. TMP helps them stay competitive by optimising usage and reducing waste rather than simply cutting quality.

Portion control is one area of focus. Jason says: “It’s not about being tight-fisted – it’s about understanding what diners actually eat. If half the garnish comes back untouched, why put it on the plate? Micro cress used to be everywhere, but often it didn’t add anything to the meal and ended up in the bin. Now chefs use it when it makes sense, and watercress is making a comeback.”

By focusing on in-season British produce – like Scottish girolles at half the price of imported alternatives – pubs can deliver better quality at a lower cost, he says.

## The recipe for success

Jason’s roots in the Market run deep. He first helped his grandfather load lorries at New Covent Garden when he was just seven or eight. By 17, he was buying trays of produce, selling them around the West End, and building a loyal customer base box by box.

From those early days, he’s seen huge changes in the industry – the rise of the gastro pub, the growing sophistication of the British diner, and the increasing importance of sustainability. His experience with Michelin-starred restaurants through his earlier company, Cream of the Crop, taught him the value of trust and consistency.

He sums it up simply: “Partnership is about understanding each other. Chefs know if you’re spinning them a line. My job is to be straight with them, to share what I’ve learned from growers, from other chefs, from the market. And I’m still learning every day.”

“We can’t offer white cabbage to replace tenderstem broccoli, but we can offer cavolo nero. It’s about knowing what works, communicating, and being flexible. And it’s about making sure that growers, suppliers, pubs, and diners all get value from the chain.”

In an industry facing rising costs, changing customer expectations, and ongoing supply challenges, The Menu Partners’ blend of market expertise, seasonal focus, and collaborative approach is proving that cost-effective doesn’t have to mean cutting corners – it can mean raising standards.

And as Jason knows from his lifetime in the market, when you get that balance right, everyone – from grower to chef to customer – is better off.

This article is an amended version of a piece first written for *The Morning Advertiser*





# Quality focus wins the day for Raj

**The Battersea General Store blazed a trail as the first retailer to open at the re-imagined Battersea Power Station back in 2017, with fresh fruit and vegetables supplied by New Covent Garden Market at the heart of its premium offer. With a sister store – The Chelsea Grocer – now open on King’s Road, the close working relationship with the Market continues**

## Tapping into a local source

Opening a 6,500 sq ft grocery shop in the heart of a decommissioned power station site wasn’t for the faint hearted, but for owner Raj Bathia, the concept of The Battersea General Store was a ‘crown jewel’ he couldn’t turn down. With 3,400 new homes about to be built in the vicinity, he saw the potential for opening a grocery store able to tap into the wonderful assortment of fresh fruit, vegetables, and flowers located on its doorstep at New Covent Garden Market (NCGM).

## Local lad with a world view

Raj grew up in Clapham Common, a couple of miles from NCGM, with fresh fruit and vegetables always ‘a big thing’ for his family growing up. “My father-in-law used to always visit NCGM,” says Raj. “He was one of the early traders there and we were working with MG & Sons at that time. We were receiving deliveries from New Covent Garden daily, so I was always aware of the Market’s existence, but I never had a need to go there myself until I opened my first store.

“Because that’s when I wanted quality.”

Raj opened his first coffee shops and delis in 2001, eventually making the move into grocery in 2008 with his first location in Chelsea Bridge Wharf. “It was a Berkeley Homes development offering a mix of retail and apartments,” says Raj, “and the concept was originally going to be a deli and coffee shop with a large seating area. It was the shop fitters who said I should make at least half of the space into a grocery store. Credit to them, I looked at it and it made sense what they were saying. That’s how the entire journey started.”

Raj had an idea - his store wasn’t just going to be a regular grocery



convenience store with goods that you could get from any of the national wholesalers. Oh no, nothing like that. “I’d travelled the world extensively from a young age and have always been in the food business or associated with the food business in one form or the other,” explains Raj. “I was used to dealing with all sorts of different people and looking at the type of purchasing habits they have and what type of products they’re looking for. My concept was to sell products from every major country and bring all of those best-in-class products under one roof.”

Central to the offer was best-of-the-best fresh produce. For comparison, Raj tried a few wholesalers based at other London wholesale markets, but the quality just wasn’t there he says. “I wanted quality, that’s why we went to New Covent Garden, as we needed a different grade of fruit, the best fruit and veg that you can get. We purchase our produce when it’s in season where possible because then you’ll get maximum flavour. What this market offers us is true seasonality.

“We had a beautiful fruit and veg boat custom-made for our first store, filled daily with the finest produce from the Market. We’d visit early, early doors, pretty much every day. We also had a wholesaler who was delivering to us daily.”

Raj established strong relationships with a host of Market businesses, including P&I Fruits and The French Garden, both of which still supply his stores. “The daily visit to the Market was essential, going to several suppliers depending who had what and cherry picking the best produce. And it really kept us in line with what was in season. Thanks to conversations with our suppliers, we knew the origin of all our fresh

# Happy Customer

★★★★★

produce and spent a lot of time on our displays. I think that is really important, isn’t it? Especially with fruit and veg, as it’s so colourful. The smell, and the look and feel is vital.”

Even though Raj now has multiple locations, including the Battersea General Store and The Chelsea Grocer, he still monitors each display every morning to ensure his fruit and veg is displayed at its best. “The managers of each store send me pictures with fruit and veg every day, and I’ll check them. Every single day. Is everything correct? Is everything filled properly? It’s so important. My office is here in Battersea, so I check our displays here every day first thing, then I visit the other stores as well. Merchandising is so important, and it didn’t take me ages to learn this.

Every box has got to be exactly right. You know, someone could have come and squashed a grape or squashed some fruit. Replenishment is really important, isn’t it? Especially with something as perishable as fruit and veg. Quality checking. Continuously. That’s been a big thing for us.”

In addition to the best fresh produce, Raj’s stores offer food and drink from across the world. Korean products, crispbreads from Norway, American foods and candies, plus a comprehensive selection of wines from both the Old and New World. “I went deep into the wine section of our store and put an assortment together which was spectacular,” says Raj. “In Bordeaux, for example, you have the best chateaux, the first cru chateaux, and then some of them produce a second wine and a third wine, which is under their brand, but they put it under a slightly different label so it’s more affordable. Instead of £200, it’s like £50 or £40 or even £35. So it allows people to drink from a great chateau, a great





winemaker, but at a much more affordable price. And it’s an entry level? If you like that, then you can step up and try this.”

At the same time, Raj’s locations sell regular groceries. “People always want their tomato ketchup,” he jokes, adding: “You know the phrase ‘bread and butter lines’, right? We were selling bread and butter, Walker’s crisps, Heinz baked beans. Any grocery business fundamentally needs to have the basics people live by every day. And actually, it becomes the basis of your business. Everything else is the cherry on top.

“Over a period of a couple of years we curated an extensive range of amazing products from across the world, as well as lots of local stuff. And at the same time, whilst this was all going on, the centrepiece was our beautiful fruit and veg boat,” he says.



Raj defines the Power Station as an ‘interesting place to be’, a unique viewpoint gained from being the first shop to open in the development back in 2017. After a year, Raj was approached by the Cadogan Group, responsible for many of the retail spaces in Chelsea. “They were developing Pavilion Road, next to Sloane Square and wanted me to join them,” says Raj. “So, we opened a very small unit – a complete contrast to our Battersea store – on a tiny little road that’s been pedestrianised. The road has gone back to the fundamentals of the traditional high street, with us offering general groceries next to an independent butcher, baker, and wine merchant. We don’t offer fruit and veg in that shop because there’s a fruit and veg store there already called Natoora. Each shop has its own speciality, and knows what it has to focus on.”

When the iconic grocery shop Partridge’s decided to relocate from its Chelsea home on King’s Road to nearby Gloucester Road, Raj saw an opportunity to bring his Battersea offer to the heart of SW3. “In the same way we launched in Battersea, we were targeting a top-end clientele in Chelsea. So we have different assortments, products and offers for each of the two shops. For example, The Chelsea Grocer stocks 2,000 varieties of wine, compared to 1,500 at the Battersea General Store. But it’s the same principle - we offer best in class. And at the heart of our offer is fresh fruit and veg. You can sell all the ambient goods you want. All the plastic packaging or whatever it is you want. But fundamentally, what’s going to draw customers and what’s going to satisfy customer needs more than fresh

**From little acorns...**

Raj started his business empire in 2001, opening a coffee shop followed by a delicatessen. Fast forward 24 years and he’s added five prestigious grocery stores, two in Chelsea, one in St John’s Wood and two in Battersea.

**Popularity of Korean food**

“It’s crazy how Korean food has become such a big trend,” says Raj, “although we’ve been stocking Korean produce since 2008. Because we had a lot of Korean tourists, we used to have an entire Korean section in one of our delis.”

**The very best food and drink**

Raj wanted a different concept to what already existed at independent supermarkets in the UK, visiting New Covent Garden Market every day to hand-pick his produce. “I wanted to see what was in season so that we could offer the freshest produce to our customers,” says Raj. “What NCGM offers is flavour, seasonality and choice.”

**Constant innovation**

Battersea General Store was the very first shop to open at the newly re-developed Battersea Power Station, back in August 2017. Success didn’t happen overnight, with the shop layout and offer constantly changing to reflect feedback from shoppers, product sales and demand. With a strong desire to offer his customers the very best shopping experience, Raj’s innovative streak has allowed him to continually tweak his range – what might be called ‘agile’ working in today’s world – to ensure the General Store continued to change its layout, refine its offer, and ensure the best service that turned casual shoppers into valuable return customers.

**Suppliers:** The French Garden is one of Raj’s key suppliers at NCGM, plus B&D Flowers in the Flower Market, which has created the wonderful displays for all of Raj’s shops. “Flowers are a big part of our offer as our demographic really appreciate them,” he says. This year saw The Chelsea Grocer take part in ‘Chelsea in Bloom’, a competition run by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) to coincide with May’s Chelsea Flower Show. “All the local retailers compete to create the most striking flower displays,” explains Raj, “and we did really well this year, winning a silver medal. We worked with Philip Corps Floristry, who created all our displays.”

**Looking forward:** “We’re looking for growth every year, in each of our stores,” says Raj. “We sit down as teams and work out what we’ve done that’s successful, and where future growth is going to come from.”

fruit and veg? It’s healthy and we’re giving our customers a very healthy offering. Then if they go on to buy some other products, that’s fine.”

Although Raj’s stores attract a wealthy clientele, his fruit and veg offer is fairly priced, offering good value for money. “I’ve proved that you can sell high-quality fruit and veggies and still make a profit. You need to be in the right place though, with the right clientele.” Raj explains that even in the short journey across the river, he’s noticed differences in the demographic shopping for fruit and veg. “In Chelsea, people are willing to spend different levels of money on the top, top, top quality,” he says, “so there’s certain fruit and veg we buy from New Covent Garden that we stock in Chelsea in our new store, that we don’t stock in Battersea, for example.”

One of Raj’s merchandising secrets is for everything to be very organised and very clean. “I like to have a massive assortment and choice in every single product category,” he says, “whether it’s olive oil, whether it’s salt, whether it’s fruit and veg or wine.

“It’s 2025 now, eight years since we first opened in Battersea and six months since we opened in Chelsea. And we are still tweaking the assortment every single day. The tweaking never stops. We’re introduced new product categories that we didn’t do before we opened up. So, you’re constantly responding. Because it’s not about us? It’s about what the customers want to buy. We’re just there to serve. And it’s important we remember that.”



# Roka brings down curtain on floral career

**Flower Market customer Roka, owner of mobile florist 'Roka Brings Flowers', has been a customer at New Covent Garden Flower Market for the past five years, bringing her distinctive pedal bike to Nine Elms twice a week to purchase stock. Having made the decision to 'retire' from the industry while still at the top of the floristry game, Market Quarterly takes a look back with Roka and finds out what's inspired her love for flowers**



Happy  
Customer

★★★★★

"I've been a florist for 10 years in total, five years working for others, five years for myself" explains Roka with the signature chatty style that her customers find so endearing. Speaking from her narrowboat home (currently moored just outside London) Roka explains how she became a business owner almost by accident.

"I've always been a very creative person and loved flowers, so when I was offered the chance to become a retail florist in Pimlico, I jumped at the chance. I started in Covent Garden, then Dulwich, and I was based in Pimlico when the pandemic struck, and the business was forced to close. The entire industry collapsed because all the restaurants and hotels were shut and there were no events due to the lockdown. I was furloughed along with all my colleagues in March 2020. I loved that place, we'd always crack jokes, I felt appreciated, and we were a good team. But I really missed the creative aspect.

"I had a friend who had this slow fashion company making underwear in Brixton, and she hired me, so I retrained and started to work as a tailor. But when I looked at Instagram and saw other people's work with flowers, I was very much missing it - I was seeing beautiful bunches and missed the joy of flowers so, in July 2020, I decided to start my own flower business - Roka Brings Flowers."

## The route to Roka's success

"Being creative is a useful survival skill and I backed myself to be successful as you've got to have confidence in what you're doing," says Roka. "Other people's opinions are important, but the most important opinion is the one you have of yourself and your ability. Part of my success is being able to travel and experiment and not being too scared to fail."

Instead of a shop, Roka chose to sell flowers from a bicycle at Camberwell Green Farmers' Market, which had luckily stayed open, because it was considered essential. "On my first day I visited the Flower Market really early and spent £70 on flowers," says Roka, who admits that until that stage, her bosses would do the buying element of the job for her. When she became her own boss she took over purchasing, and had never visited New Covent Garden Market before that day.

## Roka's first day of trading

In a stroke of luck, on her first visit to the Flower Market Roka bumped into a friend who owned flower shops, who introduced her to well-known traders such as Saul (Pratley Flowers and Plants), Dave (DG Wholesale Flowers), Eddie (at Dennis Edwards Flowers), and Darren 'Mr French' (at R French and Sons). "I wanted to sell British-grown cut flowers," says Roka, "and those introductions made it much easier and a less intimidating experience. Eventually, visiting the Flower Market became the best part of my day. I was excited but a little worried too as nobody knew I would be selling flowers at Camberwell, and I wondered if anyone would be interested. At the end of my first day, I'd made a £60 profit! That felt amazing as I'd paid myself a wage."

Roka started with a regular bicycle that had a small basket. She secured one day (Saturdays) at the Farmers' Market, one outside a bakery (Fridays), and when the bakery closed she moved to Lower Marsh (Fridays). "It was always a tactic to work around the weekend because people had occasions to buy for," says Roka. "Adding flowers to the market was a mood changer, lifting people's spirits up. People would come to buy from me as everyone else was closed, there were no florist shops open, and my customers still had money from the pre-pandemic times."

“ The most important opinion is the one you have of yourself and your ability



## Growing the business

A second selling location at the bakery helped Roka quickly establish her business via word of mouth. "I was keeping my expenses low as I didn't have to pay for storage because I was basically going from the house to the Flower Market, then selling from my two locations," says Roka. "I invested in tools, a trolley and buckets. The bike came later and cost £300, so in total I'd invested £500 before day one of selling. I broke even within a few weeks and was into profit."

Roka expanded to Lower Marsh Market, a historic street market near Waterloo station, and her fame grew thanks to interviews with a Channel 4 TV programme called *Narrow Escapes* and Sunday broadsheet *The Observer*. By Christmas 2020, business was booming. "It was crazy because I was getting more and more recognised in the community and I was selling Christmas decorations, and Christmas wreaths," says Roka. "I felt quite established, and I was starting to earn better money."

Roka's next idea was to investigate if she could grow her own flowers. "One of my friends introduced me to a neighbour who had one of those big Victorian houses with a very long garden," says Roka. "The garden was totally wild so I asked the owner 'hey, could I use your garden to grow some flowers?' I planted 4,000 tulips and she allowed me to grow flowers for the next four years! I had two months in the spring and then three months in the summer. I was able to still buy my flowers from the Flower Market and combine them with my homegrown flowers from my neighbour's garden."





The best part of the day

Roka was now visiting the Flower Market three times a week, and it remained the highlight of her days, as she explains: “New Covent Garden Market is where the creativity starts, when some flowers or colours catch your eye. And then you have to envision what sort of bunches you’ll be selling. The traders would help me by asking what my budget was and talking about what would work because of the weather. I’m selling outdoors, so I need to ask: ‘Is it going to rain?’ If so, then hydrangeas. ‘Is it going to be super sunny?’ Then let’s not risk any soft flowers.

“No matter what the weather, I would wake up at stupid o’clock and cycle in the rain to visit the Flower Market. Then you have this warm welcome - it’s just one of those places where you visit and your mood gets lifted up. And The Garden Café. I want to mention the team! They just look at you and know your order, which is so sweet,” says Roka.

Creating a demand

After several months of trading from multiple locations, Roka decided to ‘train’ her customers to visit her on a specific day and consolidate her operation from just one venue. “When you run a flower shop you purchase flowers which last for at least a week or two for a good reputation” she explains, “and you have lots of walk-in customers visiting across the day. I thought it would be better to just accumulate my customers in one day, at one location. I saved time and kept the expenses low by only buying what I suspected I could sell that day so there was no wastage. I didn’t want any waste as I didn’t have anywhere to keep the flowers for the next day.”

That was by design from the beginning and Roka established a regular buying pattern for her customers, aiming for the goal of every successful trader – lucrative repeat business. “At Camberwell Farmers’ Market there was



a time where no matter how much I would bring, it would always sell out,” says Roka. “The first two years were amazing, then in the last year two years I started to see a big difference in how people spent their money, with demand for flowers decreasing.

“I used to have so many regulars queuing up before 10 o’clock for me. And then, suddenly, some of them left the area or moved out of London. Also, there were other regular customers who started to buy from different places, when all the florist shops finally reopened.”

The decision to retire

Diminishing trade drove Roka to make the tough decision to call it a day and try her hand at other creative opportunities, as she explains. “Basically, for the past year and a half I’ve been doing Roka Brings Flowers out of nostalgia for the whole concept. I still love meeting the regular faces and going to the Farmers’ Market. But the truth is that I’m retiring and I’m looking forward to trying something new.”

Narrowboat minded

“I work from my narrowboat, which keeps my costs down. I’m currently moored in Essex, but I was previously moored in London. That was great for commuting to the Flower Market, but the canal towpath was just too busy and noisy for me. Now I’ve got the country life, it’s very peaceful and helps me to be creative. Living on the water means that I’m part of nature and I love my current life and it’s such a change to the hectic London life that I used to live. I’m happier in the countryside and it’s the perfect time for me to ‘retire’ from floristry.

“I’ve achieved my goal of setting up and running my own flower business and I’ve gained so much confidence from the experience. It was perfect at the time, and I feel I’ve fulfilled my dream,” Roka says.



Embracing challenges

Despite Roka’s love for New Covent Garden Market and the floristry business, now’s the right time to start a new adventure, she says. “As well as my flower business I have a couple of other things going on, and that’s what I’ve decided to focus on in the future. I’ve got big plans as I’ve been given the gift of a creative frame of mind, so I’ve got to embrace new challenges.

“There might be a time when I do want to return to floristry as I’ve enjoyed it so much. If I do, then New Covent Garden Flower Market will be my first port of call!”





# Market-based Greg turns on the heat to spice up mealtimes

**Rye Lane Hot Sauce is a new hot sauce brand combining unique flavours to create a tongue-tingling product. And it's all made at New Covent Garden Market in the shared kitchen facilities of Mission Kitchen**

Creating the best hot sauce using the freshest ingredients, that's the aim of Manchester-born Greg Mather. Now a proud resident of Peckham in south London, Greg's followed his foodie dream to start his own business.

## Plenty of flavours... not just heat

"The idea came to me in 2023, and I started small by making batches of sauce from the tiny kitchen in my Peckham flat," says Greg, whose first goal was to create a delicious hot red-sauce to use himself, with plenty of flavours, not just heat. "I began adding a lot of South Asian ingredients that I sourced from a local supplier in Peckham and that was how I changed the flavour profile. Adding the scotch bonnet chilli peppers offered a great combination of both flavour and heat."

## Making sauces in my flat's kitchen had its challenges

"I had a full year of making sauces from home in small quantities to sell to local delis in south London, but that had its challenges," admits Greg. A batch back then was around 100 bottles, whereas thanks to the state-of-the-art units at Mission Kitchen member Greg is producing 500 bottles each week. "Often I'm so into it," admits Greg, "that I'll forget to take a break and power through until we're finished. My ingredients include lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, fresh herbs, and special spices, with a typical eight-hour production shift split roughly 50:50 on making the sauces then bottling them."

## Sourcing key ingredients

The bulk of Greg's ingredients - mangoes, tomatoes, onions, garlic amongst other key flavours - are delivered directly from independent wholesalers, ready for him to start production at Mission Kitchen. "The problem I've had in the past - and still have to a certain extent - is that I'm

buying smaller quantities, infrequently, which doesn't match the profile that many wholesalers are looking for. As my business grows, I'm keen to source as many fresh ingredients as I can directly from wholesalers here at New Covent Garden."

## Peckham is my home - hence the name

"The company name came from the fact Greg made Peckham his adopted home and he purchases his chilli peppers from Rye Lane Market, around the corner from his flat. He says: "I've lived in Peckham for five years now and love the combination of produce you can buy, reflecting the neighbourhood's diversity. There's a big Caribbean and West African influence across the local restaurants and markets, alongside a Middle Eastern influence."

It was thanks to a local shop called Khan's Bargains that Greg discovered an amazing choice of herbs and spices. After tasting Pickle Masala for the first time - and loving it - Greg incorporated a combination of Caribbean, African and Middle Eastern flavours into his sauces to give them all unique flavours.

## Right combination of flavour and packaging

After conducting research, Greg quickly realised marinades have a short expiration date, whereas hot-sauce products have a longer shelf life. "I also discovered there's

a massive social scene that has formed around hot sauces, with plenty of festivals and events that would allow me to promote the product," says Greg. "Although there were lots of established brands that I'd be potentially be competing with, I knew that with the right combination of flavour profile and brand packaging I'd stand out from the crowd."

After first creating a classic red sauce, Greg opted for a Salsa Verde as his next creation, with the trademark hot twist. "You could purchase fresh Salsa Verde but it had a really short shelf life as a condiment," he says, adding: "I blended together a lot of fresh ingredients to create my Salsa Verde, which quickly proved a hit. It has the consistency of a sauce and can be used as a cooking ingredient or as a dip. It's the amount of fresh produce I use that gives it that perfect garlic, spicy flavour. You can use it across your cooking as it's so versatile and lasts a long time."

## Beer-based hot sauce proves a fruity idea

Greg's latest creation is called 'Topple Sauce' - a partnership with local Gypsy Hill Brewery - which has proved very popular. "I met the team from the Brewery at a hot sauce festival held in Peckham, that brings together like-minded people," says Greg. "It's one of the largest festivals in this part of south London and regularly attracts a big crowd. The brewery already supported the festival and as I loved what they were doing, I reached out about a collaboration. The Gypsy Hill team was keen to work together from the offset and suggested a mango-based beer that they thought would be a perfect base for a hot sauce, as it has lots of natural flavour."

"I'd seen other mango-based sauces before, but our creation really stands out from the crowd," Greg says. "It has complex flavours of malt and barley, but with added heat and sweetness. As a summer special, we've experimented with





smaller quantities. At the minute, I've got enough beer to create one final batch."

**Swapping prison for passion**

Surprisingly, Rye Lane Hot Sauce is a side hustle for Greg, alongside his main career working in the justice system. "My first role after leaving university with a psychology degree was at HMP Pentonville – a big male prison in north London – and now I'm part of the strategy team working at the Ministry of Justice on Whitehall. They've been very supportive of me and I'm just about to take a career break in July, so I'll be able to give all my time to the Hot Sauce project."

Greg admits that while working at Pentonville was really interesting work, the desire to create his own business was always there. "While I was studying I'd worked in bars, coffee shops and restaurants. I started out making marinade for chicken, at first just for myself when I was hosting a barbecue, and then for friends and family who gave me great feedback as everyone loved the combination of flavours. I started making up small batches in my kitchen to share with friends and that was what gave me the idea to see if there was a wider market."

**Giving back to the community**

Rye Lane Hot Sauce donates 5% of profits to food redistribution charity Food Cycle, (also

based at Mission Kitchen). "The tie-in with Food Cycle was a total coincidence, as I didn't realise their head office was at the Market. They're a fantastic charity and have a branch in Peckham that does so much for the local community. We donate surplus produce and they distribute it across the country. Being involved with Food Cycle and giving back to the community in which we trade is important. We want to lay the foundations for when the business grows," says Greg.

**Helping prisoners through food**

With his justice system background, Greg's sure there are more opportunities to combine his two areas of expertise. "There's a charity based at Brixton Prison called 'The Clink', which is a fully functioning restaurant run by the inmates where the general public can go to eat," says Greg. "It's a fantastic initiative, training people to become chefs and also gain front-of-house skills so that when they're released they can enter the catering trade. I really care about social issues and – because of my background – I want to help prisoners with their rehabilitations and outcomes once they are released."

"As a society, we need get better at reinforcing the message that people who go to prison will eventually be released back into their communities. Would people rather they come out as a good neighbour or a bad one? Anything that I can do to support this in the future would be amazing."

**Seasonal specials**

Going forward, Greg says he'd love to continue producing seasonal specials, in limited numbers, based on what's in season and what works well with the other ingredients. "I'd like to continue collaborating with local small to medium enterprise (SME) businesses, so that we can help each other build our respective brands and relationships."

After that, Greg's next goal is to expand the reach of his

**Hot facts**

Rye Lane Hot Sauce – owned by Greg Mather

- Four sauces made at New Covent Garden Market with ingredients sourced from Peckham's Rye Lane.
- A traditional red-hot sauce, using a multitude of south Asian spices paired with scotch bonnet chilli peppers;
- A Salsa Verde sauce, using a selection of fresh herbs paired (again) with scotch bonnet chilli peppers to give it a kick;
- A romesco sauce, based on an authentic Spanish recipe – traditional flavours but with an added spicy kick from (you guessed it) Scotch Bonnet chilli peppers;
- A seasonal creation, made in smaller batches using ingredients at the peak of their flavour profile. 'Toppler' hot sauce is made in conjunction with the local Gipsy Hill Brewery, which supplies its mango-based Toppler beer as a key ingredient.

products via independent delicatessens across the country. "At this stage we're not seeking to work with a wholesaler as that would see our margins decrease and we'd have to rely on volume sales. Rye Lane Hot Sauce is already stocked in independent deli Panzer's in St. John's Wood and I'm keen to continue expanding our reach. For now, we're going to concentrate on building up the business and work with a series of independent retailers. If anyone reading this would like to stock our product, please get in touch."





ON THE MAP

# Choose the Market

In the second interview that looks at some of the people who make this Market what it is, we talk to Dan McCullough, owner of First Choice Produce

**What does New Covent Garden Market mean to you?**

It's the camaraderie; how everyone supports each other. That's all part of the Market, isn't it? I don't think you'd find that anywhere else.

**When was the first time you visited NCGM?**

I was working for a company called Wild Harvest in 1993, based on Queenstown Road in Battersea. We used to sell to a few companies on the Market and working there was a great introduction for me, because I got to meet people like Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White. All the up-and-coming chefs at the time in the early '90s.

**What was your first Market job?**

I wasn't directly employed in the Market, but my first job was as a van driver for Wild Harvest. Then by the time I left - eight years later - I was managing the company and doing everything basically. I used to visit the Market all the time when I was with Wild Harvest and go to French Garden and get a few bits. We also sold products to them.  
But our main business was importing wild mushrooms, truffles and fine foods from pickers and packers all over the globe, visiting Rungis Market in Paris and selling our produce to all kinds of clients. Wild mushrooms were our big thing. This was the main core of the business.

**What did you do next?**

After eight years at Wild Harvest I started my own company – First Choice Fruit and Produce Ltd – back in 2001. I've got a wonderful building now that's just incredible. But it started with me in a transit van. And I didn't know what I was doing! I didn't know anything about fruit and veg, really, because all I knew at the time was wild mushrooms. But I was supported by a lot of chefs. It was a good friend of mine, a chef, who said 'go and buy fruit and veg and I'll buy off you'. That's basically how I started. It wasn't rocket science.  
Then I learned there are two sections of this Market. You've got the businesses who go and sell to the restaurants and hotels And then you've got the wholesalers who sell to other traders on the Market. Selling on the Market is easier, whereas in our line, you take a box, split it, bag it, then put it in another bag, and you have to do all this extra, work. Hence, you've got to charge the restaurants and hotels more to make your margin. Compared with a wholesaler, we'll need five people for every one of theirs.

**How has it been for your business being in the Market?**

It's how my business has expanded. When I first started,



I was working out of a garage for about six months. And then I moved to another unit just down the road from the old Wild Harvest unit in Battersea. By the end of that first year, I managed to get a little unit at New Covent Garden on the Growers Pavilion. It was then that we started growing much quicker.  
Every year we just kept expanding and then gradually got one bigger unit. Then the following year we got two, then three, then four, then five, then six. And then we ended up here in the new units.

**What has changed about the Market?**

The thing that's changed most is this Market used to have way more independent traders, many of whom have now fallen by the wayside, either through retirement or becoming part of a bigger firm. There are far fewer companies in the Market now than 20 years ago, that's for sure.

**What's the secret of your success?**

For me as a business owner, it's about hard

“ For me as a business owner, it's about hard work, attention to detail and consistency

work, attention to detail and consistency. Always buying the best of everything paired with the best service. We're very much customer-focused. The customer's always right and whatever they want, we'll provide.  
If you're going to be a successful business, you've got to be 100% on it all the time. I never stop thinking about the business. I do have time off on the weekends (now), but in the initial stages of building it up, you work crazy hours. I mean, I was easily working 16 hours a day, six-days-a-week in the first eight years, something like that, to build it up. It's a big commitment but I really loved it. I'd recommend to anyone who wants to start a business, just do it. Thank God, ever since I made that decision, I've never looked back, and I've enjoyed every minute of it.