

My love of food has always been why I do what I do. I've had an interest in it from the age of 10, and have now been in the industry for 32 years. It began in the eighties, when I was in my early twenties and had a degree in home economics and a post grad in marketing to my name. I was in charge of Gregg's sandwich offering during its move from being a high street bakery business to being a fast food business, with an amazing boss who supported me and was prepared to take a risk on my ideas – he recognised that I was quite entrepreneurial, even before I did. This side of me has led me to grow a valuable network which can really help people which I love, and helped me to gain first-hand experience in being a food producer (I launched and ran a brownie business until around a decade ago), and have positions on the board of a number of businesses – as well as work with the Food and Drink Innovation Network and Dragons' Den team. From this standpoint, and from working with a number of businesses across the food and drink industry, I can see its constant evolution.

Consumers are constantly learning, and the health sector is a great example of that. Transparency is so important and thankfully there is an increasing amount of food available which people can understand. A couple of years ago, people were talking about clean ingredient declarations and starting to understand that products were made with things you'd find in your own kitchen – that has become the norm. A lot of the foods being talked about as 'healthy' are going to become the norm. Public Health England has just launched a calorie-focused initiative and want the industry to fall in line with that, but in the case of 'healthy' versions of treats like ice cream, where people have been known to eat the whole tub in one sitting, I feel like I need to remind people that ice cream isn't supposed to be eaten every day – this kind of thing can't form the basis of your diet; you need real food. People are gradually going to become more aware about food, what we need and why, and realise that the dangerous trend of cutting out entire food groups is not the way forward. If a product contains a superfood, they're starting to ask if it contains enough for those benefits to show through, and see the benefits of eating certain foods and supplements in unison rather than on their own.

The public is starting to recognise that it makes sense to choose, for example, a drink containing just fruit and water over one containing chemicals and sweeteners which taste like fruit. The danger of sweetener-filled products being labelled as 'healthy' is huge – it's raising people's expectations of how sweet food and drink should be, so when they eat something genuinely healthy they don't enjoy it as much as they could do and so don't purchase or eat it again. Even the most mundane things contain sugars – toothpaste, for example, tastes sweet – and they all tempt consumers to eat more sugar-containing food. Savoury products like cooking sauces, ketchup and peanut butter have long contained a surprising amount of sugar, but that's changing – as consumer tastes evolve, more and more brands are releasing entirely



THE INTERVIEW: JANE MILTON

A passion for food and a knack for making things better are behind Jane Milton's illustrious career

sugar-free peanut butters, and cooking and table sauces are changing to incorporate more vegetables and less sweetness.

The balance of our diet has been knocked out of place; we're eating a lot more meat than we have done before, but I think some people are moving towards the way it used to be. An appreciation of non-meat foods is a big part of the current plant-based movement – I hope that this understanding translates into a wider recognition of the value of a varied diet across the population; not necessarily that people cut out meat altogether, but that they can see the effect it's having on the planet and on their health.

Free-from is an interesting case of a food movement really taking hold, and the language

used around it needs to be considered now more than ever. If something is described as being sugar/gluten/dairy-free, it makes consumers think that they're missing out on something, but if it's approached as a benefit that could change the shopper's thoughts around it – 'reduced sugar' sounds a more positive proposition than 'sugar-free'. For example, Kit Kat has recently changed its formulation to contain less sugar, but the team aren't going down that road marketing-wise – instead, they're promoting the fact that the product contains more milk and cocoa than before, so consumers feel that they're getting more for their money. Another example is Cawston Press, who have reworked their recipes to contain less added sugar

by incorporating more fruit. It's great that consumers who require specialised diets are being catered for, but we need to make sure that what we're putting into the market for them is fully understood by consumers.

With sustainability hitting the headlines at the moment, and the environment in a sensitive position, it's important that today's producers create packaging which is as minimal as possible and made from recyclable materials – more education is needed on what this entails. For example, very few people know that if packaging containing cornstarch, which is used more than you might think, is contained within your recycling bag or bin, the entire contents will go to landfill. As we've become used to stocking up, retailers in particular, manufacturers need to consider ways to maintain shelf life while minimising packaging. This is something that every part of the industry needs to work on together – from the supplier and producer to retailer and end consumer.

QUICKFIRE QUESTIONS

INSPIRATION...

I never tire of meeting people who have an idea, or have started their own business and are making it work. I enjoy working with those people and would never want to only be working with bigger companies, who would likely be slower-moving and less open to adapting. I also love Oprah Winfrey as she is such a positive person. I subscribe to her magazine and it's such a pleasure, as there's no gossip or negativity, it's all just inspiring content which celebrates good people. A lot of my friends call me Pollyanna as I'm such a positive person; I'm a doer rather than a thinker, and will always help people to be doers in their own business rather than relying on me long-term.

MANTRAS...

I have two sayings I'd like to live by. The first is to make the most of every day; I've been off my feet for six weeks following an operation and even then couldn't sit still – that's just not who I am. I would rather try something, fail, learn from it and try again than not try at all. The other is to treat everyone as I would like to be treated; it doesn't matter if I'm speaking to the managing director of a business or someone on the bottom rung of the ladder.

TRENDS...

The potential of tea is not being realised. Black tea with milk will always be popular in the UK, but infusions and benefit-added products are going to become more popular – as will options like green tea and rooibos. People will start to make their own iced tea and use it within their cooking and baking, mixologists will be experimenting with tea as an ingredient in cocktails, and we'll be seeing more tea being paired with food in restaurants as an alcohol-free option.

“ Food is an emotional thing, and people will always want a connection with what they're buying ”

MAKING IT WORK

People who start food businesses are very gutsy – it's not the easiest thing to do, and there are much quicker ways to make money. I love the passion and enthusiasm that those people have, and their willingness to embrace change. They don't just have an entrepreneurial

spirit, they have a desire to bring something to people and make them happy. This is something I've seen it a lot on *Dragons' Den*. Having said that, it astounds me the number of business owners who don't crunch the numbers properly, or have an unrealistic view of what their brand is worth – not knowing your numbers is fatal, and I worry about how they're

running their business, and how they're supporting themselves and their staff.

Small-scale retailers are at the forefront of the industry, and they're always looking at what's next – no wonder that where they go, the multiples follow. They're also closer to their customers, and a producer's range is more likely to soar in an

independent retailer; its team would have more of a connection with the producer than that of a multiple, and the people selling the products will have tasted them. Getting into a multiple is a good thing from a producer's perspective because of the volumes, but their product would be just one of thousands. Independent retailers are doing

a great job and I don't think the industry would ever be without them. Everyone thought that when we got huge out of town stores the independents would suffer, but in my experience that hasn't been the case – food is an emotional thing, and people will always want that connection with what they're buying.