

Salute to Cyprus



Cypriot producers differ from mainstream Mediterranean exporters in the same way that UK independents can't be compared to the multiples – they are conscientiously specialist and proud to be small. International appreciation of Cyprus' food exports is growing and with it, sales scope

The UK is already a key export market for Halloumi, with most consumers having tried and experimented over the last few years, but there are many other artisan and, in some cases, esoteric options, that could give your shop a USP you have

not yet considered. From capers to pickled octopus and olives to high quality pasta, there are certainly some desirable options to stock. A tour of importers and independent retailers reveals the lucrative potential of some such gems to inspire delis and independents to make Cypriot goods an intrinsic part of their offering.

Country of choice

Cypriot producers have an elitist attitude to their food and are happy to admit it. "Cyprus is restricted by its size but the producers prefer to be specialist providers, rather than supplying the mainstream, mass market," says Koullis Christofi, owner of Demos Continental, a Cypriot importer and retailer in North London. "It does not farm intensively like the rest of the world. Most food is predominantly organic and quality is second-to-none. Moreover, specialist products such as pickled octopus, capers, pickled peppers and green cracked olives are not produced in volume so demand is high, giving all foods an exclusive appeal," says Andy Sideras of Dinos and Sons. "Why produce what everybody else is already offering when there's the opportunity to do different? Cyprus'

food appeals to retailers looking to meet the demands of customers that are prepared to pay a premium for something exclusive," agrees Mr Christofi. "Businesses and consumers looking for cheap and cheerful won't bother with Cypriot foods, but they're not the market we want to appeal to anyway," explains Mr Christofi, whose family established the business in 1958. "Cyprus food is raw, uncompromised and grown organically. It's never forced. We'd rather sell a wonky tomato that tastes great than an enormous one which lacks lustre," he adds.

This reluctance to buy into food for food's sake shows the similarities between the Cypriot producer psyche and the independent's stringent sourcing policies. "We used to import Halloumi cheese made by families in their homes. And, before we were bound by red tape and bureaucracy we used a net curtain to sieve milk that was produced by sheep a few metres in front of the house. Of course, this wouldn't pass all the health and safety regulations imposed today, but it's still made in a way that is as close to tradition as possible," explains Mr Christofi.

Unsurprisingly, both consumers and businesses salute such uncompromised stubbornness, which is perhaps a good reason why Cypriot produce fits so nicely into the UK's speciality food market. "Cyprus produces a large amount of really good stuff, but it won't push any product unless it can maintain the quality – I think customers really appreciate that," reveals Peter Joannides, director of John & Pascalis.

Indeed, Halloumi imports to the US increased by 37% in the first quarter of 2009, according to recent data from Reuters, published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The results conclude the success of a

two-year CheesEU campaign. Consumers now understand that the product's authenticity is protected with US certification and sales continue to proliferate. Figures from America, interest from Australia (32 food exporters from Cyprus participated in Fine Food Australia 2009 in Sydney, last month) and pending proposals to have Halloumi registered with the EU as a protected designation of origin product (PDO), highlight a growing, worldwide demand for Cypriot specialties. Of course, the price tag might not be cheap.





Indeed, if you took it out, your nose would have a job coping with the strength of smell!" says Mr Christofi at Demos Continental. This is no word of an exaggeration, these herbs certainly pack a punch in the aroma department, but why are they so much more pungent? "Cyprus is one of the few countries still determined to do things the old-fashioned way. Of course, it's had to come up to modern food standards, but production is still manual and it's a real credit to the country," says Mr Christofi, adding that this attention to detail ensures high quality goods time and again.

When it comes to boosting flavour and aroma, another popular export is Carob Syrup, a type of sweetener which can be used in hot drinks and cakes – in fact, it is sometimes even used as an alternative to cocoa powder cakes. "We sell a lot of Carob Syrup which is good for the digestion, but can also be solidified into a hard paste which you just eat on its own. It's very sticky but delicious and very healthy too," says Koullis Christofi. He also mentions that Colocassi; another food tradition that has stood the test of time, is a vital ingredient in Cypriot cooking that could easily be integrated into the British diet. "Colocassi (an edible stem with a taste similar to the sweet potato and better known as Taro) is beautiful when casseroleed with pork or chicken. It is a much more expensive type of potato, partly grown in rich red soil, but consumers seem to agree they're worth every penny," says Mr Christofi.

Of course, Cyprus is also particularly renowned for its high quality olive oils. With groves aplenty, its oils are already recognised as top quality premium products, celebrated amongst foodies and chefs for their superior flavour, thanks to the country's unique climate and superior soils. Cypriot black and green olives, from native Cyprus olive trees, also have a reputation for being among the finest in the world. However, according to Jim Papanicolaou of Marathon Foods, these products are still finding their footing amongst the densely populated oil market. "The opportunities for market growth are severely limited because they simply cannot be mass produced like

The food comes with centuries of personality. "You're guaranteed full flavour, which people recognise from the cuisine," says Mr Christofi.

Traditional appeal

"Keeping with age-old traditions is our strongest asset," says Mr Christofi. "What we sell here is exactly what retail customers will have bought during their holiday in Cyprus today, two months ago, or two years ago," he adds, explaining how time has only improved the products, not changed them. However, conversely, the awareness in the last 20 years has accelerated, especially when it comes to the country's most world-renowned exports: Halloumi and herbs.

"They are the big ones," says Louis Constantinou, managing director of Katsouris Brothers Ltd, who hopes that their popularity in the UK retail market will have a knock on effect that will encourage consumers to try a whole range of more unusual Cypriot goods. "These products are still penetrating the UK market as we speak. We sell more than £1 million of Halloumi annually, and we're not the only importers. We haven't even scratched the surface of this cheese yet," he admits, alluding to a wider market opportunity. It appears that there are clear similarities between the growing interest surrounding Feta cheese and the potential for Halloumi to take its crown.

"Proportionally, sales between the two cheeses are currently split at 75:25 in favour of Feta, but I really believe the market for Halloumi is growing at a faster rate. Feta has

been one of the UK's brightest cheese stars, but in the last five years Halloumi demand has soared. The industry needs to be prepared for a close-run race," reveals Peter Joannides, director of John & Pascalis. "We used to import 500 tonnes and now it's risen to 2000 – a staggering increase of 400% in 20 years!

"To start with we just needed to supply enough for the Cypriot market but when Delia Smith publicised it circa 1993, respect and interest from both consumers and businesses increased and with it sales," says Mr Joannides. "It's difficult to believe how much popularity has grown. Halloumi is about to go wild in this market; it's already head, shoulders and naval above any other Cypriot provisions, punching its weight in a UK market governed by a British focus," he adds. With enthusiasm heading in a Cypriot direction, it won't be long before interest in the country's other fine exports climbs.

Full of flavour

Herbs will always retain their appeal, but why choose those from Cyprus when we can (and are encouraged to) grow them on our British windowsills? According to the experts, they offer an overwhelmingly powerful flavour that other herbs can't even compare to. "Island oregano can clearly be detected through thick plastic packaging.



Halloumi



With a history dating back to the Medieval Byzantine era, Halloumi is to Cyprus what Cheddar, Mozzarella, Manchego and Feta are to the UK, Italy, Spain and Greece. Produced from a mixture of unpasteurised sheep and goat's milk, it is perhaps one of the most versatile cheeses in the world, making its way into everything from vegetable dishes and sandwiches, to pork dinners, fruit salads and pasta meals.

"The Mediterranean diet has really developed over the past few years, with people all over the world becoming increasingly aware of the health benefits associated with eating foods from this area," explains Peter Kakolyris of specialist food importer, Bevelynn. "Halloumi has always attracted a lot of interest from our customers, particularly independent retailers who are looking for premium products at competitive prices."

Despite stocking Halloumi for 19 years, Mr Kakolyris has never seen a fall in demand and believes sales are set to rise more than ever in 2010. "During the past few years, we have seen a significant growth in the number of people asking for these products, with restaurants, retailers and supermarkets all expressing an interest. In the independent sector, we do a lot of business with Greek and Turkish shops. However, we are hoping to expand into delicatessens and farm shops over the next year."

Mr Kakolyris believes Halloumi, would be the perfect addition to any cheese counter, giving specialist retailers the opportunity to offer their customers a truly authentic product at an affordable price. "Compared to many other cheeses, Halloumi is not an expensive product, costing far less than both Manchego and Feta," he explains. "It also attracts a very large customer-base, appealing to everyone from everyday shoppers and die-hard foodies, to European tourists and students."

Although many countries have attempted to replicate Halloumi over the years, no-one has succeeded in capturing the unique flavour and distinctive texture of the cheese produced in Cyprus. "When you're dealing with food like cheese or olive oil, you can tell the difference between a cheaper product and a higher quality version so it's really important to make sure you source the best," Mr Kakolyris advises. "Halloumi is unlike any other product in the world and I believe it is time we, as an industry, give it the recognition and attention it deserves."

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olives from other countries," he reveals. However, he believes this is a real blessing in disguise for specialist retailers. "It is a major selling point for discerning customers and the quality justifies the premium price. For the deli owner, they sell themselves – although potential customers do need to be educated that the olives they are buying are from Cyprus."

Eager to evolve

With some of its goods already widely known in the UK market, exporters and retailers believe now is the time to court interest in some of the country's lesser-known goods. However, keeping with tradition remains key in its aim for success. "Of course we want Cyprus food trends to prove popular in the UK, but not so much that our heritage,

tradition and quality are compromised to fulfill mass market demand in the process," says Louis Constantinou. He explains that another high quality product is rose water, something that Cypriots are particularly proud of. "We would hate our rose water to be picked up by someone like Schweppes," adds Mr Constantinou. However, this is not to say that producers refuse to consider new ideas for a UK audience. "Cypriot producers are all willing to experiment to meet a new demand, but not at the expense of their core principles," agrees Mr Christofi. "For example, yellow courgettes are indigenous to Cyprus, but they've now secured a following over here in the past five years, prompting the need for something different," he explains. In fact, these bright specimens now feature on the menus of some of the UK's finest dining restaurants.

"I think we'll start to see an increase in Cyprus products because of these tight, traditional roots, rather than a recession-lead regression from them," adds Mr Christofi. "While there is a strong focus on British products, retailers are astute enough to realise their consumers will always want to get products they have eaten or bought on their travels abroad," he explains. "We understand that if they are going to import into the UK, they want things that they really can't get anywhere else."

Say cheese

For Cypriot producers, getting the message across that Halloumi is not the only cheese it offers is incredibly important. In fact, the country boasts far more specialities that could easily excite British consumers. Kefalotyri (also known as Kaskaval) is one example. Similar to Gruyere, this hard, salty yellow cheese is made from sheep and/or goat's milk and means 'head of cheeses' in Greek. Traditionally served deep fried, it can be added to pasta or vegetable dishes and, although it is expensive, it's certainly worth the money. "Kefalotyri is a good option for retailers with a cheese counter, because customers will recognise its value as a mature delicacy," says Mr Papanicolaou of Marathon Foods.

Anari is another of the country's popular cheeses and has achieved recent acclaim following its success at the 2005 World Cheese Awards where it picked up a silver medal. A byproduct of Halloumi, it's a whey cheese, similar to ricotta but with more flavour and a much longer life (six months as opposed to a couple of weeks). Consumers also like it because it's known to be a very healthy option, containing a high level of amino acids. "Anari can be spread over bread or crackers, used to flavour cooking, or sprinkled over pasta dishes in the same way as Parmesan," advises Mr Papanicolaou.

Halloumi variations could also

be about to take a hold of both the UK and ethnic markets. "We've had significant interest for new versions of Halloumi," says Peter Joannides, of John & Pascalis. The UK is a prime export market for sliced, cubed and flavour-added options, which nobody is yet to introduce. We've developed different types of Halloumi by inserting fresh herbs or flavouring the mix of the cheese with things like garlic, peppercorns and cranberry. There's also a real vegetarian market for seared (i.e. already grilled) Halloumi, because people use it as an equivalent to bacon. We're hoping to have these products on retail shelves before Christmas," predicts Mr Joannides, who hopes that such products will fill a significant gap in the UK market.

Something different

Drawing new interest to some of its lesser known goods, Cyprus as a country is keen to put the message across that it is not just about dairy and olives. Indeed, importers based in the UK are flying the flag for products such as potatoes, pasta and flour, in a bid to corner a new area of the market. "Cyprus potatoes are like no other," says Mr Constantinou. "They are three or four times the price of normal potatoes and yet people still buy them because they are truly delicious."

"Premium Mitsides pasta (established in 1932) and Village Flour is also very popular. Traditionally used in dishes such as Pastichio, people are attracted to the authentic appeal of both products," he adds. For uncompromised clout, Cypressa Coffee will also offer your shop something

to shout about, creating a new niche amongst the plethora of over-stocked brands currently littering the UK market.

Thirst for thought

Although unusual soft and alcoholic drinks are imported in their gallons, Cyprus exports offer something a little bit different, which may well give them an edge over the competition. "Kean Juices (made from tropical fruit which flourishes in the country's hot, dry climate) are exclusively grown and produced in Cyprus. The flavours are many and varied, and while their main market is currently with Greeks and Cypriots who know the brand, UK customers are attracted by the unusual flavours," says Mr Papanicolaou of Marathon Foods.

"The award-winning Keo beer, a light, straw-coloured lager with a thick head is brewed in Limassol, Cyprus and has the potential to be a real success in the UK," reveals Mr Papanicolaou. "Deservedly popular among British holiday makers, it has the potential to gain strong sales, but it is currently quite hard to find outside London. The same can be said of Cypriot wines, but cheaper competition from France and other countries means its market potential is untapped as yet," explains Mr Papanicolaou, who believes savvy retailers truly have an opportunity to create a real niche with these goods. "The Zivania aperitif, known as a traditional Cypriot tippie is already very popular," adds Andy Sideras of Dinos and Sons.



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Meat and greet

Although often thought upon as a country abundant in fish, dairy and olive oil, Cyprus also produces a number of fine cooked meat products using traditional and authentic Cypriot recipes. Loukanica is a smoked pork sausage, made from rich Cypriot red wine and aromatic spices and the Loukanica Special is made from the same Cypriot recipe, but with extra red wine and spice. Sheftalia is another typical speciality, a kind of ground pork or lamb sausage, mixed with fine chopped onions and parsley and wrapped in caul fat. Shaped like little balls, they are often eaten from a skewer.

Much of Cyprus' meat products are used as part of a Meze; a popular way to sample traditional dishes and is often the first experience people have of traditional Cypriot cooking, but a broader appeal is starting to spread through campaigns like the Cyprus Wine Festival at Alexandra Palace, and the International Food and Drink Exhibition in London.

"We easily sell a huge amount of Meze every year and find that once customers have tasted it, they're much more interested in trying other varieties," says Andy Sideras. "The sausages are a real delicacy and very popular among the Cypriot, Greek and Turkish communities for their versatility. Spicy pastourma sausage

is cured in hot spices and garlic, traditionally served thinly sliced with wine or an aperitif," says Andy Sideras of Dinos and Sons. They have a fantastically powerful taste," agrees Mr Christofi of Demos Continental.

With interest currently raised for continental goods – meat and sausages in particular – building a niche selection of high quality and more unusual Cypriot meats could help retailers corner a whole new market opportunity. "If Cypriot products are stocked by retailers who know how to sell them, sales would certainly increase," agrees Andy Sideras of Dinos and Sons. "However, these goods should not just be served as seen. Retailers could provide recipes to highlight the versatility of the products. For example, sausages can be finely sliced and placed on pizzas as an alternative to the more frequently used pepperoni, or they can be chopped up and stirred into pasta," says Andy Sideras.

Learning curve

"Consumers now consider many Cypriot products to be synonymous with high quality," reveals Jim Papanicolaou of Marathon Foods, exporter and distributor of Cypriot foods. "Retailers can promote these goods to audiences through targeted in-store campaigns,

tastings and point of sale material such as posters or recipe cards," he adds. However, this needs to be catered for with a comprehensive learning curve.

"It's all about educating potential customers. All too often so-called theme nights are ruined by inferior ingredients bought in bulk from Macro. If chefs use authentic Cypriot ingredients, the results will speak for themselves," says Mr Papanicolaou. "In the past, Cypriot food was considered by the wider public as a bit downmarket. For example, in the 70s, most of our business was in supplying local grocers who were catering for immigrant Cypriots fleeing to England in droves to escape the troubles in their own country. But in recent years we've seen a huge surge in high quality Cypriot themed restaurants, alluding to a new interest from an entirely different demographic," says Andy Sideras of Dinos and Sons, a family trading business established in 1966.

"As these eateries become fashionable among the English middle classes, local Cypriot produce is coming into the limelight and there is a real opportunity for delis and farmers' markets to get caught up in the trend," he adds.

"Cyprus produce cannot compete on low prices, but it has its own niche in the marketplace – quality, flavour, traceability, tradition and authenticity," concludes Mr Sideras. For a retailer currently operating in the speciality food market, what other reasons do you need to stock it?

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