

Irish shellfish butter spreads market share

USING 100 PER CENT IRISH INGREDIENTS, IASC IRISH SHELLFISH BUTTER IS GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH.

In the two years since it emerged from the Food Works programme, Iasc Irish Shellfish Butter has gone on to secure listings with international clients including: Fullers UK; Peach UK; and the Mercure and Accor Hotel groups. “We have done a lot in two years,” says James Grimes, co-founder of Iasc Irish Shellfish Butter.

The company, which produces a seafood butter that combines Irish butter with Irish mussels, brown crab and Irish seaweed, is also on trial in high-end hotels and restaurants in the Middle East and Asia. Furthermore, Iasc has been to the US on a reconnaissance mission to identify key geographies for its product in that market. It is currently going through the FDA approval process for export to that market and has met with customers in San Diego that are ready to distribute the product on the Californian coast and another interested in distributing it in Colorado.



Launch pad

Food Works is a training and development programme, jointly run by Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, which aims to support Ireland's next generation food entrepreneurs. James says the Food Works environment was a great motivator for the company and helped drive its success. “The whole programme made us think about things differently. It sets you up for the business environment and focuses your mind on the direction you're going and your market.”

James explains that Iasc is one of the early success stories from the Food Works programme. “We are the first out of the blocks from Food Works. We are the first to get an iHPSU [Innovative High Potential Start Up] funding and we are the first to bring the product to market.”

The Umami factor

Iasc's butter product is designed for use in cooking to enhance the flavours of the main ingredients. “The whole idea of the product is that it drives intense layers of flavours,” explains James. “We are harnessing the Umami factor. The Umami factor is that overall ‘mouthfeel’ that you get with a really good red wine or the liquorice taste that you get from tarragon. It's the almost sensuous taste

that you get from a really rich chocolate. What we have is a product that, once you incorporate it with a risotto or potato, cod, langoustines, lobster, scallops, peas, or as a filling, it brings out all of the layers of flavour.”

Iasc is currently availing of facilities at Teagasc’s food centre in Ashtown where it processes the seafood ingredients for the final product. “Teagasc has the only commercially available freeze-dryer process facility in the country that we can use. There are others in the country that are privately owned, but Teagasc allows us the flexibility to book in and rent the facility for a day to process and dry store the product.” James says the company’s long-term plan is to purchase its own freeze-dryer and to locate processing closer to the source of its seafood. “The idea is that if we are at source it reduces the mileage of the product, which is very important to us. It means we would be within a few miles of where our seaweed comes from. The provenance and sustainability of the product is key.”

The freeze-drying process removes all of the water content from the seafood, mussels and crab, creating a powder that is then added to a soft butter. Processing takes place in Mr Crumb’s facility in Monaghan, using Town of Monaghan butter in the process. “It is a very innovative company, very

forward thinking and has strong capacity, with BRC double-A grade facilities. The very fact that we are operating at that level allows us to work with the multiples.”

International attention

Currently, Iasc is being sold into the foodservice industry as a frozen product in 1kg containers. Each portion is a 15g oval piece that can be used in cooking or on salads. “Because our background is in foodservice we are pushing that. We know the arena, we know the game and we know the players and we have an awful lot of contacts that we’ve built up over the years that we can call on. We got excellent tutoring and support from Enterprise Ireland and Bord Bia and the message was to focus on who you know.”

Iasc has built up its base in Ireland through Pallas foods. In the UK it has established a solid working relationship with Direct Seafoods UK, part of the BIDVEST group, and it has secured a listing with Braehead Foods Scotland to manage its Scottish and Scottish clients.

The product is also on trial in a number of locations and James says he is very excited about the growing interest in the butter. “We are currently on trial with Tesco and Waitrose. We approached a company that manufactures filled-pasta products aimed at the airline industry but they are also doing filled products for Waitrose. So, they trialled our products in a stuffed ravioli and tortellini and it is now undergoing second-stage trials. We are very excited about the fact that we could be featured in first-class dining on British Airways.”

The company will be attending Seafood Expo Global this year where, James says, they have a number of important meetings lined up with prospective customers. “We made a lot of contacts at last year’s show but last year we were selling a concept, this year we are selling a product.”

Retail market

While the company’s initial focus was on the foodservice sector, James says consumer feedback and demand is driving the development of its consumer-facing products sooner than expected. Following more than 600 live tastings at Blas na hÉireann (the Taste of Ireland Food Awards), where Iasc won the BIM (Bord Iascaigh Mhara – the State agency charged with developing the Irish seafood industry) Seafood Innovation of the Year title for 2013, customers were keen to know where they could buy the product.

Irishfood was given a sneak peak at the proposed packaging for the consumer products, which will be in bright green, pink and orange packs. The sleeves of butter will include individual portions, cooking instructions and the Iasc story and, James says, it will have a shelf life of 60-90 days.

James says the company is also working on innovative branding and advertising campaigns to engage with consumers and to tell the Iasc story.

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