THE MAGAZINE WITH INSIGHT
BUSINESSFOCUS

# WOODS FOODSERVICE
# DISHING UP QUALITY




WOODS
SUSTAINABLE FOODSERVICE

THIS FIRM STARTED OUT SUPPLYING FOOD TO STREET CORNER CAFES, BEFORE TAKING THE WORLD OF FINE DINING BY STORM.

# DISHING UP QUALITY

PROJECT MANAGED BY: DAVID WATSON

**Woods Foodservice is a premium foodservice distributor. That means the products it provides can be found on plates in gastro pubs, wine bars, high-end hotels, and Michelin star restaurant in the London area. To add to that already prestigious list of customers, the firm recently acquired its rival, renowned, 80 year old food service supplier, John Mower & Co.**

"Before we acquired John Mower, our turnover was £40 million. It is now £52 million," says Darren Labbett, Managing Director of Woods Foodservice.

## FROM GREASY SPOONS TO GOURMET

Labbett took over Woods Foodservice in the year 2000, when the company was a little-known supplier for "greasy spoons and sawdust pubs" with a turnover of £1 million.

"It wasn't growing, and there was no investment," Labbett tells us. "So we changed the name, the branding and the logo and decided to target the fine dining market."

During the late 90s, fine dining was growing in popularity, but there were still only a few companies specialising in that area. Woods Foodservice was still a relatively small business at the time, ruling it out of the economies of scale accessible by its larger, multinational competitors. So instead, it worked to compete on quality and service.

"We focused on quality for the top end of the market, and the rest is history," Labbett says simply.

History is the word. Those early days are more than a quarter of a century ago now, and Woods Foodservice has since grown to a size that allows it to compete in terms of quality, service, and cost.

"There are quite a few things that set us apart," Labbett says. "We are BCORP certified, which means we do things in a very transparent, honest and open way. We have high moral and ethical standards, we care about sustainability, and we care about the people who work for us, our customers, and our suppliers." ››



Darren Labbett, Managing Director, Woods Foodservice.


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# Milk so fresh you can hear the moo!

**The Holt Family have farmed at Wells Farm for 100 years. It is currently farmed by the fourth generation Paul and Mark Holt. 25 years ago they decided to market their own milk and dairy products directly to the customer. The key to their success is down to their products and service being constantly monitored from farm to dairy and on to the customer.**

Our dairy is located at the heart of the Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire milk field in Bradley. Situated on the M6 corridor we have easy access to the major conurbations of the West Midlands, Manchester, Liverpool, Stoke on Trent, Derby, Nottingham, Leicester & London. This keeps our carbon impact on the environment to a minimum.

Here at Wells Farm, we operate with the highest quality process and packing facility to cater for and cover any customer requirements.

We source milk locally from around 50 different farms. All farms are Red Tractor assured and comply with industry standards for animal health and welfare.

All our milk is locally collected within a 20 mile radius helping us to keep our carbon emissions low.



+44 (0) 1785 780 072
dairy@wellsfarmdairy.co.uk

**www.wellsfarmdairy.co.uk**

## UNDERPINNED BY VALUE

While the BCORP certification is a relatively new string to Woods Foodservice's bow, the values that underpin it remain unchanged.

"We were already practising all of these things," Labbett tells us. "I think there are only two or three other distributors in the country who are BCORP. Our product range is unique, we sell products that nobody else does. There are farms with produce that they only sell to us, because they only want to be in the market that we're in. They don't want to overcommercialise and ruin the brand. We have numerous own brands that nobody else stocks, and the range itself is very diverse."




With strong values and close supplier relationships, Woods Foodservice was one of the few companies, especially in the hospitality sector, to come out the other side of the Covid lockdown better off than they went in. But that wasn't easy.

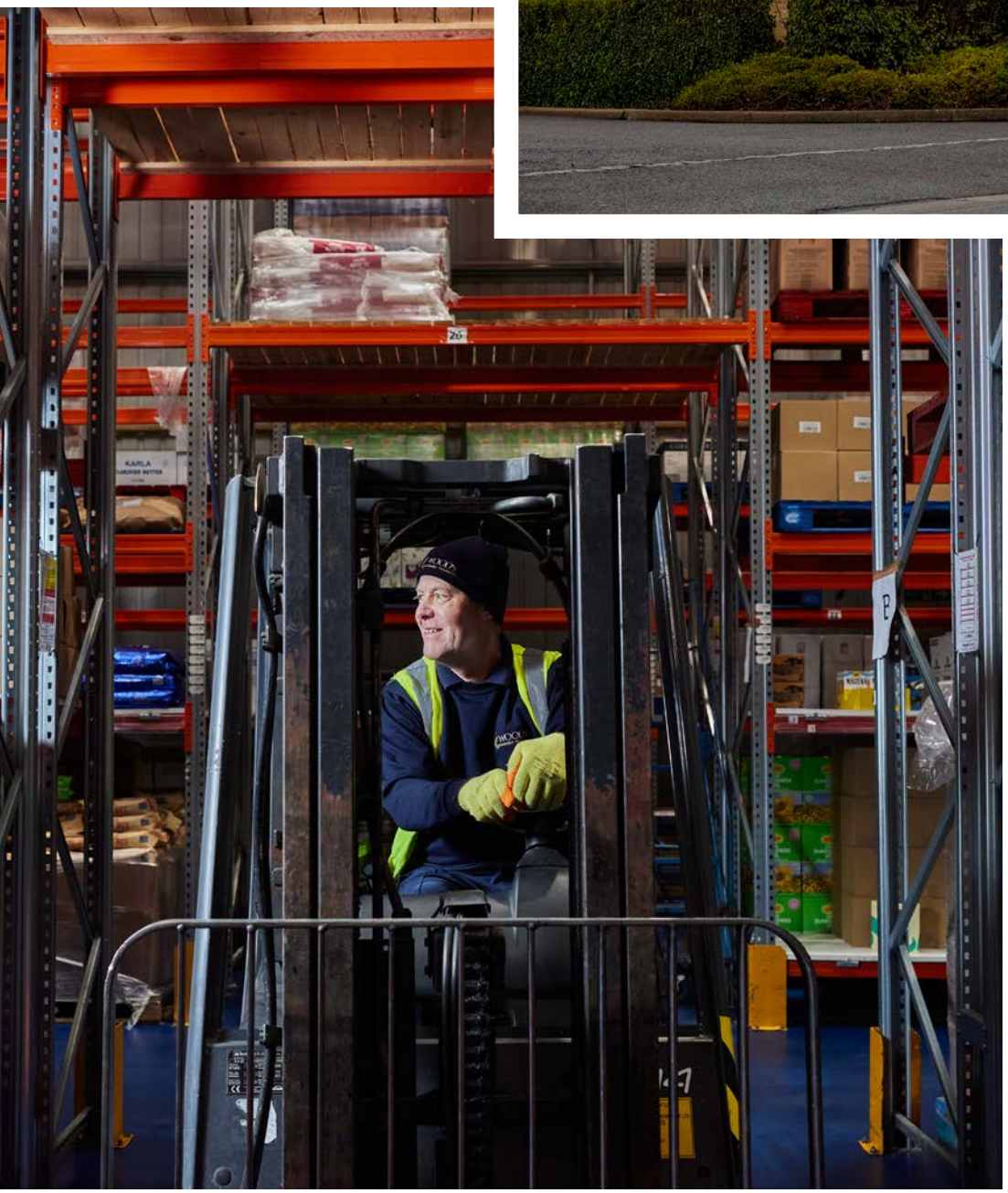
As Labbett recalls, "Being in the hospitality industry meant that when Covid happened Boris Johnson shut down 90% of our customers with zero notice. Every month of lockdown we lost £20,000 a week, but because we made good commercial decisions,

and stayed open where our competitors closed or reduced service. It meant we picked up a lot of their customers."

Surviving meant more than being the last man standing, however. Woods Foodservice had to adapt, offering a home delivery service to the general public who were struggling to get supermarket delivery slots to keep revenue coming in.

"We changed everything we knew about our business," Labbett says.



## ALWAYS INVESTING

But not quite everything. Those values that would later lead to Woods Foodservice's BCORP certification remained. To start with, the importance the company places on its staff has always been at the heart of the business.

"We tend to retain a lot of our staff, because we look after them," says Labbett. "We believe in rewarding their work as much as we possibly can, and that is reflected in our BCORP certification and our status as a London Living Wage employer. We offer our staff many benefits that are unusual in this business because so many of them are entry-level workers, pickers, packers and drivers. But all the same, we offer benefits, long holidays and very good pay."

While this package is appealing, it is not one borne out of generosity alone.

"We expect a return for all of that, but we look after our people, and some of them ››

have been here for ten, 15 or even 25 years," says Labbett. "As we grow, we are still constantly recruiting, and the same attitude applies. The package you offer and the way you look after your staff attracts more good staff as well as retaining the people you have."

This philosophy of investment is reflected elsewhere. Most of Woods Foodservice's profits are invested back into the business, finding ways to improve, introducing new technology, upgrading its fleet of vehicles, growing capacity, and, of course, recruiting more people.

"Every year we reinvest wherever possible," Labbett tells me. "We just took on a fourth warehouse that will just house a freezer, so that we can expand our frozen offering."






But even in its investments, Woods Foodservice is seeking out more than just growth for growth's sake.

"It has never just been about how quickly we grow or how much money we make," Labbett says. "It is about having pride in what we are doing, enjoying what we are doing, and offering the best of what we do to our customers nationwide."

Labbett's belief is that by focusing on the quality of the company's offering in its mindset and ethos, other forms of success will be a natural byproduct.

"If you aim to be the best, you get a reputation for that," Labbett says. "I don't just mean the best quality or the best service, but also the most sustainable, the most competitive, the best range of products. We strive to be the best in every field, and are consistently very, very good at what we do. If everyone has that attitude, we will succeed fiscally anyway."

This is the approach Labbett is taking to assure the future of Woods Foodservice.

"I've got three of my children working at the company, and my motivation at the moment is to get the company running to a point where it virtually runs itself," he says. "Then they can carry on running the business for the foreseeable future."







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