

Webinar Transcript - Marketing Masterclass: Restaurants Responding to Covid-19

00:00 – Introduction from host (Greg Smith)

I am Greg Smith from Seafish, Head of Marketing - a very good morning to you all. I will not bore you with a lengthy intro about me today instead I'm going to tell you a little bit about what we're bringing you we've been collaborating with seafood businesses to understand where we can add more value and facilitate knowledge sharing and together we've identified a bit of a gap and an opportunity for Seafish to host a collection of master classes which will help businesses across industry with their own marketing efforts and in turn that supports and drives an increase in seafood consumption which is what we're all about.

That's why we're here today it's about providing businesses with tools and ideas and skills to engage consumers across the UK and in time those consumer attitudes towards seafood will change and people will start eating more fish and shellfish more often and that leads me on to our consumer brand as you may or may not know we launched our new brand Love Seafood by Seafish in 2020 it's an ambitious long-term initiative which has been built to unite a diverse seafood industry under a single common message and goal it's ultimately about inspiring the nation to fall in love with fish and shellfish it really is that simple.

At its core Love Seafood is a 20-year always-on approach to seafood campaigning which highlights industry champions like the guys we are going to see and hear from today and provides audience relevant advertising to consumers across the UK we've also built the platform to provide seafood businesses with support and tools to help communicate to consumers and that kind of leads me on to the value of today's session I'd like to introduce you to three special guests today who are going to talk to us about some of the incredible challenges they've faced over the past 12 months whilst foodservice has done everything it can to take on the might of Covid 19 and various ongoing lockdowns so here are our three amigos.

02:04 – Introduction to three main guests

Mark Sargent joins us today as our esteemed anchorman and will lead the discussion Mark is a celebrated chef who discovered a passion for cooking at a very young age following a period of working with Gordon Ramsay Mark now owns and runs a number of restaurants and pubs in Kent.

We're also very lucky to be joined by Bob McCoubrey - Bob is the owner of Mourne Seafood Bar in the heart of Belfast. Like many in the industry Bob has spent the past year adjusting to Covid-19 regulations and you will hear more about that very shortly.

And last but not least our third well-respected and revered guest is Campbell Mickel. Campbell is chef and owner of the Merienda Restaurant in Edinburgh. Campbell launched an at-home dining experience from his restaurant during the pandemic and has recently purchased a well-known Edinburgh fishmonger business too.

Mark, Bob and Campbell thank you so much for joining us and a very warm welcome indeed Mark I'm going to pipe down now and pass over to you.

02:59 – Introduction from Mark Sargeant

Excellent thanks Greg – thank you, hi guys. Let me just scroll across I can see everyone perfect well here we are a year to the day of the anniversary of the very first time Boris told us to stay at home I don't know if that was planned or not but very very poignant indeed I suppose in our industry in particular probably the worst thing you could ever have heard from the prime minister was close down your restaurants bars and pubs and stay at home and here we are a whole year later still in a similar situation although it is looking much much brighter.

03:38 – Mark starts to chat to Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel

So Bob hello and Campbell hi. So questions – you know I've been in the same situation as you guys obviously total chaos, staff on furlough suppliers needing payments having food fresh fish they can't sell to restaurants etc etc I'm obviously going to flick between the two of you but obviously you know please feel free to sort of throw in as you want to what was the first thing that sort of went through both of your minds let's go to Bob first when you heard that that announcement shut your doors stay inside well probably the first thing Mark was a bit of panic and then the thought well no they were discussing circuit breakers so this was probably going to be for a couple of weeks at the start and then everything would be fine I never thought we'd be sitting here one year later closed you know it just if you talk about a year ago I wouldn't believe you but here we are so I mean the initial thing was just panic and then just we'll calm down and it's only for a short period of time and then we'll be ground we'll get back to normal very quickly yes how wrong you are well cam what about you I mean what do you think I suppose it's slightly different to Bob.

I was quite calm about it I think I saw it coming well in advance of when restaurants were shut down I think two weeks before and the prime minister said don't go to restaurants but of course didn't close us down and put us into any form of security at that point literally the same day I started to devise a delivery menu because if people weren't allowed to come to me they still wanted a night off from cooking and so I immediately on the day of lockdown flicked a switch on the website and went to a full delivery service from day one.

Yes it was a really tricky one wasn't it I remember obviously throughout February when the cases were getting more and more and you know we were just sort of working out hearing the news what is this you know kind of thing this thing coming towards us from overseas and on the Friday remember exactly that him saying you know the Friday night everything's closing down from 9 pm this evening close to the pubs restaurants bars all that sort of thing but there was no actual warning or advice about what we could do with all of our staff I know there's a lot of places that had already kind of jumped the gun and started making redundancies and things like that which was you know really sad and then on the Monday after that weekend I remember Rishi sort of announcing the furlough and I literally burst into tears on yes watching the news because you know I've got 160 staff all together and you know really it was a case of what on earth we're going to do with all of them you know so that was I mean not ideal in many respects but an absolute you know lifesaver and an olive branch and like you Campbell I think lots of people had already sort of gone through that thought process and things like that for us it was just the case of you

know I think to start with just you know making the most of the furlough getting everything locked down we're not used to sort of a takeaway scenario anyway but did you find that in the early days what sort of external assistance did you get were you kind of happy with the information let's face it any anyone in parliament at any stage no matter who it was going to face huge troubles with this happening and you know there's been decisions made some right some wrong but I don't think anyone would have coped really you know whoever they were so I don't I don't think anyone was prepared for what happened and no one certainly envisaged that a year down the road would still be in the starting box you know and I ideally would have been out of it by now and after the first lockdown and that's what we all anticipated obviously things were different I don't think you can.

This isn't a political for so we'll not get into who did what right but I think everyone's had to just feel their way in the dark and more information would have been great if it would have been forthcoming but you just have to get on with it and you know I don't think we had any choice but to try and find a way of ourselves and I think that's what we've been left to do yes and also for me it was a case of you know making again in the early stages we didn't know exactly what this was so I just wanted to make sure that obviously first and foremost my staff were safe and well and looked after properly which I think is why we just went full furlough to start with and also that you know the customers as well you know but when we were getting to the stage of reopening again did you feel there was enough advice you know in terms of I come to you Bob in terms of like you know the restrictions inside because you know it's easy to open up with your stickers on the floor and you're 20 meters apart but you can't control other h an beings so you know we found that we just had to really manage the bookings and be very strict on how people sort of were arriving and all that sort of thing I think the guidelines were good but slightly ambiguous they did put a lot of onus onto the business owner themselves.

09:14 – Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel provide their views on initial questions asked by Mark Sargeant

Yes well we were quite fortunate because outside our restaurant there's a there's a large open space owned by one of the government departments so over the years we've kind of mulled about you know should be should we do something out there but there was a bundle of red tape alongside it so yes come the lockdown all this red tip disappeared which was fantastic so we were able to move more or less our business outside I mean 90 percent of it moved outside we took out 70 percent of the tables and covers inside so it we were fortunate and it worked really well for us and kind of forced it to do something that we had talked about for a long time and we actually did it and it's working really well oh good well then as we'll get to later the positives have obviously come out of this because it has been a bad time but it's not all doom and gloom I mean assuming like me you had quite a lot of bookings you know in advance you know obviously in hospitality where the main pace that people go to in terms of you know birthdays weddings anniversaries all that sort of thing how did you find it you know having to pick up the phone or you know asking your team to pick up the phone and sort of you know make all those cancellations if people have paid deposits etc cetera it did throw up quite a minefield of logistical work in the background people customers were understanding across the board you know a lot of restaurants now we all have a policy where we charge people for no shows etc

that all went out the window because yes I think before the lockdown when it was same and Boris Johnson announced that you know don't go to restaurants people just stop turning up you know you have a full restaurant and twenty percent turn up for the night or whatever yes and yes you just went with that again you know yes you have to you have to be understanding you have to say we're in this situation it's uncharted territory and you just make the most of it and when you get you get on the phone to someone and say okay next week we're now shut down and people understood I mean at the end of the day there was so much confusion people.

I don't think really wanted to go out anyway and they were quite happy during that first walk down because week from day one we were day three that the orders started coming in for the social distance in men but the streets were deserted yes it takes me normally 45 minutes to drive across Edinburgh to get to the restaurant and I was I was doing it in 11 minutes because there was not a car in the street crossing a road there was no one else so people generally adhered understood what they were facing and you know knuckled down to it I suppose it was very apocalyptic wasn't it in the early days I had to go up to had to go up to London to I mean I live in Folkstone and it was I had to go there for work and I just I remember stepping out at King's Cross and it was literally like a movie you know no one there a food bag sort of blowing past in the wind and that was it.

I hopefully will never see that again in our lifetimes but it was a very surreal very surreal situation and the speed of how we got locked down so like you know you said earlier Campbell you know you were looking ahead as were we I think if you were fairly savvy and also that the numbers started dropping anyway because people was the uncertainty but in terms of like you know food stocks and things like that did you manage to have the time to sort of run things down or was it Boris said Friday that's it yes the menu we organized we were running it's a small plate menu and it changed monthly and we were halfway through it so there was the stock was there yes I mean we're not carrying huge amounts we're quite a small establishment anyway so it was we took a hit the biggest hit we had I think was we just put a new wine list on and purchased thousands and thousands of pounds filled the gantry with the wine shelves with all this new wine and then never saw the bottle yes this this this is actually one of the largest issues wasn't it is the stock.

What about you Bob you know how did you find all that because we because we didn't do what Campbell did in terms of the delivery service or takeaway you know we were sitting on the fair amount of fresh stock but obviously we froze as much as it was as we could but you know you can't freeze leaks and carrots so we sort of gave it to a few local food banks and bits and pieces and some staff and stuff but I mean did you get caught out a bit there no we're pretty lucky we would get all our fish and shellfish in daily almost yes you know so we kind of said our menu depend on what's available we don't buy to suit the menu so we weren't stuck with any fish or shellfish the wine and the spirits was probably the biggest thing you know and I spent a whole day carting it all home and locking in a yes I guess one of the main things was obviously in that respect just you know paying suppliers as well I mean I had to literally get down on bended knee and talk to all my suppliers afterwards you know for the three-month lockdown period because you've brought so much food in or ordered food or you know to wait for the revenue to come through for the next month you know as you pay sort of thing I have to say 95 percent of my spies are really

understanding and actually made a proper point of how to work with us and then you know a lot a lot of them being quite small suppliers as well which you know you'd think we obviously paid as much as we could when we could but it was it was tough on the lich yes literally everybody and I i guess you know we're talking about Love Seafood fishermen in particular who go out on a daily basis like you guys probably you know most of my fish is caught on day boats they suddenly go out to get their catch and haven't really got anyone to sell it to so it's a real serious issue so obviously in this situation you know we we've really we're because of my restaurants and pubs and stuff are in Kent where you feel part of the local community kind of anywhere but I mean did you really feel that when you were locked down and again when you had a chance to reopen it you did sort of really maximize more on the sort of the community of people who maybe would travel into larger cities and eat out and they were sort of coming to you much more I mean how did you sort of react to that.

16:14 – Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel talk about local community engagement in relation to their respective businesses

Well I mean you know from the start the support from your community has been fantastic you know we switched from being a restaurant into being a retail operation right rather than buying food for today and tomorrow you know we were taking orders for food three four five days in advance which was seafood which is always a risk you know we were saying and our staff were changing from people who you know got instant feedback put a mail on the table if it was a steak they were able to put it right to all of a sudden they were fulfilling orders putting in a cardboard box handed over their career out of their responsibility and if there was a mistake they couldn't put it right yes it was a completely different environment for those guys they weren't face-to-face with customers they were talking them on the phone or by email so you know a completely different environment but the customers were great if we made a mistake they said look don't worry about it you're not amazon we understand the community was fantastic yes.

What about you Campbell I suppose for me when we started this we you know we didn't know what we were going to we didn't know if it was even going to work and I remember sitting here actually for the first two days after I flipped the switch on the website thinking okay what's going to happen and it's not my nature to sit on the couch and be at home I'm at work all the time and for those two days there was nothing coming in and then suddenly it did all start to kick off and the orders came in and the hardest part for me was probably getting supplies the first thing I did when I decided to get social distances menu up and running was the first thing I did was talk to all the suppliers and ask them it's very simple question what's the supply chain going to look like yes everyone said don't worry everything is going to be just as it is we'll keep it going it probably took about two weeks before it fell apart oh so it did so you found that wasn't the case then absolutely there were you would you would phone a butcher and well we'll maybe get that at the end of the week we'll have that there but we won't have that same with the fish the veg man okay not great I think what I found the supermarkets we all remember what the supermarkets were like they became battlegrounds almost yes the frantic panic buying etc the whole supply chain I think got diverted to supermarkets and so our suppliers were left very short so much so that I was doing two runs to supermarkets a day just trying to keep up to speed with what I needed there was nothing in cash and carries literally my cash and

carry was empty shelves yes I mean it's terrifying really isn't it to think you know that this is what happens yes I think it didn't take long for me to see it fall apart yes and I think thankfully that only lasted let's say last year a fairly short amount of time yes but it is quite extraordinary how quickly things can you know sort of fall like a house of cards and yes you know you take your suppliers and things for granted so often and you know just seeing it I mean I remember going into the supermarkets was a different sort of side of things than we're talking about let's say lots of people not particularly acting in the best respects to everyone else let's say but I was I couldn't believe it you know I lived near one of the largest sort of Sainsbury's going and just going there to get my weekly shop it was completely empty yes decimated so it was a you know an extraordinary time.

20:11 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about some of the positive things that came out of the Covid-19 situation with regards to their respective businesses

So this is quite a blanket type of type of question but let's look at what do you think has been the positives or the things that you've really taken on board and have made work for you over the last well exactly a year let's start with Bob on that yes well I mean the two big things was our morning home service where we you know produce prep seafood meals for people at home so for ourselves that has been very successful and even when we reopened you know customer demand was there we kept it on and it's something that we will keep on forever you know there is a market for people who for one reason or another can't get out to a restaurant babysitters taxis whatever there's definitely a market there they want to trade at the weekend and you know the re-hateable supermarket stuff just doesn't do it for them how will you how will you cope with that when you've got a full restaurant as well because that's one thing we've been thinking about we know we could do you know the same volume of covers in the restaurant as we you know could take away but it's literally how you manage the expectations of that food coming in versus serving people live as it were yes.

Well we did it during August you know during the eat out to help out when we were flat out and obviously the sales went down but they were still maybe 30 of our total restaurant sales and you know the menu that we offered online matched our menu that we were prepping for in the restaurant so yes it was quite easy just to mix the two in you know very easy in fact.

Apart from when you've got you know 25 covers ordering and then you get another 30 come in at the same time that's the bottleneck it's quite difficult to manage right yes.

Well the nice thing about the online is people tend to you know you know the times are ordered in advance so Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday they're ordering for Saturday see right here yes of what's coming at you and the oven ready meals you know say the prep's all done so it's just a matter of popping into the foil bag and

okay so it's more it was yes okay so you just did a sort of different sort of style of that. What about you Campbell did you do?

I think what I've taken on is that you know we have to adapt we did have to and I think that has to be the case going forward I don't think you can you can hang your hat on just being a one-stop shop this is what I do it's a restaurant as it is I think you have to look at all avenues now I think for us we didn't want to sit still and that's what encouraged us to get up off our backsides and make something else happen I think if I hadn't done that I probably would know so many restaurants that didn't do that they didn't have the impetus right at the beginning to go out and grab a share of what people wanted and for us we made it we knew that there was there was two ways we could have done it. One was the multiple packages with lots of little containers and pages of instructions I didn't think personally that's what the public wanted, I think what I thought was they're going to be cooking lunch and dinner, breakfast, lunch and dinner at home seven days a week they just want a break from that so as adults saying I had very much decided it was going to be a very simple serving we did it was it was a microwavable meal, an oven ready meal it was all in there it was a high roast oven 20 minutes that was it, it was make everything as simple as possible just to give the public a break from it I think yes just wanted will want to just take a night off and watch Netflix and have someone cook for us exactly what that was.

I think I've watched absolutely everything there is to watch I've run out but did you say Campbell you actually bought a fishmongers during the lockdown didn't you. Opposite our site in Stockbridge is a cheesemonger and I was in awe at the queues outside his door from 7am to 7pm right through lockdown it was unbelievable 30-40 people outside in the street no matter the weather and retail has never been something that I envisioned going into, I'm a chef I want to cook and one of my suppliers is a fish shop in Edinburgh called Eddie's Seafood Market and he's been there 36 years and he like early August, late July he put it on the market to retire and I get emails from all the brokers in Edinburgh and I saw it and I was quite sad I've been I've been buying my fish there for 26 years and so but I never thought about it and then when we came into the lockdown in September, we opened in August and I'd Eat Out To Help Out and it was great and it of took my mind off it but then when the threat of another lockdown started to appear something switched in my head and I just I don't know if it was a lack of heart for what the fight we were maybe facing and as I said at the beginning no one anticipated a year down the line would still be in the starting box and so I woke up one morning and went to see Eddie and did a deal there and then, he had a few people were interested but no one put their money down, so I did and we've taken on what is an absolute awesome business, it's taking more of my time than the restaurant ever has and that's saying something we all know how much effort a restaurant takes this is 2.30 in the morning until 7pm.

Do you get your fish at Costco? I have to say one of my restaurants Rocksalt is right on the harbour so we're right next door to the fishmongers there who go out the day boats etc and Jess the guy who owns runs it I was in constant text messages with him and things and he set up a delivery service but he said pretty much every weekend's like Easter throughout the whole of lockdown it was quite emotional actually about how the local community came out to actually queue for fresh fish more than he would see it before, because I think it reignited people in a you know who couldn't really go out, didn't want to go to the supermarkets maybe so much because well one there was nothing left in there anyway, two you know it was a you know the supermarket fish lots of people in one go and so sort of rediscovered the

local kind of places as you say you know hearing people queueing up for cheese it's wonderful isn't it.

Well Eddie's had I mean we're on a block and the queue in the first walk down was right around the corner which is phenomenal and it's like that today you come up there on an afternoon and we work as hard as I hustle it like a chef you know when we're not there to hang about we don't want to serve people and get the next one because I don't want them standing outside for forty minutes and you know people are just delighted to get something fresh I think yes and it's reigniting this lockdown is reigniting people cooking at home which is well.

Yes I mean that's the point I was trying to get to as well because you know there are other industries which actually have been affected much worse than ours and still will continue to be so theatre you know music etc but we were badly hit by this and I do think it's just it's really interesting to see that out of this I think we're very resilient industry I remember the credit financial crash of 2008-2009 which basically ended fine dining pretty much certainly in London for a while and it gave birth to this really interesting sort of street food scene where lots of young chefs were coming up, you know they didn't have the backing or the funding to open posh restaurants so they got in their airstreams and started cooking outside and stuff and it was this whole boom which has now completely reshaped the sort of what we eat you know now I think, and I do think that you know as bad as it has been and there will be a lot of recovery time certainly economical that this is going to really change again you know for the better you know the face of our industry for sure as per you know people like you going out never done it before but you know bought a fishmongers that could then lead to a really incredible business view.

Well we've opened the second branch yes it's been amazing it's been so good we opened another one a couple of weeks or three weeks ago and it's it hit the ground running you know it's in a neighbourhood that was crying out for it and it's been fantastic and really well received so yes.

29:32 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about the Eat Out To Help Out scheme

And so you know but you've both mentioned Eat Out To Help Out quite a bit so I'll ask you about this Bob so for us it was eat out to help out so we were flat out basically but what we did one of the things we learned actually in this lockdown was or when we reopened on the fourth of July was usually we've been a seven day a week operation particularly in the summer months absolutely ramming the covers in you know you know making hay because obviously by the coast we're quite seasonal and all that sort of thing and I've always wondered why I never make any money well we've reopened in the you know 4th of July through the summer it was really good we shut Monday, Tuesday opened Wednesday to Sunday obviously reduced covers but what that meant was we could really sort of keep an eye close eye on our staff costs versus the covers versus the amount of food we can order it in and it became a much sort of a much better formula I think, so we've definitely learned from that.

The Eat Out To Help Out was great for us although we were shut Monday Tuesday which sort of worked against us a bit because it was only Monday Tuesday Wednesday but did either of you sort of do your own thing and carry that on afterwards, so doing discounts or anything like that?

We were shut Monday, Tuesday as well so we opened Wednesdays to Saturday every week so it was great. We continued it until the next lockdown and you know I think people were kind of scared for me I think people realized that you know it wasn't that safe to go out we didn't experience a great knock-on effect after the event had finished.

I mean you know we have a city restaurant and we have a like yourself a coastal restaurant so the coastal restaurant is all summer long flat out and tumbleweed in winter time whereas the city restaurant is more 52 weeks of the year. Yes August funny enough would be the busiest month in both the restaurants so I mean I don't think the Eat Out To Help Out scheme really made a difference to our or overall sales figures you know we got a different it was like we always got a grip on crowd that kind of made it harder to keep the social distance and there weren't our regulars tended to stay away so yes I mean financially it was okay it was no better but it made it more difficult definitely to manage it.

Yes it was an interesting one obviously it was a it was a boost from the government to help you know the economy back in and I think it was aimed at you know not everyone as it were, sort of thing I mean since then I mean have you have you been able to attract sort of different types of customers people that you wouldn't normally have seen beforehand or is it the same sort of old faces and things?

Well definitely with the online sales you know we've got new customers you know originally we started out just to click and collect service in Belfast because it was a ghost time and people could access the restaurant very easily, no traffic jams but as things started to roll on there was more and more traffic more difficult to get parked and so we started with a courier service to the whole of Northern Ireland so we've definitely picked up a lot more customers who would be 100 miles away from the restaurant who maybe have been once a year but now I can get us once a week if they want, yes around the country.

33:15 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about how they have communicated with their staff during the period of the Covid-19 situation

Yes so I mean you know what I'm seeing out of this is you know there are lots of positives you know but we've got to look on the bright side of things I have to say so I mean look let's not get to the politics side but I mean in terms of staffing how did you I mean did you have you maintained communications with your staff throughout the whole lockdown period, you know was everyone okay in terms of the furlough situation, did you utilize holiday days at all for people during this period I'll come to you again Bob, it's just interesting to sort of you know obviously people on furlough so they're not allowed to do any work but you know you still need to try and keep in touch with them.

I set up a couple of Whatsapp groups of my chefs and got my front house guys just to say hello, just to say you know what's going on what are you having for dinner today you know etc because I just wanted to keep that moment going really because as we all know humans can become very lethargic and I think I look for a lot of staff who are employees not necessarily the business owners you know sat at home if the weather's nice in the gardens having a beer or a barbecue if not watching Netflix there is that sort of level of lethargy which can creep in a bit so I just wanted to sort of touch base with my staff to you know keep them motivated a bit like that I mean it's a tricky one isn't it with staff.

You've got a huge team Mark, 160 odd rents and mortgages you're responsible for we're quite lucky we're a small team we managed to keep everyone on the books of course we didn't get rid of anyone we talked to them my chefs were working with me during the social distancing menu, so that was good and now that we're into the fish retail business we've actually brought staff from the restaurant into that operation as well to work with us so they're not stuck at home and twiddling their thumbs in some cases losing their minds.

Bob? Yes well I mean with an interesting scenario at the start where myself and the other director in the company we didn't get furlough so we actually had to come into work well the furlough staff were at home so for the first five to six weeks of the online operation my business partner he's the chef in the operation so he was up in the kitchen and I was downstairs sorting out the logistics and the idea stuff was which was interesting and the staff were phoning in to see how we were getting on and how we're enjoying working for a change. Yes so what was we you know what it picked up we were able to bring the staff in just over about 25-30 percent of them working full-time now on the retail side we bring in so the big weeks like Valentine's Mother's Day we're able to bring in another third on partial furlough and then the rest of the staff you know we keep in touch, they call in to see their friends so they're all sitting ready we haven't lost any staff. So yes ready just for reopening.

Well yes so we decided to sort of stay closed because we weren't set up really for you know takeaway delivery that sort of stuff so we but we did a Christmas Day menu we did a Valentine's menu we did a mother's day and we're going to do Easter as well so that that was really good we had great feedback from the customers and things like that sadly we're just starting to find out now that after all this furlough gone through all that we are actually you know we've had quite a few notices coming I have to say and whilst you know I think a lot of them actually the ones that you know the main people I would say key members who've given their notice have actually decided to move completely away from catering so I think there's going to be sort of quite a large backlash in this because people have seen what would happen in this industry and now they're looking to do something else just in case it happens again which is which is a real shame but I completely understand you know their situations, it's just I'm hoping there's lots of people out there looking for a new job

We're used to doing split first we're used to working 12-14 hour days the thought of doing that for a lot of people must be you know why have I done that for a career, that's insane you know yes and that's true because look at something else and now that they've had a break because sometimes you can't see the wood from the trees so if you they stop and think there's a life I have to live and do I have to do 60-70

hours in a week is that my working career for the rest of my life, you can't blame them.

I think you're going to get two types of people who are you know just desperate to get back into their passion and you know get back into the front house restaurant managers you know waiting staff who love dealing with people and things and chefs you know creative et cetera et cetera and then other people who just you know like you say have seen another life out there and think I'll keep let's say if you're chef cooking just a Sunday lunches at home and go off and find something else which is absolutely fair enough but it's a tricky one indeed.

I'm in a position where I'm quite lucky I think that I've found Eddies to keep me really busy but I know it could well be the end of my life in a kitchen which I've done I've been a chef since 1985 and I've been cooking every day of my life, long I was loving it and never anticipated I wouldn't be doing it any more yes but now I'm in a position where I just don't see when I'll get into the kitchen I really don't.

Well you got the fishmongers to consider as well haven't you that's the other thing as well so you're diversifying a bit, as I did you know.

But I am going to miss it that's something that I'll have to come to terms with.

You get over it quite quickly trust me, when you can cook for pleasure at home and you haven't got to worry about you know where's the spinach!

The past four weeks I've been doing consultancy work for one of one of our wholesale customers in Edinburgh just because I get into his kitchen and I get to mess about in his one of his kitchens, it's great.

39:39 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about how they have communicated with their customers during the period of the Covid-19 situation

So in terms of you know get getting the message out to your customers I mean obviously I mean I class my business is fairly modern business you know where sadly it's a necessary evil but we're all over social media and this is how we apart from our websites we've really been posting out message after message after message from all of my sites to keep customers informed about what we're doing so from April 12th the slightly confused, not confusing, you can open if you have an outside space so but obviously that's all weather dependent so we're going to keep our customers really informed and I think the way we're going to do it is by looking at the week's weather forecasts and you know just saying that we're open Wednesday Friday and Saturday this week let's say, depending on the weather but I mean how have you found communicating with your I mean do you have newsletters did you put things up on your website, what's the what's your method of communication with your customers.

We do all the social media Twitter Instagram Facebook everything and we also have our database where we update which we're trying to do a newsletter as regularly as possible but we'll have to have something to say and you don't want people you know if you're going to put more spam into someone's inbox try to make it worthwhile

you know so yes but I mean you people are generally that they're well receiving they want to be informed they want to know what you're going to plan and what you're going to do and you know and as you say it's it isn't a modern thing it's changed, social media has changed our industry forever and you have to use that you absolutely have to because you can capture different demographics, your older generation will be on Facebook they won't really be on Instagram or Twitter and younger ones will be, so you know that you can get a different hit from each different source that you're putting it to.

What about you Bob are you an avid tweeter?

Yes I mean you know when I think back when I opened the first restaurant in 2004 you know you had a put an advertisement a local paper yes to announce what your menu was that week you know about £100 or whatever and now for free you just you just tweet it out then you know on Twitter we have nearly 20,000 followers, so bang it goes out there, it's free so I would do Twitter myself which can be dangerous sometimes! My business partner's wife who's obviously a bit younger, she would do Instagram and Facebook and again it's a different age group. We have two mailing lists, we have a mailing list for the restaurant, we have a mailing list for the cookery school, so once a week we update people what's new, what's going on the menu and we also have a YouTube channel which has been great because you know alongside the Mourne At Home prep meals we also have a range of seafood that we sell online so people who are keen to cook themselves we have instructional videos on our channel to take them along on that journey.

Very good, yes that's great YouTube channel fantastic.

43:00 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about a post Covid-19 world

Okay so let's move into this post Covid world let's say everything on the roadmap stays the same so I believe it's 21st of June where we're currently supposed to be back to normal I think with no social distancing, what sort of operational practices and changes that we've just gone through when we have been allowed to open over the last year do you think we'll see still I mean do you envisage people still coming in you know wearing masks do you think they'll expect our staff to still wear masks although there's nothing you know in the in the laws to say that yes will you keep hand sanitizers everywhere I mean you know when do we just stop and start back to whatever normal is again.

I don't think there is I could go back to normal I think this is but certainly for the foreseeable future we know that there's an eighty to ninety percent success rate on the vaccine so that's a ten-twenty percent fail and people are still going to be very of that going forward and I think we have to offer as much security and make it as safe an environment as possible not everyone will care I think the younger generation your Nandos, Mcdonald's, etc., they'll open their doors and they'll be packed out and if your clientele is offer a more senior age group they're going to be concerned and I think you maybe you'll see some people only on special occasions, not everyone in the 50 above age group will go out the way they did before, certainly not if they don't feel safe so you'll have to make everything as safe an environment as possible.

I wonder how long that will last in our memories because it's you know as a devil's advocate we do react to things very quickly especially with social media it does tend to blow things up very quickly and by the same token you know I think does something else come along that will all of us I mean certainly not in terms of the economic situation that's caused but you know will people's memories of this continue to last do you think or do you think it's something that I've totally taken but what you've just said Campbell I think you're 100% right I think it's our as restaurant owners and business owners you know we need to still keep those practices in place to make sure that everyone's feeling safe and you know what what's you know there's nothing better than a hygienic restaurant anyway let's face it so anything that improves that is obviously great but I just wonder down the line you know when we start talking about Brexit again and things like that which we're not going to do in this question and answer session but is there going to be something else that then takes over a bit you know maybe sort of this time in 2022 or something.

You have to adapt. I think that's what makes our industry quite a vibrant one you know we don't stand still we have to constantly battle to face the challenges can be different every single day anyway, so you know this is what we're trained all our lives to do is you just you find a solution

And that's everything even in the small period when we were allowed to reopen for the 4th of July whenever that was until October I think it was wasn't it I can't really remember now it's all a bit of a blur 2020. You can do as much as possible but it's then down to the customer you know the customer has to work with you and as we all know there's some majority who are very keen to do that but then there's always others that that aren't so you know I wonder if restaurants and business owners are going to have to get a bit more strict but it's going to be very interesting.

We had people coming in refusing to wear masks and you know we're only asking you to wear a mask from the front door to your table or when you go to the toilet, and they were refusing you know it's like it's ten paces.

We had a rule a little rule book for want of a better word a little card of you know what I'm afraid you have to do. We made it quite funny you know, Boris has asked that you do this so please you know and I think 99.9% of our customers completely got it and they were just happy to be out you know but there is always that sort of small group and we were just very clear if you don't adhere to our rules which we're putting not just for our own staff you know we want to protect our staff there's the door sadly but you know we didn't I don't think we got to that at all actually in the end.

So obviously this is we're talking very much about our what how it's affecting us but yes certainly in my lifetime one that I can remember it's affected the whole world you know there's not any part of the world that this hasn't affected have you taken on board or been watching or seen anything that maybe other countries or places around the world have done that you know you you're going to put into practice or you think we should have done not on a political scale but certainly in terms of you know how maybe things that other countries like Italy or you know China or whatever have done that you think you might put into practice when we reopen.

Well we know that the south east Asian countries, Japan I think as an example I've handled this really well and they've had they've been through this before so it kind of takes us back to will we still be wearing face masks and it's standard over there and it has been for 15 years or whatever.

Like from Sars?

So it could well be that on that basis that we have to do this in a long-term scenario.

Well I mean I think from them it's germs full stop isn't it when you're getting onto a packed tube do you want to be there breathing in other people's job I think they're they've looked at it like that for quite a while haven't they.

Personally I don't think we will be like that in this country no I think we probably should people yes.

It depends what time you get the tube I suppose isn't it as well!

49:21 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about some of their future plans

So what are your plans and let's start with Bob on this, so we're easing in you know to I think you said Bob you had a nice outside space, I'm assuming you're going to be opening something from April 12th and then from May the 17th we're allowed to open indoors again but still with social distancing and then assuming it's all going well and good from June the 21st we can then open as normal, I mean are you just going to dust everything down and get back into it as quick as you can hopefully by July we'll be you know kind of staycation, hammered, full everywhere you look.

Well unfortunately Mark we don't have any dates over here so we don't, we don't have any reopening dates here you know, we have new dates here so you know it's the next review date is the 16th of April so I can't imagine us being open even outside until probably into the middle of May.

So very frustrating to you then to see you know, us having some form of plan and you guys not having dates.

Yes some indicative dates would help you know, so at the minute now we're operating the you know the online seafood the online Mourn At Home dishes which you know isn't bad you know I have to confess but I mean I do feel sorry for the staff that have been on furlough and are sitting at home and you know and just stuck you know in a rut, so I mean what we're doing now is we're gearing up to open up the outside area full blast so what we're planning on doing is putting a kitchen, a small kitchen on the outside with another bar area, so we'll run it full time seven days a week come the summer time, inside area we'll probably have 30% of the covers it'll be less of a street food menu it'll be a bit more like our own restaurant menu yes but again you know the focus mainly will be because what we saw last summer was when people turned up and they saw there was a choice of eating outside they had a table booked inside and invariably they chose to have the outside table even if it was raining or even if it wasn't a warm day, the preference was to eat outside.

Yes gosh, I can't believe you don't have dates yet sorry about that.

We're indoors, we're only allowed to open until 8pm and no alcohol, we're indoors anyway so we don't have an outdoor space. I won't be reopening Merienda until we feel confident that we're opening for a sustained period.

Yes, that's interesting so you're not going to open when you're allowed to, you're going to open when you feel the time is right.

Absolutely, I want to get it up and running I want to see the customers back in there but I don't want to go through the opening up and six weeks later we're closed again.

So in your mind Campbell, what sort of dates have you got earmarked?

26th of April we're allowed to open until 8pm but as I say without alcohol indoors.

I mean yes but so in your mind when have you have you got something that you're you know like a goal date.

We are just waiting, I'll be quite happy if we can get it open in in the summer time yes that's obviously a big period for everyone. The festival's not going to happen in Edinburgh this year which is obviously a huge draw you want to be sure but tourists aren't going to be in Edinburgh so you know you have to look at the who's going to be there it's going to be locals. The beer gardens will do really well and we've seen that the sun's been out this week in Edinburgh, the parks are chock-a-block and so people are itching to get back out there and experience relationships and friendships and social activity and but for us we'll do it when we think it's a sustainable operation that we can mount and keep it going okay.

53:53 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about what might happen if there is another lockdown

Well I know I'm going to ask a depressing question now so heaven forbid we get open again and then let's say you know we still have lots of people haven't been vaccinated this is something we have to live with forever it's not suddenly going to go away, like the flu like all these other things, heaven forbid we get put into another lockdown say come November what are your thoughts of the you know the landscape what will it do to our industry from there in your minds?

It's going to make it very difficult for a lot of businesses you know if the government supports still in place if the furlough scheme is still in place and that gives everyone a bit of security but I think there comes a point where you know you're battling so hard to survive and margins aren't huge in hospitality anymore in the past 20-30 years. We need a sustained period of operation and without that it'll make it very difficult for a lot of companies for sure..

So, like you're saying Campbell you know you'd rather stay closed even if you are allowed to open.

I think it's more soul destroying stocking up your fridges, getting your menus, bringing your staff in and retraining and refreshing everything, decorating again and just making sure it's all ready to go and all this. Yes that's where it becomes very difficult mentally for us.

Yes and I was very much of the opinion it's fine we can do this outside and this inside etc but for me it's all a case of get open but get open properly and when you can sustain that no one's got a you know crystal ball we don't know what's going to happen but you know and some people you know have to be open that you know they don't you know if you a husband and wife team that you know run your own restaurant and you live there and you work there and you can't get furlough and all that you know these people are desperate to open and you know absolutely have to open and I think you know if we do go into another lockdown I just, we've borrowed so much money as a country anyway in general how do we keep on doing that I mean that's a political question we shouldn't get into as well either but it's just that we have to start getting some form of income in so just fingers crossed we don't get to that and I think everyone has a part to play in that by not going out.

Do you think maybe that there's I mean there was the herd immunity thing right at the start that the prime minister tried to sort of guide us towards if you like it might well come to the point that that's just where we have to just get on with life and do our best and just keep going.

By which time you'd hoped that people were most susceptible would have had their vaccinations but again you know there's been plenty of young fit healthy people getting badly affected by this.

I mean there's a lot of cases in Scotland I've been looking at it the past couple of weeks and it's still five six hundred cases a day yes but the deaths have definitely dramatically slowed down so it might now be we're all pretty much getting to a strong level of vaccination that's how you say let's just go ahead right.

57:22 – Mark asks Bob McCoubrey and Campbell Mickel about what they like to do when they have some downtime

Bob on a slightly brighter note I mean I am desperate to go out to eat somewhere, absolutely cannot wait, not my own restaurants by the way, but hopefully I won't be able to get a table but I mean you know Bob I mean you seem like someone in the industry who works really hard all the time but you do get some downtime and like me I'm assuming you like enjoy spending your time going out for lunch in a pub or restaurant or something like that. Is there anywhere that you're just literally desperate to go and eat at.

Well if I'm being honest Mark, what I'm really missing is a pint of Guinness yes you know yes that's a meal in itself and that's probably why I've missed most you know yes I just can't wait to sit down. I mean there's a great pub beside our restaurant Belfast Kelly Cellers and I just can't wait to sit down there and have a lovely pint of Guinness and maybe half a dozen oysters.

What about you Campbell?

Yes, I mean we rarely get to go out and eat in restaurants but it's you don't know how much you've missed something until it's been taken away. I can't wait and like Bob I can probably murder a pint in a beer garden or something and that's you know that social thing that the hospitality gives the world that's what's been missing.

Yes, I mean there's definitely the social aspect to it isn't it I mean men and women the same, my wife's dying to go out with her friends you know have a nice day yes moan about how awful I've been for the last year at home and stuff and I'll probably do the same with my pals about how awful I've been the last year!

59:20 – Mark mentions that lots of questions have been asked in the webinar chat function – and then asks Bob and Campbell what their main highlight of the past year has been

I've seen lots and lots of questions popping up in here I think we're going to answer some of those in a bit just a couple more things from me to you guys then.

So yes okay industry news, I mean I've never been one for sort of really following the industry news so much I rely on a few things I've signed up to which pop up on my screen I generally like to just try and keep you know my eyes focused on my own businesses but I mean are you glued to sort of the industry press, if so which ones have you found really helpful to give you like more information to this.

No, I worry about what we do.

Bob?

You know, I pick up stuff from Twitter, and a Whatsapp group with industry friends here in Belfast.

Well let's just end on the one thing then, so I'll throw this to both of you to answer so obviously since a year ago today when we got told to shut down for the first time we've been closed, we've been open, we've sort of been open, and then closed again etc what's been your biggest business highlight, I think I know your answer Campbell but I'll come to you first anyway what's been your biggest business highlight over the last year.

For me I suppose it was when the orders first started coming in and I realized that I wasn't going to be sitting on the couch for very long and that was you know it was a bit of a light at the end of the tunnel that was already a fairly short tunnel but to know that we're still going to be of use, enough service to the to the community and we're still going to be able to feed people which is a chef that's why I get out of bed every morning and when that was clearly still going to happen I think I became quite relaxed about you know okay we're going to face some problems life isn't going to be what we expect but we can still move forward and that was hugely important from a sanity and to keep my staff sane and know that for them there's a light at the end of the tunnel, that we will come out of this we'll knuckle down we'll face some hard times but we will see the restaurant back you know.

And Bob?

I mean the whole the whole year has been a real roller coaster from the you know the closing down to starting up an online business and then realizing your 10 year old website is not going to cut it and it starts to crash and you have no idea about IT and you're involved so you have to bite the bullet and put together a whole new website and you see the business of all from just click and collect to employ and some taxi drivers and then employ a courier company then get rid of the courier company, then find a small food company who deliver food across Northern Ireland in chill vans which was a perfect fit for us, moving from the you know the three course meals with all the little pots and stuff you know and you look at the packaging and that was quite horrific so we moved away from there to give them like a menu starters, mains and then we discovered these aluminium bags which were perfect and then as soon as we found them of course they were out of stock so we had to bite the bullet bring a pallet in from Vietnam which took 8 weeks but we got there so you know we ended up a place where the business now is actually generating profit the only misses is you know we're using less staff so all our staff some staff are sitting at home but we've brought this business from zero to a brand new business within a year and that now takes over quite comfortably.

So obviously you've both got some really good success stories there of everyone's worst year ever I think there's obviously lots of people you know watching this interacting, questions will be answered later, what advice Campbell would you give moving forward to anyone here that's you know kind of struggling or anything like that in terms of how to when to reopen what to do you know things like that.

I'd say you just keep the faith, you know what your business needs it needs you at the front to be strong and if you can hang in there we'll come out of this we will absolutely come out of this and that's what I've been telling people from day one, things will get better eventually you need to be standing you need to be there and strong ready to go.

Yes, wise words.

Bob?

I suppose I mean everybody's business is unique everybody you know it's very personal to themselves but what I would say for the hospitality industry is I certainly think after this we're going to be a lot more appreciated you know I think there's a lot more of pent-up demand there and you know from the government side I think they'll have noticed a massive hole in their finances you know like hospitality's been a great source of taxes for them VAT, PAYE, business rates, everything else, so hopefully they'll have noticed a massive chunk in their income and they'll probably treat us with a bit more respect in the future.

Yes well I mean yes absolutely let's hope so and you know along with those other arts and things like that that actually then you know certainly any major city which has theatres and things like that actually brings us revenue as well in terms of people coming up to eat out in restaurants and all that sort of thing it's again it's a house of cards, a domino effect isn't it yes and I would say as well you know I just think again you've just got to stay true to what you were doing before really just focus on getting through to the end of 2021 and then looking passionately towards 2022. I have to

say I do think everyone keeps going about the whole staycation thing I don't think there's going to be confidence in traveling abroad for a lot of people for quite a while so I am really hoping that we will get some halcyon days over the next couple of years in you know in our industries and maybe where you're usually looking you know like you said Bob you know kind of a seasonal area and actually the kind of the doldrum months of maybe November, January and February will hopefully find over the next couple of years will be really you know fantastic and supported by people who aren't going away as much maybe they'd normally go and get a winter sun holiday or something and people aren't traveling into major cities so much anymore to go to the offices, I think so many people work from home I think that's going to become the new norm for people so you know rather than traveling into you know London or Edinburgh or any of you know Belfast major cities to go to work, they'll be you know really utilizing their sort of more local restaurants certainly what we felt in the period between the lockdowns so let's just hope to everyone out there that's you know watching and sort of tuning in today that we do have some really fantastic time ahead, we can recoup a lot of our losses and yes good luck to everyone.

I think I think there's an opportunity as well to reset for a lot of the thinking that's which led us not to where we are but to where we are you know the we have to be cleverer and how we environmentally work and I think this is the perfect opportunity and it shouldn't be passed up you know if you can source locally a lot of people bang on about doing it locally but they don't it comes from a big national supplier and it's you don't even know where it's coming from, I think you've got to look at supporting your local industries and that's a great start for everyone going forward.

Yes well yes I mean especially as we're talking in terms of seafood and things like that.

Exactly especially if you're buying fish in Edinburgh at Eddies!

Okay so shall I bring Greg back in now to go through some of the questions I saw lots of them popping up on my screen, it'd be good to go through those now.

1:08:12 – Mark brings Greg Smith back into the discussion to present some audience questions

That would be great Mark and thank you very much to you and Bob and Campbell that was do you know what at times it was really difficult to hear and I think that's important it really is, it's you guys telling your story I think we as a nation have forgotten how good we had it and I believe that there will be that boom coming and foodservice will play a huge role in that hospitality in general and you're right Campbell I hope there are some changes to the way we act as consumers and conduct as businesses. And I think it was very difficult to hear you guys talk about the stop start and I that's something else that I hope we're able to get past that kind of get ready, restock get the staff back in get the place up to scratch go and then stop again that that must be incredibly demoralizing and it really was tough to hear that. Inspiring on the other half of the other side of the coin to hear about you know there are words like pivoting and adapting and evolving and I think you guys are incredible examples of that and it's amazing to see it and I think you know there will be there will be casualties there are casualties and there will be more and I just hope

that boom coming is enough to pull as many forward as possible and you've told a survival story today guys and I think that's the bit that's really inspiring and important for us to take away and the rest of the audience as well and Bob I will join you in the fact that there is nothing better than a pint of Guinness across the water from where I'm sitting just now and I will do my best to join you in having one of those when we can again one day.

We have had some phenomenal questions on the chat guys that I'll just field for you just now and please the three of you jump in as and when you can. So, the first one is around the adaptation of food businesses in general, so cafes, delis, restaurants, pop-ups, takeaways all these different initiatives and restructuring of small town centres so safe zones and these are being developed as ways to help and the industry to look forward and become a bit more sustainable – how can you see businesses becoming prepared for future uncertainty. Sso I suppose it's the question of well what have we learned from this and how can businesses change and adapt more.

I think it will depend on the situation, I mean a lot of people have shown themselves that they can actually just try to take a 180 turn around and keep putting one foot in front of the other and I think you know it says the knowledge that you don't have to be in a square peg if you need to adapt that to a round peg go off and do it you know just try not stand still there is there's something you can do to change to generate income if you just think outside the box.

I think we're very creative, we are creative by nature obviously that's what we do we create food, we create ambience and I think because of that you know you just need to hate the saying but you've got to think outside the box a bit and in those situations I think that's where some of the best ideas of restaurants, pop-ups, food styles comes from you know is from adversity as I said before you know 2008 the massive crash there you know it just gave birth to this whole new wave of fantastically exciting young chefs and food and restaurants and pop-ups and those pop-ups and eventually went into you know local pubs which you know instead of paying large rents and restaurants and then those pubs then went into sort of restaurants and now some of the best chefs of what who I would say around at the moment were born out of that sort of adversity and I think we're in a similar situation now albeit this is much more about people's health and well-being than you know the financial aspect was but I do think yes I think obviously we're all confined by government rules and legislations but if we're creative enough I think we can really look at diversifying and reinventing ourselves over and over again yes I think that's very important and maybe have some backup plans in your head should the worst happen or anything like that.

Good advice Mark. Bob, anything to add?

just I mean it's also amazing how adaptable our customers are you know in November, December we had customers outside won't see food bar you know having a pint of Guinness, eating salt and chili squid you know and it was freezing but you know they just they just wrapped up warm and they were prepared to do that and five years ago you know I would have said you're crazy even to suggest that but they were more than happy to do that.

Just get some extra chili in it, Bob!

Yes, anywhere but in they want to be now – that's the thing isn't it anywhere but indoors.

So that's an interesting thing isn't it for cultural change moving forward we do seem to have built a resilience and an acceptance to the outdoors in all weather and which is lovely and I hope that that carries forward like some of some of our Scandinavian neighbours.

I suppose that kind of leads on to question number two which is around reduced covers and the kind of general viability for many moving forward, do you think that will change the landscape does it mean for the future smaller places and maybe more outdoor space again for those kind of backup plans and future uncertainty.

I think you probably just need to look at your opening hours as well no so if you've got reduced covers do you just do a lunch and a dinner or do you do a 12 to 8pm service or something like that, so it's a more of an all-day dining situation or indeed add breakfast on where you never did that before and have a sort of a 10.30 till you know 8 pm situation. I think you know obviously keeping your staff costs is key obviously it's a very it's all about you know a ratio of customers to staff all the time anyway so I just think you kind of almost know how many customers you're going to do if they're reduced as well because you're you know if you've got a 30 capacity and you can you know you're going to fill that every single day that's almost a bit better than doing like 10 for lunch or 40 for dinner because you can really keep on top of what food you're ordering in how, many staff you need day to day, so it almost becomes a little bit more regimented and I think what we found specifically in the in between period when we opened up just five days a week on the lockdown levels, it was much easier to control than just you know when we threw our doors open and were absolutely rammed and probably had too many staff on you know making huge amounts of turnover but losing it all through staff costs and things like that. I definitely think you've just got to re-look at your opening hours maybe you really think you're offering a bit as well.

People shouldn't be scared to change what they've been doing what's worked for you for 10 years maybe it's not going to be right going forward don't be scared to you know think about something different and do something different what we've learned definitely in Bob will back at me up here is that we never got into this industry to do takeaway but it's absolutely worked and you know so don't be regimented and try not to think well this is how I've always done it that's what I'll have to do because there's no harm in trying something new.

Yes I mean another big factor has been to reduce VAT you know, if we're going to work on the future with reduced covers you know that there's no way we can ever go back up to 20% it was just far too much in a labour intensive industry you know we're competing for tourists with countries like France being Portugal who have 7-8% VAT and when we were sitting at 20% it was just crazy, absolutely crazy. One of the big things you know from the Mourn At Home range so I'm sending out the same dish I would sell in the restaurant but at zero VAT you know compared to if they sat in the

restaurant the VAT man gets 20 of the guaranteed whether I make a profit or not but I send it out by courier he gets zero you know.

Okay.

At the moment!

Yes, at the moment Mark well said.

And the last one guys that we have for you today we have so this is from a company who have soft launched a new website in 2020 targeted at restaurants, fishmongers smokers, etc and that caters for online ordering of salmon or they can do it through an app as well, which is supported by an over the phone service, so a digital channel for this business bringing salmon to restaurants, fishmongers etc., this person's interested in your opinion in what ways this could fit with you guys as restaurateurs moving forward is that the kind of thing does that can it take into consideration some of the pivot will you guys use channels like that more often now than more traditional supplier lines of communication, would that help.

It's going to be cost driven I suppose and quality and cost I mean we want to buy as local as possible but we're still driven by a bottom line if anyone's got something to sell to any restaurant and they can give a better product at a better price then they'll always be interested.

Bob, Mark?

I didn't really understand the question to be honest I have to say.

So let me read it again Mark, I've probably stumbled through it so this business have launched a new website in 2020 targeting restaurants, fishmongers, smokers, etc., where people can order salmon online or they can use an app so it's a website or an app where businesses can order fish and they're interested to know if that service would be something that would be interesting for you guys as restaurateurs in the future, maybe you use businesses and services like that already.

Well I'm saying most of my stuff I buy order online anyway, as you know I put my older food to my fish buyer online well I haven't put an order through to a fish buyer for 12 years but my chefs do oh yes I mean I guess so I mean Campbell is probably the one to talk to because he actually owns a fishmonger and stuff but yes I mean for us all the fish we get pretty much is from the southeast coast we stretch around to Cornwall in terms of seasonality, the one thing we can't get from there also is salmon so we get our salmon from suppliers who bring it down obviously from Scotland and then in terms of smoked fish we use you know very local people you know Hastings etc as local as possible but as Campbell said for first and foremost it's always about the quality right I mean that's where you start in any decent restaurant will start with the quality then obviously comes the price if you can get similar quality for a much better price then you would you know sort of go for that price driven one obviously we're coming back into this we are we've all lost huge amounts of money throughout this whole pandemic and we have to build that money back up so we'll be looking all over for ways to cut costs, trim costs etc but you cannot whatever you do bring the

standards down or the quality down because then you know there's so many people out there going to be fighting for customers you've still got to maintain what you what you want to do.

So just can I also say that part of what I did part of the reasoning and a small part certainly of doing the social distancing delivery thing right at the start was to try and keep my suppliers also in business yes and I've got relationships after being doing this for 35 years that you know I need to look after these guys as well so there's a business relationship that's already in place so you have to be you'd have to be awfully canny to get me to buy my salmon off someone I've never met online or really cheap.

Bob anything to add to that?

I know we would be the same positions Mark so you know I would buy all our stuff direct so off the boats, the fish, lobsters off our lobster guys we have a mussel farmer, oyster farmers will all come direct probably you know salmon is the one thing that I do buy through a fish wholesaler so if somebody was able to come to me direct cut him out but there would have to be a price advantage there would have to be a good quality and it would have to be you know a good reliable delivery service to you know to out compete the guy I'm currently getting it off, so yes there is I mean in any market there's always room there for a bit of disruption but you know there can be good disruption and bad disruption.

Yes I mean so to end that point I had my local veg guy on today so we you know you have your basic veg obviously your carrots your onions and leeks parsnips that type thing whatever which you know we get kind of from a larger wholesaler, apart from things like heritage carrots and tomatoes and that sort of stuff, but if you're looking into your ultra seasonal local things I had him on the phone literally five minutes before I came onto this and they grow and supply all the local veg and obviously last year we missed out all missed out on the asparagus season which is my favourite vegetable for the right reasons obviously it's only around six to eight weeks a year so I was on to him today saying look you know we're opening April the 12th you know properly we're going to reopen in May you know do you hear how long do you think the asparagus season is going to last this year you know etc., and I'm desperate he was phoning me up because he's excited about me opening up my nine sites in fact one the new I say nine and the ninth one is going to be open in July and it's we're doing a restaurant right slap bang on the beach so that is going to be all fish and all seafood full stop we're going to have one part of the hand starter in one stage otherwise everything is going to be the local catch of the day which we're very excited about as we're on with Love Seafood, so yes I've lost myself now self-promoting, I've sent myself off down the rabbit hole!

There's nothing wrong with that Mark I don't think particularly at this point in the session as well you know what you've done you've done you've created a beautiful segueway for me to bring back on-screen a reminder of our Love Seafood support, there you go see I knew you would and it was it was beautiful seamless as they say, it's up there for the attendees to see today and to access you know alongside the information and the wisdom that you guys have imparted today and we hope that there's you know support there and like you say a bit of a thriving industry and sector

and rebirth coming particularly during the summer months and it's my opportunity to say to you guys again thank you so much for joining us today so there's a thank you.