

How Fancy Fungi made its online sales mushroom

The pandemic crisis created the perfect storm for Wexford's [Fancy Fungi](#) to pivot its business from food service to retail and respond to a strong appetite from remote workers online.

Owned and run by Nikk and Catherine George for over 20 years, this artisan family business has a passion for growing fabulous fungi and delivers only the best!

Catherine and Nikk moved back home from working in England in 1997 and turned their hobby and passion into a lucrative business when they took over some land on Catherine's family farm. In their spare time they developed a herb garden on a small plot of land on the farm.

When the herbs were ready to harvest they were brought in to the local restaurants around Wexford town. At the time they spent a lot of time out walking their dog and when in season foraged for wild mushrooms. Again, the local chefs took the mushrooms for their restaurants and they became so popular and sought after that they began having the discussion about cultivating mushrooms themselves all year round.

Quality and innovation

“At Fancy Fungi, we grow the most flavoursome gourmet mushrooms of exceptional quality by the coast in Wexford in a healthy and earth friendly way,” Catherine explained.

“We have built a strong reputation for quality and innovation within the mushroom industry. Supplying award winning Irish grown mushrooms to restaurants, speciality stores and retail nationwide along with specially selected imported gourmet mushrooms to complement our range.

“After a lot of research we came up with several mushrooms varieties that were nutritious and colourful and began growing. Over the years we have used personal experience and lots of trial and error to research and develop the process of producing several specimens of gourmet mushrooms – Grey Oyster, Golden Oyster, Pink Flamingo Oyster, Shiitake and Pholiota. To complement our range we also import several different varieties from France and China to produce a truly splendid combination of textures and flavours.”

Fancy Fungi has over the years has transformed into an entity which is competitive, productive and innovative. It currently employs 10 people.

Fancy Fungi Mushrooms are grown under carefully controlled conditions in tunnels. Unlike many others, they are not sprayed or treated with herbicides, pesticides or fungicides ensuring zero chemical content.

“Mushrooms are so versatile for breakfast to dinner menus,” said Catherine. “Ideal for gluten free and diabetic diets. Nutritionally low in salt and cholesterol, naturally rich in protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals. They make a great meat substitute for vegetarians...you are what you eat!

“Consumer trends are showing that people are more conscious of their diet and health and are more likely to buy products that enhance their wellbeing to optimise their bodies systems to feel better than well!

“We have won numerous awards from both Great Taste Awards in the UK and also Blas na hEireann in Ireland,” she said.

A light at the end of the tunnel

Nobody saw Covid-19 and its seismic impact on the business world coming. For Fancy Fungi Mushrooms it was both testing and transformative.

“Up until Covid, Fancy Fungi Mushrooms were 80pc food service and 20pc retail. Most of our mushrooms were sent up to the wholesalers in Dublin such as Pallas Foods, Total Produce, Caterway, DVP, Leonards, Begleys etc., and distributed throughout food service. We deliver ourselves to restaurants and a small amount of retail in the Wexford/Waterford area.

“Our mushrooms have also been in Dunnes Stores through a third party for about 10 years. Sales

in Dunnes Stores have doubled in size since Covid whereas sales in food service have decreased by 70pc to 80pc during lockdown. So, our sales have completely turned around. We have had to adapt our business model and premises, so it is more suitable for packaging products for retail as this is currently where 80pc of sales are.”

The ripple effect of the crisis from the closure of restaurants and hotels to related food production industries was detrimental. The company had to close tunnels and stop production in March.

Fortunately, making a pitch for the Grow with Aldi programme in February was a lucky break and the business was accepted for two of its range: Forest Mix Mushrooms and Grey Oyster Mushrooms.

“The opportunity couldn’t have come at a better time. Even though the restaurants were reopening from the end of June it was a time of uncertainty. Our Aldi trial was postponed until September which gave us time to gradually build up our mushroom compost again in the tunnels. The opportunity to have our mushrooms available in all Aldi stores nationwide will open up a whole new market for us at a time when more people are cooking at home and experimenting with new recipe ideas.

“Aldi for us, is the light at the end of the (mushroom) tunnel! If successful with our trial, it would help a small producer like ourselves to continue doing what we do best.... providing high quality, fresh exotic and gourmet mushrooms.”

Growing digital

In the midst of this Fancy Fungi Mushrooms took its first steps into digital.

“We developed a new e-commerce site with the help of a [Trading Online Voucher](#) from our [Local Enterprise Office Wexford](#) – which has given us wide exposure to new customers and greatly increased our visibility.

The between October 2019 and October 2020 the company grew sales online from 5pc to 10pc.

However, since the Aldi trial Fancy Fungy Mushrooms has seen a 100pc in website sales.

“Since our Aldi trial we have seen a 100pc increase in sales from our website,” said Catherine.

“As our business evolved into more retail than food service, we have had to employ seven new staff to cope with the increase in sales during the Aldi trial. Continuing on from the Covid-19 lockdown, there is a huge appetite for remote working among Irish workers, which also means there are growing numbers of people cooking from home. They are looking for ideas, something

different, more exotic and that's where our mushrooms come in.

“Our mushrooms are now available nationwide which gives people the opportunity to easily find them and cook them for themselves instead of them just being available in restaurants. As our Aldi trial came to an end our mushrooms are still easily accessible to people online through our website.

The learnings from the Aldi programme have given Nikk and Catherine the confidence to pursue further national listings with retailers. “We also participated in the Food Academy Programme, supported by the Local Enterprise Offices and Bord Bia and are listed in Supervalu stores across the country.”

Catherine emphasised the importance of buying local. “Speaking from personal experience since the lockdown, reopening and lockdown again we have as a family made a conscious effort to get our regular takeaways from the local restaurants in the area. The local restaurants buy our mushrooms so we buy their dinners ... we're supporting each other.”

Video: How to get your business selling online

With Christmas 2020 now past, the year ahead 2021 still presents retailers with a challenge to go online to not only deal with closed premises if they are deemed non-essential but to address the expectations of an increasingly digitalised consumer.

To get the message out to SMEs, Bank of Ireland [collaborated](#) with online shopping platform [Shopify](#) as well as [Pointy](#), the Irish platform recently acquired by Google that helps shoppers find via the internet the products they need in your physical store, and [the E-commerce Association of Ireland](#) (eCAI), to highlight the opportunities that exist online.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZsjVLonNeE&feature=youtu.be>

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