

## Episode 9: Westcombe Dairy – Tom Calver

### **Hunter Ruthven, senior content manager, Be the Business**

Tom, welcome to the It's The Small Things podcast. We're here in slightly sunny Somerset, on the side of the farm. Downstairs they're making cheese, across the yard they're storing cheese. We're going to go have a look at that later, but I thought it would be helpful just to start with a little bit of a history lesson of the business and how it started – a little potted tour of how it's got to where it is today.

### **Tom Calver, director, Westcombe Dairy**

Okay, yeah. So it's an interesting one. I think that Westcombe really reflects what's happened in agriculture and feed over the past 100 or so years. Basically, when we first started, we were a very small farm only with about 10 or 12 cows on the site here. And that was actually Mr and Mrs Brickell, who first started the business making cheese here. And then they had a daughter who married another farmer. That brought two farms into one and then basically, on the success of the cheese, at that stage we started to expand.

And then there was very much a government directive during World War Two to actually try and make sure that the UK was self-sufficient in food production. So we expanded again. So actually, it was then where a lot of farmhouse cheese producers were converting from being a farmhouse operation to more of a creamery style operation.

So we kind of followed in that way. And then we got to a stage where we were pulling milk from lots of farms in the local area and were one of the largest cheddar producers in the 50s and 60s. And, you know, looking to produce a commodity block kind of cheddar. Then it wasn't until the 1980s when there was a bit of a shake-up with things.

We were very lucky in where we are situated – right on the side of the Mendip hills. But as you know, when you're driving up here in your car, the lanes are quite tight. So bringing in articulated lorries and stuff was a bit of a challenge. And I think at that stage, when we were producing cheese, there were quite a few things that were stacked against us following this commodity route.

So when my father took over the cheese side of the business – to rewind, my dad actually came into the business, as a partner on one of the farms that the Brickells' daughter Phyllis and her husband then actually bought. He did, you know, I think a relatively good job of farming that one, so they asked him to farm the other two farms that they had. And in the 80s, they just asked him to take over that side of the business. That coupled with quite a bit of a shake up in the industry generally.

Dad decided that actually, you know, commodity cheese is not really where we want to be. And we've got this mishmash of buildings, you know, attached to an old farmhouse, which is highly inefficient. We need to kind of scrap that and go back and build a business that's based on something different. And it was only until 1997, I think that he decided to build a

dairy because we could see a decline in the milk price. And we decided that we wanted to add value. It felt that actually we had a history of cheese or cheddar production on the site.

So he decided to get back into cheese making but go for traditional raw milk cheese. And I suppose the business has evolved over time to really refine that and refine what we're trying to achieve now, which I think is trying to create a taste of a specific place and area, basically.

**HR**

Okay. And in terms of just some numbers to give listeners an idea of the scale of a business, how many people – I don't know how many tonnes of cheese produced is a fair way of describing production. But what are some of the numbers that bring that to life?

**TC**

Yeah, so we employ about 19 people across the farms and the business. We also have some commercial properties. So we rent out next door to the Wild Beer company. So they're a brilliant brewery. And, we produce around 100 to 120 tonnes of cheddar a year, about 25 tonnes of ricotta and about 25 tonnes of caerphilly. And I mean that's, you know, in cheddar terms, that's tiny if you think about it. We've got Barber's down the road – I think Barber's is running around about 80 tonnes of cheese a day, compared to 120 tonnes of cheese here. But yeah, I've got no real aspirations to really just maximise our production.

**HR**

Quality, not quantity. Exactly. Yeah. For those of us, probably most of us who don't know how cheeses are actually made, can you give us the 60-second explainer?

**TC**

Yeah, okay, right, flying in 60 seconds, this is gonna be hard to go, right. Obviously, I think cheese making is a bit like cooking – you've got to start off with the best raw ingredient.

So it starts with the soil. So if we can actually have a hugely diverse microbiome and soil, and also fantastic cows to produce that milk, that's quite a long way there. So we focus quite a lot on that. Then once you have your milk, you add your starter culture, which is a, which is a lactic acid producing bacteria. Then you add rennet, which will set everything into a junket.

And then you split that up into curds and whey. And then you can heat it up, which will drive out more moisture. And then we do a texturing thing called shattering. Once it's been shattered, we throw it through a mill, put some salt on, mix all that up, put it into moulds, and then effectively dress it and take it to the store. And then it's in that store for anywhere between 12 and 18, maybe even 24 months.

**HR**

And then it's ready to kind of ready, pretty much. Yeah. So you've touched on the fact that it's a bit of a family affair here. How does that come together? How many different family members are there here? What's that dynamic like?

**TC**

It's really good. So we've got Christine as one of our directors, and her son Rob is another director. Rob has actually got his own enterprise or business using our milk making ice cream, which is a new venture.

He's only been doing it for about two and a half years – he used to do digital marketing in Hong Kong, but I think he felt like a draw to come back into the business. But I think that the best thing that he's doing is his own enterprise here and rubbing shoulders with us to actually have a deeper understanding of how this really works. Dad is very much kind of like, he's brilliant. He's very much on the farming side of the business. He's a very good mentor for me – a sounding board.

And then I do the added value, cheese enterprise type of thing, kind of like helicopter over that side of things really. The dynamic works really, really well. I tend to come up with around 10 ideas a day, and then dad will put them into more perspective by saying, right, okay, sounds great. Let's do a business plan, see if it will actually work. And as long as it gets through that kind of stage of critique, then it's usually something pretty good.

I think we're lucky because we've got a really flat kind of management system that is really only me and dad. And then we've got, you know, Rob, who's the dairy manager. And everybody feels like they're in an equal kind of setting. Because we're all pretty much the same size cogs in a big system. And that's why I really like it. And I quite like the fact that I'm trying to push for more into changing kind of roles, basically. So everybody has a deep understanding of each other's role. I think that's really important.

**HR**

I want to come onto the dad idea vetting a little bit later on, but what was your career like before you started to come into the business with your dad and make cheese? What were you up to there?

**TC**

Yeah. So I mean, I'm not an academic at all. And so I did about a year of A-Levels. Mum and dad were brilliant, sent me to a semi-wealthy school, a private school. But yeah, I mean, I've never really excelled at that side of things, but because I am also quite heavily dyslexic as well, which actually I see as a positive, because I have a different way of thinking, I think.

And then I basically decided that I really, really like cooking. So I went and worked as a chef in London for a bit, worked at an investment bank for quite a long period of my career, which is great, you know, it was early mornings, but I found that was quite depressing in a way.

**HR**

You're the first one who's thought...

**TC**

It's that thing of value. I think people's perception of value is a really interesting subject. And, and when you're constantly served up, you know, the best of the best and the money is no object, then actually, people have a really warped idea of what is value, basically. So yeah, so I decided actually, you know, London was great, I had a great time up there. But I decided that I needed to come back to come back to Somerset and come back to my roots really.

And also at that stage, dad was having a real struggle selling the cheese. So I decided to come back and give him a hand. And it was at that stage that I went and worked up at Neal's Yard Dairy, understanding the retail side of the industry and also the industry in general. And that was invaluable.

**HR**

We're hearing the noises because cheese production is going on in the background. What are we hearing? What's that noise?

**TC**

Yes. My little world, my office, sits among some steam pipes and bits and pieces. So there's a grunt and groan occasionally, which makes life interesting.

**HR**

So that's the milk being heated right now on Steam and the steam pipes. Okay, okay.

Right, we've got the potted history sorted, we've heard about your career before this, I want to move on to looking at the changes that you started making, when you came into the business that we're focused on. The quality of product and quality of ingredient, the all-round provenance that you identified is really important to focus on. Why do you think that is so important to look at, and make a real concerted effort for, for any business of any shape and size?

**TC**

It wasn't me basically, coming into it and going, right, this is the target thing that I'm going to focus on. It was an evolution. I mean, it's a very simple evolution. At the end of the day, it didn't taste very good, you know, and I found myself, I was brought into the business or in more of a sales role. And I found myself having to work really hard.

Because it just wasn't as good as it needed to be. So actually, that was a really good lesson for me. And so I thought, well, you know, what does it take to actually make this better? How do we actually do this? And I think that it's about making lots of little changes towards, you know, getting better quality.

So I found myself being drawn more and more into the dairy side of things. And understanding that became the mechanics really of cheesemaking to try and influence the quality to make it better, so that it would sell itself. And I think that's the real key – to make something that is just absolute, you know, constantly striving for excellence, I think, is the only way to do it.

**HR**

Okay. So how did that play out? What did you start challenging the business to do differently? And how does it look different today to how it was then?

**TC**

Well, I mean, when dad did this whole thing... I never forget when I first got into the business, he said, Tom, you know, if you've got any ideas or anything like that, just keep them to yourself, because they've all been tried before. It's all been done before. So you might as well not bother.

Actually, that was like, what? Come on, you know, that was just the worst thing to say. And I was a bit disheartened, but actually, I just ignored him. And actually, I just constantly question everything. And, I think, and you say much about business, I think about the people that you've got involved with it, that is the business, it's about relationships: relationships with customers, relationships with staff, how we deal with them, all those types of things will have such a massive role to play. They just make it. So I found that actually, by getting in the dairy, questioning a lot more, focusing on quality, also having a team – now I feel that we've got a really fantastic team there, especially with cheese, making a raw milk cheese and making it so like individual as well, when they make those decisions it's based on a craft, so that's the essence of it.

**HR**

So is it fair to describe it as almost having everyone in the business having a healthy amount of scepticism about the way somebody has done things? Not from a negative point of view, but from a, let's not just say, this is the way it's going to be done? Because it's the way it's always been done. But just kind of going, look, we can challenge stuff, and it's okay to challenge stuff.

**TC**

Yeah, absolutely. That's really positive for me. I think it's just asking questions. You don't have to challenge it, just ask the question, Is this why we do this? And like, weirdly, a lot of the time, if the answer is because we've always done it, and this is the way it always has to happen, that's not a good enough answer.

So I think that actually, what we've been doing is we've been challenging the idea of tradition, quite a lot recently. We've been looking at very old school kinds of books and trying to create our own interpretation of these very old techniques of cheddar making. And

actually, it's just, it's been fascinating. You think, well, Crikey, like how the hell did we evolve to what we're doing now from where we were before? And have we evolved in a positive way or not? And so, yeah, by constantly questioning it, I think that's the way to achieve excellence.

**HR**

I think. Yeah, fair to say. So you came in and questioned the way in which the cheese has been produced: you were looking after the end product, making sure that it could be as good as it could possibly be. But I suppose you can have the best product in the world and if you don't get in front of customers, then it's a bit meaningless. So what else have you focused on, outside of the pure production of cheese that has set the business up? Kind of thinking about the systems, the processes, the way in which you take the product to market – all of those things.

**TC**

We're a small team so we've relied on relationships, and building those relationships and making sure that they're very, very good. I mean, our cheese is cloth bound, it needs to be sold by people. Our cheese is not designed to necessarily fit well on a supermarket shelf, really. And I think that that's okay.

I prefer to have, when you're purchasing our cheese or whatever we're producing, I like to think about the experience about how you're actually purchasing it. So teaming up really with our customers, really understanding their business and actually how they present themselves to their customers, and aligning, you know, their philosophies with ours or ours to theirs. I think that that's really important too, because then the end customer, the consumer will remember our cheese in a very positive experiential way. So it's not necessarily about the monetary element to it, it's about actually going in and remembering, wow, you know, that awesome deli that I went to and purchased this, you know, like it was incredibly well done in so many different aspects. I remember that person, they had such an in-depth knowledge about it and connection with what was actually how it was being produced.

**HR**

I know technology has been one element of the business that you've made investments in, you've decided it's the right thing to do, in particular a certain cheese turning machine called Tina Turner. Yeah. Can we go have a look at that and see how that's helping the business become more productive and consistent?

**TC**

Yeah, sure.

**HR**

Okay, Tom spoke about Tina the Turner. This is Tina the Turner here, this is British artisan cheesemaking meets Swiss robotics. It's not something you're gonna see every day, give us a brief description of what this robot does for the business.

**TC**

Okay, so this is a cheeseturning robot, I feel like she just gives us time basically. So it's a really important job that she does, turning cheeses over, you've got moisture in there that needs to be redistributed. These cheeses have a tendency to actually fuse themselves to the boards if you don't actually turn them over. And also we're trying to encourage an even ripening of the mould, the bacteria and the fungus that are actually on the outside of the cheese that's really important for cheese quality. So being able to turn it over and keep those conditions pretty similar, that's a really important task. And then also with that, you know, she's got the element of Hoovering. So we can keep everything tidy, keep it running, brush down, keep everything in check.

**HR**

And previously, this was a human job, whether it be going around, I'm guessing with some kind of tool, but essentially picking up flipping, brushing down themselves... how many were they doing in a day at that stage?

**TC**

Well, this is it. I mean, this was a job for me and the rest of the team at the end of the cheese making day, which in itself is a hugely physical task. And so we've been in the old store, having to hand turn them, and it was just, you know, with the best will in the world, the phone would go so you'd lose your place. Then there's the whole kind of human element in it as well, physically taking them off the shelves – there's more likelihood of damage, because of the kind of different stresses and how you're doing it, you're not necessarily going to be consistent every single time. Whereas with this machine, you know, it's taking, pulling it out on flat surfaces. So there's not much angle pressure actually at any one point. And so it's just better for quality through and through.

**HR**

Essentially, you just programme her in and she just does her stuff. What other jobs are being carried on around the farm?

**TC**

Yeah, I mean, it looks like a complicated system, which kind of in areas it is, but it's actually relatively simple. It works off of a movement sensor, reading the distance of the bottom plinth here. And so it will actually locate itself throughout the aisle and set it up. And off she goes.

**HR**

Yeah, and combined with the RFID tags for each cheese, so those are tracking how long it's been ageing for, its location?

**TC**

Yeah, so the RFID tags don't actually link with the robot. But we use RFID scanners, because the robot – well, the traditional way of labelling these cheeses has been like a luggage tag label –

**HR**

I saw some of those around the corner.

**TC**

Yeah, that's it. So those are still being hand turned. The trouble with when you turn it with a robot is she just ripped them off. And then you'd be not knowing what the cheese was and what date it had – we'd lose full traceability. So we came up with the concept of maybe looking for an RFID solution. And by doing that, it's actually opened up this new world of traceability. And it's actually really exciting. So we just use an RFID scanner, scan the outside of the cheese, that'll tell us a unique code, which is unique to that specific cheese rather than just the batch. And then we can track it in all sorts of different ways.

**HR**

Okay, and everyone in the business majority knows how to use Tina and get her to do her stuff. It's not solely the role of a couple of people.

**TC**

Yeah. Well, it's actually more of a role of a few people. But to be honest, I mean, not everybody knows the ins and outs of Tina's functioning at the moment. And I suppose with this level of investment and responsibility, it's quite useful just to have a couple of people who are actually dedicated to this machine. You know, otherwise, it's quite a heavy investment for everybody to know and not know who's actually done it. It can be programmed in the wrong way.

**HR**

The final thing is it's a big capital investment. So you have to set aside the cash to do this. It's from a manufacturer, not in the UK. You're one of the first if not the first to use it for this kind of process. So what did you do? And what have you done in terms of if anything goes wrong, in terms of risk mitigation – what was the thought process there?

**TC**

Yeah, so we first talked to the guys in 2007. I mean, this is not that new technology, because people use it for Comte, Gruyère and Parmesans, they've been turned by robots for such a long period of time. It's just with the innovations of cheddar production being more about efficiency and block production. So there's only a few of us left making this cylindrical cheese. So we spoke to these guys over in Switzerland. And it took us about three years of development to make it relevant to a cheddar rather than those like washed, washed cheeses. So yeah, we went over there a couple of times. And we talked them through the process quite a lot. I mean, I think I suppose these days with the internet, you can just plug her in. This isn't actually Wi Fi. But you can get newer versions that do work on Wi Fi and the diagnostics that they can kind of set a laptop in Switzerland and actually tell you exactly what's going wrong fills us with confidence.



**HR**

Well, we should probably look to get back to doing our job because she's got hundreds of cheeses to get through. So let's plug it back in. Cool.

**HR**

Awesome. Well, that was quite a sight to behold, who knew robotics and artisan cheese could come together so well? What have you personally learned about the success of this investment that's influencing how you look at other parts of the business now?

**TC**

I think really, for me, what it's done is that we can focus on the human element in the cheese making, which I think is critical. As I was saying before, the kind of artisan nature of what we're doing is that connection between the raw milk and the decisions that we're making, to kind of mould it into the best quality and flavour that we possibly can.

Because there's so much variation that you'll get with using raw milk or working with a natural product. And so actually embracing that is really, really good. But to embrace it, and all say to push it into a really high band of quality takes a lot of thought. And also it's an expression of a person, so what the team has bought us is the time to be able to do that, and the focus to be able to do that. I don't think that there's anything art-like about turning a cheese over. It just hurts. And it's tough, and it's difficult. And trying to find people who've got aspirations to become a cheeseturner in life is a challenge. So I think automation and robotics have their place. It can just take out the grunt worker out of a system that's really quite intricate, and you need to have specialist people involved with different areas.

**HR**

I like that description. Because a lot of people say, automation, robotics, they're killing jobs. But what you're saying is no, it's just it gives you the opportunity to focus on the things that only humans can focus on, and really add value there. And it's not about getting rid of jobs. It's just redirecting people's efforts. Totally.

**TC**

I mean, we've actually employed more people because of it. Because actually, inevitably it has to pay for itself. We've had to expand a little bit. You know, we've created a little bit more cheese. But I've identified the fact that with this variation, the variation needs to be managed to a point. I mean, I'm really accepting with variation. I think it's actually a huge selling point because at the end of the day, who wants to eat something that's bloody consistent, is the same yesterday, the day before the day before that? And actually, how do you sell that? I mean, that's one sales pitch. And that's it.

What's really interesting for me, and how I can empower, hopefully, the independent cheese retailers of the small towns and cities, is to give them a point of difference. So they have knowledge. And they have this kind of thing of like, taste This is different, but it's from the

same place. And it's different because of X, Y and Z. But that variation, as I say, needs to be managed, and how we manage that is we have people in the store working alongside Tina, tasting the cheese – I mean, she can't taste it, and say that we compare the flavour profile of that variation with our customer base. And we have, which builds our relationships with those customers, that they can kind of be confident to know that the Westcombe that they get is to that particular profile.

**HR**

One final thing in technology, expanding this away from the type of business that yours is dairy farming. Do you think other business leaders should be approaching things? Let me rephrase that. If they've got apprehension around cost and disruption and training and those kinds of considerations that come with technology? What's your advice for kind of getting over that and being able to make an investment and introduce something new into the business? Which, which could potentially really improve stuff?

**TC**

Wow. I mean, I think you've got to look at each business from a top down thing. And I think if you, if you've got this end focus and goal, if you just keep it really, really simple, in a way, how can we produce? Will it make the cheese taste better, was kind of like a really good question that we asked on most decisions. And, we felt that actually, the automation and the technology that we've used, absolutely is making the cheese taste better. And also, it's kind of giving us that opportunity to pair up those cheeses with those customers. So. So yeah, but having that kind of top down view of the whole business and how it works, where you're focused, and where you're going, is really important. It's not a very good answer, I'm afraid.

**HR**

No, I think it works for not getting too caught up in the exact specifics of something. And going, is this going to reduce the X hours? Or is this going to give me this much return this year? I think it makes a lot of sense to come back to the bigger objective of the business top down and thinking objective really, does this thing improve our core mission? Yes, then we should find a way of making it work. No, our focus should be somewhere else.

**TC**

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, that and the investment of that robot. Yeah, it was a big one, you know, we had to change the whole storage system and having this crazy idea of actually maturing cheese underground, we had to build the whole facility around that robot as well. We've been in business for well over 100 years, I'd really like to see the business still operational in another 100 years. And actually, you have to innovate, like, dragging this artisanal process into the 21st century with robots. And also, we've got our RFID tags that we put a microchip on it, each of these cheeses as well, because of traceability, and that's opened up doors of how we can actually, you know, in the future and prove that traceability to do it, not only from a food safety kind of boring element, but also from an educational point of view, where we can link almost the cow to the cheese, and then that builds on that story that you can actually explain to your customer base.

**HR**

And it's coming back to not thinking like that guy who told you to keep your ideas to yourself when you first came into the business.

**TC**

This is it. Yeah, absolutely.

**HR**

Looking at the role you play in the business, you're making the big decisions with your dad on a daily basis. Tell us more about that process of over the years – how you became a more effective leadership duo. I mean, you each have your own responsibilities, but go into a bit more detail about that, that role he plays with you and how it works so well.

**TC**

Well, I mean, that you know, he's my father, which is an interesting one. He's very passionate about the business and farming and the things that promote huge amounts of discussions. There's not really a time that we have actually time off away from the business. But I think we're happy with that, I think it's really interesting, you know, like my role is a director, so I feel like I need to direct the business. I mean, that's as simple as it is. And actually, our focus is to try and have a profitable business, but we can actually work along with nature and, you know, slightly disrupt the kind of traditional food systems that we've got in place at the moment, because I just think that they're, a lot of them are failing at the moment, you know, if you look at the commodity, production of food, it doesn't seem to be taking all every single box that it needs to. So I think that I don't know, I feel that actually, as a director of this business, that's, that's the focus and push that I need to do it really.

**HR**

And when you come to your dad, armed with your 10 daily ideas, and he starts to run the rule over them, yeah. What's that process like?

**TC**

Well, usually puts his head in his hands and goes Christ, what we're going to do now, okay. And, and as I say, he's very good. It's more, right. Okay. Well, let's consider it and expand on why, why you think this is the right decision. And I suppose if I really am passionate about it, there's a push. But also, usually at the moment, what I'm quite excited about is the other guys in the business as well. I mean, now we've got allies here. So we've got Paul in the Charcuterie side of things. And he's very passionate about the directions that he wants to push that one into. So it feels like we're enabling people to expand their own kind of creative ideas and stuff. But yeah, so to get back to what he does, yeah, he usually just throws back to a businessman. Let's see if it actually will work. And who's going to do it?

**HR**

And if your dad just decided to flat out or retire tomorrow, yeah, so I'll meet you for Sunday lunch, but I don't want anything to do with the business anymore. Do you feel like you'd have to go and find an equivalent of your dad and either bring them in or find someone outside the business?

**TC**

Yeah, I mean, it's a subject that we've been talking about quite a lot. And he's 77. So he's not young. But his mind is very young. I think he and I know that he's not going to retire. I think he's going to be slumped over in a Land Rover somewhere I wouldn't. Which, you know, I suppose that's the way to go. But I think I would run the business slightly differently. I think that kind of that role of, of the pushback on the ideas, it's going to be interesting how that goes. I think maybe actually, the confidence in the ideas might be less, because I wouldn't have the push back. So maybe those ideas will diminish from being 10 ideas to a few. And then actually, I'll probably, but yeah, it would be great to find somebody else who would. With the other guys that we've got here and stuff like that, and their relationship with that. I think they probably fill that void pretty well.

**HR**

Yeah. And his focus is always going back to the cash. It's a relatively simple discipline to live by. But it is really important, isn't it? So what, how have you learnt about its importance? And what's it taught you about having that as the guiding light?

**TC**

I think just going through the figures constantly, that is one of the biggest focuses for us – to make sure that we're profitable, we're doing all these things. I mean, if we can't, if we can't make money, then we can't actually survive. So of course, that's the number one fundamental thing. But I think it's how you actually make that and the different areas that you can gain. A lot of the time, as long as we're profitable, it's not always about the money that we're producing, I think there's a huge amount of energy. Energy is like a commodity that you need to use in a business as well as other things, other decisions that you're making, that are going to affect the world in a really positive light, I think that's really important. And people may lose focus when you're really concentrating on the bottom line, like 100 per cent, obviously, you need to concentrate on the bottom line. But also you need to have, I feel there's a responsibility of making sure that you're making the world a better place.

**HR**

I think that's a lovely mantra to live by, and can solve a lot of problems. We spoke a little bit earlier about the revenue diversifying change that you made, you mentioned the shortcuts reline. What was behind that move? I think it's a really interesting one because you've described it as a way of generating cash flow positive items in the business, so lots of other businesses will have products, which have long lead times and there's sunk costs and those

kinds of things going on. So tell us a bit more about introducing that cash flow positive item or what it's enabled you to do?

## **TC**

Jackie three isn't probably isn't the best example of the cash flow positive, because, you know, there's still a lead time. It takes, you know, either six weeks with the salamis or up to a year with the culatello and stuff. But I think that there's a few factors in that we do have cash flow, decent items, and the ricotta is fantastic. And I think that a lot of businesses have to have some kind of engine behind them as well. Because we all know cash flow is king. We have I mean, ricotta is really good, as I said, but also we have a side business, which is distributing cultures for Christian Hanson's. Which, again, you know, we provide a service which is a help from our cash flow point of view.

But the other side of things, why we started it is because we have this distributed ship with Hanson's. I wanted to have a bit more of a deeper understanding of how – I mean, we supply our cultures in salami making – how they were being used, and how we could best advise our customers on how they use as well, I think that the the only way to know that is to do it yourself.

So that was one of the reasons why we started doing it. The other one is we had somebody who's very passionate about it, and also had a huge wealth of experience in that sector. So he felt that actually, he needs to be encouraged. And the other thing as well is, I feel like in a farming business, we need to manage waste. And one of the horrendous things is that sometimes, well, to produce milk, a cow has to have a calf. And so there's a 50/50 chance that's gonna be a bull calf. And what are you going to do? How are you going to market that calf? Before now, you've had an element where you want to get it to a marketable weight, then there's a huge amount of investment that goes into that. And then when the market only gives you 10 quid back, then you are in a negative situation.

So I kind of thought, Well, how can we add value to this? It's not only that I don't like using the term waste product, because it's an actual living thing. But how can we actually add value to these animals or this aspect of that particular business? And so the charcuterie side of things really was the way to go, say producing our calves out to pasture for six, seven months, so they're not exactly veal, but we call them veal salamis. And then we use them in our salami enterprise. And I think that that's really positive, because it helps with this wider food system and also acts as a great communication tool to enlighten our consumers about what it takes to produce cheese and how the farming system works and what it actually takes. That's quite powerful.

## **HR**

Yeah, I agree. I agree there's a, there's still a massive amount of educating that everyone needs around where their food comes from, and all the ingredients that are required to produce that. And have it as a consumer a sense of ownership and responsibility in what you're eating and knowing where it comes from. And just taking an active interest in it is a big thing.

**TC**

Totally, I think that's the key: taking an active interest in what you're actually consuming is huge. I mean, there's this kind of vegan vegetarian movement that's happening and happened. And I think that that's really positive, it's coming from a really good place. But it's very dangerous, because you're only getting half the story. I was talking to somebody the other day, and they were on about creating a vegan cheese, which is fine, but where? Where are you actually getting your produce from, and the vegan cheese was using almond milk. If you're, as long as you've got the best relationship with that almond producer, and you look into the detail of the production of those almonds, and how that is affecting that particular social and economic environment around the almond production. Is it positive or negative? I don't know.

But actually, if you look in the southwest of the UK, where we are here, with great grain grass, where you grow grass, you have a really good dairy industry. And so why not? Why not have cheese as part of your diet? Because it's local to you. And I think that that's it – be totally aware of the production process and have confidence and a good relationship with the people who are producing it.

**HR**

I think the good thing is, I think there is a lot more interest being taken in most consumer goods from the consumer angle. I think it's just about as long as there are those bargain basement price products, where people can kind of just go, I'm only buying this on price, I'm only buying this and I don't care about anything else that it feels like that's the thing that needs to be overcome.

**TC**

But as I say, I think there's always going to be a market for that. And that's the right thing. But I think that as long as people just don't buy on price and actually ignore the production because then you can make a really informed decision. Okay, well, you know, I am buying this on price. And I'm happy with that, because that's all I can afford at the moment. But I understand the production mechanisms that are actually going into that. And so maybe there might be a thing of, actually, I'm buying this on a more of a steady kind of basis. But also, I'm also purchasing occasionally, which is actually because I believe in the values of this product and how it's actually produced or you change your diet. Let's be honest, people need to eat less cheese. From a cheese maker point of view. I shouldn't be saying that. But like, I'd prefer people eat less but have better quality.

**HR**

Absolutely. I want to move on to a mantra which you've described to me in previous conversations of 'don't do a job, don't ask someone to do a job you wouldn't do'. I think it's a really interesting take on things. What do you believe is so important about that? And how does that play out in your day to day activities? And I know one of them because before you greeted us on site, you were off doing deliveries, weren't you?

**TC**

Yeah. It's very difficult. I don't know if I've got the balance right? I probably haven't. And it's something that I'm constantly questioning. I think the deliveries for me are really important. Because, again, it's customer facing, you know, you can have an idea about whether or not it's being well received or not, you know, and that's really good. To be able to, if you're asking something bigger of people which we do on a daily basis, making cheese is tough. I mean, it's heavy, it's hot, it's loud, it's all these different things. And so if you're not immersing yourself in that particular environment, but asking people to do that I think you're asking for trouble. And also, it's enlightening when you actually do it, when I'm down in the dairy, and one of the guys has been asking me Oh, actually we really need to fix this thing. And then you think it's incidental, but then you do the job. And my god, you really need to fix that thing because it would make life so much easier. Yeah, I mean, that's really useful to actually do that. And I think you try your best as a boss to make sure that everybody's got exactly what they need. But then, yeah, getting in their shoes for a bit is no bad thing at all.

**HR**

And you mentioned you don't know whether you're balancing it right. Do you ever worry that you're spending time on things which aren't? Don't get clinical but drive the maximum value of your time?

**TC**

Yeah, probably. Yeah, I mean, I do worry about that. But then I don't know. I feel like as a boss, sometimes it's just kind of about firefighting. This is not – I don't advise this of anybody. But I do start the day off with a long list. And if I've achieved like two or three things off that list, that's fantastic. But then I'm not that disheartened when I don't achieve the list. Because at the end of the day, you're firefighting, so. So if you're able to achieve that list, you're probably not doing your job properly, in a way. Because there's so many nuts, bolts, cogs, screws, like bits of kit that I'll get on, and it doesn't necessarily have to be the physical things, it's, somebody hasn't got their order. So you need to kind of manage that and deal with that and be right there on the front line. That's where I feel I can be most. Yeah, may have the most value.

**HR**

So it's kind of getting to that day and looking at that, to realise that you've done nothing on it, but actually reflecting on the live things that did come up, and how important it was for you to be part of those totally. I think there's a lesson to be learned there with not getting fixated on what you haven't done that you plan to do.

**TC**

Absolutely. Yeah. And the other thing is, well, it's like you almost self prioritise. I mean, now those jobs will get done eventually, I'm sure. But then actually, I find that I've prioritised those jobs and just having that knowledge that they'll be done, but maybe just not today.

**HR**

Yeah. And you mentioned earlier, the desire and the execution of multidisciplinary jobs, and also people having an idea of what it's like to do everyone's jobs. And we've spoken before, and you've said that it's like learning to drive a forklift, even if you're never going to do that as part of your role. What's so important about that?

**TC**

I think it's useful for people to have experience with other people, you know, because otherwise, if you get fixated in one position, you won't see how much your stubborn nature is going to be affecting the next person. And actually, if you put that again, put yourself in today's cheese. And so that can be really useful for the whole wider business that actually everybody has an understanding, 'Oh, Crikey, actually, I better do it this way to present it in this particular fashion so that the next person has an easier life'.

**HR**

And does that come together in anything formal? Or is it quite naturally occurring? The thing where people just immerse themselves in other people's jobs.

**TC**

Yeah, I would. I mean, it's an evolution or anything for us. It's very hard to do. Because obviously, training takes time in itself and energy. And I think it's certainly an aspiration for us. We don't always get it, right. We've had this kind of idea that we're gonna swap around with the brewery next door, I mean, they're just our tenants, but it'd be really interesting to see, you know, what they are up to, and how they work and a couple of us have done it. But, um, it'd be great to get the full team round there. Because then it just, I think it promotes interest. I know out of that, it's almost planting seeds, you know, other things will grow out of it, they go, 'Wow, did you know that they have been using this particular item, and we've got three of those'. And, you know, it's that type of thing, that crossover can promote some creativity as well.

**HR**

And when it comes to recruitment, when you are every now and then having to bring a new person into the business without replacing someone or creating a new role, is that what you're looking for from people? An interest in the wider picture? Rather than just, I'm coming in to do deliveries or do shortcuts? You want them to take an interest in farming and food.

**TC**

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's really important. I mean, when we use my interviewing technique, again, you know, I generally sit down with people and just have a conversation. And actually, what I'm looking for is just them asking me questions. I think that's really important. Just a couple of nuggets, like a couple of little sparks of, 'Oh, wow, this is really good. Why do you know all that stuff?' I think that's really important, you can see that they're



engaged. They've asked me this question. I don't know what the answer is to that but it is really useful.

**HR**

And even if that ends up being a situation where you're bringing someone in who has no experience in this kind of environment, you're happy with that attitude, and you can fix the other stuff. What does that need to be a certain amount of? Skill?

**TC**

I think that experience isn't necessarily all that and actually, it's probably experience that can also come with a huge amount of baggage. And, yeah, because it's the people who will reflect on what they've done previously. And in a similar previous environment. And actually, I'd prefer to have somebody who is polite, nice, and has a degree of common sense and is asking questions, and he wants to actually develop with us.

**HR**

I think it's a lovely approach. And it widens the talent pool. Indeed. Finishing up coming full circle, as we tend to do on every episode, coming back to you. How are you challenging yourself to be a better leader? We've talked a lot about different elements of it with immersing yourself in the business, how you work with your dad, but where are you identifying areas for improvement? And how might you be making those happen in the next few years?

**TC**

I mean, my weaknesses are organisation to be honest. So I tend to immerse myself with really organised people around me. And that seems to work but I feel that actually, that's an area that I really need to improve on myself anyway. And, yeah, generally... I'm stumbling, not because I can't think of any, it's just, there's so many. Just trying to be a better person to be honest. And you know, like, yeah, listening to people better.

**HR**

Are there any that you think are going to be vitally important for the progression of the business as a whole? What do you need to focus on? And you might need to, I don't know, whether it's to get some help from outside the business, whatever it may be that that you kind of go, I can't just fix this internally, I have to look externally.

**TC**

They say HR is always a challenge, to be honest. I mean, I'm not. I think people and the general kind of issues around different HR is a kind of a constantly evolving thing, isn't it? You know, different legislation and things like that, I think that is an area that we certainly use some outside advice for. It's an area that I think probably most bosses that I've come across really get themselves tied up in knots, because, you know, you can have a huge

amount of passion for what you're doing and stuff like that. But then, you know, like, it's the legislation behind employing people and all that stuff that you don't want to do the wrong thing that can be a real challenge. But um, so that's probably an area that we would look at. Yeah.

## **HR**

Getting right. It's a nice one to have to finish on. Because you mentioned that business is only as good as the people that are in it. So totally needing to make sure that they're looked after, prepared for their careers, empowered, all those kinds of things all wrapped up in that is great. Well, I think we've learned a lot about cheese production. We've learned a lot about your guys' individual approach to cheese production. I think it's a really lovely family business story so thanks for sharing with us, Tom. Thank you.