



The post-Brexit hard sell for British food in Asia

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[Banzai Japan Music Video](#)

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In Asia, discussing food is like discussing the weather – it can get people talking for hours.

But when the BBC recently visited one of the region's leading food and drink events, it became clear that there are some cuisines that leave even the foodies speechless.

“British food?” asks one Thai woman with a perplexed pause. “Um... I’m not really sure what that is. Is that, like, sausage?”

A Malaysian man nearby was less hesitant to offer his opinion: “It’s boring! Definitely nothing special,” he laughs.

These are sobering words for British exporters, who were promised easy access to lucrative new markets after Brexit.

In 2021, to give one example, former International Trade Secretary Liz Truss told UK food producers they had a “golden opportunity” to get British food “to the top of the global food menu”.

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The reality is that the UK still lags far behind its main European counterparts, both in terms of sales and reputation.

“It’s a massive job educating people,” says Stephen Jones, managing director of cheese exporters Somerdale International.

From his stall at the FHA Food and Beverage Trade Show in Singapore, he introduces locals to strange-sounding cheeses such as Stinking Bishop, Double Gloucester and Wensleydale.

“The French, the Swiss, the Italians – they’ve been doing it a lot longer than we have. We’re coming in fairly late getting that message across,” he adds.

Seeing groups of South East Asian visitors trying – and liking – Wensleydale for the first time certainly raises a smile. But the UK’s small pavilion is dwarfed by Italy’s show-stopping display, which is just around the corner.

[Banzai Japan Music Video](#)

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There you find Michelin-starred chefs giving live cooking demonstrations, while the winner of Italian MasterChef chats away with her country’s ambassador. For Italy, as well as being good for its economy, selling food to Asia has long been an act of diplomacy.

“Doing this kind of stuff is a major part of the job,” says Dante Brandi, who has been the Italian ambassador to Singapore and Brunei since last year.

Speaking to the BBC under an Italian tricolour and the logo of his country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr Brandi explains how trade shows form part of the machinery of government.

“It’s an overall effort from what we call ‘Sistema Italia’”, he says. “The group of institutions all aimed at promoting our food, gastronomy and way of life, which we spread through our diplomatic and consular network all around the world.”

However, it is clear that this kind of success is not achieved overnight. For example, panettone is now a Christmas fixture in Singaporean supermarkets. But the woman who originally introduced the festive treat to South East Asia says it took “years of activities, tastings and promotions” to eventually get it onto shelves here.

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“Food is obviously a key export for Italy and something Italians are very proud of,” says Giuseppina Pravato from Jupiter 57, an Italian delicatessen in Singapore.

“We have a great rapport with the Italian institutions, but 20 years ago it was basically just me, bringing in hundreds of pieces of panettone and literally just gifting them to whoever would try it,” she adds.

The gulf between Britain and, in this case, Italy should not come as a surprise. To a large extent this is a long-term issue, which predates Brexit or the current UK government, and speaks to a country’s fundamental economic priorities.

Last year Italy exported more than €64.4bn (£55.4bn; \$69.1bn) worth of food and drink globally, while the UK sold £24.4bn (\$30.5bn). When you look at these numbers as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), exporting food and drink is around three times more valuable to the Italian economy than it is to Britain’s.

Most British food exporters seem to take a pragmatic view of where they stand in the global food market. The issue, many argue, is that the government is not doing enough to match its rhetoric when it comes to changing the situation.

In fact, the UK delegation in Singapore told the BBC they were only able to attend because they paid out of their own pockets.

“Since 2019, we’ve received no government money whatsoever to help us come to these kinds of shows,” says Karen Beston from the Food and Drink Exporters Association.

“It makes it very difficult to stand out against the other European groups or other world groups that are almost fully funded by their respective governments,” she adds.

When this was put to the UK government by the BBC, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) said: “Promoting the interests of our farmers and food producers is a priority of our trade policy”.

Defra also pointed out that – although suppliers do not receive any direct public money to help them attend trade shows – last year it spent £1.6m on events to promote sales of British food, such as tastings and networking opportunities.

Currently, the UK exports £3.5bn (\$4.4bn) worth of food and drink to Asia, which is an increase of 18% since 2019. This is proof, British ministers would say, that Britain’s status as an “independent trading nation” has benefitted the country’s businesses since it left the European Union.

But in that same period, Italy’s exports to Asia grew by 36% to €6.1bn (£5.2bn; \$6.6bn).

“Having a supportive government is definitely important,” says Italy’s Ambassador Brandi.

“But a major advantage we enjoy, along with other EU states, is the free trade agreements we have with many important Asian countries,” he adds.

Nevertheless an opportunity – whether golden or not – does exist for British producers in the wake of Brexit.

More than 60,000 people visited this year’s event in Singapore. By the start of the next decade, analysts estimate people in Asia will spend \$8tn annually on food.

“The potential is huge,” says Japnit Singh, chief operating officer at Spire Research and Consulting in Singapore.

“A few years ago, it was very local food-centric here. I used to say that would never change, but I was wrong. We’re seeing a transformation in habits – people want to eat western food and they’re willing to pay for it,” he adds.

According to Mr Singh, rising incomes, increased travel and – crucially – social media have helped make the Asian palate increasingly adventurous.

Chasing this market is at the centre of the UK government’s post-Brexit trade strategy. Last year, Britain signed a deal to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which is a free trade agreement between 11 countries.

At the time, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak hailed it as a demonstration of “the real economic benefits of our post-Brexit freedoms.”

However, the government’s own estimates say the deal will only add 0.08% to the size of the UK’s economy over ten years. Besides, it already had free trade agreements with all the countries in the CPTPP, except Malaysia and Brunei.

Although UK food exporters are being guided towards regions like Asia, the current reality is that the EU market is still four times bigger.

The problem is that trade with European countries is now increasingly fraught with post-Brexit issues. One recent estimate put additional red tape costs at £58m for exporters last year.

“Due to all the new regulations, it’s actually easier for us to sell to China than it is to France – which is crazy,” says Mr Jones from Somerdale International.

The UK government insists it is looking at the longer term picture. Last year, International Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch told the BBC that these new markets will not “replace EU trade”, but rather that they were “in addition” to it.

“You wouldn’t buy a small company and expect it to be delivering on the same day – we are thinking about the potential,” she added.

When it comes to potential, Mr Jones from Somerdale International agrees: “The Union Jack actually has a decent reputation abroad when it comes to prestige and food safety, which is especially important in China.”

After tasting his cheese, the sceptical Thai punter from earlier returned an approving thumbs up. For Mr Jones, this is all part of the educational process – one piece of Wensleydale at a time.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR8YYeb4PMk>

Banzai Japan Social Media



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Idol

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Riko Ueno

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Rino Ibusuki

Idol



Yunagi Nino

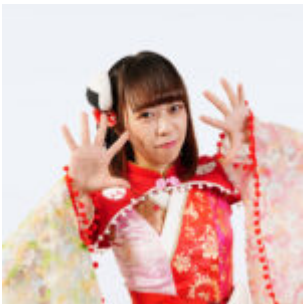
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Shiori Fujisaki

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Date Created
May 10, 2024
Author
admin