

Cheesemaker matures into a ripe business

Share



Save



Victoria Masterson

Sunday November 30 2003, 12.00am,
The Sunday Times

The joint managing director of McLelland & Son, the Scottish cheesemaker, admits he's something of a bore when it comes to his pet subject.

"At dinner parties I get introduced as Alastair, the cheese man. People like talking about cheese," he says.

Latest figures suggest Irvine and his brother, co-director Douglas, the fifth generation to run the business, know their stuff. In the 52 weeks to November their flagship brand, Seriously Strong, increased sales by 75% to more than £52m, beating the growth rate of other branded cheddars including Cathedral City and Anchor. The company is just finalising 2003 accounts which show it beat last year's £127m turnover and will maintain profits of around £7m despite a £2m investment in advertising.

McLelland also won the consumer goods category in the Scottish finals of this year's Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year awards. But the company still faces a challenge overcoming the food snob perception that good cheese only comes in small packets from obscure shops. Irvine recounts a recent speech at the British Cheese awards in which Prince Charles, the patron of the British Cheesemakers' Society, celebrates the triumph of boutique cheesemakers over the supermarkets and their "plastic cheese wraps".

“There’s an implied criticism that if it’s available in a supermarket it must be poor quality compared to a cheese shop’s produce. That really frustrates me. The point is that you don’t have to put the big guys down to celebrate the achievements of the little guys.”

Irvine believes consumers are voting with their feet and repeat-buying Seriously Strong because it is good quality, not because they like the packaging or the advertising campaign.

The brand was born in 1996 over two bottles of Cloudy Bay with the cheese gourmet Juliet Harbett. Irvine was desperately trying to think of a way to offload a ton of ageing cheese after he had overstocked the company’s creamery.

“It was twice as old as it should have been,” he remembers. “We noticed that people at supermarket deli counters didn’t ask for ‘vintage’ or ‘mature’, they just asked for the strongest cheddar. We thought, why not just call it ‘strong’.

Juliet said the name needed something else. I said it would have to be something seriously good and Douglas came up with ‘Seriously Strong’. It was a group dynamic thing.”

The brothers have since registered the brand in English-speaking countries including Australia and Canada, where they eventually hope to have the cheese produced under licence. McLelland is forever short of stock because the cheddar takes 12 to 18 months to mature, but the company’s acquisition in October of the Welsh dairy Aeron Valley opens up a new milk pool.

Irvine’s ambition is to make Seriously Strong famous in the cheese world before exploring opportunities to licence the brandname to other things such as clothes and tools.

McLelland & Son was set up in Kilmarnock in 1849 by Alastair’s great-great grandfather, Archibald McLelland. The brothers’ father, Hugh, was a cousin of Archibald, but later borrowed shares from his grandmother to become a company director and is still the chairman today. Irvine admits it was a bold move to launch a branded cheddar when everyone else was going into own-label, but the risk has paid off. He puts the company’s success down to going against the pack.

“We don’t consider ourselves to be particularly brilliant at anything, but we’re constantly challenging the way everybody else does things. If we see other companies doing one thing, the most natural thing for us is to think what would happen if we did the opposite.”

Share



Save



Cheesemaker matures into a ripe business

Victoria Masterson Sunday November 30 2003, 12.00am, The Sunday Times

The logo for The Times newspaper, featuring the words "THE" and "TIMES" in a bold, serif font, separated by a decorative crest.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cheesemaker-matures-into-a-ripe-business-t32qx3bk5bc>