

Invest NI Food & Drink Consumer Insights Conference 2026

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Speaker Profiles

Inspiration Session

 Charles Banks Partner & Managing Director	Charles is partner and Managing Director at thefoodpeople, a fourth-generation foodie, an expert in food futures and a 'champion of change'. Cooking at his mother's side in the kitchen is where Charles's obsession for food began! He and his business thefoodpeople are known for shifting the future of food and drink by harnessing the power of trends. Charles has spent the past 35+ years in the food industry working across all sectors including foodservice, fine dining, hotels, food brands and food retailing.
	thefoodpeople, established for over 20 years, is a global trends business, specialising in future foresight in the food and beverage sector. A united group of trend spotters and innovators, we're a team of psychologists, chefs, marketers, product developers, academics, flavourists, historians and anthropologists. But more than that TFP are 'champions of change' that bring their inherent experience and human intelligence to foresight, as well as an obsession for food and drink, natural curiosity, intuition and tenacity. This is underpinned by our vision 'to shift the future of food and drink'. What drives us is our desire to shape a better future across society by harnessing the power of trends. Thefoodpeople is owned 100% by its employees and operate globally supporting brands, retailers, manufacturers, hospitality operators and even governments and not-for-profit organisations, to identify the trends of today and yesterday, build the foresight for tomorrow and the future so that they can act now, to make transformational impact to their business and the wider industry.
Presentation Title:	Trends & Future Opportunities for NI Food & Drink
Presentation Content:	In this inspiration session we'll explore the food and beverage trends for 26/27 as well as a number of pertinent opportunities for the NI food and beverage sector.

 Jason Winstanley Head of Research and Insight	Jason Winstanley is the Head of Research and Insight at Pilgrim's Europe, one of the UK's largest food companies. He holds a biology degree from the University of Sheffield and began his food industry career as a graduate trainee at Northern Foods, where he spent a decade developing his skills across various operational and business sectors. He later moved to Kepak Convenience Foods, where he assisted in commissioning a new production factory before shifting his focus toward supply chain logistics and business intelligence. Over the last fifteen years, he has specialised deeply in consumer, shopper, and market insights. Alongside his corporate career, Jason is a published fiction author. He made his literary debut in May 2020 with the publication of his political and psychological thriller novel, <i>Besieged</i>.
	One of the UK's largest and most broad-based food manufacturers, supplying chicken, pork, lamb and ready meals products to leading retailers and food service operators across the UK and Europe.
Presentation Title:	Beyond the Hype: Unpicking the Reality of Shifts in Consumer Behaviour
Presentation Content:	GLP-1s, meat reduction, online shopping... just some examples of big shifts in consumer behaviour which have hit the headlines over the last decade. But just how seismic are these changes, and do they really justify the publicity that they've received? We'll use a variety of different data sources to uncover the truth...



John Stapleton
Entrepreneur

John Stapleton is an entrepreneur, investor and founder-led media operator. Over the past 30+ years, he has built and exited two businesses while heavily supporting entrepreneurship, investment, leadership and business growth. John also built one business which didn't work, and which he never got to exit. He learned more from this failed venture than the two that succeeded.

In 1987, John co-founded the New Covent Garden Soup Co Ltd., which pioneered and grew the fresh soup category in the UK. John sold this business in 1998. In that same year, John co-founded Glencoe Foods Inc., to bring the fresh soup concept to the US. This business failed. In 2025, John co-founded Little Dish, which supplies healthy, natural and convenient meals and snacks to children. Little Dish created the fresh toddler food category, developing full UK retailer distribution to become the go-to brand in fresh toddler food and healthy snacks. John exited Little Dish in 2017.

Today, he is building a media platform focusing on celebrating and implementing entrepreneurship, innovation, investment and what actually makes businesses succeed.



New Covent Garden Soup Co: We pioneered the category and launched the first fresh soup brand in 1987. We sold NCGSC in 1998 in a trade sale to Daniels (later to be bought by Hain Celestial.)

Glencoe Foods: I brought the fresh soup concept to the US and launched the business on the West Coast. It did not succeed and we shut down the business after 4.5 years.

Little Dish: We pioneered the fresh chilled toddler meals category in 2006, later adding healthy snacks. We sold the business to a US Private Equity house in 2017.

The Stapleton Academy: The ambition is to create 1 million entrepreneurs by the year 2030. This is achieved by providing what entrepreneurs need to both take the leap and to be successful once they take this leap: approaching with the right mindset and motivation and focusing on key businesses practices.

JBS Media: Championing Entrepreneurship in all forms, this is a range of media channels fronted by John Stapleton showcasing seasoned and emerging entrepreneurs and the lessons, challenges and decisions which characterised their journeys.

Presentation Title:

Have The Courage of your Convictions

Presentation Content:

When we set up NCGSC, we were doing something for the first time. We wanted to create fresh soup. We wanted to put it in a carton. We were bucking the conventional wisdom. The price we paid for this was we were told we were crazy. We were told our idea had no chance. We were told to not bother trying – that it would fail. We did it anyway.

Innovation Session



Annie Dunne
Food Innovation Consultant

Annie Dunne is the founder of The Art of GRATE Food, a leading food innovation consultancy that partners with food businesses of all sizes to drive culinary excellence and business growth. With almost 25 years of experience in food manufacturing and retail across the UK and Ireland, Annie has earned a reputation as a trusted expert in product development and strategic innovation. Her prominent work includes revitalising the iconic Harrods Food Halls in London and launching its own-label food range across multiple international markets.

Drawing from her extensive industry knowledge, Annie specialises in guiding businesses through the complexities of new product development, food trends and brand strategy, through advising, mentoring and project management. She has an exceptional track record of transforming innovative ideas into market-ready products that captivate consumers and deliver commercial success.

In addition to her consulting work, Annie is an experienced speaker and moderator within the food industry, frequently facilitating discussions on food innovation, sustainability, and consumer trends. Her ability to engage with diverse audiences makes her a sought-after moderator for panels and events. Annie's unique blend of hands-on product expertise, strategic foresight, and industry leadership continues to drive innovation and growth in the food sector.



The Art of GRATE Food is a food innovation and insights consultancy that helps businesses anticipate change, respond to emerging trends, and turn consumer insight into commercial growth. Working with organisations of all sizes, it provides expertise across new product development, brand strategy, trend-led innovation, mentoring, and project leadership. Drawing on almost 25 years of experience across food manufacturing and retail in the UK and Ireland, the consultancy supports clients in transforming strong ideas into distinctive, market-ready products.

Presentation Title:

What AI Can - and Cannot - Do for Food Product Development

Presentation Content:

AI is becoming part of the language of innovation, yet many food businesses are unclear about where it can create genuine value. This presentation would examine AI through the practical lens of product development: where it may help generate alternatives, organise information, explore formulation scenarios or accelerate early-stage thinking, and where human expertise remains essential. Rather than predicting a fully automated future, the session would encourage teams to identify focused, testable applications and treat AI outputs as hypotheses requiring validation. The result would be a balanced view of how NPD roles may evolve without losing consumer, sensory or commercial judgement.



Morgan Griffiths
Commercial Lead
(Health & Nutrition)

Morgan has worked in global food, drink and health trends for over a decade, helping organisations understand shifting consumer behaviours, attitudes and needs. His experience includes five years in public health and behavioural science, where he first encountered GLP-1 as a weight-loss tool and explored the underpinning behavioural drivers of health and food choice. An Oxford University alumnus and with a Master's degree in understanding cultural norms, Morgan brings both professional expertise and personal conviction to understanding how insight can support healthier, more sustainable food systems.

Lumina
Intelligence

UK & global consumer insight specialists in food, drink and health.

Presentation Title:

GLP-Won: Get Ahead of the Market Now Weight Loss Medication is Here to Stay

Presentation Content:

GLP-1 weight-loss medications are rapidly reshaping consumer behaviour across retail, convenience and hospitality. In this session, Morgan Griffiths, Commercial Lead at Lumina Intelligence, explores the latest evidence on who GLP-1 users are, how their eating and drinking habits are changing, and what this means for brands, operators and manufacturers. Drawing on Lumina Intelligence's latest consumer tracking and a real-world case study, attendees will gain practical insights into emerging opportunities, innovation trends and the strategic actions needed to succeed in a market increasingly influenced by GLP-1 adoption.



Brian McDermott

Chef, Food Consultant, Author & Broadcaster

Brian Mc Dermott is an award-winning chef, food consultant, author and broadcaster with extensive experience across food innovation, new product development and commercialisation. His career has included senior development roles within the food industry, establishing and managing the Foodovation Centre at Northwest Regional College, and working directly with food producers, manufacturers and major retailers. He currently works as Development Chef Consultant with Dunnes Stores Simply Better, supporting producers across product development, innovation, refinement and retail readiness.

Brian has supported businesses at every stage of the development journey, from early concept and consumer need through recipe development, product refinement, scale-up, packaging and retail launch. He is also the author of three cookbooks and a regular television and radio contributor, bringing together practical industry experience with a strong understanding of food, provenance, consumers and storytelling.



Chef Brian Mc Dermott is an independent food consultancy working with food producers, manufacturers and retailers across product development, innovation, commercialisation and brand storytelling. The work is grounded in practical food experience, helping businesses turn good ideas, quality ingredients and consumer insight into relevant, commercially viable food products.

Presentation Title:

From Insight to the Shelf: Turning Consumer Understanding into Better Food Products

Presentation Content:

Consumer insight is most valuable when it changes what we actually do.

In this practical session, Brian Mc Dermott will explore how consumer understanding can be translated into better decisions throughout the food development process — from identifying a genuine consumer need through concept development, tasting, refinement, packaging and ultimately the retail shelf. Drawing on experience working with producers, manufacturers and retailers, Brian will examine why successful innovation is about more than responding to trends. It requires businesses to understand who the product is for, what need it is meeting, where it will sit in the market and whether the final proposition delivers on taste, value, convenience, provenance and consumer expectation.

The session will also consider the importance of retaining product integrity while responding to commercial realities, and how smaller food businesses can use insight intelligently without losing the story, craft or distinctiveness that makes their products worth buying.

Activation

 Jeremy Garlick Partner	Jeremy Garlick was Head of Insight at Sainsbury's, Waitrose and Premier Foods, and Consumer Insight Manager at PepsiCo.
	Insight Traction is a FMCG strategy consultancy. Its clients are in FMCG and Retail, varying from large multinationals (Essity, Mondelez) to many smaller UK based companies. They work on insight driven growth stories (category strategy, channel strategy), shopper effectiveness and "getting heard in retailers". Their Knowledge Bank gives subscribers access to images and content that help them win with shoppers. They write a fortnightly Blog and a monthly column in the Grocer. www.insight-traction.com
Presentation Title:	Using Shopper Insight to Power your Activation, and your Conversations with Buyers.
Presentation Content:	The presentation will show how shopper insight can power your in-store activation and retailer/customer conversations. It will use examples from Insight Traction's Knowledge Bank.



Sharon Yourell Lawlor
Managing Director

Sharon Yourell Lawlor is an award-winning global retail and shopper marketing practitioner with over 30 years' experience. As Managing Director of Think Plan Do Consulting, she advises brands, retailers and industry organisations around the world on shopper strategy, category growth and retail activation. Sharon is a recognised international keynote speaker and thought leader on the modern shopper and her LinkedIn Learning course on Retail Marketing strategy has been completed by over 20,000 people globally.



Think Plan Do Consulting is a retail and shopper strategy consultancy that helps organisations better understand today's modern shopper and translate consumer and shopper insight into more effective activation, stronger retailer relationships and sustainable growth.

Presentation Title:

Winning with Today's Modern Shopper

Presentation Content:

Consumers use products. Shoppers make purchase decisions. This session explores why understanding today's modern shopper is the missing link between insight and activation. Using practical frameworks alongside global and local retail examples, delegates will leave with actionable ideas to create more relevant, engaging and effective shopper activations.

 Theadora Alexander CEO	Thea is the CEO of YF, the leading consultancy for high growth FMCG brands in the UK and abroad. Thea is widely considered the 'voice of the FMCG challenger community' having actively championed the need for more branded innovation in the market, firmly establishing herself as a reputable industry thought leader and regular media commentator. Her business has advised more than 500 brands through their journeys to £50m+ and simultaneously sits close to the biggest retailers in the UK to help them solve their innovation gaps.
	YF is a specialist consultancy focused on driving innovation in FMCG. With services spanning sales, category and supply chain, YF helps brands grow and retailers keep up to date with newness. YF has a track record of supporting some of the most successful new brand launches in the UK market over the last 10 years.
Presentation Title:	Using Insight and Intelligence to Nail your Buyer Pitch
Presentation Content:	Buyer meetings are won on insight. Thea Alexander will take you into the mind of the buyer, how they think and how brands can use insight and intelligence to win shelf space. In this presentation she will share tips, and practical guidance into making a strong pitch - as well as where SMEs can fall into traps.