

dealing with ever more intermediaries. After growing potatoes for more than 20 years, we just couldn't see a light at the end of the tunnel."

Mr Chase confesses that his answer to the age-old question, "do you really want to still be doing this when you're 60?" was a resounding, "No!"

Searching for ways of adding value, Mr Chase's gaze fell on the snack food sector, where he felt there was most potential for a quality, hand-made product. Such has been the success of Tyrrells Potato Chips that its phenomenal growth has been reported widely, both regionally and nationally. That success is now international: more than half of Tyrrells' production is exported, mostly to continental Europe, but also as far afield as Hong Kong.

From the pub to Harrods

The Tyrrells range of potato and root vegetable chips is sold through more than 2,000 outlets, none of them supermarkets. Keen though the big food retailers are to sell his products, Mr Chase is determined not to compromise control over what the company receives for them. One of the biggest deterrents, as he sees it, to going down this particular route is the supermarkets' prolonged stocking period for this type of product. "Central to the appeal of our products is that they are fresh," he says. "We recommend a maximum shelf life of 10 weeks. The supermarkets insist on a stocking period of 16-17 weeks for a new line, and we are not prepared to risk one of our main selling points. In everything we do, quality has been our watchword from the beginning."

Most customers are supplied directly, although a distributor is used in the expanding French market. A list of outlets, which started with village and farm shops, pubs and delicatessens in Hereford and Worcester, now extends to some of the world's most exclusive food halls, including those of Harrods and Fortnum & Mason.

An area that's seen sharply rising demand is the new generation of 'gastro-pubs' and up-market city-centre sandwich bars; clocking up the miles on Tyrrells' fleet of delivery vans, all of which run – legally – on the waste sunflower oil left after frying the chips.

Since the first electrified fryer was purchased two years ago, £1.9 million has been invested in the business. New buildings, quality equipment, vehicles and on-going research and development has accounted for the lion's share of that figure and, over the same period, staff numbers have grown to almost 30.

"None of us had any prior experience of the food processing industry," Mr



The range is growing all the time and includes vegetable chips

Chase explains. "I didn't want to hire an established production manager who might have come in and told us 'This is how you do it'. At every stage of growing the business, we've tried to work out the best way of doing things for ourselves."

This confidence in its ability to make the right decisions has been borne out by Tyrrells' early success. Continued

expansion has been provided for as investment has progressed – despite reaching an annual turnover of £4 million already, only 30% of the company's current production capacity is being utilised. Frying takes place on the first four days of the week, with Friday set aside for cleaning, and weekends off.

Customer contact

The overriding reaction to the way Tyrrells does its business shows that customers appreciate the contact with the producer, a feature of food retailing that has disappeared for the majority of consumers, but is making a come-back thanks to operations such as this one and the growing expertise being applied to the running of farm shops and farmers' markets.

"We receive dozens of letters and emails every week from consumers expressing their enthusiasm – as much for the story of Tyrrells as for the potato and vegetable chips," Mr Chase reports. "There really is a lot of genuine interest in the fact that we make our →

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