

“I had three suits from the Waitrose down the road checking out my place last week,” the deli owner told me. “Cheeky beggars – nicking all my ideas.”

That’s what supermarkets do, and it helps explain why they make billions while independent delis struggle. The multiples constantly check out the competition to ensure they stock the widest range at the most competitive prices.

But surely independent delis and farm shops hold the edge? They stock fabulous foods made in small batches using the best ingredients – foods that supermarkets can’t get their hands on because the producers can’t supply the quantities they need.

Or do they? For years I’ve ranted on about supermarket own-label products. They’re not what they’re cracked up to be, you can’t taste the difference and they’re not the finest around. Mostly they flatter to deceive, and delis do them better.

I’ve got a horrible feeling I’m about to get local free-range egg all over my face. It’ll soon become public knowledge that a number of Tesco Finest, Sainsbury Taste the Difference and Asda Extra Special foods have collected two- and three-star golds in this year’s Great Taste Awards.

Now, we don’t allow supermarkets to enter the Great Taste Awards, because they don’t make food, they just sell it. But there’s nothing to stop the small producers who make these own-label foods entering them, and this year, presumably with encouragement from supermarkets, they did just that.

David Williams of Godfrey Williams in Sandbach runs one of this country’s top delicatessens and recently spent a day judging with us in Wincanton during one of his regular tours around West Country food producers. He first raised the alarm after blind-tasting a stunning horseradish sauce and, along with 15 other judges who tasted it, awarding it two gold stars.

After the blind tasting, David looked for the packaged version of the product among the boxes stacked around our tasting room. He was shocked to find that he and his fellow judges had awarded two stars to a Tesco Finest product, and immediately returned to his shop to check the quality of the horseradish he stocks.

Those supermarket ‘suits’ visiting your shop aren’t just checking what you’re charging. They’re checking quality too, and will then try to find small suppliers capable of doing it better. That’s bad news.

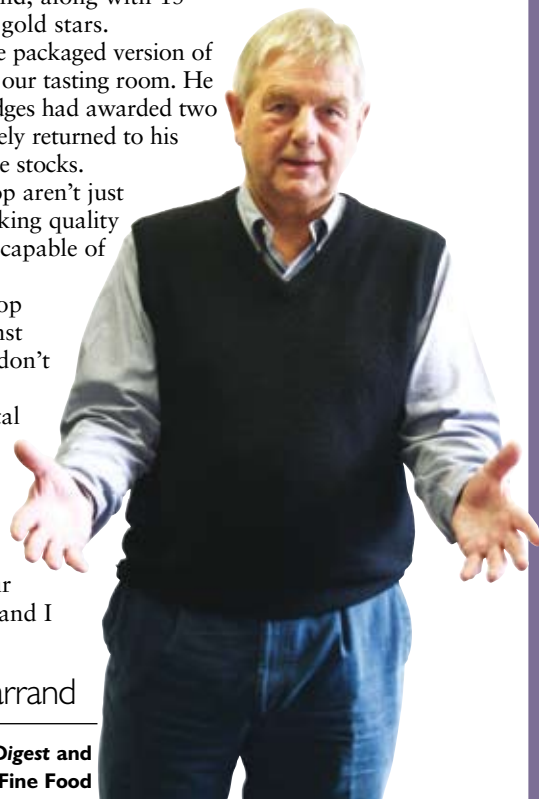
Even more worrying are deli and farm shop owners who never taste their products against those stocked in local supermarkets. Many don’t even visit food fairs or trade shows to meet new producers. Benchmarking is fundamental to survival in competitive markets and those who don’t will lose customers to supermarkets.

If Tesco stocks six Great Taste Awards gold-winning own label foods this autumn, you need to be stocking 106. That way, your customers will be certain you do it better – and I won’t have egg on my face.

Bob Farrand

Bob Farrand is publisher of *Fine Food Digest* and national director of the Guild of Fine Food

“For years I’ve ranted on about supermarket own-label products, but I’ve got a horrible feeling I’m about to get local free-range egg all over my face”



What they’re saying

“There are 20 other people out there doing canned tomatoes at all price points. If we’re going to position ourselves as a premium brand we’ve got to make sure the products deliver and the packaging makes people want to eat them.”

John Potter, Epicure director at Petty, Wood – p42

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