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## WHY ARE AT-HOME COOKS SEEKING INNOVATION?

Lockdowns led many people to use food as a route to new experiences during the pandemic. But amid growing demand for fresher, more convenient, and sustainable products, brands face a challenge in delivering innovation beyond gimmicks. So, how can they keep Britons experimenting in the kitchen?

Location [United Kingdom](#)

### Featured Experts

#### [Thea Bourke-Borrowes](#)

Thea Bourke-Borrowes is the founder of Eight Thirty, which produces 100% natural instant flavour shots. The range has been designed to boost everyday breakfast dishes with five powdered flavours that include acia, blackcurrant and vanilla, and strawberry and vanilla.

#### [Rina Meneghini](#)

Rina Meneghini is the co-founder of Zing Foods. The company is committed to flavour and innovation, and was the first to bring flavoured coconut cooking oils to market. Its products are vegan, gluten-free, natural, and ethically sourced.

### Author

#### [Lisa Harris](#)

Lisa Harris and Alexandra Hayes are food and drink specialists. As Harris and Hayes consultancy they specialise in future forecasting, food trends and insights, and always knowing the next big thing before it hits your plate. [www.thefoodconsultants.org](http://www.thefoodconsultants.org)

### Highlights & Data

- Amid a rise in eco-consciousness, food and drink brands are being pushed to explore sustainable packaging options and ways to limit waste
- **29%** of Britons claim have made changes to their diet since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 ([Strategy&, 2021](#))
- With remote working continuing to limit people's free time, there's a desire for quick and simple products that can add excitement to meals
- **57%** of all UK shoppers are willing to pay more for products that are better for the environment, rising to **69%** among Gen Zers ([YouGov, 2021](#))
- However, that doesn't mean people are willing to compromise on quality – nutrition remains a priority, especially in the wake of COVID-19
- In April 2020, **26%** of Britons said they'd been cooking more unusual meals and trying different cuisines as a result of lockdowns ([Waitrose, 2020](#))

## Scope

Almost a third of Britons (29%) have made changes to their diet since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, with these shifts causing a significant loss of sales for brands in hard-hit categories like food-to-go and hospitality. [1] But on the flip-side, they've presented an opportunity for brands savvy enough to identify and cater to emerging preferences that will stick around post-crisis. These preferences include an ever-increasing demand for convenient food and drink products, raised expectations for quality, and – as in every other sector – more options for conscious consumers.

Within a month of lockdowns coming into effect in the UK, the average amount of time that people spent cooking rose to seven hours a week, up from six hours pre-pandemic. [2] Yet while some have used this extra time to experiment in the kitchen, others have been seeking convenient products to lend them a hand by quickly enhancing the flavour and/or nutritional content of their meals. Technology is helping in this regard, opening up new food and drink format possibilities. Thea Bourke-Borrowes is the founder of [Eighty Thirty](#), which offers a five-strong range of natural flavour shots to liven up otherwise bland breakfast bowls. By using freeze-dried fruit powder, she says that Eight Thirty is able to “capture the freshness of the ingredients and retain all the nutrients and flavour.” Thanks to this use of technology, long-life flavour shots have become a credible alternative to perishable and more expensive fresh fruits. [3]

Meanwhile, challenger brands with ranges developed from scratch or which reengineer familiar formats are in a strong position to sell to increasingly conscious consumers. Over two-thirds (69%) of Britons say that COVID-19 has encouraged them to waste less food at home, and there's a growing demand for brands to be transparent about their sustainability credentials from every angle. [4] To make the biggest impact, savvy innovators are reinventing the everyday products we use the most – from [Microtea](#) drops that cut out the teabags to [Daily Harvest](#) plant mylk cubes that reduce water wastage. People are increasingly putting money where their mouths are, and they're open to new ways of enjoying familiar favourites if it means that they can do so with less guilt. So, now that cooking is the new commute – as Waitrose pointed out in its 2021 Food and Drink Report – how can brands provide time-pressed customers with culinary escapism, convenience, and peace of mind all at once? [5]

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## Conscious decision-making

From small beginnings, sustainability has become one of the biggest drivers of new food and drink product development. Rina Meneghini, the co-founder of [Zing Foods](#), believes that consumers have “a greater curiosity about the ethical and environmental impact” of their food choices. [6] Indeed, research shows that 57% of all UK shoppers are willing to pay more for products that are better for the environment, rising to 69% among Gen Zers, for whom sustainability is already an expectation. [7]

Packaging has become a focal point in the quest for more eco-friendly products. While established businesses have a lot of unsustainable processes to unravel, start-ups are in the fortunate position of being able to choose 100% green materials from the outset. Eight Thirty, which launched in 2019, uses only recyclable packaging and is hoping to switch to compostable materials in due course. Disruptive concepts by creative visionaries are raising the bar ever-higher, and they're moving beyond sustainability to create products with regenerative qualities. For instance, product designer Holly Grounds has created a biofilm packaging for ramen that transforms into sauce as

it's cooked, eliminating the need for plastic. "Convenience has become an inevitable part of everyday life, but it often comes at a cost to the environment," she told Dezeen. "That's why it was important to me to make the convenient choice the sustainable one. If the quick option for meals or snacks is eco-friendly, consumers can help the planet perhaps without even knowing." [8]

Just Bones, a project by Icelandic designer Valdís Steinarsdóttir, turns byproducts from the meat industry into bioplastic for packaging. This material even indicates the freshness of the meat within. "To make new discoveries, it is often good to look backwards and rethink accepted norms and established ways of doing things," she says. [9] Beverage company **Waterdrop** seems to have just done that with Microtea, which rejects the anachronistic tea bag in favour of cubes. Made from natural plant and fruit extracts, you simply drop them directly into hot water. And for every pack of Microtea sold, the company commits to eliminating one plastic bottle from the environment, amounting to **four times more plastic** than its packaging needs.

Product innovation will be important in achieving a zero-waste society

Dezeen (2021) ©

### **Convenience is king**

The pandemic increased many Britons' desire to get creative in the kitchen, with research published by Waitrose in May 2020 revealing that 26% of consumers had been cooking more unusual meals and trying different cuisines and ingredients. [10] But that doesn't always mean cooking from scratch. As culinary routines evolve, brands have been unpicking established habits to become more relevant. For example, **The Original Black Garlic** has launched 30ml shot sachets, helping people add an umami character to all manner of marinades, stocks, and sauces without the

messy prep. This kind of quick-win format is satisfying a growing number of younger creative cooks.

In a similar vein, Meneghini co-founded Zing Foods to satisfy a demand for innovative, creative ingredients. It's a first-to-market range of flavoured coconut cooking oils that include paprika, pepper, and turmeric. Zing products, she says, are "a quick way to add some great flavour, drawing inspiration from Berbere and Chermoula, for example. The oils add flavour as they cook and are a quick and easy option to use." [6] The product's versatility is a major advantage. Food items that can complement a spectrum of diets, from plant-based to pescatarian, will become go-to favourites for those moving away from meat-and-two-veg eating.

Food and drink brands are pushing the flavour agenda by giving people convenient ways to add some *va va voom* to otherwise average dishes. Given that 60% of people learned new cooking skills during the pandemic, potentially making them more confident playing with flavours, food producers need to call out how their products pack a punch. [11] Bourke-Borrowes points out that although speed, simplicity, and health are paramount to the development of a food brand, it's "flavour that lies at the core." [3] Her sachets have been designed to quickly and easily transform breakfast basics like yogurt, porridge, and cereal into delicious and special experiences.

Convenience is about more than just the consumption moment, and some brands are looking to get a competitive edge by delivering directly to consumers. Recognising that food is the UK's most popular subscription sector, Eight Thirty offers three different subscription plans to suit people's needs and requirements. [12] "They can pause at any point and restart when they're ready," says Bourke-Borrowes. "We think life is ever-changing, tastes are ever-changing, we want to be as flexible as our customer is." [3]

Time-pressed cooks are prioritising instant enhancements for meals

Vlada Karpovich (2021) ©

### **Quality without question**

Many UK grocery shoppers have increased their consumption of fresh foods since the pandemic began. In response, brands are launching new products or overhauling existing ones to offer improved quality and freshness. [13] **Ice Kitchen**, for instance, has used its frozen category know-how to launch a range of curry pastes through Ocado. The line has been developed as a fresher, more vibrant, and flavourful alternative to the usual pantry jars and sachets. They can be used straight from the freezer and are portion-controlled, providing a more conscious alternative to big-brand pastes, many of which are left to deteriorate in the fridge before being thrown away.

In the US, **Haven's Kitchen** has focused on quality with its refrigerated squeeze sauces, which are sold direct-to-consumer. They're culinary-led and target discerning consumers who want ways to add excitement to meals but aren't turned on by the same old jars. The vibrant range includes golden turmeric tahini and red pepper romesco. Meanwhile, Waitrose has launched a pouched **shakshuka sauce** as part of its Cooks' Ingredients range, giving customers a culinary shortcut as they get creative in the kitchen.

Health and quality are converging as people look for food and drink products that both taste good and meet nuanced wellness needs. Of course, this isn't a new behaviour, with research from 2018 finding that 93% of consumers want to eat healthily at least some of the time and 63% want to do so most or all of the time. [14] But as the wellness segment gets increasingly crowded, food and drink brands may stand out by inventing or reengineering products to put nutrition at the forefront. Formats that deliver high quality without compromising on taste, all at a competitive price point – exemplified by Eight Thirty's use of freeze-dried fruit instead of fresh – will have the edge.

93% of people say they want to eat healthily at least some of the time

August de Richelieu (2020) ©

## Insights and opportunities

### ***Respond to evolving at-home routines***

With remote working set to last beyond the pandemic, the kitchen fridge is likely to become central to everyday eating, with people regularly turning to it for quick options. According to James Foster, a strategic insight director at Kantar, “a fresh or chilled snack is almost twice as likely to be considered ‘healthy,’” hinting at ways that brands in this category could position themselves. [15] Reflecting the pandemic-related shift in snacking habits among Britons, Kerry Foods, the owner of Fridge Raiders, saw volume sales rise by 18.7% in the three months to May 2021. [16] Consumers still want the freshly-made food they used to enjoy as part of their on-the-go lifestyles, but now they’re open to new formats that feel more appropriate for life at home. **Super Cubes’ frozen smoothie cubes** are a great example, allowing consumers to chuck two or three cubes into a blender to make a personalised fruit drink. The record revenue posted by parent company Keytone Dairy in financial year 2021 highlights how brands have much to gain by extending into new categories that suit post-pandemic domestic set-ups. [17]

**Small and mighty** Consumers are likely to be excited by rich and concentrated products that are supercharged with flavour. But they also value customisation and want to be able to dial experiences up and down to match their individual preferences. A research paper from PwC and the Consumer Goods Forum noted that “brands that can meet consumer demands for greater relevance, care, and personalisation can realise benefits that, ultimately, go to the bottom line.” [18] Intense formats represent great value to consumers. They’re all about being packed with purposeful ingredients rather than using bulking agents like water. Brands may take inspiration from the household cleaning category, where products like **detergents and soaps** are getting smaller and more powerful while remaining environmentally friendly.

### ***Exploit the latest tech***

Challengers in the food and drink sector are using tech to take their products into new categories. For instance, **Blue Farm’s oat milk powder** moves plant-based milk into the long-life space, while **Cosmik** brings astronauts’ ice cream back to earth. Eight Thirty’s freeze-dried flavour shot sachets, which stay fresh in the cupboard, have similarly given breakfast-time fruit a revolutionary twist. “Tech was integral to the development of Eight Thirty,” says Bourke-Borrowes. “Using freeze-dried ingredients and blending methods has allowed us to create individual flavours and portions in single-serve sachets.” [3]

## Sources

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4. **Mintel** (June 2020)
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10. *Waitrose* (May 2020)
11. *Fine Dining Lovers* (May 2020)
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#### CONTACT

Lucy Thompson, Senior Memberships  
Manager  
[+44 \(0\)20 7377 8585](tel:+442073778585)  
[lucy@canvas8.com](mailto:lucy@canvas8.com)

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#### CONTACT

Sam Shaw, Strategy Director  
[+44 \(0\)20 7377 8585](tel:+442073778585)  
[sam@canvas8.com](mailto:sam@canvas8.com)