The Brewer, The Baker and The Fishcake Maker

Some of the most successful businesses across Atlantic Canada are in the food and beverage sector and they’re constantly innovating to cut costs, boost production and ramp up exports. From the big to the almost brand new, here are some of the recipes for success.

The Brewer

Blue Roof Distillers

Blair Hyslop
Mrs. Dunster's

Ben Cudmore and Steve LaCoure
Upstreet Craft Brewing

Photo credit: Ross Hastie

The Baker

Fancy Pokket

Mr. Duffer

Mike Timani

Devon Strang
Blue Roof Distillers
UPSTART BREWING

Until last month, Upstreet Craft Brewing was processing pints from two locations in Charlottetown, P.E.I. In October, the three-year old brewery floated their third venue—crossing into Nova Scotia to set up Upstreet BBQ Brehouse, a 140-seat restaurant and brewery on Windmill Road in Dartmouth, N.S. Upstreet co-founder Mitch Cobb told Atlantic Business Magazine the opening brought their employee tally to 70.

According to Cobb, Upstreet’s swift up-current is all about thinking differently. “We’re always asking ourselves, why do we do things that way? Is there a better way to do them?” A case in point—innovation in community building. Each June, Cobb marks Upstreet’s birthday by shutting down operations and taking staff out for a day of fun. The break, Cobb says, helps him and co-founder Mike Hogan keep employee engagement high, while building a strong workplace culture.

That drive for an engaged workplace aids the company’s efforts to support and become a part of the communities around it. In 2016, Upstreet Brewing became the first P.E.I. business to gain B Corp Certification—joining more than 2,000 firms across 40 countries—holding it accountable to stringent social, environmental and governance requirements.

Other innovations include building the business, from inception, on cloud computing by using online collaboration tools such as Slack and implementing EKOS Brewmaster, an inventory management system that connects to their accounting software, and has cut data entry in half. Tasting notes of innovation can be found in Upstreet’s brews too, with the introduction of the FizzWizz, an automated carbonation system which Cobb says has seen 500 per cent return on investment.

NO LOAFING AROUND

When Mike Timani opened his bakery in 1989, Fancy Pokket made only pita bread and employed three people in a 1,000 sq. ft. facility. Nowadays (after expanding six times and moving twice) the headcount sits at 70 and the current 45,000 sq. ft. facility has expanded the product range to flatbread, bagels, and tortillas.

In an interview with Atlantic Business Magazine, Timani says that big investments in technology have powered much of Fancy Pokket’s growth. The Moncton pita production line now has the capability to produce in less than 10 minutes what took 12 hours in 1989, he said. In August, Timani turned the key on a brand new, gluten-free US$20-million 58,000 sq. ft. facility in South Carolina, U.S., which produces 6,000 loaves of sliced bread an hour—and boasts all-stainless-steel state-of-the-art equipment.

“All ways reinvest. Get the best equipment that will stand the test of time. Automate, because that’s the only way you’ll be able to compete. Find efficiencies, and keep up with technology,” Timani explains.

Product diversification provides another growth driver for Fancy Pokket, as does forecasting food trends. Staying ahead of the game has been key for the company: Timani’s pitas were labelled cholesterol free, fat-free and no-added sugar well before the outbreak of the West’s war on carbs, fat, sugar and salt. “Go to trade shows, and source the ingredients to competitively manufacture the products you want to introduce to the market. Network, and collaborate. Come up with new innovative ideas that appeal to various demographics,” says Timani.

CLEARWATER STAYS AHEAD OF THE CURRENT

In Bedford, N.S., Clearwater Seafoods is equipping its vessels with state-of-the-art geographic positioning and 3D habitat mapping technology, as well as innovative fishing gear to focus on efficient harvesting and sustainability of the sensitive ecosystems they work in.

“Innovation to Clearwater means continually working with our customers on new products and formats to innovate and position our premium seafood to deliver superior satisfaction and value that is differentiated by relevant dimensions such as taste, quality, safety, sustainability, wellness and convenience,” says Christine Penney, Clearwater’s vice president of sustainability and public affairs.

The company’s new Automatic Shucking Technology (AST) on its scallop vessels uses high pressure water jets and air blasts to shuck consistently high-quality scallops with less broken meat, shell fragments or debris compared to hand-shucking. Penney says the AST has unlocked remarkable increases in productivity and profitability for Clearwater.

On land, Clearwater’s new global packaging is about to go live. The first change in a decade, the new look will highlight to consumers the company’s sustainable, wild-caught harvesting methods while promoting the province from which they came from. “Innovation is not just good business. Like sustainability, it’s in our DNA,” says Penney.
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WHEN LIFE DEALS YOU (SMALL) POTATOES, MAKE VODKA …
A larger-than-life potato welcomes visitors to Blue Roof Distillers, Canada’s first farm-to-bottle distiller in Malden, N.B. Situated on the TCH as you come off the Confederation Bridge, 70 kilometres from Moncton, the farm sits on land worked by the Strang family since 1855. Devon Strang, the 26-year-old, sixth generation farmer, started Blue Roof mid-2017—after getting fed up with discarding all the too-small-to-sell potatoes that were cropping up on his land.

What once was an “everything farm” as Strang describes it, evolved from a single acre to 350-acre potato-only farm over the years. But when Devon and fifth generation farmer Richard Strang realized they were producing more and more unmarketable small potatoes every year, they started to investigate potato vodka production.

During their research, they discovered that most vodka companies use potato starch made from potato waste (a.k.a. potato peels or flakes) and had trouble finding a company who made vodka with the full potato. So, they created one. Funding from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation enabled Strang to team up with the Collège Communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick Edmundston bio-research team to establish a unique and proprietary process of making vodka from the entire potato. “Not everything on paper works in reality. Pumps built for water aren’t always great for pumping potato … You have to stop yourself from buying everything you want, or you’ll put yourself out of business before you get started,” says Strang.

Strang also collaborated with P.E.I.’s DME Brewing Solutions and Amiko Control Systems to engineer unique cooking and fermentation systems so the Strangs could make vodka at the scale right for them and create a completely unique vodka blend. The distillery also differentiates itself by keeping complete control of production—from planting, right through to bottling. Every step of the process happens right on the farm.

“We get about a million tourists driving by on the trans-Canada each summer. Sales are increasing year-on-year,” says Strang. Since launching, Blue Roof has toured more than 50,000 people through the farm, and sold more than 20,000 bottles at the farm gate and via New Brunswick Liquor Commission stores. Blue Roof is now also making and selling gin—and is about to launch a range of vodka and gin-based mixed, cooler drinks in cans to help offset the slow winter season.

MODERN ALES
Even established 130-year old companies must innovate to compete in the food and beverage sector. Halifax’s Oland Brewery is using a data link—technology that enables the free flow of communication between networked computers—to increase production line efficiency. A spokesman for the brewery told Atlantic Business Magazine that Oland’s parent company Labatt introduced the data link to Oland 10 months ago. Since then the project—now almost fully implemented across the brewery—had increased production line efficiency by three to five per cent.

The data link’s ability to talk with the production line hardware such as programmable logic controllers, and software such as its Human Machine Interfaces, have enabled production line operators to react to problems in real time, cutting both waste and frustration. Meanwhile, June saw Oland pilot proprietary technology, owned by P.E.I. company Island Water, to improve the brewery’s quality controls. The technology, which uses multiple in-line sensors, allows technicians a more accurate view of what’s going on inside the brewery’s main anaerobic reactor.

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Not everything on paper works in reality. Pumps built for water aren’t always great for pumping potato … ”

Devon Strang
Blue Roof Distilleries
MANAGING SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Mrs. Dunster’s CEO Blair Hyslop credits innovation and technology investments for keeping his dough on the rise. “If we hadn’t invested approximately $680,000 on equipment and $250,000 on IT in the past few years, we not only wouldn’t be competitive—we’d be losing money.”

Consider this: two to three times a week, Mrs. Dunster supplies more than 40 different types of fresh product to 700-plus stores throughout Atlantic Canada and Maine. Hyslop’s goal is to never have a store out of stock and to never have to take anything back. His new computer tracking system has been a big help. It recommends product orders based on past experience, using dynamic inventory algorithms to predict customer behavior.

The efficiency of Mrs. Dunster’s supply management system is further complemented by improvements to the manufacturing process. While the process of making a baked good hasn’t changed over the years (mix ingredients and bake as directed) scaling up production requires greater speed and accuracy than traditional manufacturing. Following the advice of his friend and colleague, Mike Timani of Fancy Pokket—“I really appreciate how we support each other. Collaboration is often an underappreciated form of innovation”—Hyslop invested in a new English Muffin machine. The new machine is so accurate that each item has an almost identical weight, no more than a gram difference. And where they once produced several hundred a week, they are now producing over a million units a year.

A related benefit of the semi-automated manufacturing is that it helps to alleviate the labour shortage. Hyslop says he has had issues finding enough employees to work in his plant; investing in advanced manufacturing enables him to ramp up production with fewer staff.

The proof of Hyslop’s innovation mindset is in the pudding: the company has grown 35 per cent each year since 2014.