

The upstart start up

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aka The Black Farmer

Last month I launched The Black Farmer Ultimate Roasting Chicken. Even though I say it myself, it is the most innovative product in the category and my boast, fingers crossed, is being matched by consumer demand. With the retailers' own label brands dominating most of the categories, the only chance that we independent food producers stand is through innovation.

I have learnt the hard way that it doesn't matter if my product is equal in price to own label and has more stylish packaging and a better taste, if the supermarkets have their own version then you're wasting your time trying to get a share of their market. They don't allow any independent brands to challenge their monopoly. Over the years many brands have had to accept being second best to the own label brands. For those of us who don't like being second best we have had to go and explore in the most treacherous of retailer landscapes to try and make a living: innovation.

Many a company has tried to come up with the perfect formula to make entering this world less risky. Some put their trust in too much consumer research, the effect being that those products have the innovation researched out of them because retailers, and, it must be said, some very large food manufacturers, are paranoid about upsetting the consumer. Others try and make it through the new product graveyard by bombarding the consumer with above-the-line advertising. Failure after using this method must be the bitterest of pills to swallow.

To be successful with innovation you need some vital ingredients: courage, vision and passion. It's very difficult to trust these ingredients when a supermarket's performance is measured day-by-day. They work on the basis of giving the customer what they want, not lead them in to pastures new.

Some brands have managed to defy the odds and bring innovation to the supermarket shelves. For example Gü and Innocent, and I would like to add The Black Farmer brand to this list. To date I have not seen an own label brand innovate like we have.

Innovation is an area where supermarkets fear to tread because it is here that many corpses of failed products lie. The truth is that own label isn't very good at it. That could be to do with corporate culture, where the need for instant results means that any new idea is not given the most precious of commodities: time. To be honest they don't need to innovate when they have all those hungry suppliers out there desperate to get into the supermarkets. The biggest fear we independent producers have is that our new idea is going to be nicked by the supermarkets, and the greatest challenge is to come up with something that is un-nickable. Thank God that it is almost impossible for anyone else to call themselves The Black Farmer.

What is so innovative about The Black Farmer Ultimate Roasting Chicken you may ask? Well I expect you to march off to your Sainsbury's or Budgens and see for yourself. In short we have come up with a way to make value added chicken taste and look much more interesting than what is on the market at the moment.

Supermarkets are carpetbaggers capitalising on the efforts of us innovators. They lie low for a while and see how a new product innovation performs. If they see that enough consumers buy into the proposition it will only be a matter of time before they put their financial might behind copying the idea, leaving me no option but to go back into the treacherous waters of innovation to try once again to stay ahead of the game.

So if you ever see a chicken format like mine in the supermarkets, remember where you saw it first.