

ST JOHNSTON STORE GETS GALA TREATMENT



The stylish interior

The skill of a good retailer is spotting opportunities that others miss.

Paul Harkin's new Gala store in St Johnston is a perfect example. This time last year, it was a somewhat neglected shop in a small Donegal village with its potential overlooked by many. Now it's a bright and bold Gala store, stuffed with offers and innovations, and a shining beacon of retailing for the local community.

Paul took on the store in October last year completing a full fit out in five weeks. The result is a stylish and attractive store, complete with Applegreen forecourt, that has proven greatly beneficial to the local area.

"The old store was really in need of some serious TLC," Paul told Ireland's Forecourt & Convenience Retailer. "I knew that it was crying out to be turned into something decent. We gutted the place completely and carried out a complete fit out, installing a new deli counter and a 15 seater diner."

Independent retailer Paul Harkin has brought the Gala brand to the village of St Johnston in Co Donegal, along with his exceptional experience and expertise

Paul also revealed that St Johnston's appearance as a small town is also somewhat misleading.

"It's actually a really good area," he said. "Within a five kilometre area, there are over 1,000 homes, and the road it's on is very busy, used for people travelling between Donegal and Derry, so we get a very strong morning trade with a large number of commuters."

The St Johnston store is Paul's second Gala outlet. His Ballybofey store is now in its ninth year and has won respect among customers and the trade, along with accolades and fans for its quality food offering.

"We're very focused on fresh," Paul said. "We do a lot of our own ready meals and food-to-go for people on the move and offer a number of different pre-prepared meals, from chicken curry to Cesar salad.

"They are all prepared daily in-store and we've install a number of attractive spider-fridges to really improve their presentation to customers. We also do our own baking in the store, making fresh bread every day, and have introduced the now famous Gala Baker's Corner concept with cup cakes, cookies, apple turnovers and more and it has been a huge success for us.

"We've really tried to make a name for ourselves for our fresh food, and that extends all the way to our fresh chicken, which has become very popular."

With the St Johnston Gala impressing customers with its fresh food offers, Paul's store was given another vote of confidence with an approach from Applegreen to enter a partnership on the site.

"Applegreen are a very good partner and great to be involved with," he said. "They



Service at the deli



The impressive coffee dock

are interested in all aspects of the store and very conscious of the image across the whole site. The attractive Gala fascia and the Applegreen canopy really play well together, and it was important to us to achieve a mutually beneficial partnership and I think we did that. Between this and our continuing successful partnership with the Gala Group, we count ourselves very fortunate."

Paul has worked hard to ensure the site has a broad offer, with every square foot maximised and utilised in full.

"We've also installed a car wash on site and have everything you would need," he said. "While there is this huge passing trade, we're also mindful that many of our customers are local people – something the Gala Group is very aware of - so that has to be considered in our offerings as the ultimate goal is to provide the community with the best that we can offer. We have a really strong grocery range and there are very few lines we don't carry – frozen food,

cleaning products, car accessories, it's a very broad range."

Having worked with Gala for a number of years, Paul is keen to acknowledge the wealth of skills, knowledge and support they have brought to his business.

"Gala is a very proactive company, especially in fresh food," Paul said. "It has two dedicated fresh food managers who are exceptional, and provide a lot of guidance and training for my staff, which is invaluable."

Paul explained how Gala help deliver a range of in-store events to promote the sites and develop links with the community, most recently with a sizzling barbeque that proved a huge hit with St Johnston's locals.

"We held a barbeque around a fortnight ago. Gala came up with the concept and supplied a lot of support in carrying it out," he said. "One of the fresh food managers was onsite throughout the event, ensuring it all ran well. We had a similar event in Ballybofey two years ago. People still talk about it.

"At the recent St Johnston event, we had great support from our new customer base, which is amazing for such a new site. There were a lot of fun events, music and entertainment all taking place for our customers, and it was a really fun day for all involved."

According to Paul, community events such as the barbeque have helped cement his store as a "destination" outlet which the local community are keen to use for a range of missions, from top-up shopping to food-to-go and food for tonight.

"It's all there for them, and so far they've been really supportive of the store and what it's aiming to do."

Looking ahead, Paul is open to further expansion of his growing network, but he still believes there is work to be done at the St Johnston site.

"I'm very much someone who, when I take on something, I want to ensure it's well established and working perfectly before I move on to something new," he said.

"You have to ensure it's working well and has found its niche in the market. If you're not focused, then one bad site can bring down a good site. I've been in retail for some ten years, and with the support and experience of the Gala team behind me, I'm confident the St Johnston site will be a huge success."

It's also a stand-out store in the Gala network. **IFCR**