



# The retailer of choice for fresh food

**That is what Ben McGinn wants the Gala Retail Group to become - and he believes that his ambitious goal is in sight. As fresh food innovations executive, he has been the driving force behind Gala's fresh food innovations over the past decade. He talks to Maev Martin about his focus for the coming year**

**A** chef by trade, Ben worked in Ireland and abroad, including in London and The Czech Republic, before joining Kerry Foods. "I worked with the Group for 11 years and we designed products for the retail market," he says. "Gala was one of my biggest customers during that time, and I worked a lot with their fresh food manager. I then moved on from Kerry Foods and joined Gala as a fresh food manager with responsibility for the eastern seaboard. I was brought on board to help increase the retailer margin through effective sales and my

experience as a supplier was invaluable because I could see both sides of the equation. In my previous role, I did a lot of staff training on how to develop and sell products, so I brought that with me to Gala."

## A team effort

Ben has two other fresh food executives on his team – Christopher Curtin and Peter Duffy. "I would describe myself as the custodian of the innovation that is developed and executed at Gala," he says. "Chris has experience in retail, butchery and raw meats and Peter is an experienced chef with a track record of

running successful innovations through stores. The three of us work as a team. I look at each concept in our range and try to innovate with NPD, staff training and other elements that can be brought into the mix to enhance the offer. I funnel ideas and products through, and Christopher and Peter help me to implement them throughout the Gala Retail estate.

"We will be recruiting another fresh food executive over the coming months because we can see that fresh food is a huge part of what is going on in our shops at the minute. It is a very competitive space, and our goal is to be the retailer of choice for fresh food. In-store concepts is a great way to bring new products to the consumer and consumers have been increasingly looking for new fresh concepts during the pandemic.

"The Gala Retail group recognises the role of innovation in catering to consumers' changing needs. Innovation is what sets Gala apart from our competitors and gives consumers a reason to visit our stores."





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### The concepts

The Gala fresh food concepts suite has expanded quite significantly since Ben joined the Gala team nine years ago. “I lead the concept suite, but it includes our marketing department, our retail operations executives, our retailers and their teams who execute the concepts in-store,” he says. “Once that is done, it is a great asset to the local community. When I first started with Gala, the tagline was ‘Your Local Market’ and that has never been as apt as it has been in recent years, and particularly during the pandemic.”

### Baker's Corner

Gala Baker's Corner was first rolled out to stores across the Gala retailer network in 2013. Delivered in partnership with an independent, Irish-owned business, O'Brien Ingredients, the concept allows Gala's retailers to offer quality home baked goods to their customers. Ben says it has been instrumental in recruiting new customers to the Gala brand. “We spotted a niche in the market as customers were visiting stores to purchase their standard bread but were going to farmers markets and buying soda bread and freshly made scones, so we decided that we needed to bring this offering into our stores and we came up with the Bakers Corner concept,” he says. “The idea was to offer a USP for Gala stores that was as simple as possible for our retailers to execute and maintain, with no extra equipment required.

“Bakers Corner is about constant NPD, so part of my role is to look at what else is out there and what we can add in. For example,

during the pandemic we discovered that increasing numbers of our customers wanted to buy pre-packed bakery products, so we brought out a bespoke range of packaging for our breads, as well as a thaw-serve range that was pre-baked to help retailers meet the demand for pre-packed goods.

“Our approach was to help retailers introduce products during the pandemic, such as pre-baked yeast breads, batch loaves and Vienna rolls, that are simple to bake and sell to our customers, while keeping the ingredients fresh and relevant.”

### Coffee Junction

Like so many other convenience retailers around the country, coffee is a key category for Gala stores. “Not only that, but it is also a very important product to get right because it can be the difference between losing a customer and getting repeat business,” says Ben. “When Coffee Junction was brought into play it was the perfect fit for Baker's Corner. Every Gala store had a coffee offering, but we wanted an easily recognisable coffee brand, so we introduced the world-famous Lavazza Italian brand to our Coffee Junction concept in Gala





stores throughout the country. Gala customers have a premium coffee to go with the beautiful bakery products from Bakers Corner.”

### New Street Deli

New Street Deli was created to complement and reflect the updated modern look of the rebranded deli areas in Gala stores - and to introduce a street food inspired menu. Offerings range from New Street spice boxes and messy taco fries to on-trend healthy protein salad boxes and new fusion wraps, as well as the usual deli favourites, including hot breakfasts, freshly made sandwiches and baguettes. The new ‘Street Box’ offering in stores features compostable and versatile packaging for food in which consumers can enjoy their menu choices on-the-go, complete with a compostable knife and fork, which can be disposed of in the recycling bin.

“The New Street Deli concept was about bringing something new to our existing deli offering,” says Ben. “The great thing about New Street Deli is that it allows us to bring lots of innovations into play. For example, more and more people are eating on-the-go, so we looked at the latest innovations in street food and came up with easy-to-follow recipe ideas like messy taco fries and new fusion wraps that featured a Kimchi salad instead of standard tomato, lettuce, and onion. We have also given the spice bag, which became popular

a few years ago, a bit of a street vibe, and even extended it to the standard chicken fillet roll. We feel that this is a great offering for Gala, particularly with everyone now talking about the outdoor summer.”

### Galato

Gala recently introduced its own fresh whipped ice cream and dessert station, Galato. The Galato offering comprises a range of chilled dessert options, including ice-cream, milkshakes, and desserts. Seasonal offerings include the Halloween Spooky Banana Boat, Christmas Hot Waffle & Ice Cream with Cinnamon Sprinkles, Valentine’s Day mini filled donuts with strawberry topping, and a St Patrick’s Day green and gold sundae.

“The offering taps into the upturn in consumer demand for frozen desserts and is a great addition to Gala’s expanding concept range,” says Ben.

“Everyone is familiar with the cone and the 99 but what happens in a lot of shops is that the ice cream machine gets wrapped up and put away at certain times of the year. We wanted a concept that allowed retailers to use their ice cream machine all year round, so we put a menu of different ice cream cones, milk shakes and desserts into a small concession unit within each store.”

Ice cream ‘puddle’ donuts – a fresh donut with a ‘dimple’ that hosts a ‘puddle of sauce’ topped

with ice cream and a sprinkle of chocolate flake – is the latest Galato innovation.

“Gala retailers who operate the Galato concession are constantly coming up with new ideas and we see them popping up on Facebook all the time, which is great because it means that the retailer and their team are really invested in it,” he says. “One of the most popular desserts now is the hot muffin and ice cream. We may look at introducing new products, such as crepes and bubble waffles, as part of the Galato offering over the coming months.”

### What’s new

Gala’s latest fresh food offering is the Blissimo pizza, which is freshly made in store and sold by the pizza or individual slices. “Blissimo is a product that we recently incorporated in our New Street Deli,” says Ben. “They are Italian pizzas, handmade in Ireland to an Italian design, which offer a distinctive taste and quality every time.

“We are also offering training for staff in stores that will operate the concept, as well as bespoke packaging and point of sale in-store. In rural areas that mightn’t be served by a large selection of pizzerias or pizza delivery outlets, our Gala customers can ring their local Gala and select one of 10 pizza options and call down and collect it. We are working through a roll out of Blissimo across our stores at the moment.”





Blissimo is Gala's new concept for 2021, and for 2022, it will be all about introducing innovation to existing concepts. "The Galato concept is a good example of that in terms of what we are planning on the NPD front," says Ben. "Now that the pandemic situation appears to be improving throughout the country, I will be looking at touching base with retailers a lot more this year, and during 2022, to bring the innovation to individual stores throughout the Gala estate. That will be my focus, and the focus of the fresh food team, over the next few months. It isn't all about rolling out new concepts, it is also about developing those concepts in-store and ensuring that they continue to work for our retailers."

### Coming soon

Not content to stand still, particularly where its New Street Deli offering is concerned, Gala have recently been exploring other innovations, including a Kentucky style chicken offering. "It is not for every store in our estate, but it will work for some of our retailers and customers," he says. "We have a large grab-and-go range that includes the Good for Me range of healthy, calorie conscious options (sandwiches, wraps and salads), and we are also developing a ready-to-go home cooked convenience range. This could be a range of burgers wrapped up and ready for the customer to cook at home, marinated chicken breasts, or ready-to-cook potatoes. We have trialled the range in a few stores in Cork, so it is about moving it into other retailers, and we will develop that over the coming months."

"We believe that it will be a hugely successful innovation for us because it will be appreciated by the many people who discovered or re-discovered their local stores during the pandemic. It is all about ensuring the loyalty of those many new customers we secured during the pandemic and giving them as wide a choice as possible."



### On the go again

Indeed, the easing of restrictions over the past few weeks has given the hard-hit food-to-go segment a big boost. "People are back on the move – we are seeing a big rise in our bakery and coffee sales, and our New Street Deli products are also becoming popular again," he says. "As a result, our retailers are looking for more and more packaging for products to accommodate the increased demand for food-to-go. One of our big food-to-go successes was our hot island offering for pre-packaged hot goods like sausage rolls, goujons, spice boxes and potato wedges. They have been well received by customers in the stores in Kildare, Wexford, Wicklow, and Meath where we have introduced the hot island offer. When

September comes and people are back in offices again, I can see the grab-and-go side of our offering gaining further traction, but it will take a while to get it back to where it was. Also, prior to the pandemic, food-to-go was a prepacked sandwich, but now customers are looking at it as hot food to eat on the street and as something they can take home and cook quickly, so they are looking at food-to-go in a different way. It isn't just a sandwich and coffee; it is about what they can get for their lunch or dinner and what hot bites they can buy to eat on-the-go and outdoors."

Gala Retail is also keen to allocate more space in its stores to install features like hot islands, but before this can happen, the focus is on training retailers and their teams. "Over the coming year, we are going to set up a staff training facility at HQ in Kill, Co Kildare," says Ben.

"We already provide training in-store, but we now want to run staff workshops around the country. These could focus on New Street Deli training, food safety training or training in some other aspect of the business. We believe that the workshops will work better for staff than the in-store training approach as it can often be a distraction when staff are trying to serve customers."

The role of fresh food in the convenience store setting has grown significantly over the past decade. "In recent years, the convenience store and sector has evolved dramatically with customers expecting to find a full food offering," he says.

"Retailers are seeing the changes directly from their own customers – they are coming in for a strong offer on fresh food and that is what is driving revenue for stores in Gala and across the entire industry. Also, with the focus on staycations, we are seeing people shopping with Gala while they are on holidays. That is where the business opportunity is this summer and will be over the next few years." ■

