

The Watercress Company

Changing tastes create new opportunities.

A couple of decades ago, it would have taken a brave supermarket buyer to put fresh watercress, hardly the epitome of the 'pile it high, sell it cheap' philosophy, on his busy shelves, let alone baby leaf spinach or prepared mixed salad.

Today, however, the philosophy of the major supermarkets has changed and so, in response, has that of the supermarket supplier. Marginal produce has been embraced by the consumer, and after creating the demand, growers and distributors have had to gear themselves to supply it, professionally and consistently, for twelve months of the year, often from growing centres which straddle the globe. The Watercress Company is a living manifestation of the new era in produce supply.

The association between Peter Mills and Charles Barter had long existed. They had both farmed watercress on long-standing family farms for many years, Peter in Hampshire and Charles in Dorset. From their friendship a close cooperation developed, and in the early 1980's, when each perceived a need for a year round watercress supply, a formal association was entered into. The first manifestation of that was the acquisition of their Spanish operation, and by 1989, the two businesses had finally amalgamated into B & M Watercress.

In March 1994 Peter left the

Washed baby spinach leaves on the inspection belt watched by Peter C Old, Chairman of the Watercress Company (left) and Gerald Malone MP, Secretary of State at the Department of Health; MP for Winchester & Alton (right) at the opening of the Company's £1.5 million investment in new packing facilities at Alresford, on Friday 19 July 1996





Unveiling the plaque at the opening of the Company's £1.5 million investment in new packing facilities at Alresford. (Left to right) Peter C. Old, Chairman, Charles Barter, Managing Director, Gerald Malone MP, Secretary of State of the Department of Health.

business to pursue other agricultural interests and his share was purchased by Peter Old. In the same year the company was re-launched as The Watercress Company - Peter Old is now the company Chairman, and Charles Barter Managing Director.

By that time, of course, the company was already a well respected supermarket supplier of watercress, and also served the catering and wholesale trades. Their success was such, in fact, that they felt able to expand the business and identified the potential for prepared mixed salads for the supermarket customer. In early

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By last summer, a programme of expansion was well under way. And by early this year, packing area had been increased by 100% and capacity by 200%, and watercress beds had been modernised and upgraded. The real innovations,

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however, were coming from the land crops, with the extension of the Spanish farm and the acquisition of land in Florida for the year round supply of watercress, various lettuce varieties and baby leaf spinach. However, as Charles Barter explains, though expansion has been extensive, it has also been controlled, and for a very good reason:

"All our development has been - and will continue to be - in growing and packing. We do not want to get to the stage where we are sourcing other people's produce. By growing the produce from seed we have complete control, and we are not relying on the professionalism, or otherwise, of anybody else. The supermarkets like the fact that we have that complete control."

The operation is controlled from the UK, where the company employs around 105 people rising to 120 with seasonal staff. Purely growing operations, the overseas farms employ between 10 and 15 each, and send all produce to the English headquarters for packing and distribution. In total, 90 acres are utilised for watercress production, and anything up to 120 for land based crops. At this time of year, the company supplies around 20 tonnes of watercress to supermarkets every week, and around 6 tonnes of baby leaf spinach, though the second figure is set to increase considerably thanks to a new deal signed only recently. The prepared salad trade, as well, is expanding.

The Watercress Company is the exclusive watercress supplier to the Tesco chain, and although Tesco is the company's major customer other major supermarkets are also supplied. In addition they have some trade with the wholesale markets and the catering industry,

In keeping with the company's 'complete control' philosophy, they employ all their own quality control experts in England and abroad. All growing is overseen by a Production Manager on each site, along with a Technical Manager who is totally responsible for the efficient implementation of quality control procedures. The systems are designed and implemented by The Watercress Company, ensuring that stringent customer specification is always met.

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Similarly, the company runs its own haulage fleet and can cover all of the UK including Northern Ireland. The logistics involved in getting produce from Spain or North America to supermarket depots across the country, and keeping produce fresh and shelf life to the maximum, means transport systems have to be exemplary. "Our systems are designed to get watercress from Spain, say, and into a supermarket depots within a day and a half," Charles explains. "All produce is imported by air, of course." The supermarkets demand a complete attention to detail in every area, but the caterers and wholesalers get the benefit as well.

Watercress remains the backbone of the company's operation, and it has served them well. Charles is not sure whether the increasing popularity of more marginal produce is consumer or supermarket led, but he is certain that tastes are changing. "There is, for example, a move away from whole lettuce, and towards more convenience salads. Prepared and ready washed, you just open the bag and tip it into the salad bowl or whatever. With something like baby leaf spinach, it is actually very difficult to prepare at home. We have the equipment to do it and by doing so we are offering choice."

They have their competitors, of course, but few can offer the same level of control. Whereas most of the others invariably source produce, The Watercress Company is one of the only ones to take full responsibility from seed to sale, and Charles is always looking for new produce and new products. Meanwhile, watercress sales continue to grow by between 20% and 30% per annum and the company does not foresee a slow-down of this organic expansion. "We are expanding rapidly but in a controlled manner," says Charles, "and we are constantly striving to perform more efficiently and to the high demands of our customers. We see a tremendous future."

and though the volumes involved are small compared with the supermarkets, they are still regarded with equal importance. "The wholesale trade has been under real pressure from the multiples," says Charles, "but the part of the industry that remains must be the best and most progressive, and it can only get stronger. And the catering industry will continue to expand. There is certainly a future in both areas."

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