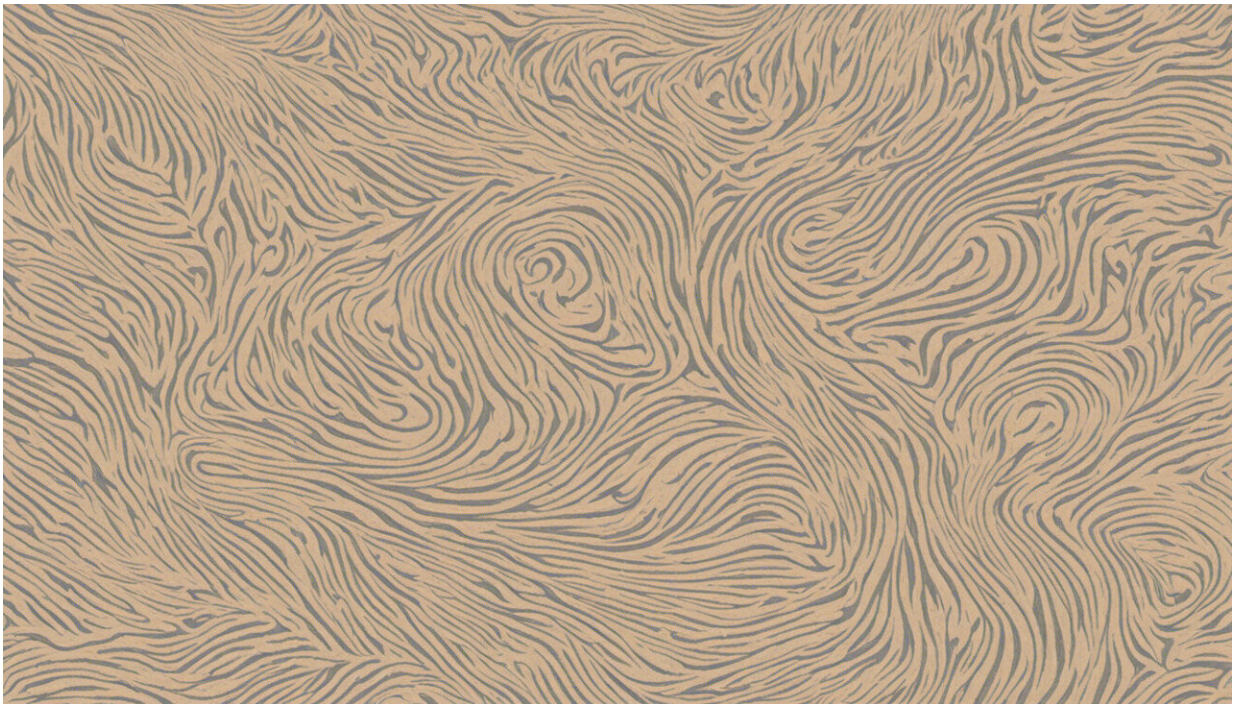


Why forgotten food manufacturers deserve our thanks too

June 5 2020, by Ruth Fairchild



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK government's [list of key workers](#) helping society to deal with the pandemic was a long one. But it seems to me that some of the people who really keep us going have been overlooked.

For while supermarket staff and delivery drivers have quite rightly

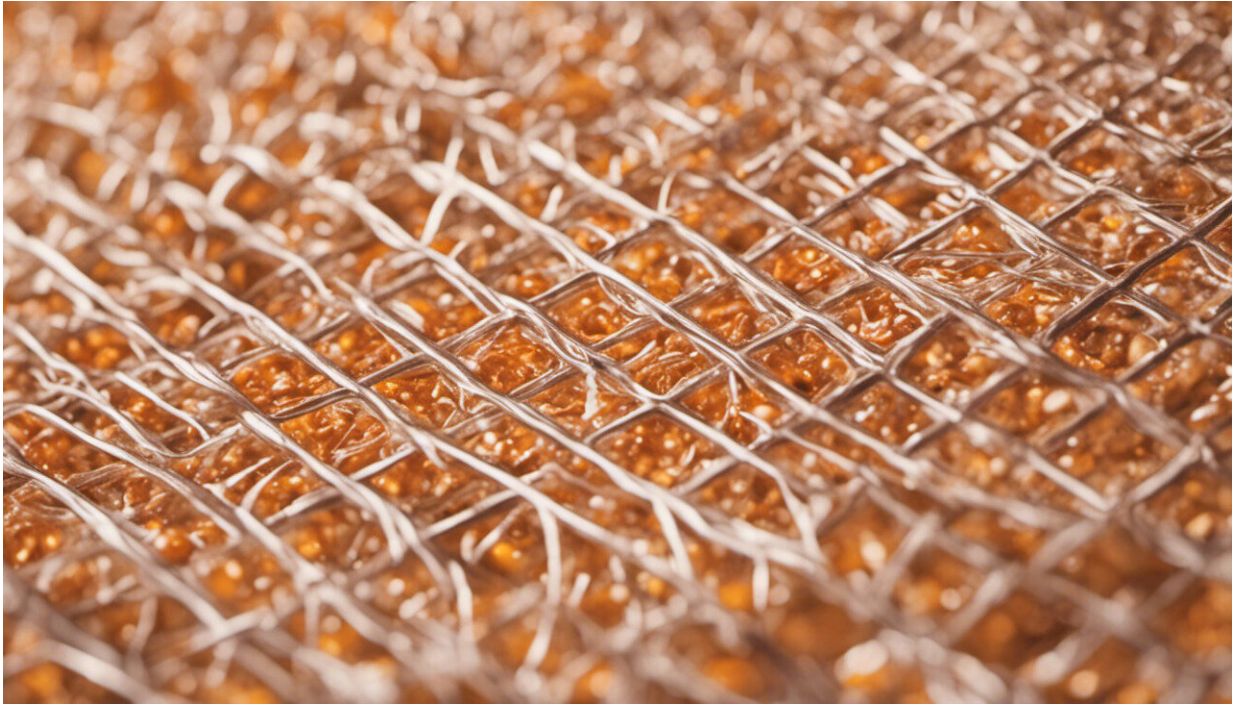
achieved hero status, much less attention has been given to where the [food](#) they sell or transport actually comes from.

But someone has to produce the raw, unprocessed food ingredients. Then someone else has to turn those ingredients into the kind of [processed food](#) products that fill the supermarket shelves. And for months now, they have been [coping with unprecedented demand](#).

There are, of course, varying levels of process and human involvement required to end up with the food we want to eat. Even at a minimal level, [primary processing](#) involves cutting, cleaning, packaging and storing raw foods before they reach the consumer. Farmers produce livestock for example, which is sent to abattoirs, where a team of production staff ensures a continuing supply of various cuts to butchers and ready meal manufacturers.

And it was interesting to see that among the first foods mentioned in tales of panic buying and hoarding, were pasta, tinned tomatoes and sausages. These are all [secondary processed foods](#), defined as raw ingredients made into more useful or edible forms. This requires the skills of the often forgotten workers involved in refining, purifying, extracting, and combining minimally processed primary [food products](#).

Many people's shopping baskets consist predominantly of these secondary processed foods, which include dairy products, flours, oils and sweeteners. These form the beginnings of many quick, easy and cheap meals, so it makes sense that they were in such high demand. And as uncertainty about imports and transportation increased, food buyers and packaging companies worked hard to maintain supplies as sales soared.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Home cooking

As well as a surge in sales of flour and tinned tomatoes, lockdown also saw a new level of interest in recipe websites (and even the BBC [launching a new daily cooking show](#). Perhaps in the days before lockdown we had become over reliant on takeaways, eating out, and [ready meals](#)—and less confident in our own cooking abilities.

This apparent lack of food knowledge and skills could be blamed on the [virtual eradication](#) of what used to be called "home economics" and is now termed "food technology" becoming [increasingly less common](#) in British schools and colleges.

As a nutritionist then, I found it pleasing in a sense, that supermarkets

were running out of the primary and secondary processed foods. It seemed to demonstrate that people were trying to cook well for themselves and their families. Every supermarket [appeared to have plenty](#) of ultra-processed foods on its shelves, which were full of cakes, biscuits and confectionery. Perhaps this was evidence of a nation altering some of its poorer eating habits, and turning to healthier home cooked meals.

So when you reflect on the complexity of food manufacturing you can see why food industry workers are on (the somewhat ignored section of) the key workers list. One way the industry has coped is by speeding up recruitment. [Just like medics](#), final year students studying food science and technology are finding themselves required by employers much sooner than they expected, prior to graduation, to keep [outputs meeting demand](#).

Food technologists are taking up their graduate scheme posts early, in a [variety of roles](#) both office and factory based, involving everything from sustainability to laboratory, safety and processing.

These food industry professionals are essential for maintaining a safe food supply. And luckily, the food industry continues to be a [caring, dynamic](#) career destination.

In the UK in 2018, [14% of the working population](#) were employed in the food industry and the British population spent £226 billion on food, drink and catering.

So when you next queue to shop at a supermarket, do spare a thought for the [forgotten heroes](#) working hard to ensure your basic essential products—be they raw carrots, dried pasta, chicken nuggets or truffle oil—have been safely delivered to your supermarket or independent retailer. In times of trouble, food is not only vital for our stomachs—it is

also [dear to our hearts](#).

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