



# The South East Food & Agricultural debate



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Brachers was delighted to jointly host the South East Food and Agriculture Debate with Insider, Smiths Gore and Hadlow College Group. Held at The East Malling Research Centre, the debate brought together the heads of five leading companies and a trade organisation to discuss a range of issues that are affecting the rural economy in the South East of England.

In this paper, Sarah Webster, Brachers' Head of Agriculture & Rural, summarises some of the key themes which arose in the debate.

The sector is a huge contributor to the nation's economy, with a collective turnover of £92 billion last year and is responsible for 3.5 million jobs. In a highly competitive environment, manufacturers, producers and farmers are facing a host of challenges whilst working to provide high quality products to customers.

The breakfast was aimed at identifying challenges and what those in the industry are doing to overcome these difficulties.

Key messages that came out of this discussion were the importance of recruiting and retaining skilled workers, the need to innovate and diversify, the ability to access finance and the need to be more productive and competitive. All panel members identified the impact of branding as vital to their success.



**William Opie**  
Managing Director  
Bennett Opie

A manufacturing and distribution business, founded in 1880. In 1929 the family moved to Sittingbourne and began producing Kentish glacier cherries. They now sell a range of other products to supermarkets. In the 70's William began importing syrups to bars in the UK and then to coffee chains such as Costa coffee which experienced a mass growth in the last decade.

### Key challenges

- Price pressure – The introduction of supermarkets such as Aldi and Lidl to the UK market has increased competition across the industry. Supermarkets are only concerned about the cost of a product and where it came from.
- Supermarket own brands – Supermarkets are pushing unique products out through their own brand. Branded products are the same in all supermarkets and a similar cost so the challenge is to keep a strong brand but also develop products for the supermarkets.

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**Jack Cookson**  
Founder  
Nudge Drinks

Nudge produce a range of frozen fruit smoothies as 'fresh from frozen' giving the consumer a healthy and simple option to make smoothies. They are currently in the process of getting the product to market.

### Key challenges

- Product innovation – Nudge has created a product not currently seen in supermarkets, they provide frozen fresh fruit in a sachet which can be blended with juice to make a smoothie, taking out the hassle of peeling and chopping fruit. The product also has a shelf life of two years.
- Funding – Nudge received funding from the Government's Start-up loan scheme and from The Prince's Trust.



**Ed Martin**  
Manager  
Produced in Kent

Produced in Kent represents a group of 250 SMEs across Kent, many in the food & drink industry.

### Key challenges

- Exporting – There is a lack of awareness from Kent businesses about exporting products. Many economies abroad have increasing disposable incomes that should be used to business' advantage to reach a wider market.



**Angie Curwen**  
Managing Director  
Kent Crisps

Kent Crisps produce crisps using Kentish produce and Kentish flavourings. Originally they were part of the Quex Food group but completed an Management Buyout (MBO) to allow both companies to focus on core business activities.

### Key challenges

- MBO – The MBO has allowed Kent Crisps and Kentish Oils to grow further and seek more investment opportunities.
- Branding – Kent Crisps recently re-branded and upgraded the product by manufacturing a gluten free and suitable for vegetarian and vegan options which have increased opportunities in new markets.
- Exporting – Kent Crisps are currently working with the UKTI to export to Europe and the Far East.

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**Paul Ross**  
Director  
The Marvellous Meat Company

Selling Sussex beef to the London market. Their consumers have become more aware of the origins of their meat and are willing to pay a premium. They operate an online model, straight to retail with an overnight delivery service.

### Key challenges

- Quality/provenance – The London market is prepared to pay a premium for quality meat which they know has been carefully reared in Sussex by local farmers.
- Funding – The Marvellous Meat Company have begun crowd-funding through a crowd-funding platform to raise £250,000 finance to help develop their website and branding.



**Fraser Thompson**  
Chief Executive  
Chapel Down Winery

Market leaders in producing English Sparkling Wine, Chapel Down produce a range of sparkling wine, red, white and rose.

### Key challenges

- Branding – Chapel Down have created a powerful brand with a very recognisable look. Their aim now is to produce consistent messaging about who they are as a company and what they do.
- Product diversification – Chapel Down opened a shop and a restaurant, they now offer tours and wine tasting alongside their wines.
- Innovation - The UK climate can be challenging to produce wine and secure a long term supply of fruit, Chapel Down is now looking to technology to help.

## About the Agriculture & Rural team

Farmers, landowners and rural businesses are faced with ever evolving opportunities and challenges as a result of the swift pace of change both in legislation and technology. Our team of specialist lawyers has a keen understanding of the issues and will work in partnership with you in order to provide effective solutions that meet your needs. Please contact Sarah Webster to find out more.

