



Belazu

Locally sourced, high-quality produce has won over the nation's chefs as well as consumers. Samuel Solley reports

Adam Wells and George Bennell first met at the age of 11, when they sat next to each other on the first day of secondary school; 26 years later, the two friends still spend their days together, but now as owners of upmarket food brand Belazu.

The concept behind the brand is so simple it seems crazy no one came up with it earlier: a branded premium foods business for consumers who want to buy the same quality ingredients as the best restaurants. Yet the pair have clearly spotted a gap in the market – their company's turnover jumped from £4m in 2002 to £7m last year, and is estimated to reach nearly £9m in 2005.

The focus is on Mediterranean produce. There are foodie essentials such as olive oils and vinegars, along with olives, pastes, pickles, tapenades and North African delicacies such as pickled lemons and barley couscous. The brand's credentials are helped no end by endorsement from some of the country's top chefs. For example, Belazu products feature on the menu of Jamie Oliver's high-profile London restaurant Fifteen. Nigella Lawson swears by the brand's rose harissa paste, while Raymond Blanc describes its balsamic vinegar as a 'must-have' ingredient at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons.

After 14 years in business together, Wells and Bennell say they have built a good working relationship. 'Trust is im-

portant' says Wells, 'and we both bring different things to the business.'

Wells happily admits that Bennell, a chef by background, 'brings the product knowledge and cultural understanding', while his role is more administrative. It was Bennell, whose mother lived in the south of France, who spotted that the quality of most of the ingredients available on the continent was far better than what could be bought in many UK supermarkets. Indeed, his insider knowledge on the ingredients and the best place to find them was key to setting up the company.

The pair's first foray into the business of selling food was the Fresh Olive Company. They borrowed £10,000 and began by shipping back buckets of olives, which they sold to delicatessens.

They admit their success is down in no small part to luck, as the launch of their business coincided with changes in many Britons' lifestyles. 'We caught the crest of the Mediterranean food wave,' says Wells. 'People were "ooing" and "aahing" over the amazing olives they found on their holidays, but could only buy horrible tinned versions when they returned home.'

With that realisation they stumbled across the idea for a consumer-facing food brand to run alongside the fresh olive business. The result was Belazu, a name they invented to evoke images of azure Mediterranean skies.

Timeline

- 1991** Adam Wells and George Bennell spot a gap in the market for fresh olives. With a £10,000 loan, they buy an old van and drive buckets of olives from Provence to London. The Fresh Olive Company is formed.
- 2000** The two decide to launch a retail brand and decide on the name Belazu. The brand secures listings in Sainsbury's.
- 2001** The brand's packaging, designed by Turner Duckworth, wins a Clio design award.
- 2003** Belazu opens a children's school in Douar Lamsayen in south-west Morocco, the source of the brand's Argan nut oil.
- 2004** The brand updates its packaging and begins online sales direct to consumers.

Based at a warehouse in Park Royal in London, the brand sells through delicatessens and supermarkets across the country, and last year set up an online shopping facility. It now employs 40 staff, with whom Wells and Bennell are keen to share their enthusiasm for food. To help their workforce understand the culture behind the products, they flew their entire team out to the company's olive grove in Catalonia for a Christmas break.

This love of locally sourced produce is at the heart of the brand's success. 'We like to think of Belazu as working in partnership with small, local suppliers to bring the best of Mediterranean food culture to British food lovers,' says Bennell. 'We want to help people evolve their ideas, bringing them new, exciting products. It's all about making a difference to cooking at home, in an easy, accessible way.'

Their commitment to their suppliers is clear in their desire to 'give something back'. The company has set up and funds a school in Douar Lamsayen in south-west Morocco, from where the brand's Argan nut oil is sourced. It teaches about 50 children aged eight to 16.

'We don't always want to be about the bottom line,' says Bennell. 'Every trip we take out there, we are welcomed into peoples homes, fed and looked after, but they won't accept our money. This is our way of saying thank you.'