

This freezer-aisle favourite has been touted 'the next Oatly'

After a decade working in his family's fruit and veg business, Sam Dennigan became acquainted with the gaps in global food production and distribution. Now, he's working to produce healthy and sustainable options as Founder and Group CEO of Strong Roots – the UK's fastest-growing food brand.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Maddyness spoke to Sam about the misconceptions surrounding the nutritional value of frozen food; using biogas to fuel production; and supporting initiatives that combat 'veg poverty'.

[Maddyness] Your dad owns and runs a fruit and veg company. What did this teach you about food and agriculture, and how did this background eventually lead you to Strong Roots?

[Sam] Spending ten years in the family food business in Ireland taught me a lot about the industry; from production, distribution, sourcing, sustainability, nutrition and more... I learned very early on that not all food is created equal. This is especially true in the freezer aisle. I started Strong Roots because I felt for too long, frozen food has meant bland, unappealing and unhealthy options. From working in fruit and veg, I knew that frozen food could be better.

What are the benefits of frozen food? Is it as healthy and nutrient-rich as fresh produce?

There was a gap in the market for premium frozen vegetables, which has a two year shelf life in comparison to fresh, which lasts only a few days. Fruits and vegetables are picked at peak ripeness and frozen within hours, locking in nutrients and flavour. They actually have more nutrients compared to fresh foods.

If you're trying to shop in a more seasonal way, freezing allows you to still have all those sweet summer fruits out of season, while shopping in a way that's more harmonious with nature. Many frozen foods, like Strong Roots, contain no preservatives, unlike dried and canned food. And frozen food just saves you time. That's what we're all about - delicious, plant-based food for busy people.

Why do you make plant-based products? Are you vegan yourself?

I try to eat plant-based as much as I can. I founded Strong Roots to offer consumers a tasty, healthy plant-based option that could slot into their lives, freezers and whatever healthy eating they chose to do.

The plant-based category is no longer just for vegans, it's for flexitarians, healthy eaters, and people wanting to eat more consciously. COVID-19 has pushed health and sustainability even more to the fore for consumers. Both of those are at the core of Strong Roots.

Would you say there's been a noticeable shift to plant-based produce? Have you noticed increased interest from supermarkets etc on the ground?

2020 was the year that plant-based went from a fringe product to a supermarket staple. We entered Walmart in the US last September and consumers across America have embraced the brand.

Retailers across the board are ramping up their plant-based options with other challenger brands like Sophie's Kitchen, Fiid, and Love Corn being added to the retailer's shelves. It's part of a larger trend as consumers are coming into plant-based at affordable prices now – as they look to feed their families delicious plant-based products via the freezer aisle amidst the pandemic.

How do you incorporate sustainability into other aspects of your company?

At Strong Roots, we incorporate sustainability at all points of our value chain. All Strong Roots packaging is fully recyclable. Manufacturers use vegetable waste to make biogas, which turns gas into energy used to steam and freeze the vegetables in Strong Roots products.

We use low waste production methods to ensure that we prevent disease in crops. Our products are transferred sustainably for example - the average speed of the trucks is reduced to 80km/h instead of 96km/h, which results in a reduction of 10% in diesel consumption.

And we're trying to continue to get better. Our goal is to be B Corp certified in 2021 - making us the first Irish-based frozen food brand to achieve certification.

We're also assessing our entire value/supply chain (from packaging, to supply chain, to how we do things in our HQ) to measure our environmental impact and identify areas for improvement and supporting initiatives that restore the connection between growing and consuming food, particularly amongst children and young people, who might go their first few years without seeing the fields where their favourite foods are grown.

What would you say needs to change for a more sustainable food production system on a global level? Do you have any key areas of interest within this area?

Sustainability shouldn't be optional anymore for Big Food and small challenger brands alike - there are so many touch points across which food companies can do better.



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Some key areas of focus for us are integrating sustainable production methods, irrigation at our production facilities, transport, and packaging. The use of less chemicals and excess ingredients that one can't pronounce also ensures not just cleaner and more tasty, but more sustainable products.

And finally, a more personal question. What's your daily routine at the moment - and what are the rules you're living by to get you through COVID-19?

I think the pandemic has put a lot in perspective for a lot of us. As a food consumer, the shift to cooking even more, focusing on my health, and having moments at home with the family around food have made it more of a centrepiece and grounding element during the pandemic.

Otherwise, it's busy at Strong Roots as we expand - so I like to take time to read, listen to podcasts, and get some nature when I can (us New Yorkers struggle with that). I'm actually home in Dublin now with the family - so it has been nice to be home.

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