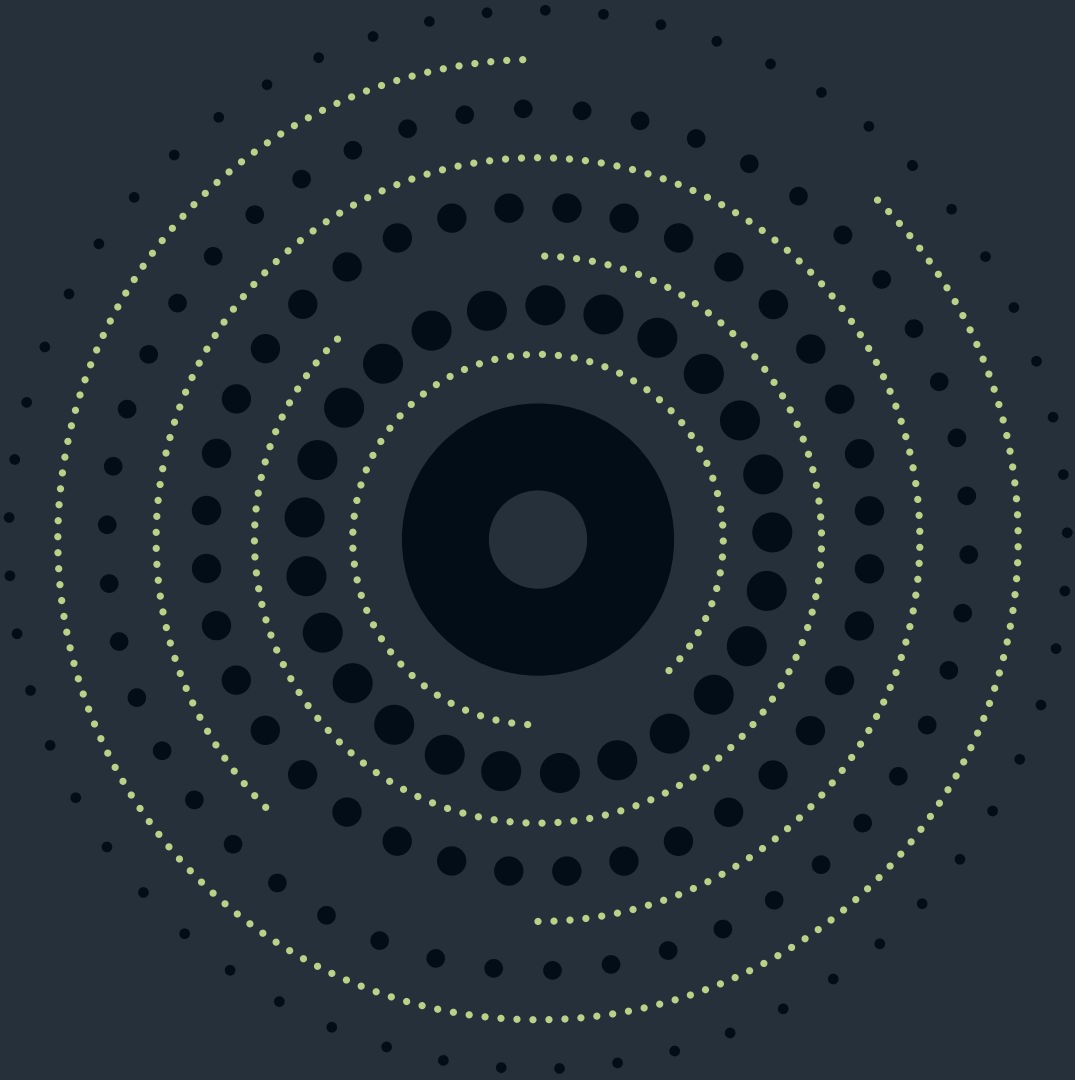


FOOD & BEVERAGE  
FAST 50



ALANTRA

## Foreword

Welcome to the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50, our annual celebration of one of the UK's fastest growing and most innovative sectors. We have now been producing these reports for 13 years, tracking the progress of hundreds of high-growth food and beverage companies from their earliest days to, in many cases, household name status and international reach



**CHARLES LANCELEY,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
HEAD OF UK FOOD & BEVERAGE

To qualify for inclusion in this research, food and drink businesses must be privately-owned and have published reports and accounts covering at least three years of trading. We rank businesses according to their compound annual sales growth over the two most recent years for which data is publicly available. The aim is to provide an accurate and timely analysis of which businesses in the food and beverage sector are growing most quickly.

Naturally, smaller, early-stage businesses have the greatest headroom to deliver explosive rates of growth; this year's report features a significant number of businesses that have done exactly that, growing rapidly from a relatively low base of sales. But this is not the full story. As in previous years, the 2022 Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 also includes a number of businesses that have already built sizeable sales, but which are continuing to accelerate at speed.

This year's ranking includes a number of stalwarts of previous years' reports that are still delivering stellar growth as they continue to scale.

These businesses are proving that they are no flash-in-the-pan; they are sustainable enterprises with a proven track record of development and genuine momentum now playing out over the longer term.

Overall, the average business in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 delivered annualised sales growth of 36% in its two most recent years of trading – a sharp increase compared to last year, when the equivalent figure was 25%.

That is a remarkable achievement given that during much of the period covered by this report, trading repeatedly experienced disruption linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, this year's report confirms last year's observation that many food and beverage businesses have managed the Covid-19 crisis with great skill, capitalising on consumers' increased interest in food and health as the pandemic left them stuck at home. This is not to suggest the sector had it easy – supply chain issues, labour shortages and the closure of the foodservice sector were all significant challenges – but many businesses skillfully navigated a path through such difficulties.

Their reward was strong demand from consumers in a marketplace where a growing number are looking for new and interesting choices. Many of the businesses in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 have strong challenger brand credentials – their success has come from offering something different in sub-sectors of the market that have long been dominated by the same incumbents.

Since the 2021 Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 report, uncertainty and volatility have increased dramatically. However, for as long as upcoming businesses are able to show such agility and imagination, there is every chance they will continue to thrive.

## The 2022 Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 revealed

The UK's 50 fastest-growing privately-owned food and beverage companies have delivered stellar levels of sales growth despite a tough market backdrop

Privately-owned food and beverage businesses in the UK have shown remarkable resilience. Despite the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the volatility of the domestic and international political backdrop, and the growing economic uncertainty, these businesses have continued to innovate, to tell their stories, and, above all, to grow aggressively.

The average business in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 delivered annualised growth of 36% over its most recent two years of trading. That is significantly in advance of the 25% we reported in last year's research, and well ahead of pre-pandemic levels of growth.

Such a leap is remarkable given the broader context. This ranking is based on businesses' most recent filings of full-year results, so in many cases it includes the performance delivered by food and beverage companies as they traded through the difficulties of Covid-19. The sector successfully navigated many of the pandemic's challenges.

This is underlined by the stellar performance of the leading businesses in this year's ranking. The top-performing business, THIS™, delivered two-year compound annual sales growth of 246%, getting on for three times the 89% delivered by last year's number one business, Gousto. Indeed, Gousto itself was able to beat 2021's performance, registering a figure of 95% this year; but this time around, these very strong results were only good enough for sixth place in the ranking.

Looking at the top five businesses alone, this year saw them deliver an average growth rate of 167% – that compares to 73% from the top five a year ago. Even in the 2020 report, a high-water mark for the sector, the top five achieved average growth of “only” 110%.

One explanation for this year's acceleration is the relative size of the leading businesses in the ranking. The top five's sales in their most recent year of trading averaged £8.4m, compared to £39.0m in last year's report. Clearly, these are smaller businesses with greater headroom to deliver exponential growth.

This year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 marks something of a changing of the guard. While the ranking features a number of businesses that have appeared several times in previous reports – Huel and Charlie Bigham's, for example, as well as Gousto – there are many new entrants. Smaller businesses are breaking through right across the sector.

There are multiple reasons for this. One driver for the rapid success of these breakthrough brands is the trend towards online retail, which accelerated during the pandemic, and gives smaller players a means to expand quickly. This year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 features eight businesses that primarily depend on a direct-to-consumer business model (with many more that sell direct as well

as through other channels). That compares to just one in the 2019 report.

It is also the case that consumers have been actively seeking out smaller food and drink brands offering something different, argues Pam Digva, co-founder of Sauce Shop, a new entrant in this year's research.

“I do think people have become steadily more comfortable with the idea of challenger brands, to the extent that they often go looking for them now,” argues Digva. “They want something interesting and distinctive, and if you're smart, you can really tap into that.”

David Knibbs, founder of The Tofoo Co, another Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 new entrant, has seen a similar effect. “The pandemic gave us a real boost in that sense – it got people more interested in cooking and they were willing to try new ingredients and recipes,” says Knibbs.

“It's a compelling story to take to supermarket buyers, Knibbs adds. “If you looked at sales of tofu in the US, the UK market should have been worth around £40m if it had the same level of household penetration; it wasn't, it was around £7m, a point we made every time we pitched to a new buyer. Six years on, the market is worth £40m and now we've hit that target, buyers really believe. We are now planning for a tofu market of £100m!”

A related trend – certainly one that has benefitted The Tofoo Co – is the continued acceleration of brands selling healthier foods in one way or another. Growing interest in vegan and vegetarian lifestyles in the UK, as well as broader awareness of health and wellbeing in the context of Covid-19, continue to help businesses with a good story to tell in this regard.

This year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 features nine “functional food” businesses selling products such as meal-replacement shakes, protein bars and health supplements, as well as four protein specialists. Businesses that once focused on a small niche of the overall food and beverage market – targeting athletes and fitness fans, for example – have seen their potential customer base broaden and adjusted accordingly.

“We've evolved very rapidly in recent years, from being a brand targeted at gym goers to a highly relevant lifestyle brand”, says Mark Coxhead, founder and CEO of Protein Works, a

top performer in this year's ranking. “That transition has been hugely exciting, particularly in a post-Covid world where I think everyone is now thinking much more about their health and wellbeing.”

The focus on health and wellbeing also has knock-on effects. Pet food continues to be a high-growth area of the food and beverage market, as people pay greater attention to how they feed this member of the family.

“It's a movement we saw several years back but which has really gathered pace,” says Fiona Hope, the CEO of Lintbells, one specialist in this area included in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50. “Pet owners wanted better quality products with the right ingredients and some genuine science behind them; we think of our customers as the people who read labels – there are growing numbers of them and they appreciate companies with rigour behind their product development.”

This is not to suggest the UK has become a nation of puritans. Consumers continue to want treats, but they have become more discerning. This year's ranking includes more than ten bakery and snacking businesses, well up on previous reports. However, these include the likes of Love,Corn, which sells a healthier corn snack, and companies such as Signature Flatbreads, which are extending the bakery category.

**As for the future, many of the businesses in this year's report are convinced their best years are still to come. They're focused on product development, on market share and on building a greater international presence.**

On the latter, for example, the direct-to-consumer model offers an opportunity to test out new markets without making a major commitment on the ground. Last year, THIS™ made a major push into the US market but already has significant international experience through the sales it makes online to customers in almost 100 countries.

Another major opportunity for many of these companies is the one area of their business that really suffered during the pandemic.

Sales to foodservice customers – restaurants, cafes and pubs that closed during lockdowns – are now beginning to recover and offer the potential for a further super-charge to sales in many cases.

“We've really focused on foodservice since the worst of the Covid period,” says Andy Shovel, co-founder of THIS™. “It currently accounts for about 30% of our revenues but we'd like to get that up to 50%; it's great for brand building because you're effectively getting this self-servicing marketing support.”

There will also be challenges along the way as these businesses continue to grow. One issue is production and logistics, particularly as supply chain disruption persists. Many fast-growing businesses are already concerned about maintaining control of quality while meeting demand – but outsourcing is not always the right solution, warns Sauce Shop's Pam Digva.

“As our business started to take off, we decided to outsource production; that lasted 18 months before we went back to doing it ourselves,” she recalls. “It was hard work, but we got an immediate benefit in terms of improved product quality and better margins.”

Another question mark could be financing. As the Bank of England continues to tighten monetary policy, will growing businesses, including in the food and beverage sector, find themselves struggling to secure debt financing and venture capital?

Indeed, one feature of this year's report – reflecting the relatively small size of many of the businesses in the ranking – is the smaller number with private equity backing; only ten of this year's cohort have taken on such investment, down from 14 a year ago and 16 in 2020's report.



I do think people have become steadily more comfortable with the idea of challenger brands, to the extent that they often go looking for them now. They want something interesting and distinctive, and if you're smart, you can really tap into that.

PAM DIGVA,  
CO-FOUNDER, SAUCE SHOP



## This year's top performers

### Sales growth\*

THIS™  
PLANT-BASED MEAT-ALTERNATIVES

246%

MISFITS  
VEGAN FUNCTIONAL FOODS

215%

ABSOLUTE COLLAGEN  
COLLAGEN SUPPLEMENTS

158%

DASH WATER  
FRUIT INFUSED WATER

118%

SAUCE SHOP  
SAUCES AND SPICES

98%

RANK

1

2

3

4

5



\*Compound annual sales growth rate over past two financial years

THIS™

THIS™ soars on demand  
for plant-based foods+246%  
ANNUAL SALES  
GROWTH RATE

Six years later, THIS™, the business that Shovel and Sharman eventually launched to deliver that product, is reaping the benefits of its appeal to a broader market of “flexitarians” reducing their meat intake and searching for alternatives.

Its most recent results reveal a two-year compound annual sales growth rate of 246% – securing it the top spot in this year’s Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings by a margin of more than 30 percentage points.

Such remarkable success is ultimately based on THIS™’s products. Shovel and Sharman spent 18 months researching, developing and testing its launch range of eight products, from plant-based burgers to chicken substitutes, before going live with the business. Largely reliant on soy bean and pea protein, THIS™ products are characterised by their fibrous texture, which feels much closer to meat than most other plant-based foods.

The completely meat-free ingredient list certainly appeals to vegans and vegetarians, but THIS™ caters to a much wider audience. And the products’ sustainability credentials, including a carbon footprint more than 40 times smaller than that of beef, are an important part of the appeal.

Having developed something different, Shovel and Sharman were also keen to build a distinctive brand – something miles away from the different shades of green favoured by other plant-based specialists.

Andy Shovel and Pete Sharman, co-founders of THIS™, the fastest growing business in this year’s Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50, have an unlikely back story. Plant-based foods specialist THIS™ is their second successful joint venture; previously, they ran a successful burger delivery business.

The sale of that business in 2016 proved to be something of an epiphany, Shovel recalls. “We made a commitment to ourselves that our next business would be something more sustainable,” he says. “We wanted to feel we were making a constructive difference.”

Shovel and Sharman found their answer close to home. Part of the inspiration for their burger chain had been their love of meat; now, keen to give up meat, they couldn’t find a product they wanted to switch to. “There were plenty of meat-free brands out there, but none of them really spoke to the kind of consumers we were,” Shovel explains. “We wanted a product with the texture of meat – and felt like it wasn’t aimed just at vegans and vegetarians.”



We wanted a product with the texture of meat – and felt like it wasn’t aimed just at vegans and vegetarians.

ANDY SHOVEL,  
CO-FOUNDER, THIS™



“People told us we were mad to go for a mono-chrome colour scheme, but we felt it really cut through the noise,” Shovel says. “People have very well-established preconceptions about plant-based products, many of them negative, so we needed to address those right from the start.”

**A tone of voice based on humour and irreverence – rather than the more virtuous feel of some rival brands – was part of that strategy.**

“We set out to surprise people,” Shovel adds. Examples have included exercises such as a fake burger tasting competition in which food critics were asked to rate rival “beef burgers” before THIS™ revealed they were all plant-based.

It’s an approach that appears to have resonated with consumers from the start, as well as other groups of stakeholders. The company has raised millions from investors through crowdfunding and quickly gained shelf space in all of the leading supermarkets.

Today, THIS™ earns about 70% of revenues from consumer sales in retail outlets.

The remaining 30% of revenues come from a growing number of foodservice partners, including nationwide chains such as Greggs and Caffè Nero as well as many smaller restaurant businesses; all are using THIS™ products to meet the demand from their own customers for meat alternatives.

In fact, that 30% figure would be higher, believes Shovel, had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic. “We’re not in a position to complain because the pandemic was a real opportunity to connect with people taking more interest in food at home,” he explains. “But our food service business would have taken off much more quickly if so many of those customers had not been forced to close during the lockdowns.”

Still, that gives THIS™ an opportunity to target further growth in the months and years ahead. Building more partnerships with foodservice companies is an important part of the growth plan, though internationalisation, starting with Europe, is a key plank of the strategy too. Expanding the product range through further innovation will also be important, Shovel believes, with the supermarket freezer cabinets a clear target for THIS™ now it has such a strong presence in the chillers.

“We expect to become a household name,” he says. “We can become the one-stop-shop for plant-based foods.”

## Misfits

Misfits builds business with broader appeal



Misfits Health completely overhauled its brand and range of vegan protein bars in 2020 – and hasn't looked back since. "We represent the future of snacking," promises Henry Sether, co-founder and CEO of the company. "We take well-known treats and apply our Misfits formula – replacing sugar with protein, dairy with plants and bland with delicious."

Misfits has very deliberately sought to build a lifestyle brand, avoiding the approach taken by peers who specifically target gym goers or the health food market. "We feel massively passionate about making healthy snacks accessible and enjoyable to everyone," Sether explains.

The company's leading product is its range of chocolate protein bars, which replace the added sugar and dairy products in other snacks with healthier alternatives; the company sold seven million in 2021 alone.

Misfits regularly adds products to its range, "dropping" new bars to a community of customers who have become advocates for the brand. The company invests significantly in its community, with a team who spend time talking to customers and taking on board their feedback. Very high levels of engagement on social media channels such as Instagram have been a crucial ingredient in Misfits' rapid growth, Sether adds.

It's a strategy that appears to have paid off. Over Misfits' two most recent years of public trading, it delivered compound annual sales growth of 215%. This more than two-fold acceleration was enough to clinch second place in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings.

Until recently, the company has focused largely on eCommerce, with around 84% of sales coming from online channels – both its own direct-to-consumer site, but also through Amazon, where it is currently the top UK seller in the vegan protein bar category. More recently, however, Misfits has begun working with physical stores. "We recognise true scale lies in retail," adds Sether. Its products are already available in stores such as Sainsbury's, Asda and WH Smith, and a significant roll-out is planned with a national retailer in early 2023.

The company is ambitious for further expansion. The business continues to expand its product range, including a move into cereals unveiled in the spring of 2022. It is also focused on overseas sales – the company has shipped its product to almost 100 countries worldwide.

Indeed, internationalisation is now proceeding at pace, with a full-scale launch in the US in 2021. It's a huge market, Sether argues, with sales there already matching sales in the UK; so far, US customers have been served entirely online, but Misfits is planning a retail launch there too.

Misfits has also made a public commitment to sustainability, securing carbon neutral status in work with Climate Partner, which calculated and offset the company's total impact across all its operations.

+215%  
ANNUAL SALES  
GROWTH

## Absolute Collagen

Maxine Lacey co-founded and launched Absolute Collagen in 2017 with her daughter Darcy, convinced that the home-made beauty supplements she had created would have widespread appeal

+158%  
ANNUAL SALES  
GROWTH

The company sells a range of liquid collagen products to both men and women, promising beauty benefits such as healthier skin and hair.

Sales are predominantly online, with a direct-to-consumer website that saw huge traffic last year. That has helped the company deliver two-year compound annual sales growth of 158% up to the date of its most recent publicly-available reports and accounts – comfortably enough for it to take third place in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings.

From Lacey's kitchen table beginnings, the business has grown rapidly, with a strong focus on community and customer service. "We've always seen ourselves as more than just a product – our 'absoluters' are massively important to us," Lacey says of Absolute Collagen's community. "Each customer should feel valued and important."

After launching the business, Lacey very quickly worked out how to play to her strengths, with a focus on authenticity and relatability in her branding and tone of voice. "I was a 50-year-old woman with grey hair cooking up pig trotters in my kitchen," she says.

"When I look at our marketing, from the start we focused on everyday women."

The approach has paid off, with many of Absolute Collagen's customers becoming ambassadors for the brand – more than a third of new customers arrive by word of mouth, Lacey says – as well as advocates for one another.

A close-knit Facebook group, for example, is full of members offering support and advice to the rest of the group. "Our community is powerful because we come from the same place," Lacey says. "We speak to our Absoluters every single day about the issues they have."

Three years after Absolute Collagen's launch, the business took a minority investment from private equity firm Livingbridge in 2020. Lacey and her daughter Darcy continue to be actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the business, working closely with chief executive Frances Russell, who plans to take Absolute Collagen into new categories.

For Lacey, the investment provided additional capital to fund expansion plans, as well as "accountability and challenge" for the business's leadership team.



## M&A Highlights

A place in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 is a sure sign that a business is flourishing. Fast 50 constituents have a track record of reinventing product categories and of being highly responsive to consumers' needs making them sought-after acquisition targets

Brands with high levels of innovation and extremely strong, and genuine, consumer relationships tend to be attractive to large strategic trade players that struggle to replicate these characteristics in-house.

Six businesses from the 2021 ranking (12% of constituents) and ten businesses from the 2020 ranking (20% of constituents) have since been acquired by trade players. Of these 16 deals, 14 were acquired by international trade buyers.



## NORTH AMERICAN BUYERS

<p><b>%:</b> 53%</p> <p><b>A:</b> McCain</p> <p><b>L:</b> USA</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 33%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Mondelez</p> <p><b>L:</b> USA</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 51%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Saputo</p> <p><b>L:</b> Canada</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 29%</p> <p><b>A:</b> INW</p> <p><b>L:</b> USA</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 22%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Grupo Bimbo</p> <p><b>L:</b> Mexico</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 20%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Spectrum</p> <p><b>L:</b> USA</p>	

## EUROPEAN BUYERS

<p><b>%:</b> 59%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Sonae</p> <p><b>L:</b> Portugal</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 23%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Danone</p> <p><b>L:</b> France</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 43%</p> <p><b>A:</b> VAFO</p> <p><b>L:</b> Czech Republic</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 21%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Vibrant</p> <p><b>L:</b> UK</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 35%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Palacios</p> <p><b>L:</b> Spain</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 20%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Inspired Pet Nutrition</p> <p><b>L:</b> UK</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 34%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Nestlé</p> <p><b>L:</b> Switzerland</p>		<p><b>%:</b> 20%</p> <p><b>A:</b> The Frostkrone Food Group</p> <p><b>L:</b> Germany</p>	
<p><b>%:</b> 23%</p> <p><b>A:</b> Valeo Foods Group</p> <p><b>L:</b> Ireland</p>			

## ASIAN BUYERS

<p><b>%:</b> 27%</p> <p><b>A:</b> SATS</p> <p><b>L:</b> Singapore</p>	
---	--

**KEY**

% 2-year CAGR\*

A Acquirer

L Acquirer location

\*% IS TWO-YEAR CAGR AT THE TIME A COMPANY LAST FEATURED





## CASE STUDY

## Protein Works partners with YFM Equity Partners

Protein Works completed a management buy-out with the support of YFM Equity Partners in 2019, with the private equity business providing backing as the company sought to broaden its appeal. What started out as a sports nutrition venture has evolved into a broader health business. Sales have grown rapidly as a result, propelling the company into the upper echelons of this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings. Two-year compound annual sales growth rate of 43% secured thirteenth place in this year's ranking.

"Our goal now is to create the best shakes on the planet in the healthy living category," says co-founder and CEO Mark Coxhead. With the support of YFM Equity Partners, Protein Works is pursuing a number of growth strategies simultaneously.

It sees the potential to capitalise on the growing interest in health and wellness in both the UK and in international markets, and to shift further into lifestyle products.

"The key is to invest in innovation ahead of the curve so that we can be a leader in new areas with ground-breaking products," Coxhead says. Recent moves have included the launch of a savoury meal range and new breakfast options.

Working with a partner also enables Protein Works to confront challenges with more confidence. Coxhead warns that supply chain instability and raw commodity price inflation continue to be major issues. "We work with partners from around the world and it's harder than ever to keep supplies flowing," he says. "It helps that we do everything in-house, from ideation to fulfilment."



The key is to invest in innovation ahead of the curve so that we can be a leader in new areas with ground-breaking products.

**MARK COXHEAD,**  
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, PROTEIN WORKS

## CASE STUDY Inflexion backs Lintbells



Direct to consumer accounted for less than 5% of sales in 2018 but it is now close to 50%.

**FIONA HOPE**  
CEO, LINTBELLS

Inflexion invested in pet care business Lintbells – best known for its YuMOVE product – in 2018, leveraging its previous experience in the sector from investments in Medivet and Kynetex. The investor has worked closely with Lintbells to support its growing direct-to-consumer proposition and to enhance its digital presence.

"Direct to consumer accounted for less than 5% of sales in 2018 but it is now close to 50% says Fiona Hope, CEO of Lintbells, who joined the company shortly after Inflexion's investment. That growth story has been an important driver of the company's accelerated sales – and, therefore, its entry into this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 as the eleventh fast-growing business with compound annual sales growth of 52%.

Founded in 2006, Lintbells traditionally worked closely with vets, stressing the scientific research that underpins its product range. That science-based approach remains, but the company has more recently sought



to build a stronger brand that would also resonate with pet owners.

That work has included the company's first forays into TV advertising, through sponsorship of ITV's For the Love of Dogs, and a greater digital presence. The growing interest in health amongst consumers, which extends to their pets, has boosted the company, Hope adds.

"We believe in a multi-channel model," Hope says. "The direct-to-consumer business is growing fast, but our commitment is to ensure pets get the right support for their condition, therefore we offer higher strength products to the veterinary channel too." Indeed, consolidation in the veterinary market, including the rapid growth of companies such as Pets at Home, is a supportive factor.

The Fast 50's eleventh fastest-growing business with compound annual sales growth of **52%**



## The making of a challenger brand

The Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 is full of challenger brands taking on the established businesses in their sector. But what does it take to succeed as a challenger?



The challenger brands that succeed are those who understand who they are and why they want to be in the world.

**RICHARD TAYLOR,**  
FOUNDER, BRANDON CONSULTANTS

Many of the businesses in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 share the same characteristic: they are disruptive challenger brands that have gone out of their way to shake up product categories where new ideas have previously been in short supply. It's an attribute that has characterised many of the high flyers from our previous reports going back more than a decade – the likes of Innocent Drinks, BrewDog and Fever-Tree, for example.

For businesses hoping to emulate these brands' success, what does it take to disrupt and challenge? There's good news and bad, says Richard Taylor, the founder of Brandon Consultants, which specialises in helping businesses build brands that can drive growth.

"There is definitely a backlash against large corporate brands amongst consumers, particularly amongst the young; they are looking for something more artisanal and authentic," Taylor says. "But there has to be an idea that stands behind any challenger – a high-quality solution to a genuine problem."

In other words, good branding won't sell a poor product. The recipe box company Gousto – last year's top-placed company in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 and a top 10 performer this year – is a success because it has the perfect product for its demographic.

Relatively affluent customers short on time are happy to pay for Gousto's fresh ingredients and easy-to-follow recipes. Similarly, Charlie Bigham's, which has repeatedly featured in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50, honed in on consumers' concerns that the ready meal market was full of low-quality, unhealthy products.

"Our job as marketers is to help brands articulate their story in the most effective way possible, but there has to be a story in the first place," Taylor adds. "The challenger brands that succeed are those who understand who they are and why they want to be in the world."

For brands with that vision, the key is to express it in a way that resonates with potential customers. One common strategy is to define the proposition in terms of how it is different to what came before. "It helps if you have something to fight against," points out Taylor.

Sometimes, this strategy can be aggressive. BrewDog, for instance, has built its brand, in part at least, by being prepared to call out what it perceives to be the failings of its sector. Criticisms of established brewers as bland and characterless appear to have struck a chord with consumers.

In other cases, the challenge is more nuanced. THIS™, the top-ranked business in this year's Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 is a case in point. "It's the antithesis of previous products in its category," says Taylor, pointing out that THIS™ set out to create a meat-like product that carnivores would enjoy, rather than simply courting the vegan and vegetarian audience. "Everyone else was doing something different, so THIS™ has a more rebellious feel."

Distinctive packaging, advertising, marketing material and tone of voice can all add to this sense of difference. In THIS™'s case, for example, the company very deliberately operates with a monochrome colour scheme; it stands out in a sector where green is the dominant colour because brands feel it plays to their plant-based, natural attributes.

One common strategy is to build the brand around an individual. People, after all, relate to people – and particularly to an underdog perceived as standing up to the establishment or a larger organisation.

Charlie Bigham's is one example of this idea; Gousto's use of Joe Wicks is based on a similar rationale.

It also helps if brands win sufficient support to give themselves an almost self-sustaining momentum.

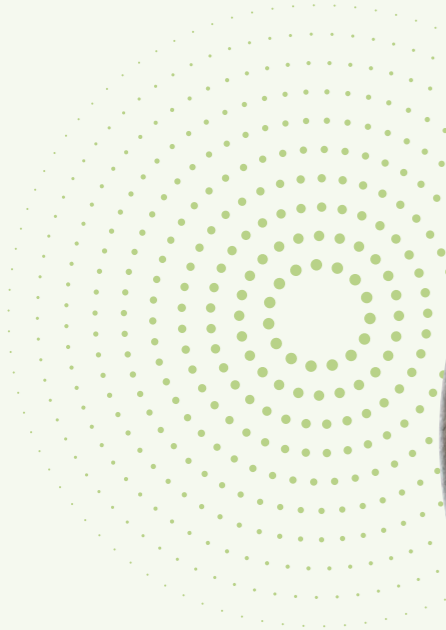
**Many challenger brands in the sector are working hard to create communities of customers who effectively operate as brand ambassadors, building noise around the company independently of its own efforts.**

This has worked well for businesses such as Huel, another regular in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50, whose customers engage with one another on social media, sharing tips and advice about how to use the product.

The most successful challenger brands have grown very rapidly using such tactics, but the key is to avoid complacency, Taylor warns. "You do need continuous improvement of the user experience," he says. "Your product becomes a lifestyle choice, but you have to keep giving customers new reasons to make that choice, rather than taking them for granted."

Indeed, the danger for challenger brands is they eventually grow to such a size and market position that they themselves are open to challenge from newcomers with even fresher ideas. It's a problem many brands would happily have, of course, but must be confronted nonetheless.





**CASE STUDY**  
Sauce Shop

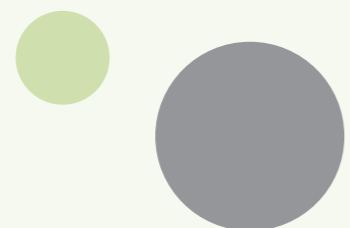
Sauce Shop, founded by husband-and-wife team James and Pam Digva in 2014 to sell distinctive sauces such as ketchups and mayonnaise, is a classic example of a business causing a stir in a sector where innovation was previously absent. From the start, the Digvas deliberately set out to differentiate themselves from industry giants such as Heinz.

“We were inspired by examples such as BrewDog,” recalls Pam. “We had a great product that genuinely excited people who had only ever tasted the incumbents’ sauces, so we had the confidence to be a bit cheeky and rebellious.”

There’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance, she adds, but the key is to listen as well as to be loud. “We have set out to be disruptive, but we make a huge effort on social media channels to listen to what people are saying and to respond.”

It helps if the product stands out. Sauce Shop’s marketing and packaging is deliberately stripped back to emphasise its different approach to that of larger rivals. Its black labelling is prominent on aisles dominated by the red of Heinz and the blue of Hellmann’s.

It’s an approach that has delivered consistent growth over the past eight years, with sales growing online, via supermarkets and also in the foodservice market. In the two most recent years for which performance data is available, Sauce Shop delivered annualised sales growth of 98% – enough to net it fifth place in this year’s Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings.



“We had a great product that genuinely excited people who had only ever tasted the incumbents’ sauces, so we had the confidence to be a bit cheeky and rebellious.”

**PAM DIGVA,**  
CO-FOUNDER, SAUCE SHOP

**CASE STUDY**  
The Tofoo Co

The Tofoo Co, which handmakes tofu at its factory in Malton, North Yorkshire, got an unexpected boost in the autumn of 2022 when under-fire Home Secretary Suella Braverman criticised her opponents as the “tofu-eating wokerati”. The Tofoo Co’s customers took to the airwaves and newspaper letters pages to extol the virtues of a widely misunderstood product.

For David Knibbs, who launched the brand in 2015, challenging people’s assumptions has been the mission from the start. That began with the development of a product widely acclaimed as different and better-tasting than anything else in the sector – blind tastings with supermarkets proved the case – and has continued ever since in the company’s messaging.

“We felt we needed the brand to shout,” says Knibbs. “We went for a bold branding and a blue colour scheme with our Shelf Ready

Packaging when everyone else in the sector had used orange and brown. We went big from the start.”

The company also worked hard to build a story for the product, publishing recipe cards to give people ideas about how to use tofu more imaginatively and maintaining a strong presence on social media channels. “We were ahead of the curve as more people moved towards vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, so we had to build that momentum for ourselves,” Knibbs says.

The strategy has paid off, with sales growing ever more rapidly since those early days. In the last two years for which performance data is publicly available, The Tofoo Co delivered annualised sales growth of 54%, comfortably clinching a top 10 place in this year’s Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 rankings.

“We were ahead of the curve as more people moved towards vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, so we had to build that momentum for ourselves.”

**DAVID KNIBBS,**  
FOUNDER, THE TOFOO CO

The Tofoo Co delivered annualised sales growth of 54%





RANK  
01

THIS™

2-YEAR CAGR

246%

Plant-based meat-alternatives



RANK  
02

Misfits

2-YEAR CAGR

215%

Vegan functional foods



RANK  
03

Absolute Collagen

2-YEAR CAGR

158%

Collagen supplements

# The fastest-growing food & beverage companies

## Food & Beverage Fast 50 methodology

The Fast 50 ranks the fastest-growing privately-owned food & beverage businesses in the UK by compound annual sales growth rate (CAGR) over a two-year period.

## Qualification criteria and research approach

To qualify, companies needed to have sales exceeding £4m in the last available year. Companies needed to have three consecutive years of accounts available and needed to be registered in the UK as independent and unquoted. Abbreviated accounts at Companies House were excluded unless permission was otherwise authorised. Companies that have any shares or other financial instruments listed on a stock exchange, or where their shares are held by any unquoted, quoted UK or overseas company, did not qualify for inclusion.

### KEY

00 Rank

% 2-year CAGR

C Company

A Activity

## KEY

00 Rank

% 2-year CAGR

C Company

A Activity

## The Fast 50

04	118%	C Dash Water A Fruit infused water
05	98%	C Sauce Shop A Sauces and spices
06	95%	C Gousto A D2C meal kits
07	91%	C Little Moons A Mochi ice cream
08	55%	C McQueens Dairies A Milk
09	54%	C The Tofoo Co A Organic tofu
10	54%	C Love,Corn A Roasted corn snacks
11	52%	C Lintbells A Pet health supplements
12	47%	C Bird & Blend A Tea mixologists
13	43%	C Protein Works A D2C functional foods
14	43%	C Huel A D2C functional foods

15	41%	C Glasgow Whisky A Whisky distiller
16	41%	C Veetee Foods A Rice manufacturer
17	39%	C Mister Freed A Gluten-free, vegan tortilla chips
18	36%	C The Glenallachie Distillers A Whisky distiller
19	36%	C Crust & Crumb Bakery A Frozen commercial and gluten-free dough-based products
20	34%	C Northern Monk Brewery A Wine and spirits company
21	34%	C Moju A Health drinks
22	34%	C Bulk Powders A D2C functional foods
23	33%	C The Real Petfood Company A Pet treats
24	32%	C Nutrition Group A Manufacturer of vitamins, minerals and supplements
25	32%	C Snaffling Pig A Pork scratchings and pork-based snacks

26	30%	C Cawingredients A Soft drinks manufacturer
27	30%	C Fullgreen A Plant-based meals
28	27%	C Bright Blue Foods A Manufacturer of ambient cake and chilled desserts
29	27%	C Seafood Products A Fresh and frozen fish supplier
30	27%	C Food Innovations A Home baking products
31	26%	C Parkacre Holdings A Manufacturer of vitamins, minerals and supplements
32	26%	C The Lakes Free Range Egg Company A Organic free range eggs
33	25%	C Lintz Hall Farm A Egg farming
34	25%	C Fieldfare A Frozen convenience foods
35	25%	C Signature Flatbreads A Flatbreads and morning goods
36	24%	C The Real Yorkshire Pudding Company A Yorkshire puddings
37	24%	C Copernus A Chilled fish supplier
38	24%	C Summit Foods A Manufacturer of chilled sandwiches and frozen snacks

39	24%	C G.H. Sheldon Wholesale Bakers A Baked products
40	24%	C AIB Foods A Ethnic foods
41	24%	C The Coconut Collaborative A Plant-based yogurts and puddings
42	24%	C Supreme Petfoods A Pet food products
43	22%	C Charlie Bigham's A Chilled prepared meals
44	22%	C Shire Foods A Pies, pasties and sausage rolls
45	22%	C Kendal Nutricare A Early life nutritional products and speciality formulas
46	22%	C St Pierre A Baked products
47	21%	C Daylesford Organic A Organic farming
48	19%	C Brothers Drinks A Cider producer
49	19%	C Wenzel's The Bakers A Baked products
50	17%	C Rain Nutrience A Manufacturer of vitamins, minerals and supplements

# The Food & Beverage Fast 50 in perspective

This year's entrants have delivered remarkable growth. How does the ranking compare to the most recent Fast 50s?

36%

### Average growth rate

The average growth rate of Fast 50 companies was 36% in 2022, a higher growth rate than the previous three years.

## 2022 Key statistics

167%

### Top 5 growth

Winners are growing at a much faster rate, demonstrating how quickly brands that capture consumer demand and loyalty can scale. The top five companies grew at an impressive 167% in 2022.

246%

### Highest growth

While growth rates are higher than previous years, companies are much smaller. This explains the especially fast growth rates. The top ranked company, THIS™, grew sales by an average 246% a year, the highest growth rate in the history of the Food & Beverage Fast 50, from £981,000 in 2019 to £11.8m in 2021.

£315m

### Highest sales

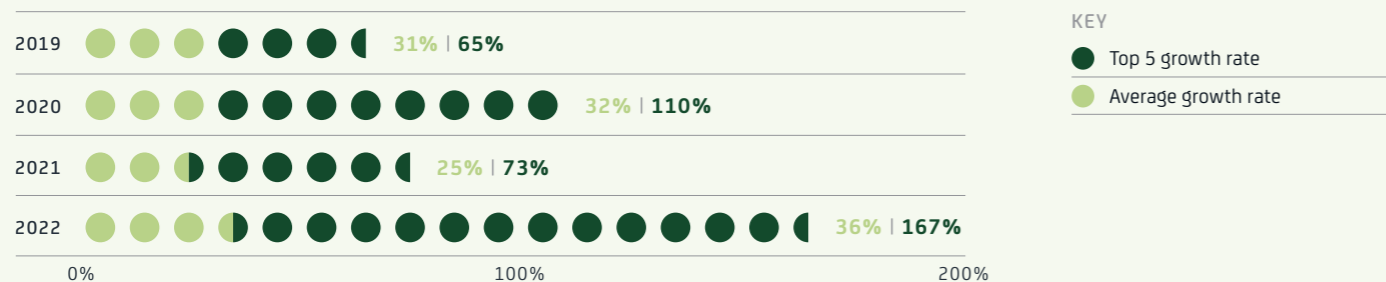
Meal kits and home delivery specialist Gousto (ranked 6<sup>th</sup>) reported the highest sales at £315m. Gousto was the fastest-growing business in the 2021 Food & Beverage Fast 50. Seven of this year's cohort had sales of more than £100m in their latest year.

33

### More new entrants

All of this year's top 5 are new entrants to the ranking. Just 17 businesses also appeared in the previous year's ranking. In the prior two Fast 50s, 23 and 26 businesses made follow-on appearances.

## Growth in sales

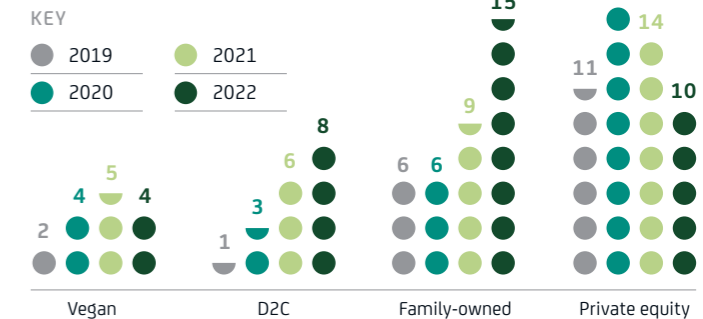


## Growth vs size



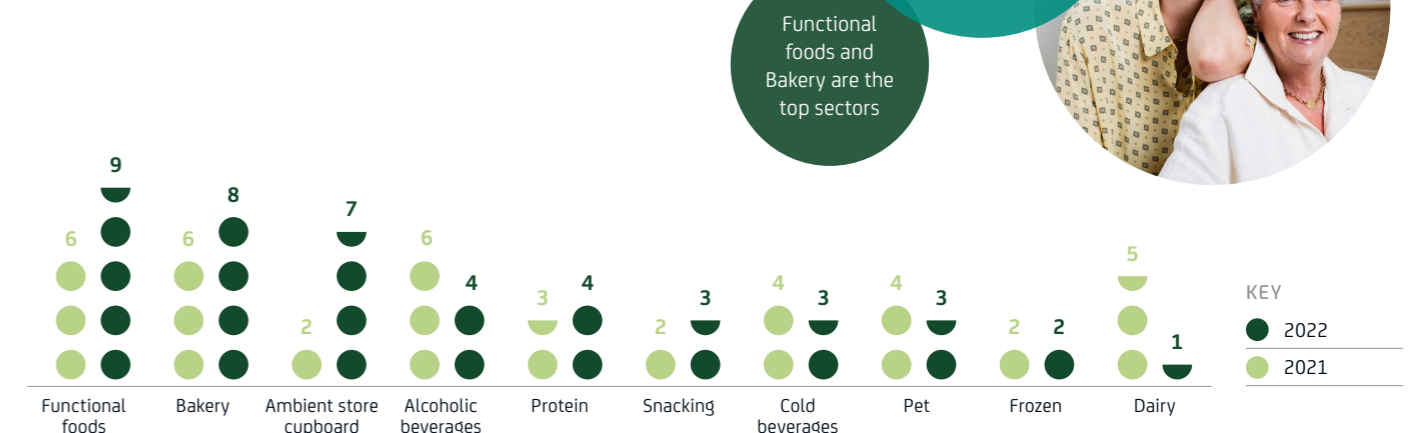
## Key trends

- This year's Fast 50 has the highest number of family-owned businesses (15).
- Ten businesses have equity investment from PE, the lowest number in recent years. PE is supporting businesses across a range of sub-sectors.
- The direct-to-consumer trend is accelerating and establishing a direct relationship with consumers is an essential part of a proposition for many brands. From just one business four years ago, there are now eight D2C businesses in the Fast 50.



## Sector breakdown

The majority of businesses in the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 came from one of ten key subsectors. Functional foods dominate this year's ranking with a record nine businesses, including young brands like Misfits and Absolute Collagen alongside more established players such as Kendal Nutricare, Protein Works, Huel and Bulk Powders.



# Alantra's Food & Beverage sector coverage

We bring together strategic trade acquirers and financial investors with business owners and management teams looking to create and realise value. We have completed c.60 food & beverage transactions over the last five years, with enterprise values up to £600m.

## Selected Food & Beverage deals advised by Alantra

 <p><b>Herb &amp; Juvella</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY VENTURES PLC</p>	 <p><b>Illy</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY gruppo illy</p>	 <p><b>STRONG ROOTS</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY GOODE PARTNERS</p>	 <p><b>WALSH WHISKEY</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY AMBER BEVERAGE GROUP</p>
 <p><b>absolute collagen</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY LIVINGBRIDGE</p>	 <p><b>PERMIRA</b> BUY-SIDE ADVISORY HANAGROUP</p>	 <p><b>MONTEZUMA'S</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY Inverleith LLP</p>	 <p><b>BULLDOG LONDON DRY GIN</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY CAMPARI GROUP</p>
 <p><b>MUTTI</b> BUY-SIDE ADVISORY Verinvest</p>	 <p><b>FRUSEL</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY Ocealia, menguy's</p>	 <p><b>CHR HANSEN</b> BUY-SIDE ADVISORY UAS Labs</p>	 <p><b>BEE HEALTH</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY INW</p>
 <p><b>Aakamp</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY FARMACEUTICI PROCESMA</p>	 <p><b>FSN CAPITAL</b> BUY-SIDE ADVISORY Gortz</p>	 <p><b>ARES FRIAL</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY GROUPE LE DUFF</p>	 <p><b>GS CAPSULE MEIRUA GROUP</b> SELL-SIDE ADVISORY Advent International</p>

# Senior Food & Beverage team



**Charles Lanceley**  
Managing Director,  
Head of UK Food  
& Beverage

charles.lanceley@alantra.com



**Jeffrey Robards**  
Global Head of Food  
& Beverage

jeffrey.robards@alantra.com



**Oriane Durvye**  
Managing Partner,  
Food & Beverage

oriane.durvye@alantra.com



**Iñigo Mateache**  
Partner, Consumer

inigo.mateache@alantra.com



**Christopher Jobst**  
Partner, Consumer

christopher.jobst@alantra.com



### ALANTRA

Alantra is a global investment banking, alternative asset management and credit portfolio advisory firm focusing on the mid-market with offices across Europe, the US, Latin America and Asia.

### FULL ADVISORY SERVICE

Alantra advises business owners, management teams and financial investors on:

- M&A transactions
- Private equity
- Equity capital markets
- Debt capital markets

### GLOBAL REACH

Our team of 450 corporate finance professionals are present in over 20 countries:

- Advised on over 1,500 deals worth more than €220bn
- Over 50% of our deals are cross-border
- Quoted partnership with over 100 partners leading deals

### SECTOR EXPERTISE

Deep coverage of chosen niches:

- Over 500 business sold to strategic trade acquirers
- Cross-border relationships with strategic acquirers and capital providers

### CONTACT US

If you would like to discuss the Alantra Food & Beverage Fast 50 or would like to feature in next year's report, please contact Charles Lanceley (charles.lanceley@alantra.com).

---

# ALANTRA

Possibility is in the ascent

Argentina

Austria & CEE

Belgium

Brazil

Chile

China

Colombia

Denmark

France

Germany

Greece

Hong Kong

Ireland

Italy

Netherlands

Portugal

Spain

Sweden

Switzerland

UAE

United Kingdom

United States

---

Alantra Corporate Finance LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England & Wales (registered number OC306421).  
Registered Office: Bank House, 8 Cherry Street, Birmingham, B2 5AL.

Alantra Corporate Finance LLP is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (number 478406)

© Alantra Corporate Finance LLP 2023

[alantra.com](https://alantra.com)

---