

Transcript – Food and drink in the Highlands

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speaker: John Murray

Alana MacLeod: 0:17

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. In this episode we'll be talking about the importance of the food and drink sector in the Highlands and Islands for career opportunities, and for regional economic development. I'm Alana MacLeod and today I'm joined by John Murray, founder of the Highland Food and Drink Club.

I know you've had a very interesting career story. I wonder if you would share with us how you got to where you are today.

John Murray: 0:42

Hi Good Morning Alana, and thank you for asking me along today. Well I wasn't maybe the best in school so I left school and I went on and served my time as a mechanic, and after I did that there was no jobs after I served my apprenticeship and I ended up by default into the family company which was a wholesale fruit and vegetable company delivering to restaurants and chip shops and cafes and hotels, etc. And we would buy fruit, vegetables, from the Glasgow fruit market and come up and resell them, and we would also buy from farms and deliver animal feeds to the farms, and we'd actually move fish for another contractor down to Hull and Grimsby. Yes, so I've been in the food sector quite a wee while but latterly, I ended up running a chain of a convenience stores for myself, so I grew from one shop to nine. I had 95 staff, and they were based from Caithness to Keith, down to Aviemore, and everywhere in between, they were Spar shops. So I bought and sold some more, and I ended up owning 15 shops overall, and I sold them. I then didn't do very much for a wee while, and I latterly worked for Scotland Food and Drink for two years. And I decided that I really wanted to go on and try and pursue my dream of a putting together a regional food group for the Highlands.

Alana MacLeod: 2:06

Brilliant, you're certainly well qualified for what you're doing now then. So the Highland Food and Drink club, it's a new organisation aimed at businesses in the Highlands and Islands, to connect to promote Highland Food and Drink as one. How does it work? Why is it so important?

John Murray: 2:22

Well, the Highland Food and Drink Club as I said, is in essence to be a regional food group. And that's a farm to fork organisation. It's really showcasing and highlighting the quality of goods that we have in the Highlands, and helping companies grow and connect to local outlets, you know, help them develop their offer, and really a celebration of the quality that we have and it's really looking towards to be a kind of single entry point for food and drink in the Highlands, working collaboratively with HIE, Scotland Food and Drink. Scotland Food and Drink have got a number of strategies, skills is certainly a pillar within every one of them actually. And you know they've got an ambition which is

ambition 2030 to grow their sector to 30 billion by 2030. We're currently all at, nearly 15 billion so we're halfway there. COVID will obviously have changed that but equally it's offered some opportunities.

Alana MacLeod: 3:18

That's something that we're really aware of at the university as well is that although there's challenges at the moment there's a lot of opportunities to come for this, so the focus then of the club is on promotion and collaboration, growth and opportunity. What type of careers might be available for students or graduates, you know, now and into the future?

John Murray: 3:37

I think I touched on there lightly about COVID and whilst, yes, it's got some concern for sectors like the hospitality and tourism. It's also opened up opportunities on online selling in local supply chain etc but, you know, if we look at this as a food and drink sector throughout the whole of Scotland, and wider UK and world and, you know, I think that people generally will cook food, or serve food, and that's what they think about food and drink generally. But really, there's so many - there's supply chain, there's the engineering side of it, there's e commerce so there's the computing side of it. There's just so many different angles, I mean everybody's involved in food and drink. We all eat it and drink it. Marketing...the list could go on it's just endless, and it's an exciting sector to be in and most people that are in it are very passionate about it.

Alana MacLeod: 4:29

Absolutely and I suppose as well, there's opportunities for full time work, graduate work but also for casual work as well and seasonal work too, so it's an exciting sector to be to be involved in. So, I mean, it's quite hard because there is such a range of different jobs you could be doing in the sector but which key skills, would you say are needed to work in the food and drink sector? You know maybe thinking about as well as specialist skills, the softer skills too.

John Murray: 04:56

I think, passion and interest in it are fundamental, you know not all jobs and production jobs etc. then maybe less so, but I think that the passion and the interest in the sector would carry most people through, and you will find that you know that it is a community within the community. Scotland's not a big country and you know when you're in the sector, you know it does really become a bit of a food and drink community so the softer skills, definitely. And I think that working in hospitality, working in retail, serving etc. You know, and as I said earlier that was a large part of my life. Don't under value the skills of being able to communicate with people and connect with people, because these skills will carry you forward, no matter if you're the chief exec of Tesco or the Royal Bank of Scotland, etc, These skills, you'll look back and go, I learned that serving up food in that café.

Alana MacLeod: 5:53

So, I mean, in looking at changes in the way that that people approach tourism really, how have trends like food tourism and agri tourism and the prominence of the NC 500, affected food and drink businesses, in creating opportunities but also maybe posing challenges as well?

John Murray: 6:11

I think it will. The challenge is the movement of people in the communities that in the Highlands how they're going to react to tourism coming back, that's going to be a challenge but you know I think that all the organisations and groups are really working well together and collaboration has been fast forwarded, you know it's been much, much better in over the whole piece of COVID. I think that the trends agritourism – there's an example, if you look at Go Rural. Go Rural has for a little while struggled to get a bit of traction but now through COVID if you check it out on Facebook, they're doing foreign tours all throughout Scotland and they're getting a worldwide audience actually looking at it and that then leads the tourists to go do you know what, we'll go to the Highlands and we'll go and we'll have that experience, so I think the opportunities are within experiences you know I think it's about the storytelling. And that's where your people skills come in, your knowledge of the area, and we've got such a great brand in that we've got the hills, the water, the clean air, and that's what we're perceived as being so we can welcome tourists, and that's why they want to come and see us and the opportunity is definitely in trying to slow down tourism, keep them here for a bit longer, and make them aware of the opportunities that we have in all the different products. So for example you've got distillers now over the last little while, they've got gin schools so they're able to offer an experience. You know the storytelling of how the gin's made, you get the fun of making it and even more drinking it. So, yeah, I think it's all about really showcasing, and that's part of what we hope to help in that process is celebrating.

Alana MacLeod: 7:43

And that takes all sorts doesn't it? It takes your marketeers, your HR people, your front of house staff, cooks, manufacturers.

John Murray: 07:51

Digital within this is an opportunity, we've all adapted to digital much more, so you know I think that opportunities for apps and bloc chain, and Google it if you've never heard of it, but you know there's lots of exciting opportunities within the digital space as well, you know?

Alana MacLeod: 08:07

Yeah, There are some exciting times ahead I think. So, in terms of the Highland Food and Drink Club and its members, you've got lots of members don't you, what's next, what are the next steps?

John Murray: 08:17

I think now it's down to myself really to get my head together, obviously COVID has been a roller coaster for everyone and that doesn't exclude me, and I think now it's about almost putting myself in a cupboard and really getting my head in line and making use of all these fantastic connections that I've got, because I've got a number and have made even more throughout COVID, and really it's about just me getting the offer right, clarifying what the offer is to the members, potential members, and moving forward together so we've got an exciting sponsorship announcement that will come out in the next week. That's going to be quite exciting and yeah really the partnerships that have been formed, even with yourselves with the skills talking about taking everybody together, Skills Development Scotland, Food and Drink Federation, Scotland Food and Drink, etc. I think there's exciting times ahead for that too, you know it's like, getting the journey for the young team to make it easier and clarified and to promote the sector to them as something that they might now want to do and they never considered before.

Alana MacLeod: 09:20

Yeah, it's the sector collaboration piece and also the pipeline that will feed the sector in the future, isn't it? So, my last question for you is, we've talked about what types of jobs might be available. Why should students and graduates consider a career in the food and drink sector in the Highlands and Islands, what makes it so special? I mean we mentioned you know we really do have a unique selling point, don't we?

John Murray: 09:42

We certainly do, but before I go on to that, everybody remember we have to eat. Everybody has to eat, and we have to drink, where we choose to do that and what we choose to eat and drink, that's a choice, but we have to eat and drink. So in terms of the sector, it's probably one of the most robust sectors, because it's not a choice that we eat and drink and the exciting part is the whole emphasis on local and shortened supply chains, I mean logistics is a part of that, you know the planning, etc. So, the emphasis on local has been fast forwarded and I think in many ways, it's an exciting time to get into the sector because you know look at the long term, look at the technologies. We can shape, a lot of different and exciting things, food hubs, micro breweries, distilling and there's things out there that we don't even know exist yet. You guys could be helping create and formulate and put all these things together. Is there not a stat that a lot of the primary school kids now, their jobs that they will do, don't even exist today.

Alana MacLeod: 10:45

Yeah, and these guys they'll be the innovation champions and they'll be coming up with the new ideas that help to boost the economy in these sectors too.

John Murray: 10:54

Innovation, you know I touched on that and I wrongly put that in the box that that was like a scientist with a white coat on and was something that was too far away from me but innovation is such a wide spread word so guys you're all innovators, you know, get on and grab the opportunities.

Alana MacLeod: 11:12

Yeah, absolutely. So John, is there anything else you think it's important for our students and graduates and staff as well who are listening to this podcast, to know or to think about and consider, when it comes to food and drink in the Highlands and Islands and in Scotland.

John Murray: 11:27

I would just say, take a little step back, be a bit considered about what you buy, and what you eat, think about the local economy, because when you buy local, I believe there's a stat that for every pound spent local and a local business delivers something like £2.21 to the local economy. So, it's not all about, buying the cheapest. It's all about affordability too I get that. But, you know, just be a little bit considered about the next beer or biscuit or cake that you buy and enjoy the quality and think how did it get to me? Who put that label on there? who made the formula to create it? So, there's so many elements who sold it? How much margin did they make? There's so many elements so yes you're eating and drinking, enjoy it, but think about it. It might make you think do you know what, I could help with this.

Alana MacLeod: 12:15

Yeah. okay, John and thank you so much. Thank you all for listening. Just a quick reminder that after you complete your qualification at UHI you are a graduate for life. This means that you can access careers and employability advice and guidance at any point, students and graduates can get in touch via the Future Me system targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk so visit the website for more information.