

Case study



Small producer, big opportunities

The Transylvania food company and its journey to BRCGS Standards

Always committed to high standards in food safety, The Transylvania Food Company in central Romania first engaged with BRCGS Standards in 2010. Adapting to new process requirements involved numerous challenges, but now the small, artisan producer has a robust framework in place and is punching above its weight in the market.

The Transylvania Food Company (TFC) specialises in the production of artisan cordials and sweet and savoury preserves. Based in Saschiz, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in central Romania, TFC combines local ingredients with traditional recipes, producing in small batches and slow cooking to ensure their handmade products are full of flavour.

TFC adheres to a traditional way of working – in fact, the company’s brand name, Pivnița Bunicii, means “grandma’s cellar or pantry”, as Jim Turnbull, CEO at TFC, explains:

“Our products are based on traditional Romanian recipes – the rich, flavoursome jams and juices like your grandmother used to make. To preserve them, in the days before electricity she would have stored them in her cool cellar – and that’s how we got our brand name.”

TFC also bottles several types of honey, which is collected from the surrounding wildflower-rich grasslands and produced by local beekeepers. On a larger scale, TFC produces raw acacia blossom and elderflower juices, which it sends to the UK for further processing by food and drink manufacturers.

Blending with the landscape

The Tarnava Mare area, where the TFC production facilities are based, is one of Europe’s most important natural and cultural landscapes. The region’s grasslands and fields have been shaped by hundreds of years of good husbandry, with ancient oak, hornbeam and beech forests, and an abundance of fertile meadows and pastures, supporting an astonishing range of biodiversity. Traditional farming is still practised here in ecological balance with

nature, and many of the local farming communities are entirely self-sufficient in their production of fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy.

TFC has worked hard to ensure that its facilities blend with, and do not disturb, the architectural landscape of Tarnava Mare. Externally, the company’s buildings merge seamlessly with the surrounding fields and grasslands, while internally state-of-the-art building design and equipment ensures thermal efficiency and flexible food processing capabilities. Overall, TFC maintains a unique balance of traditional skills and modern production controls to deliver consistent, handmade products that are healthy, safe and delicious.

Sustainable enterprise development

Registered in Romania in 2010, TFC is a social enterprise wholly committed to sustainable business development. It is owned by the Food Development Company Ltd (FDC), whose founding objective is to promote socially responsible investment in small scale enterprises that have limited supply chains, are commercially viable, ethical and sustainable.

TFC fits FDC’s investment criteria through the social, economic and environment benefits it delivers at a local level. Employing seven full-time staff, three part-time staff, and a rota of seasonal workers, TFC has a major positive impact on the local community. Indeed, over 1,500 of the poorest local people (approximately 50% women and children), pick the fruit and wildflowers for TFC’s juices, in some cases securing their only income for the year through the TFC harvest. In addition, TFC helps to enhance local skills and knowledge through employee training and development. Its focus on standards also creates increased capacity for compliance with health and safety legislation and other regulatory requirements, leading to long-term enterprise sustainability within the region.



certificated 2015

artisan food & drink

Economically, TFC helps to stimulate local supply chains. It also generates increased trade for local hotels, shops and restaurants through eco-tourism, delivering a much-needed boost to the local economy as a whole. Environmentally, meanwhile, it promotes sustainable wild harvesting, based on annual environmental impact assessments. The company's operations also actively engage local people in landscape conservation and biodiversity protection, while the recycling of by-products for on-farm compost returns vital nutrients to the soil.

TFC and BRCGS Standards certification process

When it first opened for business in 2010, TFC's processes and product control were HACCP-based. The company was always firmly committed to rigorous standards in health and hygiene, and took a systematic preventive approach to food safety, looking to safeguard against all biological, chemical, and physical hazards within its production processes.

However, the management team was aware there were more advanced certification schemes out there, as Jim Turnbull explains: "We always had an eye on BRCGS Standards, but due to lack of local knowledge and skills in this area we weren't really ready at first. A major UK client started to audit us annually against the BRCGS Standards for Food Safety Issue 6 and provided valuable assistance and training. This took us firmly in the direction of BRCGS Standards certification, and eventually in 2014 we signed up for the Enrolment Programme."

The engagement with BRCGS Standard for Food Safety Issue 6 presented a number of challenges to the TFC team. Not least, the legacy of Communism in Romania meant that achieving the requisite shift in employee mindset was a major undertaking: "During Communism, there were restrictions on sharing information, debating, problem-solving and doing things differently. And initially, our staff really struggled to embrace the in-house training and process changes involved. What's more, many of our production staff didn't have running water, let alone hot water, at home, so handwashing and general cleaning was a challenge.

Added to that, highly restrictive and punitive Romanian bureaucracy made it difficult for us to move forward. The authorities would audit us at least once a year, but mostly to impose fines for non-compliance, certainly not to provide help or advice on how to improve. So, the initial perception among our staff was that our systems were being developed to avoid financial penalties."

Time, effort and understanding

At first, Jim Turnbull also wondered if he and his team had taken on too much – the documentation and sheer volume of work involved seemed overwhelming. But over time, he was able to engage his people with the new processes and principles and immerse himself in the certification requirements:

"It took a lot of time and effort, but we are now at a point where our staff at last understand the need to be audit-ready every day and that BRCGS Standards is not going away – perhaps the mindset has indeed changed. We are trying to introduce a systems-based approach to every aspect of management, and the more I've got involved with the standard the more I appreciate

the logic and framework it provides. In addition, BRCGS Standards has given us a structure on which to build common sense controls and a framework for staff training, while the evidence we have to produce has helped us greatly with the Romanian authorities."

Armed with new systems, outlook and knowledge, TFC progressed through BRCGS Standards Enrolment and transitioned to the BRCGS Standards Global Markets Programme, passing their first audit in December 2015, and the second annual audit in December 2016. And while it has been a long and demanding process, the benefits, according to Diana Cristea, TFC's Finance Manager, have been immeasurable:

"BRCGS Standards has given us the control over products and processes that aligns with the International Financial Accounting Standard, which has greatly enhanced our financial transparency and accountability. The Romanian authorities no longer arrive for inspections determined to identify infringements and impose fines; instead, we have professional discussions with them based on evidence and process evaluation.

But better still, through BRCGS Standards we have opened the door to discussions about our products with larger customers, and we are now supplying two major supermarket chains. We've also been able to simplify our first export to Canada, and we're attracting a lot more interest from Romanian consumers who are becoming more aware of food safety issues."



Looking ahead with confidence

Following their first two successful audits, TFC are now looking to transition to the full BRCGS Standard for Food Safety. According to Sandor Doczi, Production Manager, the company will also increase communications around its new certification credentials, looking to target larger customers around the world:

"BRC Global Standards is essential to the medium and long-term sustainability of TFC. As food safety and security gain traction, we think this will be a great calling card for us internationally. What's really important to note, for other smaller companies out there, is that BRCGS Standards is not just for large producers – it really works for artisan producers as well. Food safety is the key to a sustainable future, whether you're a global multinational or a small local outfit.

Of course, you need determination to succeed, and you need to be prepared to put in a lot of hard work. But the benefits are very real and potentially transformational. We may be small, but now, thanks to BRCGS Standards, we have big opportunities ahead of us."