



## Tacon's drive for fresh and local

From the world of engineering to the fast-moving food industry via zinc die and bricks, Christine Tacon has been there and done that. In a revealing interview with FPJ, the MD of The Co-operative Farms lifts the lid on the extent of her task to sort out The Co-operative's farming operations, her thoughts on supermarket-supplier relations and the importance of marketing for food producers. *See Interview, page 16.* ■

# Life in the fast lane

A racing driver, a chartered engineer, an amateur grower and a mother of two, Christine Tacon has turned around The Co-operative Farms and made the role her own. Anna Sbuttoni met her to talk marketing, multiple retailing and Morris Minors

It was an exhilarating moment when Christine Tacon and her sister Joy sped over the finish line in the Rallye des Princesses classic car race from Paris to Monaco in their 1956 split screen convertible Morris Minor.

The pair had spent five days in the front seat on a course that tests 75 female drivers and their co-pilots to navigate the 1,750km route across some of the most beautiful parts of rural France.

It was their first time and they were up against Ferraris, Porches, Austin Healeys and Morgans with their own 1098cc engine, but the sisters came back with trophies for first in the pre-1967 class and seventh overall.

"We are both very competitive, but it was great fun," says Tacon. "I wish my father were alive to see it. He would be so proud."

Fast forward a week, and the managing director of The Co-operative Farms is showing that same determination as she outlines her vision for a business that has changed almost beyond recognition since she joined 11 years ago.

The latest shift happened when The Co-operative Farms became part of the group's food business in September and Tacon is set on making the production arm something of a secret weapon in a cut-throat retail market. She now sits on the food executive board in a strategic role and is working to bring the production arm closer to the retail business.

"I suspect that we are probably the only retail business that is getting farming input to every board meeting," says Tacon. "I can sit in and listen to their problems, I listen to their supply

chain issues and I have access to their waste data – it's shocking how much food is wasted either in the field or in the supply chain, and the degree to which the supply chain has developed into all these bits that don't talk to each other.

"It's really about trying to break down all the barriers," she reasons. "My guys are now on the buying floor instead of having to ask permission to go there, chatting to the buyers over tea and in the loo. Now we can have frank discussions about what we are all doing.

"If a retailer asks you do something, most suppliers say yes and think about how to do it afterwards," she continues. "But if a retailer is asking you to do something that is going to cause a problem down the line or is going to increase costs, or it could be a brand new buyer who doesn't know what he's doing – if you keep saying yes and giving them what they want, that's not a good way of working efficiently. I see the opportunity and we are already seeing dividends right across the board."

It's fair to say that Tacon would probably never have predicted that she would end up shaping the future of one of the top's UK retailers. A chartered engineer, she turned down a job at Mars after university and worked in zinc die casting for three years, "making little bits for cars and spark plug caps and things like that". She then started an MBA at Cranfield University and realised that she was not learning at the pace she wanted to, so she took up the offer from Mars and worked in production planning for 18 months before moving into

marketing, where she stayed for five years. She worked on one of the bids for the National Lottery with Vodafone, before becoming marketing director at brick manufacturer Redland Brick, where she combined marketing and engineering. Her career in food picked up again at dairy brand Anchor, where she was marketing and then also sales director.

"I went from rectangular chocolate to rectangular bricks to rectangular butter," she says. "I was recruited from there to sort out The Co-op's farming business, which they reckoned just needed a bit of a marketing touch to it – which, of course, was complete bullshit; it was in a real mess and it was losing money.

"I still proudly claim not to be a farmer," she insists. "I think it's much better to try to guide the farmers in what they are doing and try to inspire them to think in different ways. I am most proud of the fact that every single person in our farming business, whether it's through our Farm to Fork educational project or through their role as one of our growers, actually understands the importance of the marketing of what they do.

"It's so easy for farmers to run down the retailer and say it's everybody else's fault but I have really raised that connection between the public [and production], whether it's kids on the farm or the shoppers in stores."

Tacon knows she has made a lasting difference to the business and that's the reason she calls her role "the most rewarding thing I have ever done".

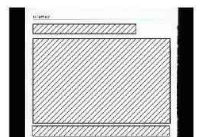
She is behind the move for The Co-operative Farms to plant

apples "like nobody's business", with 75,000 trees in the ground in the first year of a three-year plan to confront the shortfall in UK supplies. Her next initiative will be to consider the possibility of creating five new reservoirs in five years. At the same time, she aims to cut waste by improving communication between the growing, packing and retail sides of the business.

This is all part of The Co-operative emphasising its role as "Britain's biggest farmer", a message that will be reinforced later this year by a rebrand featuring photographs of farmers in stores and on packs.

In fact, The Co-operative Farms is aiming to supply a quarter of fresh produce for the chain by 2015 as part of The Co-operative Group's groundbreaking strategy for ethical trading unveiled in February, in the shape of the three-year Ethical Operating Plan. The initiative, which has 47 targets, will also see a minimum of 30 per cent of food promotions on healthy options including fresh produce alongside a push to reduce carbon emissions below any other major UK business and a multi-million pound investment in training and development.

"The marketing side is starting to realise that having a farming business is of real consumer benefit," says Tacon. "I am not sure that the food business recognised it as something that





was very relevant but now they are starting to see that it is.

“First, my job is to make sure that we are competitive and profitable. Second, as someone who has been in marketing for a fair chunk of my life, making the most of the brand value. Third – and it’s almost single-handedly from the farming point of view – I’m trying to alert The Co-operative to food security and where we see that they are going to be having issues so that we as the farming business can start to protect them.”

Tacon grew up in Norfolk but now lives in Macclesfield, on what used to be a farm that she shares with her husband and two children, a girl of 15 and a boy of 12. They have seven acres, some of which the family has just turned into a vegetable garden featuring everything from lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, onions and garlic to gooseberries, blueberries and even globe artichokes.

“It’s hugely exciting,” she says. “My husband’s in charge of the construction, I feel like I’m doing most of the weeding but the plan is that we will all do it. My son is most interested in it but I don’t think my daughter wants to get dirt under her fingernails.

“But of course, we shop daily at The Co-op,” she smiles.

If Tacon has anything to do with it, so will many more. ■



Tacon: Worked to raise the connection between the public and production

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