

Rockfish launches tinned British fish range as restaurant expansion continues

The celebrity chef behind South Devon's Rockfish seafood restaurant chain has launched the world's first range of tinned British-caught seafood.

Mitch Tonks has ploughed around £200,000 into the pioneering lockdown project in a bid to find a wider market for seafood caught off the south coast and landed at Brixham.

The range, which has already attracted orders worldwide, includes Lyme Bay mussels, mackerel, Brixham cuttlefish and Mounts Bay sardines packaged in bold bright designs created by Mitch's wife, Penny.

It's the first range in Britain that is caught direct from fishermen, including Rockfish's own boat – The Rockfisher.

Canning seafood ensures that all of the catch is eaten, reducing waste and increasing the value for the fishermen.

Mitch, who has also revived interest in Devon Crab through the South Devon Crabfest, said: "The idea came out of having a little bit of space during lockdown which is something I don't usually have running a business day to day.

"I have always been fascinated by tinned seafood, the amazing products from Portugal and Spain that we just don't have here. We have tinned pilchards, tuna and salmon but nothing like the range you see on the continent, so I started thinking how do I go about it."

Mitch explained that he wanted to set up his own cannery to

process the fish coming into port but soon realised that domestically, there are not the artisanal skills to tin seafood.

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Instead he sends the seafood from Brixham to be prepared and tinned in Spain.

He said: "It's a bit like charcuterie was 20 years ago, nobody knew how to do it here but that has changed and I'm certain that in the future we can do that here.

"But in the coastal communities in Spain, the whole community supports the fishing industry and they all get involved with preserving the catch, it's part of the culture."



Rockfish has launched a range of British caught tinned seafood – Lyme Bay Mussels

(Image: Nick Hook)

The range is the latest spin-out for the Rockfish brand that also launched seafood at home during the height of the pandemic. The service is set to be expanded in January which Mitch says will ‘revolutionise’ the way people prepare and cook seafood at home.

And the eight-strong restaurant chain’s expansion plans which were in place pre-pandemic are still rolling ahead with [new restaurants planned in Salcombe and Sidmouth](#) in Spring 2022.

Mitch said that demand has returned with customers craving the dining out experience.

He said: “The response since re-opening has been massive. People are appreciating more the experience of someone cooking and serving your meal and doing the cleaning up afterwards – that has got to be one of the greatest human pleasures to have another human being taking care of all of that for you. Having someone else saying ‘how are you, let me take care of all that for you’, that’s when service becomes hospitality and that is what people are looking for.”

The Rockfish Group, which employs around 400 people, is chaired by Will Beckett, co-founder of Hawksmoor, with board members including Henry Dimbleby (ex-Leon & London Union), Steve Leadbeater (ex-Findus and 2 Sisters Food Groups) & John Barnes (ex-La Tasca and Harry Ramsden).

In July 2020, the business secured [a loan of more than £1million](#) after losing all revenue during the first coronavirus lockdown.

The Exeter-headquartered Rockfish Group, which counts Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a patron, secured a “seven-figure” finance package from HSBC under the [Government’s Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme \(CBILS\)](#).

It used the funding as working capital, enabling changes to be made to the restaurants to adhere to Government guidelines, employing additional members of staff for dedicated anti-coronavirus roles and to support the business through a lower period of revenue.

Mitch said they used the time to re-evaluate the business.

“We were looking at what was right and wrong with the business and what we could do better to look after our staff, our customers, community and the environment. That was the magic of lockdown, in a way, having the space and time to think about how we could change things.”

But like many hospitality businesses, it has been hit by staff shortages since re-opening.

Mitch said: “I’m always looking for the icebergs coming up so we made the decision to shut the restaurants for a few days a week because we did not want to fill the days with people who were exhausted. We did 80% of service at 100% budget. It was really interesting and we retained all of our staff.”

“We have to [accept that the staff shortage](#) is not going to go away – we have emerging industries like warehousing and logistics and people are changing careers.

And businesses have to think about what they can offer staff in order to recruit and retain staff.

He said: “People want to work for businesses that have a purpose and are clear about why they exist. They don’t want to work for a business that has the sole purpose of making money for shareholders, they want to work for a business that is working towards BCorps, considering the environment and switching to green energy.

“The world changed in 2019 and we are never going back, the pandemic put us on a different track, thinking about what we

really value and our environment. Businesses that are not adapting to those things going on around us will not survive.”

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