Mash up: giving wonky potatoes a new lease of life

Historically, our choosy attitude to what we eat has contributed to food waste, but some suppliers are using innovation, imagination and ‘digital potatoes’ to give uneven (edible) spuds a second chance

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from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board – have pointed out, this staple of British
cuisine is low in fat, high in fibre and a great source of energy. Bonus points if you eat the vitamin-
packed skin.

But making an effort not to bin the peel isn’t going to solve the problem of food waste alone. The
potato has long been a contributor to the more than £1bn of produce thrown away every year before
it even reaches a supermarket.

“Potato growing is not precision agriculture. You’re much more at the whim of Mother Nature than
with some other vegetables. From year to year, exactly what’s coming at us has quite a lot of
variation to it,” explains James Truscott, managing director of Branston.

Branston is nearing its 30th anniversary with Tesco, for whom it processes over a third of a million
tones of potatoes annually. That’s a lot of spuds.

To ensure supermarket success, the produce must meet the expectations of customers – some of
whom are swayed by appearance. While food-waste-reducing efforts such as “wonky veg bags”,
including Tesco’s Perfectly Imperfect range, have emerged in recent years, Truscott points out that
we need to be realistic about what sells.

“There is an increasing number of consumers who have food waste much higher up their priority list
than they might have done a few years ago, which is great. And things like “wonky veg” have real
resonance for some customers. But the reality is, great-looking produce sells better.”

He explains that about 80% of the Branston crop is perfect for the potato bags we buy. But that
leaves plenty of potatoes that are perfectly edible, but are too big to be baking potatoes or too
small or asymmetrical to be easily peeled.”

However, oversized or undersized potatoes are attractive to ready meal manufacturers, something
Tesco recognised five years ago when it was trying to find ways to reduce food waste across its
business – part of its commitment that no food fit to eat should go to waste across its entire UK
operations.

“We introduced Branston to another of our suppliers, Samworth Brothers, who make prepared
meals,” explains Tesco’s head of sustainability, sourcing and waste policy, Mark Little. “Together we
worked out a way that potatoes that don’t meet our usual size and shape requirement for sale can be
turned in to our own-brand mash instead, part of the reason we are 80% of the way towards the
target that no good food will go to waste.”

Branston, in turn, was able to invest in state-of-the-art peelers that can cope with the wonky veg.
“We now take a really big proportion of those secondary potatoes, peel them and then send them off to Samworths to become the mash on the top of a cottage pie,” says Truscott. “Finding other routes to market for the crop is key. We can offer a product customers want and still find a really good added-value home for the rest of it.”

Branston sends 350 tonnes of product a week to Samworths from its potato-peeling unit, which means that ready meal we grab when we’re too tired to cook may be more sustainable than we think.

But that’s not all. Keen to further stamp out food waste, Branston and Tesco are embracing state-of-the-art technology, an investment that has been helped by a five-year contract to supply Tesco with most of its fresh potatoes. Introducing the “digital potato”, which predicts how likely the crop is to get damaged during harvesting, washing and sorting.

“It looks like a potato, but it’s bright orange and blue,” says Truscott. “It’s basically got a load of sensors in it. You plant it in the field, and then harvest it and see how much damage happens on the harvester. You can put it through washes and graders on the production lines too to see if there are particular points of impact, so that we can address those with a smarter design.”

And just when you thought the potato couldn’t get more high-tech, Truscott reveals that the company has launched a new system that started life as a 3D camera from an Xbox.

“We will mount it on harvesters and it will count and size all of the potatoes on the harvest bed, so we know exactly what’s coming at us,” he explains.

“Right now, growers go into a potato field with a fork, dig up a few potato plants and measure them. It’s a method that’s been used for centuries, but it’s a tiny snapshot and statistically not a very good view as to what’s coming.”

The camera will enable growers to see the size profile and expected yield of crop for every field. This information will hopefully generate fewer potatoes that would have otherwise gone to waste.

“We’re really excited about technology, because it’ll help growers get better at what they do in the field, and therefore be more sustainable,” says Truscott. “But it’ll also allow us to plan really, really well.”

Tesco’s long-term partnerships with its suppliers means they can then invest in new technology, such as Branston’s major investment in handling and packing tech, and work together to cut food waste.

Giving potatoes a new lease of life is not the only way that Tesco is working with its suppliers to reduce the impact producing food has on the environment. Tesco and WWF are working together to halve the environmental impact of the average UK shopping basket, partnering with suppliers to drive innovation and tackle sustainability challenges across their supply chains, starting with some of the most popular products in the modern basket, like potatoes.

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