

# The way the cookie is crumbling for Burton's

Paul Kitchener has transformed Burton's Foods from a bland player into an exciting innovator. Stefan Chomka reports

**P**aul Kitchener's two children must think themselves pretty lucky. As chief executive of Burton's Foods, Kitchener has the enviable job of overseeing the UK's second biggest biscuit manufacturer and producer of kids' favourites such as Wagon Wheels, Maryland Cookies, Viscount and Jammie Dodgers. Playground boasts don't get much better than that.

The best part of Kitchener's working life has been dedicated to all things dunkable: over 20 years out of 27. But life in the industry is not always sugar-coated, and in his latest role as CEO at Burton's Foods, a post which he took up in January 2004, he has had to work hard to revive a company that had gone stale in a category that has been slowly crumbling over the past few years.

"Burton's needed to and is going through a transformation process, and one of my strengths is changing businesses," he says. "Part of our transformation is moving Burton's from what we would describe as being a fairly boring biscuit manufacturer to a more innovative, exciting snack manufacturer."

To coincide with Kitchener's appointment, Burton's relocated its headquarters from Blackpool to St Albans, Hertfordshire, moving into a new business park with fellow food company Premier Foods as its neighbour.

Says Kitchener: "When I started I had a new office and new people. You start with a blank canvas and mould and develop. The first few months were difficult, losing all that experience, but it allowed an injection of new ideas and for us to start again."

He hasn't wasted any time in doing things his way, demanding Burton's become much more proactive.

"When I came into the business last January we had absolutely no innovation in the pipeline. From that standing start we've put more than 30 products into the marketplace this year."

These include mini Viscount biscuits, new variants of Jammie Dodgers and Maryland Cookies, a new functional fruit bar called Fruvo and Burton's latest venture – the first milk chocolate jaffa cake launched under the Cadbury brand. And the company is working on a further 50 different products. Kitchener says: "Some are out of this world, really clever stuff."

Yet he concedes there is still more to be done in a category still punching well below its weight.

"One of the problems we suffer from is that not enough consumers walk down the biscuit aisle," he says. "It's quite a boring place and Burton's has not done enough to make it interesting. I need to work in conjunction with my competitors to make the biscuit aisle a more exciting place to go down. It's not about

We are no longer seen as a boring biscuit company that has lost its way. We are now an innovator, adding value to the market

stealing share off competitors – I want more people to buy biscuits and be interested in buying.

"There are far too many products down the biscuit aisle. It's just adding confusion. There have to be fewer SKUs and less confusion and more innovation. We have to get more theatre down the aisle."

Kitchener has bold plans for Burton's, which include moving the company into previously untapped areas to offset the decline of some of its key markets. While healthy and luxury products are growing, the ordinary everyday biscuit category – the area in which Burton's principally operates – is suffering.

"Although we would describe ourselves as working in a \$1.7bn biscuit market, it's not true. We operate in a \$4bn snack market. Our growth needs to come from getting into healthy and more indulgent products."

He also plans for the company to branch out into cakes and savoury items for the first time, and says it will be making products more portable.

"It's a gap we need to fill," he explains. "We're working on a number of ideas."

Kitchener's work is already paying off and, since joining, the company's annual profits have doubled. He also believes the company has gained much greater respect over the past 18 months.

"If you talked to the major retailers, we are no longer seen as a boring biscuit company that has lost its way. We are now an innovator, adding value to the market."

But it won't end there. Keen to further close the gap between Burton's and main rival United Biscuits, he is not afraid of rolling his sleeves up and getting stuck in.

"Industry is tough but it's a way of life – I often say to my guys there's no point in talking about it as it's like saying you have to breathe every day"

The wheels are already in motion to generate greater interest in Burton's biscuit-making heritage, which he says the company has not made enough of in the past.

Unsurprisingly, when off duty he finds it hard to switch off. He jokes: "My wife is always going on about me organising the biscuit shelves and walks away from me in embarrassment – it's difficult to go past a superstore without going in and having a look."

"Most Monday mornings I come into work and say I had a great idea over the weekend. But I think I have had a very good idea this weekend so I think there will be a product coming out soon based on that."

And does his family get showered with biscuits? "I have them so often at work I forget to take them home – so the wife ends up buying our biscuits," he admits.

He makes them, his wife buys them; the kids must think they're in heaven.



## Q&A

### **What's a typical day for you?**

It depends whether I'm in the office or not. If I'm not in the office there is no typical day – I'm out in the field dealing with customers. I try to get out and deal with customers as often as possible – not just the major retailers but also our local independents and cash and carries. I also try to visit our operations around the country. I try to get out and visit my factories on a reasonably regular basis, although it's often not enough. I tend to hit the office between 7.45 and 8am in the morning and my day is made up of reviews. I prefer face-to-face contact with people, and meetings as opposed to emails, and so my day is generally made up of meetings. I tend to get away from the office at around 7pm at night. I don't think it's a long day.

### **What do you do in your spare time?**

I like to cook. I come from a food background and it's one of my hobbies. I bake all the cakes in the family, including the birthday cakes.

### **How did you get to where you are today?**

I've been in the food industry since the late seventies. My career started with Smiths crisps, at the time when it was owned by General Mills, where I worked in the transport department.

From there I joined Nabisco and worked in its biscuits and cereals department before I was headhunted to join United Biscuits. I was with United for 14 years and then, in 2001, joined the Brakes Foodservice business as divisional chief executive of UK business. A couple of years later I was approached to join Burton's as chief executive.