

Pierre Louis Montfort – Head of R,D&I at Grupo Siro

Pierre Louis Montfort is a bakery products, R&D expert with over 20 years industry experience. After a career working for some of the world's major consumer companies in a variety of production, marketing and product development roles, last year he decided to relocate his family to Spain to become the Chief RD&I expert for bakery products at Grupo Siro, one of Spain's leading food manufacturers. He met with Nigel Wright Group to discuss his new role and what he hopes to contribute to Grupo Siro's growth strategy both in Spain and overseas.

It's been almost a year since you came to Spain, what's the business environment like here compared to France?

Spain is suffering more than France and possibly more than any country in Europe. It has one of the highest levels of unemployment in Europe and consumers are finding it more and more difficult to adapt to the current economic conditions. I feel, however, that Spain has got the internal talent and ability to adapt at a quicker pace that it has done so far. It has a relatively young population capable of fighting adverse conditions and also the will to look for new economic models that will benefit the country in the long term.

What about the specific challenges in the food manufacturing industry?

Like anywhere, the challenges are quality, cost efficiency and the need for innovation. But there are certain key challenges, which I believe the food manufacturing sector must rise to in the current climate. Firstly, it is essential to develop and secure the value chain for the benefit of all of the 'actors' involved – from producers of the raw materials to the final transformers. It is a play with many actors not just one!

The second challenge, innovation, is to be viewed with the support of other industry sectors. They must adapt to new ways of processing, analysing and organizing, while ensuring that the safety, nutritional and environmental standards expected today by the consumer, are communicated across the entire value chain.

The third challenge of the food manufacturing industry is to ensure the recruitment of talented people who will lead these changes. I believe the competition to attract the best chemists, physicists and food scientists in our industry, starts at the doors of the University.

What attracted you to the opportunity at Grupo Siro?

I share the belief in the importance of placing people at the heart of the strategy - trusting people and giving them responsibility, whatever their age and experience, to make things happen. It is clearly a differentiation point of the strategy of Grupo Siro, versus other companies.

Another important aspect for me, coming from a blue-chip background, was the opportunity to working with a different business model. I'm used to working in an environment where products are developed and sold through conflicting negotiations with large national retailers. Grupo Siro is different - we are an 'integrated supplier' for Mercadona – the number one supermarket chain in Spain. We are, via this unique alliance with them, seeking to maximise the added value for the consumer in the first place, but also the employee, the supplier, society as a whole and the capital owner.

This very attractive model has led to Mercadona enjoying double digit growth over the last ten years. As a bakery supplier, Grupo Siro is dedicated to promoting the brand Hacendado and developing its bakery range, hence concentrating our efforts on value creation.

Finally, in joining Grupo Siro, I felt I could add value to this young and ambitious company in terms of organizing innovation and also helping to develop its people, talents and competencies.

Grupo Siro's success in Spain has been its commitment to innovation and differentiation in its products – how are you developing this side of its businesses?

I think Grupo Siro's success derives from its commitment to test and evaluate products with consumers, in a sales situation. We basically keep developing products until we have the absolute buy-in of consumers. We must continue to develop this ability to differentiate our products, to ensure we stay ahead of our competitors. Our role at the i+dea centre is to maintain the success of our current products but also to secure the route for innovation in product development, across all of our main categories – crackers, pastas, breads, pastries and cakes.

You've been involved specifically with bakery product development since the mid 80's, what's changed? What are the latest trends internationally?

I don't think trends have changed drastically in the last thirty years. Certainly the freshness and nutritional aspects of food products are considered more important today. Convenience is another increasing trend while aspects such as ethnic and additive free product recipes are also attracting new consumers, every day. I wouldn't say there has been a great revolution in the industry, but rather a series of evolutions.

Europe is experiencing a decline in traditional bakery products, which has been linked to the fast-paced and increasingly mobile lifestyles of many Europeans today. What is Grupo Siro doing to meet the demands of the new consumer?

Changes in eating habits provide you with an opportunity to innovate across the whole value chain – in terms of taste, quality, packaging etc. The demands of consumers today are undoubtedly centred on traditional tastes, convenience, less additives or longer shelf life - the fact that Grupo Siro is selling its products internationally allows us to learn from and borrow ideas from other markets, when trying to meet these demands.

Obviously Grupo Siro has a strong position and reputation in Spain, what are its wider European ambitions? What about beyond Europe?

Grupo Siro has wider European and global ambitions. Large companies such as Pepsi-co and Unilever are current customers of Grupo Siro. We have also clients in the UK, USA and Canada. Ultimately we would want to recreate our successful model of alliance in Spain, in other territories. In terms of emerging markets I see (Latin) America as being the most obvious place to develop Grip Siro because of the cultural and linguistic similarities.

Tell us about 'i+dea center', what's it like to work there?

'i+dea center', is a brand new innovation centre, that cost €6 million and serves 15 production sites across Spain. We currently have 47 staff working partly on site and partly attending industrial trials in factories. The average age of employees at the center is around 30, so it's a very lively, young environment!

Our ambition is for i+dea to become one of the top performing food innovation centres in Spain and in Europe. We have a team of very ambitious people, so I believe this is a real possibility. I think the key challenge we face is to diversify and strengthen our methods, to improve efficiency in processes and to build knowledge across the team, with support from our suppliers.

The centre is open for collaboration with other food companies, research organisations, universities etc. It's a fabulous tool and we need to reinforce that fact to make sure we get the most out of it.

You've spent most of your career working for Unilever, what did you learn from your time with that iconic FMCG business?

Mainly three things : how to align people in one common direction, the power of forming alliances and the huge benefits that come from creating a collaborative and innovative culture.

How do you attract and retain R&D talent at Grupo Siro?

Since its creation, i+dea center has relied on a talent pool that initially helped us to respond rapidly to non-forecasted demand for staff, caused by high growth. This talent pool has now evolved into an efficient method of finding and attracting talent, with the right experience and background in the food sectors in which we operate.

At first we were basically looking to hire food engineers but now we have expanded our remit and seek to identify chemists and physicists. Fundamentally, we are looking for people who can bring a different approach to the team dynamic, while adapting to the culture and values of the company.

I consider the talent pool to be a benchmarking tool which helps us to evaluate what skills we have and don't have, and understand development routes that will enrich the values and the potential of our team. It is also important to remember that i+dea center is essentially a talent pool itself, for the whole company.

Has relocating to Spain been a challenge or have you adapted well to the culture?

I thought I would be able to pick up the language quicker than I have done so far, but it is more complex than I imagined. Being driven by new challenges, however, is always rewarding. The process of learning a new language and culture helps you to understand better, the differences in the ways of working you are used too as well as reinforcing your capacity to view, diagnose and test solutions.

It's not only a real challenge for me, but also my wife and four children – including the two eldest ones who have remained in France! I find that there is nothing better than to challenge yourself in your professional and private life. I have the philosophy of a runner and believe that effort is part of your life.

CV

Grupo Siro (2010 -)

-Head of R&D

CSM (2000-2010)

-Head of R&D, BakeMark Ingredients

Unilever (1985-2000)

-European Project Manager, Strategic Product Development

-Marketing Manager, B2B Bakery - France & UK

-Product Development Manager, Turkey

La Roche aux Féés (1984-985)

-Product Marketing Manager

Unilever (1977-1983)

-Process & Production Manager