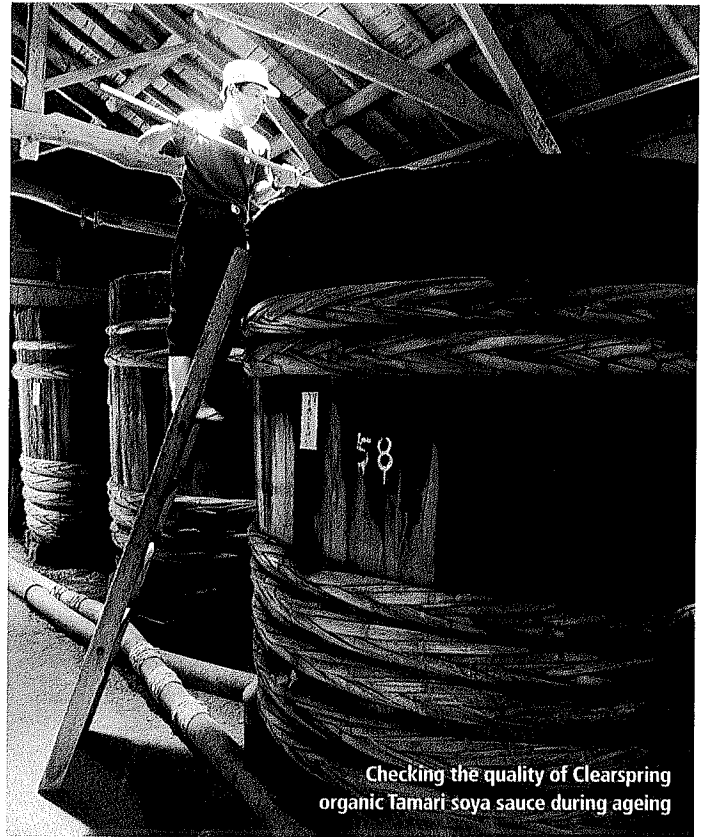


Food for the SOUL

At Clearspring there is a belief that food is more than just fuel, and that a holistic approach is best when producing it. Rebecca Green reports



Checking the quality of Clearspring organic Tamari soya sauce during ageing

You are what you eat, which puts Christopher Dawson, the mind of London-based organic and traditional food company Clearspring, in a pretty good position when it comes to healthy living.

Founded by Dawson 20 years ago, the company offers a range of organic Japanese foods, organic Italian oils, vinegars, snacks and fruit purée desserts.

Dawson professes a passion for sustainable farming and vegan food, and it shows. An 18-year stint living in Japan has enabled him to provide an export market for small and medium sized producers there, helping them to gain EU organic certification for their foods.

Dawson's main focus is on working with farmers and manufacturers to maintain tradition [in Japanese and organic food] and he regularly travels to Japan to achieve this. "It's hard for many farmers to market their products. I see Clearspring as a vehicle for such people, so I seek out small manufacturers or farmers who are making great products but not getting them out there. I will go the extra mile to get the right producer – we are committed to quality at any cost."

Most producers are small, family-run businesses, but a few are larger companies that manage to produce on a larger scale without compromising quality, he adds. While many products originate from Japan, European lines include the leading UK range of cold-pressed oils and organic fruit purée desserts. And from a factory in Wales, 20,000l of Clearspring organic soya sauce is produced annually (by Shoda Sauces). Work is also underway on a variety made using Demeter beans, which are

a product of the principles of 'biodynamics' – something Dawson believes strongly in.

Biodynamics takes the organic concept one step further, he explains. It is based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, who believed in a more holistic approach to farming that looks beyond science to the cosmic. It aims to regenerate the forces that work through the soil by using 'enlivened' compost or manure and working with the planetary cycles. Products made using these methods are known as Demeter products. The market for them is quite small in the UK, but Dawson predicts it will catch on as a point of difference for manufacturers, especially those looking to compete with normal organic products.

Dawson likens biodynamics to the ethos of Japanese cuisine: "A Japanese chef is trained to bring out the intrinsic value of the ingredients, whereas the western approach is to say 'what can I do with these ingredients to make them taste good?'"

As yet, the Demeter soya sauce hasn't been launched under the Clearspring brand, but is being used by a German company as a flavouring for tofu. "Before launching it as a brand we want to get a range of Demeter products going, including pasta, oils and vinegars," explains Dawson.

For Dawson, the biodynamic movement

A Japanese chef is trained to bring out the intrinsic value of the ingredients

offers some relief from the direction he believes the organics market has gone in: "Organic has become commercialised, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but when we started to do organic food in the 70s everyone laughed at us. Now the organic brand is a trademark, all the things like refined sugar and flour that [Clearspring] threw out of the organic kitchen have been allowed back in the marketplace, so organic is no longer as healthy. Manufacturers just saw organic as an opportunity to get a premium on their production," he claims.

Having said that, Clearspring, which turns over \$4.1M a year, is no stranger to commercialisation itself, with listings for some of its 177 products in Sainsbury, Tesco and Waitrose.

It used to have the Rice Dream (milk alternative) brand in its portfolio, but lost the business and had to consolidate. "Now we have a chance to grow again," says Dawson, who plans to extend the Miso range into dressings and sauces. "Miso [made from soya beans] is the one product that I couldn't live without – a powerhouse of nutrition," he proclaims.

Right now Dawson's biggest challenge is marketing: namely the huge costs associated with getting his message (and products) out to the masses. A revamped website and eye-catching new packaging should help, however, and the likes of TV celebrity Gillian McKeith have certainly done their bit when it comes to raising the profile of foods like miso and tofu.

Ultimately, stresses Dawson, consumers need to 're-connect' with their food and "realise that good food connects mind, body and spirit"

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