

MADE SMARTER

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Martyn Mangan, Made Smarter; Rhian Caffull, Veg Life; Shai Tailor, MTC

Veg Life aiming to crack 10,000 vegan scotch eggs a month with Made Smarter support

A fast-growing plant-based food business is transforming production from a largely manual process by introducing digital technology to fulfil orders of up to 10,000 vegan scotch eggs a month.

Veg Life, founded by Rhian Caffull, has worked with Made Smarter West Midlands and MTC (Manufacturing Technology Centre) to redesign its production processes, introduce automation and develop a digital roadmap that will support the next stage of its growth.

Before: Handmade production limited growth

Veg Life began in Rhian's parents' kitchen after she returned to Malvern in 2020. Having previously worked on projects with a long-lasting sustainable impact in Kenya, Uganda and Ecuador, she wanted to build a business that combined food with her environmental values.

The idea for Veg Life's Scotchegg - a vegan alternative to a traditional scotch egg made from potato and soya - came after Rhian made a batch for her local pub and received an enthusiastic response during the Covid restriction that required a substantial meal to accompany drinks at the pub. The business moved from home to rented pub kitchens to 500 sq ft premises at The Hop Pocket in Bishop's Frome, Herefordshire.

But production remained heavily dependent on hand-making each product, restricting how quickly the business could respond to larger orders.

Rhian, Founder and Chief Eggxecutive Officer of Veg Life, said: "Our capacity was limited because, for three years, we had been making each vegan scotch egg by hand - including the boiled egg! We needed to significantly increase our capacity to fulfil demand, and knew we couldn't do it by hand. It was a great problem to have, but very difficult to plan and organise funding whilst still running the day-to-day operations."

At its busiest, Veg Life was producing around 1,000 Scotcheggs a week by hand. Interest from larger customers showed there was a significant opportunity to grow, but also made it clear that the existing process could not scale far enough.

Turning point: Moving from a proven product to scalable manufacturing

Rhian had proved there was demand for a more ethical and sustainable alternative to scotch eggs in the market, but scaling the business required a fundamental change in how its products were manufactured.

She said: "I started making vegan scotch eggs and took them to my local pub. People said how lovely they were (until I told them they were vegan!) and that was my lightbulb moment for setting up Veg Life.

"I started taking Scotchegg to markets and farm shops and I had a stand at a trade show which attracted significant interest from big buyers.

"I realised we needed to move to automation because there was a limit on how far we could grow while still making them by hand.

"Access to funding was holding the business back because I couldn't use traditional funding methods. I tried crowd funding and other funding streams. The only option was equity.

"At this point I met with Made Smarter and it was great to have all the work I had been doing validated and that I was on the right track."

With support from Made Smarter West Midlands, Veg Life secured a £20,000 grant and invested a further £50,000.

Transformation: Redesigning production around automation

Made Smarter West Midlands worked with Veg Life and its strategic partner, the MTC, to analyse the existing manufacturing process and develop a digital roadmap covering both immediate priorities and future growth.

The work looked at robotics and automation, 3D-printed moulds and the design of manufacturing tools that could take Veg Life from handmade production through to semi-automation and, ultimately, towards full automation.

The business has invested in new equipment to tackle its capacity constraints, and is redesigning its production set-up so that a process once carried out almost entirely by hand can operate at much greater speed and consistency.

Rhian said: "Through the work with MTC, we produced a diagram which shows how everything works, and that has made it much easier to explain to potential customers and investors."

Shai Tailor, Senior Advisor, Digital Transformation, at MTC, said the diagnostic work was focused on giving Veg Life a scalable manufacturing model.

"We reviewed Veg Life and recommended the best way for them to automate the production process using the most suitable equipment," he said.

"Once all the machinery has been installed, we will be helping them with capturing, managing and understanding the data from the machinery, to make the data administration side as easy and possible."

Impact: Building capacity, creating jobs and preparing for expansion

The business is currently producing between 400 and 1,000 Scotcheggs a week. Its next milestone is to reach 10,000 a month by November 2026 to meet larger orders as the new manufacturing set-up is installed and scaled.

The planned manufacturing set-up is now designed to support multiple production lines, with one line capable of handling up to 2,500 Scotcheggs.

Veg Life now has four full-time and one part-time members of staff, and Rhian is focused on building the team with local people.

One of the new recruits is Jack Probert and he said: "I have returned after three-and-a-half years and when I first worked with Rhian, everything was handmade and now it is amazing to see how technology has evolved the product.

"It's been really easy to step back in to a very stream-lined set-up and see how everything has progressed particularly in terms of how many more orders we can produce."

Rhian added: "We're moving in the right direction and I can see the feasibility of it all. With automation, it is clear how we can increase our orders and keep growing. We have increased our recruitment and are growing the team with local people."

The business also has ambitions to move beyond its current 500 sq ft premises and quadruple the size of its manufacturing space as production grows, remaining on the same site at The Hop Pocket.

Rhian added: "The incredible support from our landlord as the opportunities have evolved has made this rollercoaster of a ride possible!"

Martyn Mangan, Digital Transformation Specialist at Made Smarter West Midlands, said Veg Life demonstrates how targeted manufacturing advice can help a small business prepare for significant growth.

He said: "We were referred by the Worcestershire Growth Hub and I came to meet Rhian and I could immediately see the potential for Veg Life.

"It was about establishing a manufacturing plant from very small beginnings and creating a much larger operation with digital integration at its heart.

"Rhian is a go-getter who has clear values and I'm impressed with how she has grown Veg Life from a small kitchen at her mum and dad's to a larger semi-automated manufacturing plant that is on the verge of fulfilling 50,000 plant-based eggs a month."

For Rhian, the value of the programme has gone beyond grant funding, by giving her access to specialist manufacturing knowledge at a critical point in the company's development as she plans to triple the size of the business premises.

She said: "I would recommend Made Smarter because access to specialists within manufacturing has been really valuable. It has been great to receive that insight from a manufacturing point of view and to have tailored advice."

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