

From distributing prawns by bicycle to billing 38 million euros selling seafood in Jaén

 by **Bhavi Mandalia** — January 30, 2021 in **Business**

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Castellar workers in the kitchen that the company has in Jaén

The monoculture of the olive tree configures the green ocean with which, from a bird's eye view, the province of Jaén appears. And it is surprising that, in the middle of this forest of 70 million trees, one of the leading companies in the commercialization of seafood and sea products emerges. Prawns, prawns, crayfish or crabs leave from Mariscos Castellar's cookers and manufacturing plants to the main food chains in the country. In 2020, despite the pandemic and the closure of the Horeca channel (hotels, restaurants and cafes) for many months, the sale of seafood has remained at the highest levels, but it was during the Christmas holidays that they soared.

“We are pleasantly surprised by how sales have been in the last Christmas season, much better than we could think after such an unusual year,” explains Josefina García Calero, Mariscos Castellar’s commercial director. This company, founded half a century ago by his father, concentrates 70% of its annual turnover on these holidays, which in 2019 amounted to 37.5 million euros. The Jaen firm sells more than 10 million kilos of seafood and is going to increase its production of cooked seafood.

The foundations

It was in 1969, in the El Condado region, one of the most depressed in Jaén, when José García and Elisa Calero laid the foundations of what is now a successful family business. First they began to sell, almost in a rudimentary way, the boxes of prawns that came from the Andalusian coast. Later they created their own seafood cooker and currently have an important logistics network that makes their products reach a good part of the national territory (especially the center-south strip) and also to Portugal, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, and get ready to make the leap to Germany. In the British market, sales slowed down when the pandemic broke out, with the hotel industry being its main market niche, and now Brexit worries about the immediate future.

Mariscos Castellar sources the best seafood in the Huelva fish market and also imports it from Maghreb countries. Products from fish farms are brought from Ecuador, while in Vigo they acquire another type of fish. And it is that, in recent years, the company has put on the market other complementary products to freshly cooked seafood and deep-frozen ones. This is the case of white fish, such as first-frozen cod from Iceland; seafood salpicón and preparations for soup and paella; precooked as shrimp omelettes, nettles or mussels; and, finally, they have dared with meats and offer everything from croquettes to chicken nuggets or mini flamenquins.

Its three production centers, with a surface area of 36,000 square meters and a cooling capacity of more than 100,000 cubic meters, are spread throughout the province of Jaén. In the small municipality of Castellar, with just 3,000 inhabitants, they keep their original cooker, where they make 2.5 million kilos of seafood every year. In the neighboring town of Santisteban there is the largest refrigeration capacity and offices, and in the capital of Jaén they have their main distribution center. From here they sell their products through wholesalers and in the main food chains of the country. Some of them, with a presence in other countries, market Mariscos Castellar products under a private label.

Despite the adversities that arose with the outbreak of the pandemic, Castellar has not been forced to make any workforce adjustments among its hundred workers. Nor has it applied any ERTE, although the temporary employees who used to hire in times of high demand, such as Easter or summer fairs, have suffered. “We have maintained the type thanks to our clientele in food stores, where demand has increased, largely due to the competitive prices we offer,” says Josefina García. It does not hide, however, the impact that the closure of the Horeca channel had on the company’s accounts during the months of confinement, since the hotel industry accounts for 40% of its sales.

Make up for

But this drop in sales has been more than offset by the upturn experienced in the run-up to the Christmas holidays. Although they launched this campaign in October, it was after the Constitution Bridge that the orders skyrocketed. “I think that despite the economic difficulties many families are going through in this crisis, it has become clear that seafood is something embedded in the gastronomic culture at Christmas in our country”, underlines the commercial director.

In a very competitive market, Mariscos Catellar wants to expand by betting on innovation and diversification. Coinciding with its 50th anniversary, in 2019 the Jaen firm renewed its image and packaging, which earned it the ARCA award for the best food packaging on the Iberian Peninsula for the innovative design of its new packaging. It also approved a strategic plan with which it plans to continue this growth line in the coming years. “And so important for us is the human factor, which constitutes an essential pillar in a food industry in which the value of the artisan tradition still survives,” says Josefina García.

In this half century of existence, Castellar has evolved in the face of an increasingly demanding market to become one of the most thriving seafood cookers in the country and a benchmark in the distribution of frozen foods. A kind of oasis in the middle of the green blanket that covers the world’s olive-growing territory par excellence. And all thanks to the business vision that José García had, who began by distributing prawns and crayfish on an old bicycle.