

PEOPLE PERSON

Peddling burgers may seem like an easy business, but there's far more to it than a quality bun, juicy beef patty, and crispy fries. Thomas Kelly, managing director of Food Folk Sweden – the owner and operator of the McDonald's brand in Sweden – lives and works by two mantras: surround yourself with good people and keep things simple.

THOMAS KELLY / MD Food Folk Sweden

“You may be forgiven for thinking that McDonald’s is a hamburger business serving people, but we’re actually a people business serving hamburgers,” says the MD of Food Folk Sweden Thomas Kelly, who is preparing to hand over his role to Joachim Knudsen before taking up the senior advisor position in Food Folk Nordics. Over three decades, the Glaswegian has worked his way up from flipping burgers (during a graduate trainee scheme 29 years ago) to overseeing thousands of staff and dozens of restaurants proudly displaying the iconic golden arches. “People make this business successful, without good people you’ll find it very difficult to move forward,” he adds.

It’s therefore no surprise that during his time in management, Thomas has urged McDonald’s to invest heavily in its employees to keep the company one step ahead of the game amid some fierce competition. Millions of dollars are pumped into staff training workshops each year, not only in Sweden, but in the 100 plus countries in which McDonald’s

has set up shop, to make sure the customer service at the forefront of every strategic move is second to none – whether it be opening a new restaurant or rolling out a reimagined menu. Thomas continues to position both the employee and customer at the heart of every decision McDonald’s makes. This philosophy paid dividends when he was operations director for Scotland and Northern Ireland (managing 91 outlets, 5,500 staff, and a million customers a week in Scotland alone) and

“The golden arches can’t hide from the spotlight – every move, strategy, and mistake is scrutinised by the public”

continues to bear fruit in Scandinavia. Before moving to Sweden three years ago he was MD of McDonald’s Finland.

Family affair

Thomas is not the only one working for McDonald’s who knows the organisation from the ground up: “Everyone starts out in the restaurant, even people coming into the office positions. We give them orientation within the restaurant so they understand the process. All staff, no matter how senior, need to know how to serve customers, it’s the foundation of the business.” He has played a big hand in propelling the business forward and has fuelled some major changes in recent years, like installing free WiFi in all restaurants, sourcing coffee from sustainable farms, and promoting healthier menus. McDonald’s can’t afford to sit still for a second in such a dog eat dog industry, there are always popular rivals nipping at its heels. It’s not just a case of selling burgers but staying relevant to a customer base ranging from young children all the way to old age pensioners. The on-going challenges and va- →

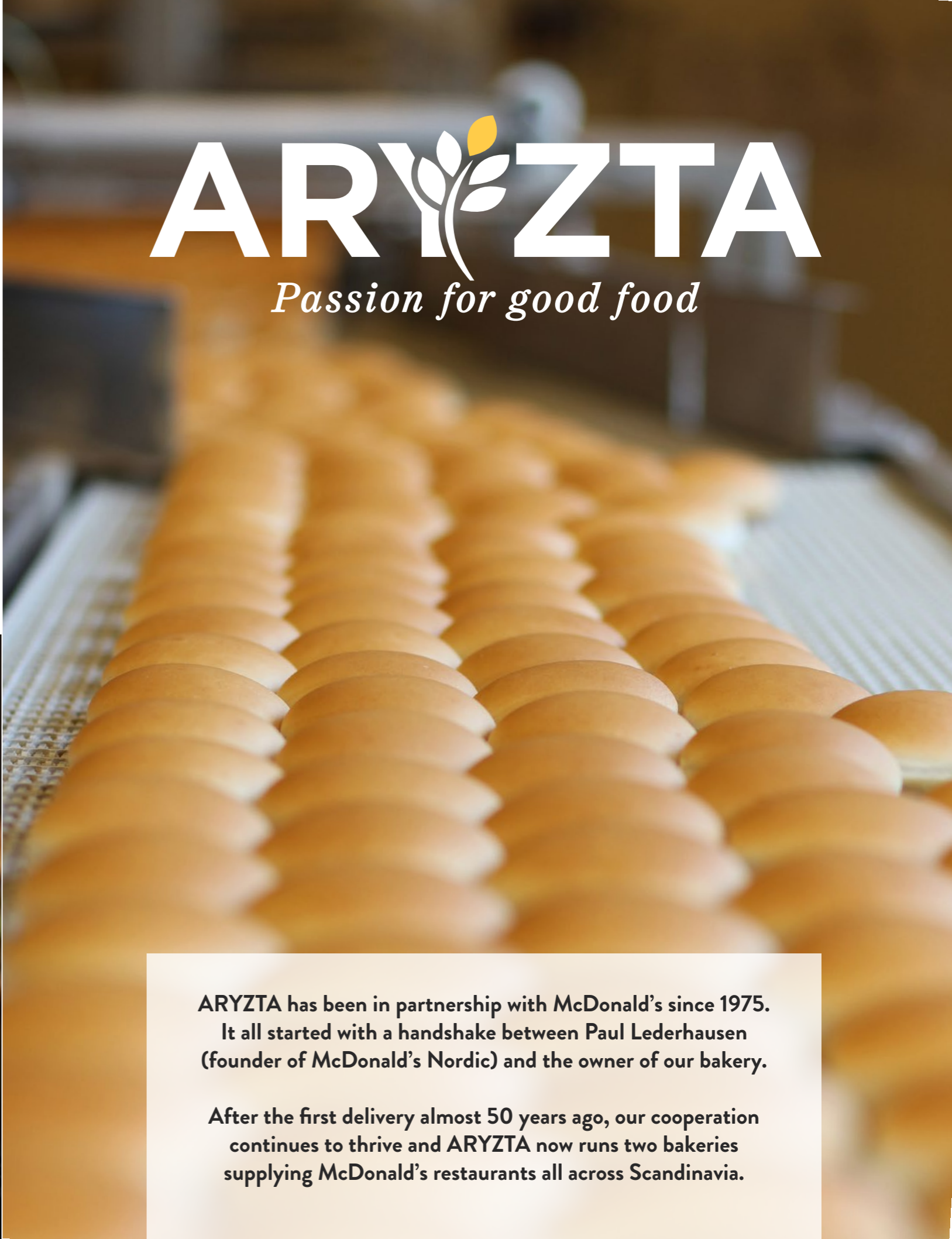
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riety of work are what pique Thomas' interest.

"From a retention point of view, you'll always get some interest from head hunters and recruiters, but I've been really lucky because I've always had a bit of change," he says. "McDonald's is a great company to work for, I have nieces and nephews who work here, and I even met my wife here! My daughter is asking me if she has to work here now! The reason I stay here is because I've always had a challenge in front of me and been surrounded by good people. You need good people with you if you want to be successful. I'm always looking for improvement, how to take everything forward and make things better. We are forever changing. There are a lot of stakeholders, many of whom work for the company, so we all have skin in the game. Keeping things simple is really important to ensure that everyone remains focused. McDonald's is customer-focused and customer-lead, we are customer-obsessed!"

Experience of the future

Despite being a massive global brand, McDonald's focus is often on being as local as possible,

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Michael Spurling,
global commercial director at McCormick

ble, which as you can imagine is no easy task. When it comes to brand affinity ratings, local burger joints are usually ranked higher because they can honestly claim to be 100% local. Thomas refers to the scale as the "forgive-

ness rating" because he says it's a measure of how willing customers are to forgive brands if they make a mistake. The golden arches can't hide from the spotlight due to the corporation's status, so every move, strategy, and →

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Thomas is responsible for implementing table service in McDonald's restaurants

mistake is scrutinised by the competition and customers alike. "We need to get everything absolutely right and really listen to our customers. We need to give them a reason to come in the first place, and a reason to come back," the MD of Sweden says.

One hugely successful move that Thomas has masterminded in Scandinavia is the adoption of table service, which is not something you might automatically associate with McDonald's restaurants. The idea – billed as "the experience of the future" – is in fact very simple but during its implementation the company left no stone unturned to guarantee it continues to be a triumph. In Sweden, McDonald's Triangeln in Malmö was the first to be upgraded with table service, followed by an Uppsala restaurant a few days later. "It's all digital, you pay at the kiosk, you sit down, and we bring the food to you. Because there are three floors in Triangeln it's tough for customers with buggies, kids, or shopping, so it's worked brilliantly. It was so successful that from this point we started converting six restaurants a week →



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to table service, so now 120 out of 200 are updated and we'll complete the entire country by the end of this year. We've gone the extra mile by putting 12,000 staff through what we call "feel good moments" workshops so they're fully prepared to run table service smoothly. I'm not sure other organisations would take that same approach."

The focus may be on the employees and customers – or "the people" as Thomas calls

" We're a people business serving hamburgers, not a hamburger business serving people "

them – but the producers who supply the iconic hamburger company are equally important. Sustainability, quality, and fairness are the basis for all deals McDonald's signs with suppliers and farmers. Thomas, always one for coining terms, describes it as the "three-legged stool." "One leg being our franchisees, one leg being the corporation – Food Folk in this instance – and the third leg being the suppliers. Our DNA is about having long-term, fair relationships with the suppliers. We can't make mistakes in a business this big, so you need to trust your suppliers and get the best products possible. Quality and sustainability are really important. To become a McDonald's supplier is a rigorous process because we have our own strict quality standard and audits that are under continuous development. We expect and demand full traceability, so we can trace any food from restaurant to field.

But Thomas is not one to rest on his laurels, with over 40 new McDonald's restaurants earmarked for Sweden in the next five years. The fast food chain is riding a wave at the moment – this quarter is its 16th quarter of consecutive growth of sales, not to mention its sixth consecutive quarter of guest count growth. July was McDonald's Sweden's highest sales month in its 46-year history, while 2019 is set to be the loftiest sales year ever. The numbers are looking very healthy indeed. [➔](#)



The MD of Food Folk Sweden is preparing to take up a senior advisor role in Food Folk Nordics

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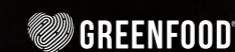
30 years ago we started to deliver our fresh cut iceberg salad to a couple McDonald's restaurants in Sweden. Today, we help 453 restaurants all around the Nordic countries to find convenient ways to add fruits and vegetables to the menu.

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