



THE TABLE IS SET FOR GROWTH

Future-proofing culinary skills for
the food and drink sector.

Insights and actions from **Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy**
March 2026 roundtable discussions.

EDINBURGH
FOOD & DRINK
ACADEMY

FOREWORD

By Lucinda Bruce-Gardyne

Executive Chair, Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy

Food has always been at the centre of my life.

It brings people together; it creates joy, connection and memory. But it also creates opportunity. It builds confidence, opens doors, and for many, provides a pathway into a meaningful and rewarding career.

Over many years working across food and drink, from working in restaurants, to founding and scaling a global gluten free bakery brand, I have seen first-hand both the extraordinary potential of this sector, but also the very real challenges it faces.

We know those challenges are significant. Skills shortages, rising costs, shifting expectations and increasing pressure on businesses are being felt across the entire system, from field to fork.

What stood out most during our recent roundtable discussions, is that this is a sector full of people who are working hard, innovating and adapting to customers' needs to secure the work they care so deeply about in an increasingly uncertain economic environment.

However, too often, businesses in this sector are tackling the same issues in isolation, rather than coming together to share knowledge, shape solutions and create meaningful change.

That is why **Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy** exists.

Our role is simple: to create, to connect, and to elevate.

To create the skills and pathways that prepare people for fulfilling careers across food, drink and hospitality.

To connect industry, education, community and entrepreneurs, in ways that are practical and impactful.



And to elevate the sector by championing what makes it such a powerful, diverse and rewarding place to build a career, and its vital importance to the health of our population and the nation's economy.

These roundtables were the beginning of that work.

They brought together voices from across the sector; industry leaders, educators, policymakers and entrepreneurs, to explore the challenges we face and the opportunities ahead.

This report captures what we heard. But more importantly, it sets out what we can do next. Because the future of this sector will not be shaped by one organisation alone. It will be shaped by all of us.

We are creating the space for that to happen.

The invitation is open: come and take your seat at our table.

Lucinda Bruce-Gardyne

Lucinda Bruce-Gardyne

Executive Chair of Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy





THE POWER OF FOOD

Food is more than an industry.

It is how we connect with one another. It is culture, identity and memory. It is the shared experience of sitting around a table; of creating something together; of nourishing both people and communities.

But food also has power beyond the plate.

Gaining skills in food preparation can build confidence, and a sense of belonging in those who feel excluded. It can offer structure, purpose and opportunity. It can create pathways into employment, entrepreneurship and independence. It can transform how people see themselves, and how they are seen by others.

From our own research, we know that almost one in six people in the UK are unable to cook a single dish without following a recipe. Even simple fare like pasta and sauce is beyond the reach of millions of Brits, with 19% admitting they only feel confident cooking this basic ten-minute meal with instructions.

Previously known as Edinburgh New Town Cookery School, Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy launched on March 18th 2026, holding two distinct roundtable events the following day inviting key industry figures and contributors to take their seat at our table.

The first, How do we future proof culinary skills for the food and drink sector?, was a curated breakfast roundtable bringing together cross-sectoral leaders from across food, drink, hospitality, education, science and policy to explore how culinary skills and training must evolve to meet the future needs of the sector.

The second roundtable, Cooking Up Growth: The challenges, solutions and opportunities for scaling, was a hands-on cooking and dining event for food and drink entrepreneurs, chefs, investors, sector



leaders and members of the entrepreneurial support ecosystem to explore how businesses can navigate current challenges and unlock growth opportunities across the UK and Scotland.

The conviviality and bonding power of cooking and eating together forged new relationships between our entrepreneurs and deep conversations during the round table discussion.

The power of food came through time and time again.

From chefs describing the pride of a successful service, to organisations using food as a tool for social change, to educators seeing curiosity spark into confidence; the impact of this sector reaches far beyond its economic value.

To understand the challenges ahead, the industry as a whole must also recognise what is at stake.

This is not just about filling roles or supporting businesses.

It is about recognising the value of the food and drink industry to the economy and the nation's health and food security, and realising the full potential of the people within it.





WHAT WE HEARD AROUND THE TABLE

Across our roundtables, a number of clear and consistent themes emerged. These reflect not only the challenges facing the sector today, but the opportunities to shape its future.

KEY QUESTIONS

The day's discussions helped the industry to answer six challenging questions:

1. How do we create attractive career pathways for the next generation?
2. How do we build relevant skills that work for employers and leaders?
3. What does it look like to support growth and progression, not just getting started?
4. What do we need to do to prepare for a changing industry, in a rapidly changing world?
5. What does it take to create inclusive access to work and demonstrate the opportunities in the industry?
6. As an industry, how do we come together and take responsibility for creating an industry where we can all thrive?



1. Creating an attractive workplace for the next generation

Context

From chefs and front of house, to farming, manufacturing, delivery and across the full supply chain, the sector is facing a significant challenge in attracting new talent.

However, this is a sector also defined by creativity, collaboration, global opportunity and entrepreneurship. It offers careers that are dynamic, fulfilling and, for many, deeply meaningful.

Around the table, there was a clear challenge to the narrative we often hear in the media: that people are unwilling to enter demanding careers.

Courses such as paramedic science and drama, both involving long hours, unpredictability and pressure, continue to attract strong demand. The issue is not the nature of the work itself.

"We're not encouraging people by explaining that this is a job that they can get into and love... the teamwork - when you have a service that goes well and that everybody plays their part, it's magical. It's like winning a hockey match together. But you can't do that if you're terrified of the person who's leading you. And so I think we need to look at ourselves."

Challenge

In contrast, hospitality courses can be difficult to fill; not because the work is inherently less appealing, but because the sector has not clearly articulated the opportunities for progression and long-term career development.

Hospitality and food and drink careers are too often perceived as low paid, unstable and demanding; a narrative reinforced by parents, educators and, at times, the industry itself. One of our attendees, a skills specialist, shared the following perspective:

"I've got four sons, one who's desperate to get into this industry, and I have reservations. I'm concerned about what it means for his future. Is it a sustainable career? So I have probably fallen into some of the narrative that comes with the hospitality industry."

The challenge is not convincing people to work hard; it is demonstrating that it leads somewhere worth going. It's true, unfortunately, there are still bad practices in many workplaces, and work still to be done to create a truly sustainable and flourishing industry.

Several participants reflected on the tension between addressing real challenges, and how those challenges are communicated more publicly. While issues such as pay, conditions and pressure must be addressed, there was a concern that constant negative framing risks reinforcing the very perceptions the industry is trying to change.

There is a clear need to reshape the narrative, to better reflect the diversity, potential and value of careers in food and drink.

Industry Action

The sector must take collective responsibility for how it presents itself to the next generation.

This means:

- actively promoting the breadth of careers across the full food and drink system; not just front-of-house roles.
- creating and showcasing modern working environments.
- being honest about challenges, but equally vocal about opportunity, progression and purpose.
- engaging directly with schools, parents and communities to reshape understanding of what a career in food and drink can be.

Without a more honest and ambitious account of what the sector offers, the perception gap is likely to persist.

2. Building relevant skills for the future health of the sector

Context

The food and drink industry, especially in Scotland, is a crucial driver of economic success. Looking to the future, investing in the development of skills required by the next generation is investing in the future growth of the economy.

"The economic importance of Scotland's food and drink industry is £18.9bn turnover, £7bn and 115,000 jobs spread across all regions of Scotland and importantly in rural and coastal communities where food and drink may be the only employer. To stimulate and help businesses achieve growth, it is important that we have an ecosystem in place to do this."

Amanda Brown, Programme Director,
Scotland Food & Drink



Challenge

However, there is a growing disconnect between education and industry. Hospitality leaders highlighted that many entrants lack the practical skills, confidence and understanding required to succeed in real-world environments. At the same time, educators face challenges in keeping curricula relevant, engaging and aligned with industry needs.

"We've had graduates come to us who have been on a three year college cookery course, and have never actually filleted a fish. Three years in a kitchen should mean they can hit the ground running, not need months of hand holding."

A leader in education highlighted that in many sectors, employers don't just articulate what they need; they show up, build relationships and create direct pathways for students into their businesses. That level of engagement is not yet consistent across food and drink, and the result is a fragmented approach to workforce development with no shared ownership of the pipeline.

This is not just a skills gap, it is a gap between training and what the industry requires from its employees. There is a need for training that reflects the realities of modern kitchens and businesses: combining technical ability with adaptability, teamwork, commercial awareness and resilience.



Industry action

The gap between education and industry will not close without deeper, ongoing collaboration.

This requires:

- educators and industry working in partnership to continuously adapt content in line with how the sector is evolving.
- training environments where learners build confidence through doing, not observation.
- a broader definition of skills; including ecommerce, direct to consumer sales, marketing and commercial decision-making.

If training is not grounded in real-world practice, it will continue to fall short of industry needs.

3. Supporting growth, not just getting started

Context

While the UK and Scotland are strong at fostering new food and drink businesses, scaling those businesses remains a challenge.

"People put the cart before the horse. They're looking too closely at why a business is not successful in raising, rather than at the market opportunity and growth potential to build the plan to get to the next stage."

Josh Robson, Chief Policy Officer, Scale Up Institute

Challenge

The following barriers to growth in the food and hospitality sector were identified in the recent ScaleUp Institute Survey:

- Talent and leadership development
- Access to markets in UK and Internationally
- Access to right bank / equity finance
- Access to tax breaks
- Infrastructure and access to R&D facilities



Entrepreneurs face barriers in areas such as production, infrastructure, funding and access to expertise. Finding the right help can be a hurdle in itself.

These challenges are not faced by founders alone. As businesses grow, employers must build and retain teams with the skills, confidence and commercial understanding to support that growth; while employees are expected to adapt quickly to more complex, fast-moving environments.

"There's good support out there, as well as EIS and SEIS. I had no idea how to actually get involved at first, but when I did that opened up [access to] a whole number of really beneficial companies, and they were great."

"In my 31 years experience within hospitality myself and with a strong team, training - that's the core problem. It's a very, very difficult, complicated situation these days with cost and resources and balancing the books, but somehow we've got to find that solution to allow that real, well constructed training development, for careers to build in the long term."

The knowledge required to move from small-scale production to commercial growth is not always readily accessible. Scaling is not just about ambition; it is about capability and support, as one food manufacturer stated:

"In manufacturing I think the skills gap that we're finding is around ecommerce. There's loads of support for exporting, working with multiples, big manufacturing focus, and that's one way to scale. But we're way more profitable if we are selling a box of 12 as a gift online. How can we open up third party channels? I feel like food direct to consumer support is really overlooked. "

There is a clear opportunity to better support businesses as they grow, providing the tools, knowledge and connections needed to move from idea to impact.

"At Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy we're here to showcase our unique culinary space for entrepreneurs, businesses... for connecting, developing and promoting their brand and products."

Caroline Lamont, Director of Culinary Education, Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy

From hospitality businesses expanding their offer, to producers increasing capacity and reach, growth brings a new level of operational and people complexity that many are not fully prepared for. As one hospitality industry leader put it:

"We're very good at promoting people before they're ready, and not always giving them the support that's promised."

This means building the next generation of leaders; supporting individuals not just to deliver day-to-day operations, but to progress into roles with greater responsibility, confidence and commercial understanding. Clear development pathways and opportunities for progression are critical to retaining talent and sustaining growth.



Industry Action

The sector must place greater focus on supporting our people and businesses as they grow, not just when they start out.

This requires:

- shifting investment and support towards the scaling phase; where the risks, complexity and opportunity are greatest
- improving access to practical expertise in areas such as production, operations, sales and route to market
- investing in leadership development; ensuring individuals are equipped for progression, not just promoted into it

Growth should not rely on individuals learning through trial and error alone.

4. Preparing for a changing industry

Context

The future of food and drink will be shaped by a combination of craft, science and technology. Advances in areas such as food science, data, automation and artificial intelligence are already beginning to influence how food is produced, prepared and experienced. One hospitality leader spoke about their experience at a robotics in hospitality demonstration, highlighting that the future is closer than we think.

"We need to be thinking about robotics and automation in the future of hospitality. It might feel a long way off, but it's coming much faster than we think, and the question is how we embrace that without losing what makes hospitality, hospitality."

"There's a real gap in understanding the science behind food. We focus a lot on technique and craft, which is incredibly important, but without that scientific understanding, it's much harder to innovate, adapt and really push things forward."

Challenge

There is a strong desire to retain the creativity, intuition and human connection that sit at the heart of the sector. The challenge is not choosing between tradition and innovation.

"Some people say that if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always had. In today's climate, that no longer stands. You need to progress just to stand still."

As one hospitality leader noted, this is an industry of restrictions. But those restrictions are where creativity can flourish, with a resourceful and flexible mindset.

As technology, automation and artificial intelligence continue to reshape large parts of the economy, the value of distinctly human skills is becoming more pronounced. The ability to create, to serve, to connect and to craft something physical and immediate cannot be easily replicated.

In this context, food and drink stand apart. It offers careers rooted in creativity, passion, human connection and real-world experience; qualities that are increasingly scarce elsewhere.

There is a balance to be had. Businesses need to look for opportunities to innovate using technology, whilst not losing the human touch and creativity that are its hallmarks.

This is not a sector being left behind by change. It is one that may become more valuable because of it.

Industry Action

The sector must actively prepare for a future where craft, science and technology are increasingly intertwined.

To address this, the sector must:

- look for opportunities to integrate science, technology and digital capability
- create opportunities for hands-on engagement with emerging tools; from food science to automation and ecommerce platforms
- support individuals to continuously upskill
- ensure that technological progress is balanced with the creativity and human connection that define the sector

Sectors that fail to invest in these capabilities risk being left behind as the industry evolves.



5. Creating access and demonstrating opportunity

Context

Food and drink has the potential to be a powerful entry point into employment and society for many. From hospitality to manufacturing, and right across the supply chain.

We heard from the CEO of a charity tackling the causes and consequences of homelessness, about the role food can play far beyond the industry itself; not just as a career, but as a tool for building stability and preventing crises. Through the charity's work, they've seen how something as fundamental as cooking can have a lasting impact on people's lives.

As it was put, ***"we use food, again and again, as an agent of social change."***



This insight underscores the broader role the sector can play; not only in employment, but in building confidence, independence and long-term stability.

Challenge

For young people, career changers and those facing barriers to work, the food and drink sector offers a tangible, practical and often transformative pathway. The industry has a plethora of versatile career paths, to suit different people's lifestyles, priorities and needs. Yet there are shortages across the board.

"There is a bit of a crisis in our logistics system. There aren't enough people to pick and pack in warehouses. There aren't enough people to drive the lorries... yet it's kind of the backbone of the industry working."

However, access to these opportunities is not always clear or consistent. There is a need to develop more inclusive, flexible and accessible routes into the sector; recognising that people learn in different ways and at different stages of life.

Industry action

The sector has both a workforce shortage and a missed opportunity to create meaningful employment at scale.

To address this, the sector must:

- promote careers across the supply chain, such as logistics and manufacturing
- invest in flexible, practical training that supports people at different stages of life
- partner with organisations already working at the intersection of food, education and social impact
- provide ongoing support and progression opportunities; ensuring people can build sustainable careers, not just access entry-level roles

The challenge is not just attracting people into the sector; it is ensuring they can stay, progress and thrive.

6. Improve the industry for all, together

Context

Many of the challenges facing food and drink, from attracting talent to building skills and supporting growth, are already being worked on across industry, education and government. The knowledge, experience and motivation exist. But too often, efforts are duplicated, insights aren't shared, and solutions are built in isolation rather than in partnership.



Challenge

What's missing is alignment. While culinary courses can be difficult to fill, the challenge is compounded by a lack of proactive involvement from the food and drink sector itself. In contrast to other disciplines, where industry partners regularly engage with institutions — sharing insights, shaping curriculum and actively creating opportunities for students — food and drink businesses are far less visible.

There is also a tendency to look outward for solutions rather than inward.

"The government doesn't have any money. So stop the narrative we all talk about every time the industry comes together about asking the government to do more. Start to really talk about what's good for us and what we're doing together."

"It means creating learning environments that inspire students, spaces where innovation, experimentation, criticality and collaboration are encouraged, and where students can see the exciting possibilities for their career. With you, our industry partners, with your valuable input and insight, we can create passionate and skilled professionals, to ensure that the food and drink sector continues to flourish for many years to come."

Industry Action

From events like these roundtables, to creating regional hubs, to engaging meaningfully with training organisations, greater collaboration across the sector is essential. This requires:

- contributing time, insight and resource to shared initiatives, rather than operating in isolation
- engaging proactively with education and training establishments to shape the future workforce, rather than reacting to its limitations
- creating spaces where collaboration, experimentation and challenge are actively encouraged

Without this collective commitment, the sector will continue to address shared problems individually, with limited impact.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE FUTURE

There is no doubt that the challenges facing the food and drink sector are real; and some are growing, but there is no single silver bullet answer. A collaborative rallying of efforts and sustained change is required.

Across hospitality and food and drink manufacturing, people already work incredibly hard. The issue is not a lack of effort, energy or ambition. It is that too often, businesses and individuals are trying to solve the same problems in isolation, without the proper skills on our side - and without collaborating with others.

The future of this sector will not be shaped by individual resilience alone. It will be shaped by collective action and real investment in personal development.

The sector needs to come together; to share knowledge, to challenge one another, and to build solutions that go beyond the boundaries of individual businesses.

Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy exists to create the conditions for that to happen.

Take your seat at our table

Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy has been created as a space for connection, collaboration and capability building.

A place where skills are developed, ideas are tested, and relationships are formed.

A place where industry, education and entrepreneurship come together with a shared purpose.

We are setting the table.

For industry, this means engaging with training, shaping the next generation of talent, and building environments where people can thrive.

For educators and policymakers, it means working together to create pathways that are relevant, accessible and aligned with the needs of the sector.

For entrepreneurs, it means sharing knowledge, showcasing their brands and products, exploring new ways of working and embracing the opportunities for growth and innovation.

And for us, it means continuing to listen, to convene, and provide relevant training to the next generation of food, drink and hospitality professionals.

To keep the conversation going, we are advancing this series of curated events and bringing the right voices together around the issues that matter most. Following the approach we took with the two roundtables outlined in this report, each is shaped to generate real insight, honest exchange and shared action, and findings will be shared openly across the sector.

The conversations we are planning include:

- How can we attract and reframe careers in food and drink?
- Co-creating the future workforce: how can education and industry work better together?
- How can experiential learning and innovation in training better prepare people for careers in food and drink?
- How can we better develop leadership, continuous upskilling, and real progression pathways to build long-term, sustainable careers in food and drink?
- What is needed to unlock the expertise and support that enables food and drink businesses to scale with confidence and resilience?
- What does genuine collaboration across food, education and social impact look like, and how do we move from isolated effort to shared action, experimentation, and collective impact?

These are not one-off events. They are the starting point. An ongoing programme, shaped by the people in the room, and the wider sector, whose insight and experience will define what comes next.

The invitation is open. Meaningful change will only happen if we all take our seat at the table.

Closing

If we get this right, the impact will go far beyond the sector itself.

We create careers that people are proud of. We build businesses that are resilient and innovative. We strengthen communities and create opportunities where they are needed most.

Through it all, we harness the power of food; to nourish, to connect, to inspire, and to transform.

The future of food and drink is something we must build together. And it starts here.

If you would like to be part of this movement for industry advancement we would love to hear from you. Whether you have a perspective to contribute, a challenge you have identified that the sector can collectively support, or a shared commitment to building a stronger future, there is a seat for you at this table.

Get in touch: info@efda.co.uk

These roundtables brought together a diverse group of voices from across the food and drink sector. We are grateful for the time, openness and insight shared by everyone who joined us at our events.

How do we future-proof culinary skills?

Breakfast roundtable | 19 March 2026

A focused discussion bringing together leaders from hospitality, education, science and policy to explore how culinary training must evolve for the future.

The conversation centred on what skills are truly needed; and how we better connect learning with real-world practice.

Chair

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Cooking Up Growth: the challenges, solutions and opportunities for scaling

Entrepreneurs' lunch - cooking and roundtable | 19 March 2026

A hands-on session bringing together founders, sector leaders and support organisations to explore the realities of scaling a food and drink business.

By cooking and sharing a meal together, the session created a more open, honest and collaborative space for discussion.

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Formerly Edinburgh New Town Cookery School

EDINBURGH FOOD & DRINK ACADEMY



CREATE. CONNECT. ELEVATE.

Edinburgh New Town Cookery School was founded in 2009 by Fiona Burrell, former principal of Leiths School of Food and Wine, in a stunning five-storey Georgian townhouse in Edinburgh's city centre. Led by Lucinda Bruce-Gardyne, on 18th March, 2026, this respected institution was relaunched as Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy, reflecting its wider remit in upskilling food professionals across the sector as well as inspiring the community in the joy of food and drink. The Academy offers a wide range of professional chef diplomas, recreational courses, and cookery classes for all skill levels.

Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy is widely recognised for its intensive diploma courses, which prepare students for careers in top restaurants, catering businesses, and food enterprises across the UK and internationally. Graduates of Edinburgh Food & Drink Academy have gone on to achieve success in Michelin-starred kitchens, in food startups, as caterers and private chefs as well as writing their own cookbooks and appearing on television

Alongside its professional qualifications, the Academy offers day, evening, and weekend courses for food lovers, as well as bespoke team-building and private cookery experiences for corporate clients and groups.

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