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The new managing director of one of Scotland's top butchers has outlined his ambitious plans for the business. Andrew Staal, of Perthshire-based Simon Howie, told The Herald the time was right for the firm to grow and the next stage was to double the business within three years and become a player on the national stage. Mr Staal, who built up a European business for currymakers Patak's, says the Scottish food and drink sector ought not to be daunted by the economic weather. ANDREW Staal, who was on a beach in Sydney last New Year and working for the £10 billion turnover Associated British Foods, knows he can expect things a little more chilly this time around in Auchterarder.

Managing director Andrew Staal has aspirations to extend the brand by exporting meat products across the border to England

"I started the year off with the temperature in the high 30s – here I'm told it was minus 15," says the new managing director of £9m turnover Simon Howie Butchers, who plans to move his wife and two young daughters to Perthshire from his home city of Manchester as soon as he can.

"I wanted to avoid finding a house and a school on Google Earth from Sydney," he explains.

As he clocked up two months in the post, Mr Staal told The Herald: "I am not Scottish, I am not a butcher, it is a great experience for me to learn along the way and bring some of the outside in. I love food, it's a great industry to be involved in."

But he is no stranger to Scotland. Mr Staal was a frequent visitor to the four Scottish plants of Manchester-based Patak's during his 15 years with the group, the last two setting up an Australasian operation for ABF, owners of Patak's since 2007, which he grew from zero to £18m in a matter of months.

He has been lured back home by arch-entrepreneur Simon Howie to take over the reins of one of Scotland's food success stories. It began with one butcher's shop 25 years ago and now supplies all the big supermarkets, 200 hotels and restaurants, and accounts for a high-profile quarter of the £40m turnover Howie empire.

Ready to move on from ABF, Mr Staal began to look for a smaller business "such as Patak's might have looked like 20 years ago".

The curry giant turns over £80m, but its operations, like those in Dundee, Brechin, Bellshill and Cumbernauld, are run like small free-standing companies, and have "small motivated teams that take great pride in their work", Mr Staal says.

That experience helped attract him to Perthshire, where Howie has two award-winning shops and a purpose-built factory employing 100 in deepest Dunning, 10 miles from Perth. What has he found? "The unique thing about this business is it has got a superb balance between experience, with long-serving and highskilled people, and a real appetite for the future.

“It seems like a business which is confident in what it has achieved to date and open to exploring different avenues to get to the next stage.”

He says Mr Howie’s idea of the next stage is to double the business in three years, adding: “If I didn’t think I could do it I would not be here. The great thing about this is it is a blank sheet of paper, even though it must be quite difficult for someone in Simon’s position to take a step back and entrust you.”

He adds: “The first few weeks have been superb. He has given me the space but has been there when I have needed him.”

Mr Staal says that, once he has absorbed and consulted, his style will be purposeful.

“I am a great believer in doing a couple of things really well, rather than a lot of things to mediocre standard.”

The big prize looks to be exports to England. Half of the Howie business now comes from the shelves of Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Morrison – but only north of the Border.

“Our aspirations for the brand extend outside Scotland,” Mr Staal says. “There is substantial opportunity to gain the support for Simon Howie as a national player rather than a regional one.”

He says brands such as Irn-bru, Tunnocks and Walkers travel the world.

“There are some limitations to the distribution of our products because they are fresh, but people like Barrs and Highland Spring are fantastic examples for the Scottish food and drink industry.”

His secret weapon could be bacon – new to the Howie range and selling like hot cakes as customers discover it does not shed water (the white stuff) on cooking.

“The feedback we have had has been phenomenal,” Mr Staal says.

“It differentiates us in an area that fits with supermarket needs, whereas a lot of our products are predominantly ‘own label’ territory – it might be a difficult play to get branded minced steak.

“If our aspirations are to push the brand further afield, products such as bacon and sausage may offer more resonance with the consumer.”

He also wants to build on the success of the shops, which account for 25% of turnover, encouraging innovation such as the “£10 Goodie Bag”, which has proved popular.

“We launched it on Facebook and have got 1700 followers in four months. When you look at some big FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) brands they have a presence on social media but maybe have double-digit followers and not a great deal of engagement from customers – that was one of the things that impressed me.”

Mr Staal says many people are daunted by the door of a butcher's shop.

"They don't know what to ask for, how much it will cost, or what to do with it when they have bought it. We have been able to break down some of these barriers."

Holding the shopper's hand is particularly necessary in these straitened times, he admits.

"Margins are squeezed, the price of meat is going one way, prices on the supermarket shelves are either static or going the other way, it's a realisation of the economic reality in which we operate."

That means production costs have to be squeezed without sacrificing quality, but he says: "There are always opportunities to innovate and think a bit differently."

Mr Staal, who built up a European business for Patak's, says the Scottish food and drink sector ought not to be daunted by the economic weather, providing their product meets a real consumer need.

"The strength of sterling offers opportunities for exporters and there is a great network of people in the likes of Scottish food and drink with great skills and resources for businesses to tap into. The barriers to entry are not necessarily as high as some businesses might think.