



By Nina Pullman

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Industry mourns 'monumental' loss of Charlie Hicks



Charlie Hicks

Food writers, wholesalers, chefs and friends have paid tribute to Charlie Hicks as a legend among his peers and the glue holding a community together

Suppliers, chefs and food writers have paid tribute to industry legend Charlie Hicks, who passed away this week, with many mourning the loss of a friend and "the link between field and fork".

A passionate foodie and advocate for the produce industry, Hicks was loved and respected across the entire industry from producers to high-end chefs. His most recent work for Total Produce helped small-scale growers boost their profile through entertaining video market reports, where he provided a fount of knowledge for food writers and chefs alike on seasonality and availability.

Unfailingly cheerful until the end, Hicks described his shock cancer diagnosis as an "irritating touch of A.A.Gill's Full English".

He was known for embracing social media and the opportunities in multimedia, and was a strong voice for

encouraging the produce industry to move with the times and engage directly with consumers and chefs.

Regional director at Total Produce, Nick Matthews, tweeted: "As friends and colleagues of @totalcharlie we are devastated to learn of his peaceful passing earlier today. His passion for produce was a shining example to all.

"It was an absolute honour to have worked so closely with Charlie during his time with Total Produce and to be able to call him a friend as well as a colleague. He was a complete one off and his passing leaves a huge hole in our business that I'm not sure will ever be filled."

As a longstanding veteran of the wholesale trade, Hicks began his career at Old Covent Garden Market in central London, before moving with the market to its new premises at Vauxhall's Nine Elms.

From his time as a produce supplier to top London restaurants, Hicks had an unlimited supply of lively anecdotes of celebrity chefs who he had watched at the start of their career, such as a young Jamie Oliver in the River Cafe kitchen, his encounter with an angry Gordon Ramsay on a motorbike, or how an icy phone call from revered River Cafe chefs Ruth Rodgers and Rose Gray could strike fear into a room full of tough wholesale salesmen.

He hosted the Radio 4 show Veg Talk with Gregg Wallace and was fond of recalling how he and Wallace would leave the market after work in the morning, and catch the Tube up to Broadcasting House to host the show, often enjoying a drink or two while they did so. Outside produce, Hicks was a huge fan of 70s punk rock and considered David Bowie one of his idols.

Recalling how he began in Covent Garden market as a young buyer in 1986,

Wallace said he and Hicks became friends, before working together at wholesaler

would call. If I wanted the inside track on the challenges facing the growers right now,

as a legend amongst his peers". "A friendly and outgoing individual who always had an

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George Allen where they launched the popular and pioneering market reports. Speaking about co-hosting Veg Talk with Hicks, he said: "If it wasn't for Charlie Hicks I would never have got that gig on Radio 4, and if I hadn't done Veg Talk, I wouldn't have had a television career. I didn't have the talent to be on radio at that time – Charlie carried me.

"You won't get another character like Charlie Hicks. There are some people that are simply unique and he was one of them. To have such knowledge and a passion for it – he understood the growing of fruit and veg, the harvesting, the shipping, the distribution and also the cooking and eating of them. The man was an encyclopaedia of fruit and veg, and incredibly funny and good company."

Bristol move

Leaving London and New Covent Garden behind, Hicks ran his own grocery retail shop in Haye-on-Wye before returning to his beloved wholesale sector at Bristol fruit market, firstly with French Garden Bristol and then with Total Produce.

Last year, he was honoured to have been selected as a judge on the prestigious BBC Food and Farming Awards, a sign of his influence and knowledge of the sector.

Tributes to his influence, generosity and humour have poured in across social media, where he has been described as a champion of produce, an inspirational figure, a mentor, and a much-loved friend.

Food writer for the Telegraph, Xanthe Clay, said: "Charlie was the link between field and fork. Everyone knew Charlie, and his contacts list was a Who's Who of farming, food, and drink. He was as at home cracking a joke on a field of asparagus in Herefordshire as in a three Michelin star kitchen. Charlie provided our community's glue: without him we will have to work hard to stick together.

"He shared his friendships too, liking nothing more than to introduce people; if I wanted to speak to a farmer, producer, expert, chef, it was Charlie I

be it logistical, political or climatic, Charlie had the big picture, he knew their stories, and he told them well.

"Above all, Charlie was a friend, one who will made me laugh, who I could trust, and who I could rely on. I know I'm one of many who feel that way. I shall remember him raising a Negroni with his adored wife Anna, over dinner at St John's Place in Hay on Wye. Cheers, Charlie."

'A monumental loss'

Restaurant critic Jay Rayner tweeted: "Very, very sad to hear of the loss, far too soon of @totalcharlie. A brilliant man, funny, clever, and the best bloody greengrocer ever there was. Did series after series of Veg Talk for Radio 4 back in the day, then went back to doing what he loved best: selling the good stuff."

TV presenter Chris Bavin said: "I would say that Charlie was without doubt the most passionate and knowledgeable man I knew in the industry and had the perfect balance of history and heritage but wasn't afraid to change and adapt to the new developments in the business. He will be sorely missed."

A colleague at Total Produce Bristol, Dan Bush, said: "To one of my favourite people I ever had the pleasure of working with, @totalcharlie you made my world so much more entertaining. You jolly funny bugger! RIP dude, much love you to you and your family."

Fellow wholesaler Vernon Mascarenhas described "a monumental loss". "He was my mentor," he said. "It's hard to say what we're losing because it's so much. There isn't really a comparison that can be made. I don't know anyone who had a single bad word to say about him.

"We had his last birthday celebration in a restaurant called Franklins in Dulwich. We had a terrific Sunday lunch with his son and new grandson and after the meal Charlie and I sat at the bar and finished a whole bottle of Armagnac between us. It was really good fun."

Former colleagues from French Garden Bristol said Hicks was a "knowledgeable one-off character, seen

enthusiastic outlook on the industry. The trade will miss him greatly and find it impossible to replace his expertise. Once you met Charlie there was always a story that would be told time and time again," the company said.

"He will be sadly missed by all but never ever forgotten. It was an honour and a pleasure to have been associated with him."

A huge supporter of chefs either starting out or well established, particularly in his home city of Bristol, Hicks was often greeted at the table by head chefs when out for lunch. Chef and food writer Dan Lepard said: "I bought a perfect pomegranate this morning & opened it in his name. Chefs everywhere thank Charlie for his encouragement & help. Say his name out loud as you work in your kitchens.sleep well matey."

Friend of the media

Hicks was also well-known across the mainstream consumer food media, as well as the trade press, with head of radio and editor of the BBC Food Programme, Clare McGinn, paying tribute on Twitter and describing him as "an important and inspirational figure to all of us on @BBCFoodProg and @BBCRadio4."

The Food Programme's Dan Saladino joined his colleague and tweeted that: "you couldn't meet a lovelier and more knowledgeable man. Rest in Peace @totalcharlie."

Hicks also appeared at a number of FPJ publisher Fruitnet Media International's events, most recently at Fruitnet World of Fresh Ideas in Berlin last year. FPJ editor Michael Barker said: "Charlie was a great friend and supporter of FPJ, and always lit up the room when he spoke at our events. His warm character, magnetic personality and unmatched knowledge of fruit and veg will be deeply missed by all who knew him."

Hicks is survived by his wife Anna, and his two sons.

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