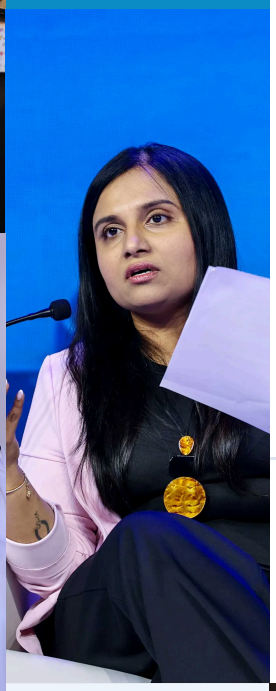
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EIGHTH ANNUAL
FUTURE FOOD 2026

تجمع الإمارات للغذاء
UAE Food Cluster

UAE FOOD & BEVERAGE BUSINESS GROUP





Future Food Forum 2026

Post Event Report

SME PROGRAMME

Competition · Showcase · Founders Meet





29–30 September 2026

Le Méridien Dubai Hotel & Conference Centre



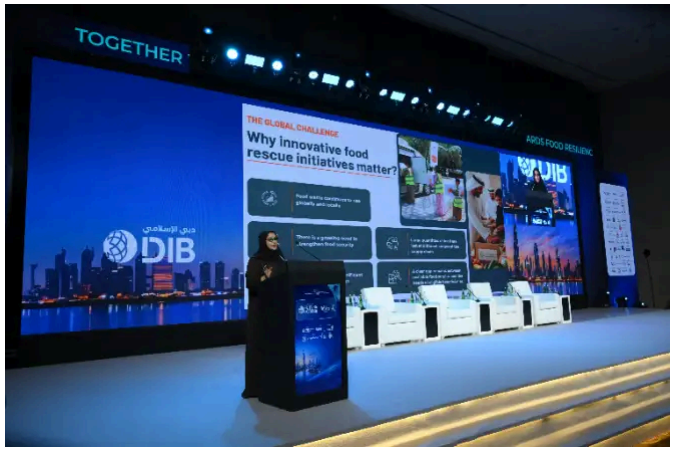




Event highlights











Event highlights











01 Executive summary

The Future Food Forum 2026 SME Programme was developed as a strategic platform by UAE Food Cluster through support from Majra, in line with both organisations' commitment to SME growth in the country. Rather than operating as a stand-alone exhibition feature, it created an integrated pathway through which innovative food and beverage businesses were identified, prepared, showcased and connected with the stakeholders to support their growth.

The programme combined open selection and curation, a two-day market-facing showcase, structured founder pitches and a dedicated Founders Meet, which discussed challenges and recommendations for the segment. Twenty-eight SMEs participated and 20 founders presented their product pitches. Together, these components moved participants from visibility towards practical market feedback, capability development and commercial engagement. The programme also generated new partnerships, while attracting senior visitors from the Ministry of Economy and Tourism, the Africa Food Systems Forum and the Abu Dhabi Healthy Living Program.

The Founders Meet served as the programme's capability-building pillar, where in experienced entrepreneurs and specialists worked through the commercial realities that determine whether an SME can progress from early promise to sustainable growth, including finance, pricing, manufacturing, supply-chain readiness, channel selection, distribution and market access. This enabled the programme to surface founder needs that can inform continued Cluster and ecosystem support beyond the Forum.



Programme at a glance

PROGRAMME COMPONENT	WHAT IT DELIVERED
Competitive selection	A transparent route for identifying promising UAE F&B SMEs and curating a diverse showcase cohort.
Two-day showcase	Product display, sampling, founder visibility and live feedback from the wider industry ecosystem.
Founder pitches	Twenty growth-focused pitches with questions from retailers, investors and industry stakeholders.
VIP and stakeholder engagement	Direct exposure to government, industry, food-system and public-health stakeholders.
Founders Meet	A fireside chat, expert panel and open audience Q&A focused on the practical barriers to scale.

Overall contribution

The SME Programme contributed more than product innovation or event visibility. It demonstrated how the UAE Food Cluster can convene founders, buyers, investors, corporates, government stakeholders and support organisations around a shared growth agenda. In this sense, the programme functioned as both a market-access platform and an ecosystem intelligence mechanism, revealing where emerging businesses need stronger pathways, clearer connections and more coordinated support.

Programme leadership. Seda Solmaz and Sascha Dutta led programme curation and founder engagement, with Mahmoud Adham contributing as a committee member and Founders Meet speaker. Mazen Kanaan and Prapthi Rai provided UAE Food Cluster Board oversight, strengthening alignment between programme delivery, the Cluster's SME-support mandate and wider ecosystem engagement.





02 The integrated SME support model

STAGE 1

Open competition and curation

The programme began with an open application and curation process designed to identify promising UAE food and beverage SMEs and bring them into a structured ecosystem pathway. Applications were promoted through the UAE Food Cluster, Future Food Forum and founder-community networks, then reviewed against a selection framework. This approach reflected the Cluster's mandate to support SMEs through access, engagement and stronger connections across the food ecosystem.

The model was deliberately broader than complimentary exhibition space. Selected businesses entered a curated founder journey combining product discovery, direct stakeholder feedback, commercial storytelling, peer learning and access to potential partners. Each component was intended to build on the previous one and move SMEs closer to practical business opportunities.

STAGE 2

Exhibition and market exposure

Across both Forum days, founders used the SME section to introduce their products and business models to attendees. Categories ranged from culinary ingredients, fermented beverages and confectionery to baby food, better-for-you snacks, fresh produce, frozen meals, hydration solutions and sustainable packaging.

The physical showcase functioned as a market-access environment, making the cohort discoverable to buyers, distributors, corporates, investors and public-sector stakeholders. VIP and ecosystem visits created access that many early-stage businesses would find difficult to secure independently, while repeated interaction across two days allowed initial product discovery to develop into more substantive conversations.



STAGE 3

Founder pitch sessions

Twenty SMEs delivered concise, growth-focused pitches structured around a five-minute founder presentation followed by stakeholder questions. By emphasising commercial development rather than a fundraising-only narrative, the format enabled founders to present their differentiation, traction, route-to-market requirements and immediate support needs in a form that potential partners could evaluate and act upon.

STAGE 4

Founders Meet and peer learning

The Day 2 Founders Meet moved the programme from exposure into capability building and ecosystem problem-solving. Founders with experience of scaling and exiting businesses shared practical lessons, while specialists addressed capital, distribution, supply chain and market expansion. The open Q&A captured specific founder constraints and translated them into priorities for future ecosystem support.

How the programme created an integrated support pathway

1. Open selection created a transparent pipeline of promising businesses for the programme.
2. The showcase delivered product discovery, market exposure, sampling and direct stakeholder feedback.
3. The pitches converted founder ambition into clear commercial propositions and identifiable support needs.
4. The Founders Meet converted recurring founder challenges into shared learning and a practical ecosystem agenda.
5. Follow-on engagement created the basis for partnerships, reported MOUs and continued ecosystem connection.





03 Programme leadership and contributors

SME Showcase committee

PROGRAMME CURATION AND FOUNDER ENGAGEMENT



Seda Solmaz

Founder, Idea Atelier; programme curator leading SME outreach, selection support and showcase development.



Sascha Dutta

Founder, Foodpreneurs Collective; committee member, founder-community contributor and Founders Meet moderator.



Mahmoud Adham

Committee member and Founders Meet contributor, sharing lessons from building and exiting Munchbox.

UAE FOOD CLUSTER BOARD OVERSIGHT



Mazen Kanaan

UAE Food Cluster Board overseer, providing strategic oversight for the SME Programme.



Prapthi Rai

UAE Food Cluster Board overseer, supporting alignment with the Cluster mandate and ecosystem engagement.

Saleh Lootah and A. Abdul Vaheed supported the initiative alongside the wider organising and production teams.

The programme was delivered through coordinated leadership, curation and ecosystem mobilisation. The committee worked with the UAE Food Cluster, Future Food Forum and the UAE Food & Beverage Manufacturers Group to translate the SME-support mandate into a structured Forum programme.

Founders Meet

ROLE	CONTRIBUTOR
Fireside chat	Seda Solmaz with Mahmoud Adham
Panel moderator	Sascha Dutta — Founder, Foodpreneurs Collective
Investment and consumer brands	Ahmad Shamieh — General Partner, Homegrown Ventures
Commercial and route-to-market	Taher Mansour — Founder, Koot Experts and Grow Management Consultancy
Supply chain and logistics	Graham Burne — Managing Partner, LAB03 and AGS Solutions

Wider investment conversation

The SME experience also connected with the Forum's main-stage investment discussion featuring Matthew Singh, Hany M Haneef, Ahmed Bayoumi and Alan Smith. Together with the SME-stage activity, this reinforced investment readiness and founder–investor connection as important parts of the Forum's entrepreneurship agenda.

Strategic alignment and shared purpose

The UAE Food Cluster in collaboration with Majra presented a broader agenda of responsible SME growth, with a look into investment and national economic contribution. It reaffirmed Cluster's convening role and food-industry ecosystem with Majra's focus on responsible business and impact, creating a platform through which promising SMEs can strengthen commercial readiness while contributing to innovation, local value creation, sustainable production and a more diverse food system.





04 The SME Showcase cohort

The programme recorded 28 participating SMEs. The consolidated exhibitor roster supplied for this report contains the following 27 named enterprises; the remaining participant was not identified in the available roster.

TabChilli
Fermented mix; beverages, sauces and condiments

Maraqah
Culinary stocks and broth

Flour Masters Bakery
Tortillas

Tapenaz
Olive spreads

Liviano Foods
Dips and sauces

Daddl
Date confectionery

Vegan Organic
Fresh produce

ME Kombucha
Kombucha beverages

ZRO POP
Beverages

Midtown Factory Majlis
Halal beer

Bumble Bee
Baby food

Pure Filth
Mushroom supplements

Bubble Bro
Beverage equipment and hydration solutions

Aubaine
Chocolate

Catcha Matcha
Matcha beverages

Marsh n Mallow
Confectionery

Mum's Foods
Spices and culinary products

FRZN
Frozen fruit snacks

Fermonte
Sparkling fermented fruit beverages

Wolvesera LLC
High-protein snacks

From Noora's Majlis
Emirati sauces

Novella
Ice cream

YBH Foods Manufacturing LLC
Ginger and garlic paste

Rescube
Frozen meals

BioSip
Sustainable straws and tableware

Rype
Fruit snacks

Inzi Eats
Better-for-you savoury snacks



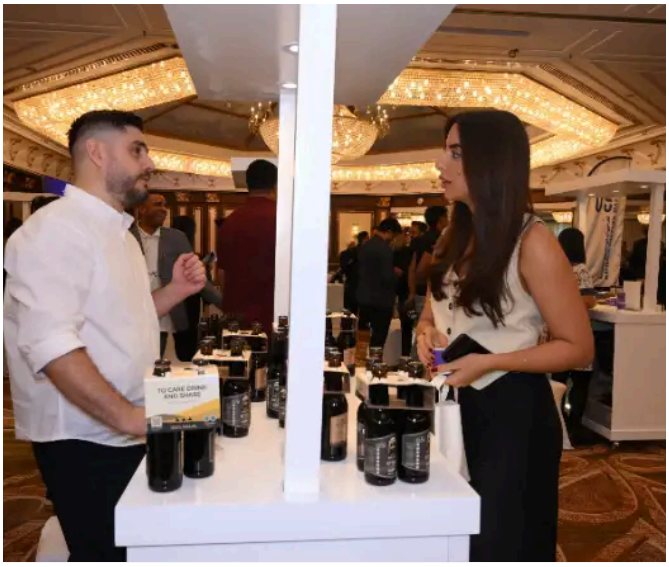
Innovation represented in the pavilion

The cohort reflected several shifts in the UAE market: interest in fermentation and functional beverages; healthier and higher-protein snacking; convenient culinary formats; culturally rooted Emirati products; sustainable packaging; and new approaches to frozen, fresh and family-oriented foods.

This breadth strengthened the showcase. Stakeholders could see not only individual products but also a wider picture of where founders are responding to changing consumer expectations, sustainability priorities and gaps in the market.

A platform for product discovery

Sampling and founder-led explanation allowed visitors to experience products and ask questions directly. For SMEs, this created immediate qualitative feedback on proposition, packaging and relevance. For buyers and partners, it reduced the distance between discovering an emerging brand and understanding the people, capabilities and ambition behind it.









05 Founder pitches and stakeholder engagement

Twenty businesses presented their growth stories

The founder pitches gave 20 SMEs a structured opportunity to move beyond product display and articulate a credible growth case. Founders presented the problem addressed, their differentiation, current traction, intended route to market and the specific commercial or ecosystem support required to progress.

Questions from retailers, investors and industry stakeholders tested assumptions and explored commercial fit. This helped convert general networking into more focused engagement around distribution, listings, partnerships, manufacturing, investment and market access - areas where the Cluster can continue to connect SMEs with relevant decision-makers.

VIP and ecosystem visits

The SME section received visits from senior and specialist stakeholders, including representatives connected with the Ministry of Economy and Tourism, the Africa Food Systems Forum and the Abu Dhabi Healthy Living Program. These interactions expanded the relevance of the programme beyond sales: founders could connect their propositions with policy priorities, food-system development, health and regional collaboration.

Partnership formation

New partnerships were formed through the programme, and a number of MOUs were reported. These outcomes demonstrate the value of placing curated SMEs within a wider industry ecosystem and creating multiple routes for commercial dialogue rather than relying on stand-alone product exposure.





Why the showcase format mattered

- It placed founders inside a major industry forum rather than in a separate startup-only environment.
- It allowed repeated contact over two days, improving the chance of a substantive follow-up conversation.
- It combined product experience with founder narrative and commercial questioning.
- It exposed SMEs to several stakeholder groups at once: buyers, distributors, investors, corporates, government and ecosystem organisations.

SMEs as a strategic Cluster priority

The programme demonstrated that SMEs are an important source of innovation, employment potential, local value and supply-chain diversification. Their products made emerging opportunities visible, while their questions exposed the operational constraints that require coordinated ecosystem action. Future editions can build on this intelligence by linking programme activity to defined ownership, follow-through and measurable SME outcomes.

06 Founders Meet | Capability building for sustainable growth

Fireside chat: the realities of building and exiting

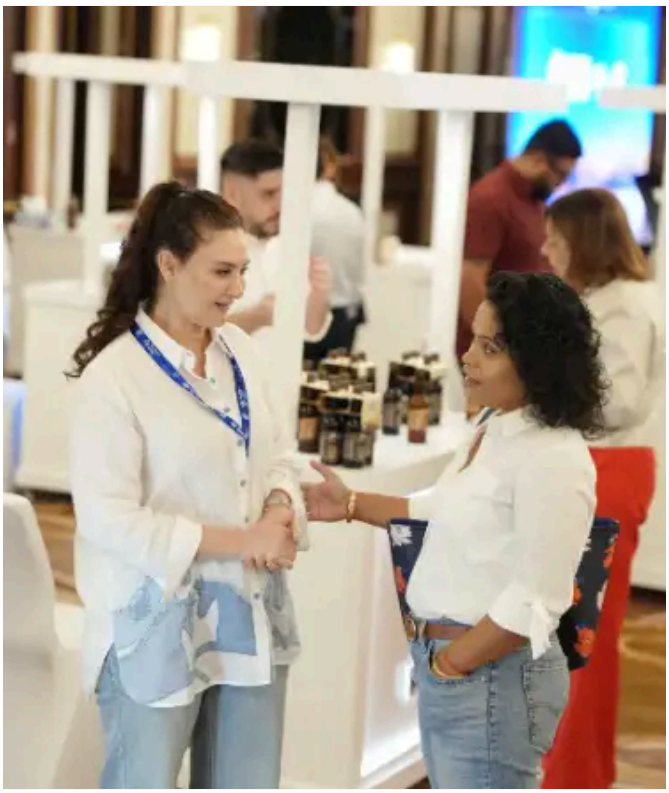
The Founders Meet opened with Seda Solmaz and Mahmoud Adham. Adham shared the highs and lows of building Munchbox and completing an exit. The conversation set an open tone by acknowledging that growth involves difficult trade-offs, setbacks and decisions that are often absent from polished success stories.

The SME Growth Equation

Sascha Dutta moderated the panel discussion, “What does it take for SMEs to move from potential to sustainable growth?” The discussion focused on capital, supply chain and route-to-market, followed by an audience Q&A in which founders raised immediate business problems.

Capital: match the instrument to the stage

The discussion highlighted that founders are not always aware of the financing options available or the stage at which each is appropriate. Bank loans and credit lines, crowdfunding, angel investment, family offices and venture capital bring different expectations, costs and implications. Funding decisions need to reflect the business model, traction, cash-flow profile and intended pace of growth.





Route-to-market: focus before expansion

Founders were cautioned against entering too many channels or countries before understanding the economics. Retail listings may bring fees, promotional requirements and working-capital pressure. The panel favoured proving one channel or market well, then expanding with evidence and sufficient operating capacity.

Distribution: a partnership, not an outsourced solution

A distributor becomes useful when the business is large enough to justify the cost and support listings. Product fit, channel reach and commercial capability need to align. The founder remains responsible for brand-building and marketing support; paying a distributor does not transfer the entire task of creating demand.

Supply chain and pricing: build margin for reality

Founders need accurate product costing that includes marketing and contemporary supply-chain costs. Manufacturing, forecasting, inventory and logistics should be strengthened before they become constraints on growth. The panel also explored when co-manufacturing remains appropriate and when a business might consider its own manufacturing capability.



07 SME priorities and next-cycle programme design

Requests raised by founders

PRIORITY REQUEST	UNDERLYING NEED
Lower minimum-order manufacturing options	Allow young brands to produce commercially viable quantities without excessive inventory and cash exposure.
Shared manufacturing facilities	Explore multi-brand production infrastructure comparable to shared kitchens, with suitable quality and compliance controls.
More incubators and accelerators	Expand structured support beyond a small number of recognised programmes and involve corporates as well as retailers.
Reduced listing barriers	Consider discounted or subsidised listing fees for eligible early-stage UAE brands.
More buyer-facing platforms	Create recurring opportunities for founders to meet buyers, distributors and corporates and to demonstrate their products.



From event activation to accountable SME support

The next phase should move to an ongoing SME-support programme with defined ownership, a regular review cadence and measurable outcomes. Building on founder priorities, the UAE Food Cluster and Majra can concentrate continued support on ecosystem matchmaking, retailer and distributor access, commercial readiness, manufacturing pathways, finance navigation and responsible growth.

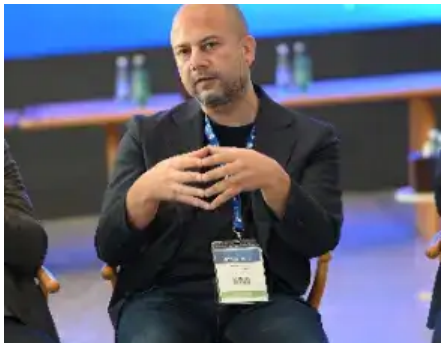
Proposed SME programme pillars

PROGRAMME PILLAR	DELIVERY FOCUS AND INTENDED VALUE
Year-round ecosystem matchmaking	Use the UAE Food Cluster platform to connect selected SMEs with suitable retailers, distributors, buyers, investors and strategic partners based on category, maturity and stated growth needs.
Market-access engagement	Convene focused sessions with retailers and distributors so SMEs can understand listing criteria, buyer expectations, channel economics and market-entry requirements.
Commercial-readiness development	Provide practical support on costing, pricing, margins, pitch preparation, investor materials, negotiation readiness and evidence required by commercial partners.
Manufacturing and scale pathways	Connect SMEs with co-manufacturers, shared facilities and lower-volume production options that support compliant growth without excessive inventory exposure.
Finance and growth navigation	Help founders understand relevant funding instruments, incubation programmes and accelerators, and identify which option is appropriate for their stage and business model.
Programme governance and outcomes	Assign clear programme ownership, review delivery regularly and track outcomes such as qualified introductions, market-access progress, capability milestones, partnerships and responsible-growth indicators.

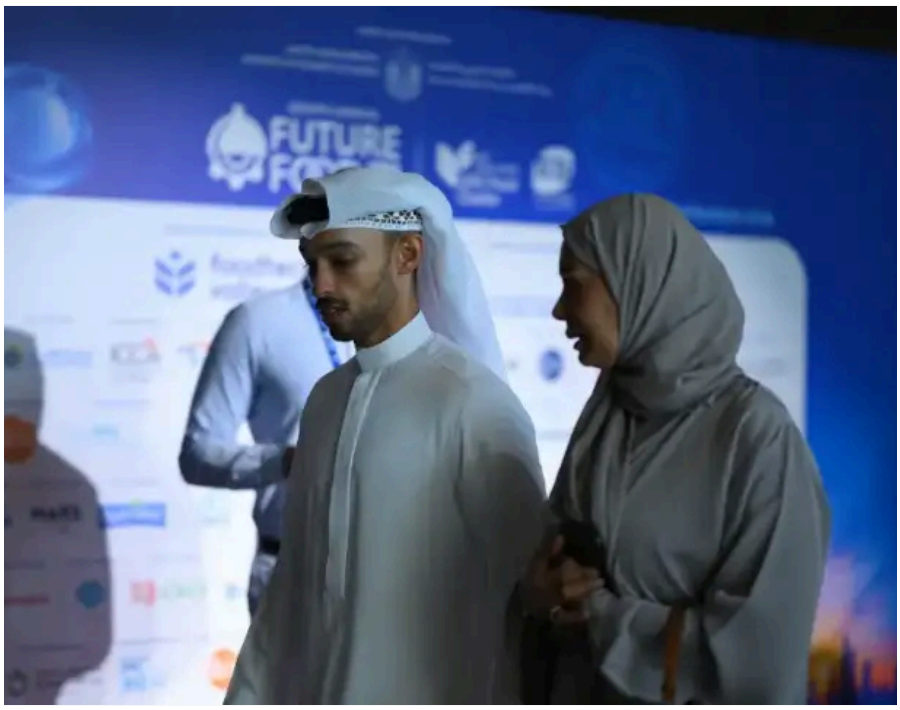


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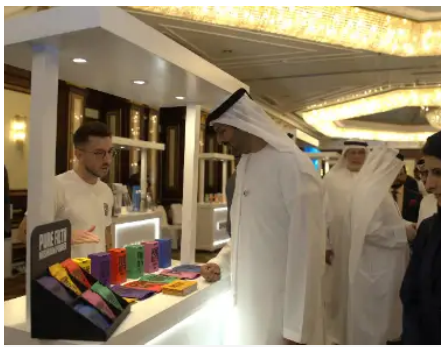




Gallery

















Pavilions


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08 Conclusion

The Future Food Forum 2026 SME Programme demonstrated how the UAE Food Cluster's SME-support mandate can be translated into a structured initiative. Its connected journey - from curation to showcase, pitching, capability building and stakeholder engagement - created more value than a stand-alone exhibition opportunity and established a foundation for continued ecosystem support.

Its strongest contribution was the ecosystem intelligence generated through direct engagement with founders, who met senior stakeholders and prospective partners, while the UAE Food Cluster gained direct insight into the constraints affecting emerging food and beverage businesses. New partnerships and reported MOUs indicate that the initiative created momentum beyond visibility and provide a basis for more structured follow-through.

The programme also established a practical agenda for continued action: ongoing matchmaking, focused retailer and distributor engagement, stronger costing and supply-chain readiness, lower-volume manufacturing pathways, clearer finance navigation and wider incubation support. Converting these priorities into named workstreams and measurable outcomes would strengthen the programme's contribution to SME growth, local value creation and the wider food economy.

With continued UAE Food Cluster leadership and Majra's valued support, the programme can evolve into a year-round platform for responsible SME growth - connecting high-potential founders with the expertise, markets, partners and support systems required to build commercially resilient businesses. The UAE Food Cluster acknowledges and appreciates Majra's contribution to the programme and its role in strengthening opportunities for participating SMEs.

THANKS TO

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