

Brewing up interest in niche markets

organics

GRACE
MAHER



DEPRESSED prices continue to leave many producers feeling powerless this year. The Teagasc Farm Survey for 2015 records the average farm income at €26,526, but this is predicted to fall with this year's low prices in the

dairy and tillage sectors in particular. Without a doubt, farm incomes are linked to direct payments.

For many farmers, once production costs are met, the only profit comes from direct payments. Critics argue if farmers continue to be price takers then they must deal with the consequences of market volatility.

Producing commodity products for a commodity market is generally a safer bet, but leaves farmers with no control over prices.

Farmers producing for niche markets certainly take higher risks but it

can be rewarding on many levels. In addition, operators in niche markets must use everything including their own personal story and product provenance to sell their goods, and this is certainly something that Irish farmers could exploit more.

One of the growth areas is the drinks sector.

Ireland now boasts over 100 craft breweries. According to Adrian Hyde from Munster Brewery in Youghal, Co Cork: "The combined output from these breweries still only represents 2pc of the drinks market here in

Ireland, so there is plenty of room for expansion."

Ireland is certainly experiencing an explosion in small-scale distilling and brewing.

Driven by consumer demand, the level of innovation in the sector is impressive.

Farmers have been growing malting barley for years for that distinctively Irish drink, Guinness. So for many farmers the concept is not new. Many of the smaller breweries and distilleries are working hard to strengthen the link between where

their raw materials come from and the end product. Provenance is the buzz word, with emphasis also placed on crops grown being in specific areas with different soil types that can influence the final taste of the beer or spirit.

Some of the smaller breweries grow their own crops, but there is clearly a role for more farmers to get involved in this enterprising area.

Grace Maher is development officer with IOFGA, www.iofga.org

CASE STUDY

Brothers' 'hops' for the future

TWIN brothers Adrian and Padraig Hyde set up Munster Brewery in 2013.

"It was in the middle of the recession so money was hard to come by. As a result, we grew very slowly and every penny we made was ploughed back into the business. Now we are in a new 2,500 sq ft facility with a fermentation capacity for 6,000 litres of beer," said Adrian.

They currently brew three beers, Blackguard, Fir Bolg and 12 Towers. The aim was always to produce a pure, natural beer.

"For us, we are conscious of what we eat and that followed on to the beers that we make. We want to brew a clean product that we can stand over, so

the logical step for us was to make an organic beer. Hence 12 Towers was developed using organic ingredients, and is now certified by IOFGA. Quality is everything in craft beers, and we love getting feedback.

"One of our greatest challenges is to educate people about small-scale brewing. For example, explaining why you get sediment in the bottom of the bottle, or the different types of grains, hops and yeast used by craft breweries," he said.

Adrian also pointed out the opportunities for Irish farmers, both organic and conventional, to get involved in growing raw materials.

"We would love to source all of our ingredients locally, as that is what local beer is all about.

"But at the moment we are forced to import our raw materials as there are no farmers producing hops locally and very few nationally. We need farmers to look at this seriously.

"For the past couple of years we have grown our own small plot of hops, and while it is not difficult to grow, like all crops it has specific requirements. Set up costs can be expensive but as the crop has an average lifespan of 20 years, it is definitely something that could be grown here in Ireland at farm level," he stressed.

Indications from the craft beer sector are very positive, and as people consume more locally brewed beer it will inevitably lead to more demand for raw ingredients which are also produced locally.



Twins Adrian and Padraig Hyde set up Munster Brewery in 2013 and now have a 2,500 sq ft facility; (inset below) their organic beer



WE WANT TO BREW A CLEAN PRODUCT WE CAN STAND OVER, SO THE LOGICAL STEP WAS TO MAKE ORGANIC BEER: 12 TOWERS WAS DEVELOPED USING ORGANIC INGREDIENTS

PREMIUM PRICES PAID FOR ORGANIC BARLEY

JOHN and Marcella Mallick farm sheep, beef and cereals organically in Tinahely, Co Wicklow. They are in their second year growing organic barley on contract to Boortmalt for an organic whiskey.

"You need to have good ground to grow organic barley, so the barley went in after a red clover ley to ensure good crop growth and weed suppression. The only inputs used are farmyard manure and some lime applications. So far, this year's crop is on a par with last year. In 2015, the barley was the most profitable enterprise on our farm, so it was an easy decision to continue to grow the crop."

Organic barley is a difficult cereal crop to produce as it does not compete well with weeds. So to succeed, it must go into relatively clean

ground. "I think the fact that it is not an easy crop to produce is reflected in the premium price paid to growers. The seeding rate is high at 14st/ac, and I have 27ac in this year," said John.

"This is a product in demand and like, most markets, it is about supply and demand. As a farmer you need to optimise your output and your returns per acre. But you need to follow the market to be sustainable. I am getting a premium for everything I produce here on the farm. Subsidies are one thing, but you also need to have pride in what you are doing, and so for me as an organic farmer it is nice to be involved in something like this that is cutting edge. We are definitely looking forward to sampling organic whiskey made using barley produced here on our own farm," added John.