**The Little Milk Company – organic dairy farmers are doing it for themselves!**

For many farmers they are happy to see their primary product exit the farm gate and leave the processing and selling to someone else. For 11 organic dairy farmers in the south of Ireland they decided that they wanted more control over what they were producing. They formed a co-operative called ***The Little Milk Company***, encompassing farmers from Carlow, Kildare, Wexford, Limerick, Tipperary, Cork and Waterford.

2013 is a big year for the company as they are launching their first product, an organic cheddar cheese, onto the Irish and international stage. They have also handed over the reins of the company to General Manager, Conor Mulhall, so that they can continue to be full time dairy farmers. “They have done the hard work developing the product while farming full time, it is now my job to take the product, contextualise the story and take it to the market and make sure it sells” said Conor. “The real selling point for me is that it is a fantastic product with a genuine story. Our unique selling point is that it is a raw organic milk product, it is a hand made cheese which is rare these days”.

**The Cheese**

The co-operative have over the last 18 months, using their milk produced the cheddar cheese. Initially they went to the UK to work with Val Bines, a renowned artisan cheese maker and worked with her to get the recipe. It is a traditional nineteenth century recipe using raw milk as the key ingredient. Now it is made for them by 2 cheese producers in Ireland, Mossfield in Offaly and Knockanore in Waterford. Once manufactured the cheese is delivered the following day to The Cheese Hub in Drumshanbo, where it is placed in a maturing room in cheese cloth and is then hand turned every 2 days in the traditional way. The cheese is then matured for up to 12 months for the Mature variety and 18 months for the Vintage variety.

**Market**

With any new product the challenge can be to match supply with demand. However one of the main strengths of the Little Milk Company is that they have the capacity to increase production with 11 members of the co-operative. “Consistencey of supply can be a huge challenge for producers particularly with challenges to winter milking, so for us it is a great advantage to have 11 members on board. This gives us a great marketing edge when dealing with the bigger retailers in the speciality sector in overseas markets” said Conor. “We are obviously looking at the Irish market, but also the UK, French and Austrian markets, as we can produce enough cheese to supply the top end markets in these countries. Obviously the Irish market is limited enough in size with a capacity for 5-10 tonnes, the investment costs to get up and running made it essential to look overseas to sell the product”.

**The farmers perspective - Pat Mulrooney, Tipperary**

Pat and Angela Mulrooney have been involved in organic dairying for many years. Pat is one of the pioneers of the sector. When asked why he decided to take things a step further and look at processing he says that for him it was an easy decision. “As a primary producer you become a price taker especially with a commodity product like milk, we wanted to become price makers so we decided to do something about it” he stated. “Under Food Harvest 2020 all farmers are being encouraged to gear up production at huge expense with no financial guarantees. I think that is a dangerous strategy, we don’t have the land structure or environmental capacity to produce those volumes. Those who have gone down that road have found that for the most part it does not pay them to do so”. With almost 30 years of farming experience under his belt Pat sees a dismal future ahead for farmers if they continue with the attitude of business as usual. “The only future I see for famers is to get involved in the market, while it is a daunting task it is essential if they want to run successful and truly sustainable businesses”. Pat continued by pointing out that most Irish farms are family owned and as a result are only viable due to the supply of labour available, once stock numbers increase then so too does the demand for inputs and associated costs.

Pat strongly maintains that he still wants to continue farming. “I have enjoyed the process so far and for a small group of farmers I think that we have achieved a lot. I am very happy with the product, we had great fun getting it to the processing stage, but it did require dedication and organisation on our part as this was a new venture for us all. However in the longer term our goal is to continue to supply our existing markets and to produce a high quality organic product for people to eat, in order for us to do that we need to stick to what we are good at which is organic farming”.

**John Liston, Limerick**

John Liston converted to organic production in 2004. Summer milking is better suited to his farm and he found that year round dairy production was very challenging. “When the price went down and market costs went up I found myself re-evaluating my system”. The group of organic dairy farmers originally were part of a Teagasc dairy discussion group, they had an informal purchasing group and John felt that this was “important as an initial starting point, the group built up trust with individual members, we are a like minded group which is fantastic, if you have any technical problems you have a range of people to get advice from, often conflicting advice but advice nonetheless!”.

The transition into a co-operative was relatively straight forward from there and the group have worked tirelessly over the past 24 months to develop organic products, and to work on a marketing strategy to bring these products to the retailers. “Our cheese is a grass based product, we are delighted with how it tastes and to get to this stage has been a steep learning curve. As producers we felt that we were producing a commodity product and were losing our connection with the consumer. Our aim via the Little Milk Company is to shorten the supply chain, otherwise our message as producers gets lost. We want to be closer to the consumer. Also from the farmers point of view as we have control of our product we are insulated from a price drop”.

As many producers will acknowledge it is extremely difficult to produce quality food and also market and sell your produce, which begs the question why are there not more organic producers working together in either formal or informal groups? Many organic producers will be following the progress of these 11 farmers with interest over the coming months and years and lets hope that it is the start of a new chapter in Irish organic food production.

At the time of going to print sales of cheddar cheese from the Little Milk Company have done well and they have had some encouraging feedback from some of the top buyers around Europe. No doubt the cheese market is a tough market to break into but with this enterprising bunch of farmers I think we will see many more interesting developments not to mention great organic products!

*\*The 11 farmers involved in the co-operative are Mike Keane, John Boohan, Sean Condon, John Liston, Bat Sheehan, John Stephenson, Pat Mulrooney, Fintan Rice, Bill George, Peter Young and Leo Barry.*