

Kitty strikes oil down on the farm at Urlingford

AS the organic movement matures the next organic generation emerges to take up the reins.

Kitty Colchester is Ben and Charlotte's daughter. The Colchesters have a 200-acre organic holding near Urlingford in Co Kilkenny called Drumeen Farm, an organic farm since the mid-1970s.

A central part of the organic movement since then, their mixed farm has cattle (mostly Angus), sheep, poultry, turkey, honey and forestry. They also grow their own feed, which has led to Happy Heart Oil, the latest feather in the bow of this award-winning Teagasc organic demonstration farm.

Daughter Kitty's Happy Heart organic rapeseed oil is divine, really sustainable and perfectly affordable, retailing between €5.50 and €6 for 500ml. It is easy to see why it won the sustainability category at the Bord Bia National Organic Awards this year.

The taste is exceptionally fresh, because it is pressed each week on the farm. In fact, all the work is done on the farm.

Ben Colchester had been growing rapeseed and pressing it, for the protein feed by-product it yields, to feed the chickens and turkeys. This created an opportunity for Kitty. She says: "I'd been in sales, but after doing aid work in Africa for a year, I didn't want to go back to that, I was more interested in doing something on the farm. The oil was an obvious choice."

Having done some research into the nutritional benefits of rapeseed oil, Kitty started pressing, labelling and bot-



Organic Diary

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ting earlier this year. The oil has been a huge hit so far.

"Most oil available in Ireland comes in from southern Europe. It's usually about three to four months old by the time the customers get it, whereas I press weekly".

The nutrition and the taste of the oil improve because of its freshness.

Three times a year, 300 or so customers come to the farm to collect their large organic food orders.

They sell freezer portions, including half and whole beef and lamb animals, butchered to customers' requirements.

A similar poultry service is available. "We do three batches, chicken in June and in September, and then a Christmas turkey run."

"We kill about 1,500 animals here in our on-farm abattoir each time. In June, the oil was also available to the customers, they tried it and they all bought some."

Since then, the distribution base has expanded. The oil is available from Duncan

Healy's Organic Delights stalls at farmers' markets on the east coast, at other mostly regional farmers' markets, including Clonmel, in some regional box schemes, and in various retail outlets in Dublin, Tipperary, Cork, Wicklow and Offaly.

"The rapeseed is rotated every three or four years. We grew 11 acres, but went up to about 20 acres this year. We get 10 to 15 tonnes, and a tonne give about 600 bottles. Next year's plan was to double, but that's been delayed by a year."

Delayed. That's a euphemism. "We won the award for best sustainable product, sales and feedback were going really well, and then we had a fire. I lost the whole crop."

Despite being encouraged to buy oil in for the year, Kitty decided not to. "No, I want to do something different, something 100% Irish and traceable. Buying in and then changing back to my own oil next year would be too confusing for the customer."

She does the pressing, bottling and labelling herself, so the crop loss hasn't been as costly as it might have been. Also, she has enough stock left to keep for the farm sales, and to "dribble out over the year".

Meantime, she will work on branding, labelling and other marketing-related areas.

But watch out for the limited supplies of this year's 2009 vintage, it will be much sought after. And here's to a happy and healthy growing, pressing, and bottling experience for Happy Heart oil from now on.



Kitty Colchester, centre, Drumeen Farm, Urlingford, Co Kilkenny, the woman behind Happy Heart Oil, with Eileen Bentley of Bord Bia and Food Minister Trevor Sargent.