



Original organics

Drumeen farm, established in 1976, is Ireland's oldest existing organic farm, one that pioneered the organic movement long before it became fashionable or profitable

Drumeen Farm in Co. Kilkenny was established by Ben and Charlotte Colchester, in 1976. They were pioneers of the organic movement in Ireland and started farming organically and producing wholesome certified organic food. Thirty-four years on, they are producing beef, lamb, poultry and honey, as well as tillage crops to produce the feed for their animals. "We set up the farm organically in the beginning. I had worked on some very large conventional farms but I had a negative reaction towards some of the practices I witnessed in conventional agriculture," says Ben.

A Changing Market

When they first began, Ben and Charlotte were operating in a much harsher market than they are now, with few financial benefits but Ben explains that they wanted to farm organically for different reasons. "To us, organic means the health of the soil and it means a high priority on the environment and animal welfare," says Ben. While there was not much market for organic produce in the early days, the market has since changed dramatically and according to Ben there are two main reasons for this. The first was when the EU started supporting organic production, and the second was the advent of BSE. "Before BSE, we didn't have a market for organic beef. Then, all of a sudden, there was an enormous market for it. People's attitudes changed," says Ben.

The majority of farm produce is sold directly to the customers, who order what they want in advance. The farm has its own abattoire

so customers can come and collect their meat directly from the cold store. They also supply some turkeys to Superquinn and approximately one-third of their lamb and beef to Good Herdsmen Ltd., the largest dedicated organic meat processor in Ireland and the UK.

Family Business

Following in her parents' footsteps, their daughter Kitty is now also involved in the farm but admits that her interest is a recent one. "I was away travelling and my interest in food just grew and grew," says Kitty. She returned home and saw an opportunity right there on the farm. As Ben produces his own rations for his poultry, he grows his own rape seed crop. They press the oil out and use the expeller as the protein in the poultry's diet. They had never used this by-product to their advantage but Kitty now sells the oil, marketing it as the only Irish organically grown rapeseed oil. Having carried out a feasibility study last summer, Kitty discovered a huge market for the product. "For the five years previous to this, the rape seed industry had been growing and rape seed as a nutritious culinary oil had been growing in Europe, so it was a really good time to get started here," says Kitty. While she got off to a good start, her winter crop last year was fire damaged setting her back an entire year. Now back on track, the next batch is due to be bottled in early September and will be on sale in farmers' markets around the country, as well as speciality food and health stores.