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MONITOR

A slick of green gold

Organic rapeseed oil from Kilkenny is great on salads

I'M ALL FOR local food. Ideally, everything I eat should come from nearby. That is until I come to the question of salad and dressings generally. I am a junkie for olive oil. I just adore it. Bread, tomatoes, salad leaves, what on earth did we ever do before the wide availability of this golden wonder. And then the other day I came across Happy Heart Oil, winner in the sustainability category at the Bord Bia National Organic Awards this year.

I agree, the name is hardly promising. It doesn't quite have the gravitas of any number of extra virgin, cold-pressed Italian, Spanish or even French olive oils. Maybe it's the lack of association with the sun. But then I looked closely at the label only to discover this is Irish, organic, cold-pressed virgin rapeseed oil.

The colour is deep green, golden green, not an Irish green but something far more sunshine-influenced. At least so I think as I pour some over my salad leaves and season with lemon juice, salt and pepper. The result is delicious, more earthy and nutty than olive oil certainly, but very, very good. This oil has a toastiness to it, a certain charm. Think elegance and sophistication but also a bit of farmyard.

HHO is produced by Kitty Colchester on Drumeen Farm in Co Kilkenny. While this county may lack the sunshine quota of Tuscany, it is just as dramatically beautiful with rolling hills and secluded valleys. Drumeen Farm is a self-sufficient organic farm. It's something of a showcase where crops are grown, fed to animals which in turn fertilise the land and so the cycle goes on. Totally closed means just that, all waste is used and no outside proteins are brought in.

Which is where the rapeseed comes in. An ingenious harnessing of the oil from this vivid yellow plant which is cold-pressed on a weekly basis ensuring maximum nutrient value with no damage done to the heat-sensitive enzymes. Indeed, if you live nearby you can pop in on a regular basis and collect something which is so freshly pressed you only need to follow the smell.

So why, I ask Colchester, did she think of turning this yellow-flowered crop into such an interesting oil. Dieticians had started to write about the health and nutritional properties, and fields of it were sitting, literally outside her front door. Was there a eureka moment? Not really, rather the growing awareness that maybe there was another business there.

The oilseed rape is traditionally a source of protein for livestock, so the jump to bottling it was quite a step. Still, the first run of 300 bottles sold out to those visiting the farm who come to buy poultry, beef and lamb. And so it has grown from there. Or at least it was growing.

A few weeks ago the entire harvest of HHO seeds went up in flames, after an accidental fire in a drying tub. What to do? Buying rape seed is very easy but the ethos on which HHO is built – it has to be “right and real” – even in these early days held firm, and Colchester has decided to wait for next year's crop. A brave decision and one that is undoubtedly driven by her belief in sustainability.

In the topsy turvy world that is currently ours, the words local and sustainable are gaining credibility as we are forced and encouraged to refocus our lives. Will I give up olive oil? No, but I have already bought a second bottle of HHO and that makes me one of the converted, I reckon.

Happy Heart Oil is available from Duncan Healy's Organic Delights stalls at Farmers' Markets on the east coast, and at other regional farmers' markets including Clonmel, in some regional box schemes, from specialist retail outlets, and direct from Drumeen Farm, Urlingford, Co Kilkenny (Between €5.50 and €6 for 500ml). harnold@irishtimes.com



IT'S A WINNER
Kitty Colchester (centre), with Eileen Bentley of Bord Bia and Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Trevor Sargent TD