

When success is Second Nature

Kitty Colchester's parents were master fencers and organic pioneers, long before it was fashionable or profitable. And the Kilkenny woman has discovered it's Second Nature to follow in their footsteps, with her award-winning Happy Heart rapeseed oil, writes Maria Moynihan.

In her teens and early 20s, Kitty Colchester wanted to be "anywhere but the farm!" But the Kilkenny woman behind Second Nature Happy Heart organic rapeseed oil – an award-winning 100% Irish alternative to imported olive oil – finally found her niche – doing what came naturally.

Kitty (33) is the eldest daughter of Ben and Charlotte Colchester, who have farmed at Drumeen outside Urlingford since 1976, after re-locating from the UK.

"I think a fortune teller told them they were going to live in Cork, but they found this place instead," smiles Kitty.

The prediction might have been geographically askew, but the Colchesters soon established themselves in the Irish farming community as master fencers and pioneers of the organic movement, long before it was profitable or fashionable.

"Everyone thought they were off their rockers," recalls Kitty. "But my parents worked seven days a week, 17 hours a day, so I think anything they did, putting in that amount of energy, would really have to have been successful."

Despite her upbringing, Kitty confesses that she had neither interest nor inclination towards farming. She spent her teens and early 20s travelling and working in sales, and at 28 was involved in the then-booming Irish motor trade.

But somehow, the financial reward no longer seemed worth it. "I remember coming home one day and saying to my mom: 'I want to sell something "real" instead of cars and ink cartridges: something I believe in,'" she explains. "But at the time, I hadn't thought of doing anything here."

HAPPY HEART OIL

Instead, Kitty spent six months as a volunteer in refugee camps in Ethiopia. The experience left her "food obsessed", and she returned home in 2009 determined to set up her own business.

"My first idea was to do ready-made organic meals, but it soon became apparent that there were huge costs involved, as I would need my own premises," explains Kitty.

"I was actually listening to the Pat Kenny show when I first heard about the nutritional benefits of rapeseed oil. I started looking it up on the Internet and realised there was this whole craze in England. I really wanted to do something Irish, and saw that this could be an alternative to imported olive oil."

With her father already cultivating organic rapeseed for expeller cake – and basic infrastructure like a combine harvester, press and seed dryer in place on the farm – Kitty's initial investment was a modest €7,000 from her savings to cover costs like packaging.

Between June and September 2009,

she carried out a feasibility study on her "Happy Heart" organic rapeseed oil, with an initial run of 2,500 bottles. Milder than olive oil, high in omega 3, 6 and vitamin E and versatile from dressings to desserts, the product whetted the appetite of foodies like Darina Allen and won four major awards, including the Bridgestone

and Euro-Toque honours for taste and the Bord Bia gong for most sustainable product. More importantly, plaudits led to orders.

"I've been in sales for so long that opening new accounts was not an issue, but I found people very supportive," says Kitty.

"A lot of it was just plain, simple curiosity. When I started, I was concerned about repeat sales but then, on the farmers' markets, it was lovely to see customers coming back every week for their bottle of oil. I was amazed; I wouldn't go through a bottle of oil in a week! People like the product."

SETBACKS AND SUCCESS

Sold out by September, the trial run exceeded everybody's expectations. However, the start-up was slammed by successive catastrophes when a fire on the farm, followed by the Christmas frost, destroyed the winter and spring crops.

While "devastating", Kitty refused to buy in seed from Europe, as it would completely compromise her 100% Irish ethos, focusing instead on further research and product development for the September crop.

With 23 acres of rapeseed, Kitty aims to produce 18,000 bottles of oil, which she will sell through the farmers' markets network, artisan and health stores and restaurants like Ballymaloe House with a RRP of €5.95 this year. Though, like most Irish food producers, she expresses frustration at the mark-up some stockists apply.

As demand grows, Kitty hopes to buy organic rapeseed from more Irish farmers. In the meantime, she is running another feasibility study on hempseed oil.

Kitty believes the key to a successful start-up is networking, which is exactly how she met her boyfriend Joel. "He was selling salad leaves at the farmers' market, so I said: 'Would you be interested in stocking a little bit of the oil on your stall?' That's how we got together!" she laughs.

But most important is the discovery that carrying on her family's proud farming tradition is actually second nature. "Confidence wise, that's what made me have the guts to go and do it," Kitty says. "I'm not a risk taker, but because I had their customer base, I thought: 'Okay, I can try this,' and then I started branching out on my own."

"I never thought I would be content or able to make a living from the family farm. It's a real triumph on a personal level."

Rapeseed oil is a healthy alternative to imported olive oil.



Kitty won the Bord Bia gong for most sustainable product.

