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Signs of green shoots

Farms and new businesses may be facing tough times, but that isn't stopping Kitty Colchester from taking on a challenge involving both. Part of an up-and-coming generation trying to make a living from the land, the Urlingford woman is already receiving high praise for her organic rapeseed oil.



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IT is daunting enough starting up a business – particularly when it's your first time and when the country happens to be in the middle of a recession – but winning four awards in the first five months would be plenty of encouragement that you're doing something right.

It certainly has been for Kitty Colchester, a young entrepreneur in 'The Islands, Urlingford.

Since July of this year, Kitty has been producing organic rapeseed oil at Drumeen Farm, where her parents Ben and Charlotte Colchester have run an organic farm for the past 35 years. "My parents were farming organically long before it became fashionable or profitable. And farming organically is much more than just producing healthier food. The health of soil, plant, animal and man is one and indivisible" is a well known quote and something my parents believe in profoundly."

Kitty, however, had little intention of following in their footsteps.

"Before I did this I lived in cities and worked in sales – selling things like cars and computers. Then I went to Africa to do aid work for eight months, and when I came back to Ireland something had

altered in me. I wanted to do something from the land, and I wanted to sell something that I actually believed was doing the right thing," she says.

"Putting more cars on the planet and increasing a population of 'computer heads' is not something I want to do anymore. We don't know what we are actually eating nowadays and there is growing evidence that the chemicals and synthetic fertilisers used to produce our food is directly linked to heart disease, infertility and cancer. The fact that a lot of our food is flown in from all over the world means that the nutritional value has depreciated in supermarket store rooms and airports, not to mention the air miles it clocks up unnecessarily and the jobs it would create here if we stopped importing so much of our food; all the food we need is here on our doorsteps. Where I was in Africa, in Ethiopia, food is about survival; here in Ireland it is taken for granted, little interest is shown in where and how it is produced and that lack of interest is having a big effect on our health, on the health and welfare of our animals, on the soil and on our ecosystem."

She acknowledges the difficulty in choosing organic farming rather than relying on pesticides and synthetic fertilisers, but says that when you're thinking about producing healthy food for people's nourishment, the choice is clear. "Yes, it is more challenging to grow crops organically but organic crops is what the customer wants nowadays," she says.

A comparison for her own product would be like apples and oranges, so to speak. "When you cook with the conventional (non-organic) oil, you are actually eating the chemi-



Kitty Colchester with her Drumeen Farm Happy Heart Organic Rapeseed Oil.

(Photos: Eoin Hennessy/www.ehp.ie)

cal residues used to grow the plant," she explains. "Also with non-organic oils, hexane solvents are used when pressing the seed in order to get more oil from the seed and therefore more profit. With organic oil production there are very strict rules to comply with and these rules are checked by the Organic Trust Ltd, which means that when you buy a certified organic product you won't get any of these chemicals in your food."

"Because I press the oil weekly it means that it is the freshest cooking oil available in Ireland and retains a higher percentage of Omega 3 and 6 and has more cholesterol-reducing fatty acids than olive oil and sunflower oil flown in from abroad. Unlike a lot of oil producers I cold press the seeds instead of using high temperatures which in fact deplete the excellent source of vitamins and Omegas in the oil," Kitty says.

It's not exactly a walk in the park to sustain a small farm either, as larger farms take over the markets worldwide – and as a recent *Irish Times* report noted that there are currently more third-level stu-

dents than farmers in Ireland.

"If you are going to try to make a living from a small farm, you need to diversify and you need to find a niche for your product," Kitty notes. Which is exactly what she has done. "The idea itself was even 'organic', if you'll excuse the pun.

"My father has grown rapeseed for the last five years on the farm for the by-product 'expeller cake', which is very high in protein and is very good as animal feed for the chickens and turkeys that he sells directly from the farm. So he had bought the press and the land etc, and all I had to do was bottle the oil," she laughs.

"Of course it wasn't that simple though.

"I had been doing car sales and then I took the year out and came back, and I knew nothing about farming, organics, the food industry or cooking oil," Kitty says.

It is clear that she has good business sense, however, and boosted it by completing an Enterprise Ireland 'Start Your Own Business' course.

She is also determined not to let any setbacks deter her from her plans to

produce "the best possible Irish cooking oil at an affordable price". Even a fire in the farm's drying machine in September is not stopping her, despite destroying the entire harvest of rapeseed and delaying the major rollout of her Rapeseed Oil until next summer.

"I was encouraged to buy in seed from Europe for this year, but I decided to wait until next July

when my Irish crop is ready because I want the oil to be affordable and if I buy it from abroad I have to factor in that cost financially and morally. Also I want the oil to be 100% traceable from field to plate and I want it to be fresh, but most of all I want it to be Irish," she says.

In the meantime she is sourcing equipment to bottle and label her product as the demand is too large to

continue doing it manually – at least, that is, when she isn't collecting awards. Most recently she won a 2009 Food Award from Euro-toques, the European Community of Chefs and Cooks, "for producing an innovative and sustainable quality farm product".

She had already won a JFC Innovation Award for a Rural Business plan and her Happy Heart Organic Rapeseed Oil was named

"Best Sustainable Product" by Board Bia. It is also highly recommended by the Bridgestone Guide.

More importantly, she seems very happy pursuing this idea, and creating and selling something she truly believes in.

"I never thought I would be content or able to make

a living from the family farm," she laughs. "It's a real triumph on a personal level as well."

Indeed.

For more information about Kitty Colchester's Happy Heart Organic Rapeseed Oil, tel: 087 9265423 or email info@drumeenfarm.com.

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