

Young homeowners are beating the crunch by working from their kitchens producing organic food. **Mark Keenan** hears how they did it

Have you been laid off from your job? Are you reading this at home in your kitchen while pondering the future with some dread? If so, ask yourself whether you are capable of nipping across to the cooker and baking a cake. Or can you make cheese, or bread, or wine, or beer, or jam, or a burger?

If you attended a music or arts festival this summer and bought a burger from the Clanwood Farm organic catering trailer, you will not only have eaten some of the healthiest fast food available, but you will also have put money into the pockets of no fewer than four thriving small Irish food businesses — three of which have been set up in their founders' homes since the recession started.

Orla Clancy, the Offaly-based farmer's wife who started the Clanwood farmhouse food brand just as the economy was beginning to crumble in 2006, earns a decent income from her organic soups and burgers. Hers is one of hundreds of businesses which have been started with few resources from their owner's kitchens.

Many of these new businesses were showcased during the Irish food board Bord Bia's Organic Week, which winds up today. The excitement they generated made this year's event one of the most vibrant to date.

Perhaps Clancy's burgers are symbolic of an exciting new Ireland of opportunity: food-based, 100% local and organic, with all its components supplied from other new businesses in the locality, all of whom help each other — a back-to-basics approach that we do well in Ireland and arguably lost during the Tiger years.

Clancy's Aberdeen Angus beef paté comes on bread baps organically baked by Jonas Hein, a former chef who runs a smallholding and farmhouse bakery with girlfriend Layla O'Brien, a former marketing executive, at Coolfin outside Banagher.

The lettuce and onions are supplied by Tony Garahy, who runs a vegetable box scheme from his Lough Boora organic farm outside Tullamore, while the cheese is Mossfield, a gouda-style cheese made from pasteurised organic cow's milk and vegetarian rennet by Ralph Haslam from his home and organic dairy farm outside Birr.

Clancy exchanges her own organic eggs for Garahy's lettuces and all of their produce is regularly piled into O'Brien's van and taken to be sold by her in big city farmers' markets.

Those who are keen to restart their careers but are unable to access bank loans or afford premises can draw inspiration from the Do-it-yourself spirit of enterprise and co-operation displayed by this emerging Irish organic kitchen movement.

We spoke to four of Ireland's newest businesses, all of whom started their enterprises in their own homes in the thick of recession and with nothing more than what they could muster up in their own homes.

KITTY COLCHESTER Second Nature Oils, Kilkenny

Kitty Colchester's parents, Ben, an Englishman and his wife Charlotte, a south African, were "mad hippies" who moved to Ireland to start the "good life" as organic farmers in the 1970s.

"I didn't buy into that and from an early age I was always searching over the horizon for something," says Colchester. She hit the globe running at 18. "I travelled from country to country and did every job imaginable for over a decade."

As she neared her thirties, Colchester decided to volunteer and took a flight to Addis Ababa where she asked directions to the nearest orphanage. "I spent nearly a year in Ethiopia. It taught me about food security and I suddenly realised that what my parents had been doing in Ireland was hugely important in the greater scheme of things."

On her return in 2009, she asked if she could develop a business from the family's organic rapeseed crop — at the time, the only 100% organic seed crop in Ireland. The "cake"

part of the plant was being used for animal feed, but the oil was a by-product used only to power their farm machinery. "I had heard

on the radio about the nutritional benefits of organic rapeseed oil, and so I began to bottle it and sell it," says Colchester.

"My boyfriend let me sell it on his food produce stall at the farmers' market. It was received extremely well. We received a 40% grant from the Organic Trust for bottling and labelling equipment and I took a Teagasc course in organic food production, which was excellent."

"We took it to shops, craft butchers, artisan food stores and top restaurants. It helped that Ross Lewis of the Michelin-rated Chapter One restaurant was an enthusiastic customer from the start. It caught on quite fast because within three months we were on the RTE news."

Colchester sold 18,000 bottles of her gourmet oil last year and expects to shift 40,000 this year. She is now buying organic seed from two other Irish farmers and last Monday her Second Nature Organic range was voted Ireland's best organic product by Bord Bia.

"My father kept me grounded and Africa eliminated the fear," she says. "If you find yourself out of a job, do something, do anything. Volunteer for something — it will give you an idea to start your own business."

Homemade careers