

# Women Who Launch

WORDS: LIV MORGAN

» "When you're growing food organically it is a little like Russian roulette," says organic rapeseed oil producer, Kitty Colchester. Of course she is referring to the hit or miss nature of a guaranteed crop. The 34-year-old Kilkenny native set up Second Nature Oils as a sole trader in 2009.

Born on Drumeen Farm to parents who were pioneers of the organic movement, long before it was fashionable or profitable, Kitty spent years travelling, doing various jobs and volunteering before she entered the world of entrepreneurship.

"Approaching 30, still not having found my niche in life, I headed off to Ethiopia to work in orphanages, food camps and refugee camps. After nearly a year I started to see my place was in Ireland and that I wanted to start my own business which would be involved in sustainable food production," she says.

On her return to Ireland, Kitty had notions of producing organic ready-made meals. Though, some would say, fate stepped in to put her on the right path; "When I was on my way back from the airport I heard Pat Kenny on the radio talking to a nutritional dietician about the health benefits of rapeseed oil." In the knowledge that her father, Ben, was already growing the seed and pressing the oil to create expeller cake, a high protein feed for poultry, Kitty's entrepreneurial seed was sown.

She commenced with a Start Your Own Business course with Kilkenny County Enterprise Board, followed with an Organic Production course with Teagasc and then some market study. "I did some research on the Internet and couldn't find anyone else doing it in Ireland so I decided to go for it. My boyfriend was working on the farmer's market in Clonmel so I asked him could I go along, sell some

oil and see what the feedback was. That's how it started," recalls Kitty.

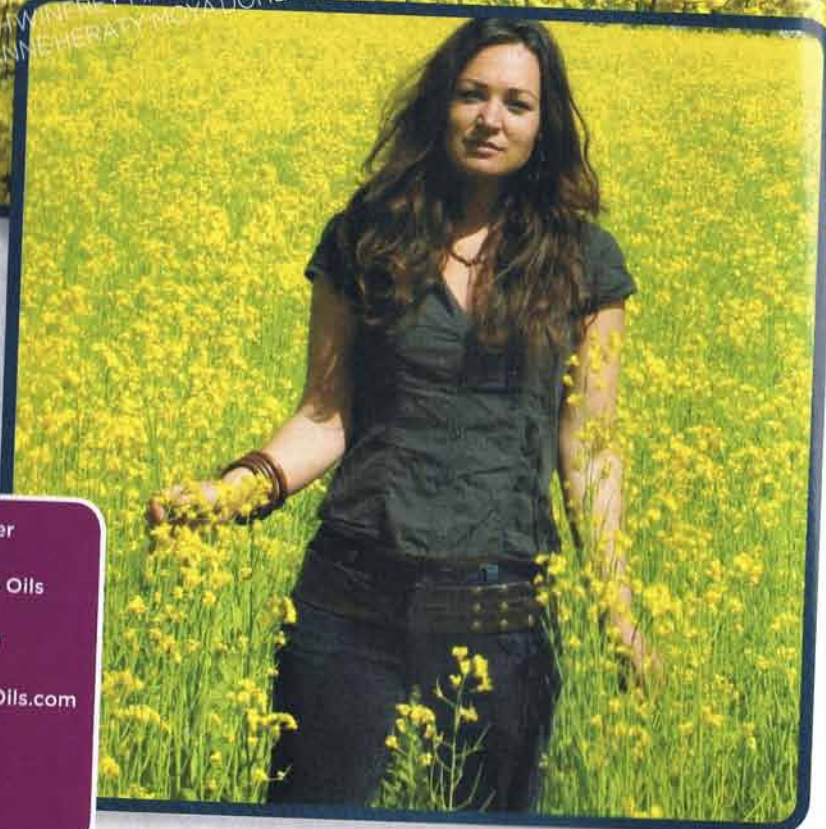
Second Nature Oils began with sales of 2,500 bottles. In 2011 Kitty has forecast sales of 40,000. The popularity of the oil soared once people became knowledgeable of its benefits; organic cold pressed extra virgin rapeseed oil has a higher content of Omega 3, 6 and 9 — cholesterol reducing fatty acids — compared with olive and sunflower oil. Hence Second Nature Oil's reference to it as the 'Happy Heart Oil'!

In true entrepreneurial spirit, Kitty viewed the swift emergence of competitors as a positive. "Very quickly, I think within the first season, a few other companies started doing rapeseed oil. I think every season since then, in the last three years, there has been a new company producing rapeseed oil in Ireland. But they are doing it conventionally, we don't tend to compete head on. I concentrate more on the organic sector."

Second Nature Oils remain the only culinary oil grown organically and a leader in freshness with oil cold pressed once a week, bottled immediately, so no sitting in settling tanks, and distribution happens within days.

These competing companies had much bigger marketing budgets and so spread the word about rapeseed oil more effectively than Kitty was doing at grass roots level. "My plan was initially to keep it local. When the other companies started to emerge, I sort of presumed we'd all stay in our local area but it didn't really work out like that! So then I started to spread around the whole of Ireland."

Getting the word out about 'Happy Heart Oil' didn't phase Kitty; she had five years experience in cold calling and field sales work with a company



Colchester  
Second Nature Oils  
2009  
SecondNatureOils.com



who produced ink jet cartridges. What was daunting, was approaching the larger supermarkets who she felt may shun her for not being 'professional' enough.

The answer? She targeted upmarket gourmet and organic stores, cheffing schools and restaurants across the country. She describes the process as an organic one. In her first year of business Kitty's rapeseed oil received the Euro-toque Award leading to her meeting with industry veterans like Ross Lewis and Darina Allen. Within three months of Kitty's pioneering venture, Second Nature Oils was featured on RTÉ's Six One news and a host of accolades have proudly been updating Second Nature Oil's website since.

Most recently, Kitty received the Best Overall Organic Product Award, at the Bord Bia National Organic Awards 2011, for her Happy Heart Organic Garlic Flavour Irish Rapeseed Oil. Chilli and garlic flavoured oils were introduced to the range in September this year. "I needed to develop new products and that really stemmed from distribution problems. I was driving around the whole country with plain rapeseed oil and I just thought 'this doesn't make sense, I may as well have a few other products to make it worth my while.'"

With the garlic flavoured oil only in its infancy, it was a surprise to Kitty to win the overall award at the National Organic Awards 2011: "I thought let's enter it into the awards because there's a really good judging panel and I can get some feedback and see where I need to go in order to bring it to market. I was thinking a runner up prize would be great! So I was absolutely delighted. Things like awards mean so much to customers."

Last year Second Nature Oils didn't meet demand, running out two months early, so this year Kitty has grown three times the amount. With two harvests a year, and no other employees (apart from a helping hand from her brother when needed) Kitty works flat out seven days a week, twelve hours a day. "But I love it, it's not work. I often feel like somebody is going to tap me on the shoulder and say 'come on now, get back to work!'"



(L-R): Aidan Cotter from Bord Bia, Kitty Colchester and Shane McEntee (TD, Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with responsibility for Food, Horticulture & Food Safety). Pic: Gary O' Neill

## YOUR MENTOR

If I had to pick only one, I would say Darina Allen. Her energy and work ethic is incredible. Her passion, networking skills and ability to build a successful business with so many members of her family and in-laws is admirable.

## YOUR TRAITS

Hard working, focused and pro-active.

In profit for the second year in a row, Kitty puts her success down to three things: one was timing, two was being completely ready with heaps of energy and three was pure luck! For Kitty, there is a sense that her whole life has led to where she is now in a strange kind of way.

"Two years before I went to Africa I did a job that made me lots of money with the intention of doing just that — making lots of money — and I lived in a place where I didn't have to pay rent. I basically saved every single penny I earned, put it in the bank, and went off to Ethiopia for a year; where I spent about €200 because you can't really spend money there. When I got back I had a lump sum of money and it was my intention to do something with my life as it were! To either start a business or get an education.

"So I had a little bit of money behind me but also my father had bought the farm 30 years previous, bought the press in 2006 which costs c.€7,000 and the seed dryer which costs c.€40,000. He had the premises, a loft, and a packing shed for me to use, so all I had to buy was a bottling machine, a labelling machine, a capping machine, labels, bottles, lids and a car!"

For those who are looking for the catch, well, Kitty admits, "paying myself a salary is still a bit tricky!" And her analogy of growing food organically being like Russian roulette is very apt with finches, pollen beetles and weather taking the role of potential saboteurs. "You are very open to all sorts of problems so the yield and the actual crop isn't always guaranteed."



Also, in 2009, a seed dryer fire on the farm left Kitty's production reduced to just one crop. "I just sat tight. I was absolutely determined to continue so I grew the business for about nine months without any stock."

Main expenditure lies in the purchase of rapeseed which Kitty buys from her father, and the distribution that she does herself mostly. "I'm still trying to get customers' feedback and insight, and I'm still doing business development so this is the cheapest way of doing it."

According to the latest organic market research from Kantar, the Irish organic sector is currently valued at €103 million (August 2011). Kitty believes the general attitude towards food is changing, "Since the recession there's a lot more people at home and a lot more people thinking about food and cooking. The cooking shows on television have really taken off and the cookery schools have really thrived in the last few years. So I think since a lot of people are at home and a lot of people are turning toward food, they're thinking more about the quality of their food and local food and fresh food."

One consumer study carried out for Bord Bia in May 2011 found over 1.5m Irish adults had purchased organic food in the previous week and 73 per cent of consumers are either very likely or fairly likely to purchase organic food in the future. Despite encouraging statistics, Kitty says there's still a long way to go: "The perception is still very much that organic food is a rip off and in many ways in the boom time it kind of was." Producing organically can make it harder for the figures to add up, explains Kitty, "We get one tonne of seed per acre and we get 18 per cent oil per seed whereas conventional rapeseed oil producers get two tonne of rapeseed per acre."

"I wanted to produce a rapeseed oil that was very good value. For a long time I was selling my rapeseed oil, an organic oil, at a conventional rapeseed oil price, I could when I didn't have to pay for land, the combine harvester or any of that since my father already had done that."

### 3 WISHES IF YOU HAD A BLANK CHEQUE?

- Invest in a purpose built unit for processing and storage of larger quantities of raw material in order to increase production to meet the demand.
- Employ a product development manager to create an Irish organic health oil blend, salad dressings and pesto sauces.
- Employ a production manager for pressing, bottling and labeling.

In 2009 when Kitty's Happy Heart Oil won runner up in the National Organic Awards judges urged her to improve her packaging as they thought she should be charging a lot more for it. "I felt very strongly the opposite way — I wanted to sell a good product at fair price with no frills and that's what I did for the first two years." In recent months Kitty has added the small increase of 75 cent to her oils and in turn upmarketed her packaging to reflect this.



As to whether Kitty would consider taking on a farm herself, now that demand for organic produce is growing, she is quick to highlight that she's not a farmer, rather "a networker and sales person". "I have all sorts of plans. I'm restricted in the sense that I'm squatting on my parents' farm at the moment. I hope to invest in a purpose built unit in the next few years and employ somebody for pressing and bottling and labeling; that would give me more time to concentrate on other things. I would love to do an Irish organic health blend — like an Udo's Choice oil, or a salad dressing, pesto sauce, mayonnaise."

Within these ambitions for new products, are there plans to export Second Nature Oil's ware? Although Kitty has made alliances with other artisan food companies who are exporting to Dubai, America and Australia, she's hesitant: "It's very new to the Irish market and I think in the UK it's fairly saturated. In Europe it's certainly cheaper to produce so I think I'd have a tough time. It might work in artisan stores abroad just because it's Irish but it won't be fresh, which is what I was trying to achieve and it won't be local, which is where my heart is. Having said that, if I can't sell all the oil here and I can't make a living here and there is an export market, then I may have to do that. But it's certainly not my plan."