

A Tipperary farm where hens go out to graze

Kylie and Billy Magner produce pasture-raised eggs and pasture-raised chicken. Kylie provides some background to starting a poultry enterprise, and producing an award-winning chicken bone broth.

How did you start farming?

I grew up on a farm in Australia and Billy's background has been in the equine industry in Ireland. In 2016, Billy and I took the decision to leave Australia, along with our four children, to return to Ireland to a small farm, that we previously purchased back in 2004. We started out with some sheep and cattle and hens, but we soon began to focus on the hens as an enterprise. Hens return cash on a weekly basis, which as you can imagine is not the case with cattle or sheep.

We began by selling eggs from the few hens that we had; and my son Finn, who was eight years of age at the time, was soon onboard with the enterprise. We kept the money in a jar and when we had enough money to buy more hens; we bought more hens and it just really all developed from there. In October 2017 we started in earnest, buying 150 commercial laying hens from James Ryan, a breeder from Cork. James gave us some great advice on infrastructure and how to manage the hens and we started off selling at farmer markets.

Pasture-range

We didn't have any experience in poultry management, so we possibly approached things slightly differently. We allowed our hens out on grass where they 'creep graze' like cattle or sheep, topping up on fresh vegetation and natural food from the soil during the day. Soon our eggs began getting really good reviews and lots of people began buying on a regular basis.

Last June we bought another 300 hens and again our markets continued to grow. We sell our eggs, as we collect and pack them, which means that they are really fresh. Our motto is that the 'happiest hens lay the healthiest eggs'. We really want to ensure that our hens are kept to the highest welfare standards and hopefully the standard of our eggs are higher because of that. So that's where the term 'pasture-range' arose from.

Our hens are classified as free range, but we further refine that by saying, that they are also pasture-range. I think it shows to our customers that we are going that extra bit for the chickens' welfare. So even now when we go to market, people might say to us, 'are you really putting them out on grass everyday'? And we say, 'listen come back and have a look for yourself at our hens on our farm, because that's how they live - they all live like that'.

Nutrient density

Our birds are happy and free to act like a hen should, which includes digging, looking for morsels and rooting around, looking for bugs and worms and things like that. A chicken isn't really a vegetarian and there is a limit to the amount of vegetable protein you can incorporate into a chicken feed. We still feed a commercial feed to our hens, but our hens probably eat considerably less bought-in feed because they are not standing around the sheds all day with nothing else to do - so they are outside eating their own food from the pasture.

We believe that our hens benefit from the additional protein they receive, directly sourced from the natural foodstuffs, within their pasture-based environment. Our research shows that pasture-range eggs have four to six times more nutrition than hens that are non-free-range. The most interesting part of that is vitamin D, which makes sense as the hens are outside in the environment and in a position to absorb additional vitamin D.

Coeliac

A family from Cork with coeliac disease approached us and said that they found it hard to buy eggs for their children, from hens reared on a lower-grain diet. They explained that their children were sensitive to the more common, high-grain diet that hens are normally fed on. Interestingly, when they started buying and consuming our eggs, they said that their children didn't have any more reactions.

Following on, they then asked us to start growing some chickens for their table. Initially it was something we really didn't want to get into, but we did as a bit of a favour for them and thought 'we have hens to produce eggs, so why not produce chicken'?

We carried out a bit of an experiment over the summer and we put 300 hens through the same sort of free range-pasture lifestyle that we give our egg-laying hens. When we got back our first batch from the processing plant, the difference in the quality of the chicken was unbelievable. It was like a different product with a completely different texture.

Awards

At the end of last year, we were also delighted to win the Chefs' Choice Award in Dingle for our Chicken Bone Broth in the Blas na hEireann, Irish Food Awards which is the biggest competition for quality Irish produce on the island of Ireland. When we won, we were on a bit of a high and somewhat overwhelmed by the whole atmosphere and excitement of it all.

What is your target market?

We sell a lot through our local farmer markets at Cahir and Fethard. Initially, we thought that our customers would be your typical foodie, interested in either provenance or in health but interestingly we get customers from across the board. It's not just older people - it's young mums and dads with children, middle-aged people, people from ethnic backgrounds, older populations - it's really quite diverse. People buy from us regardless of the price because they perceive them as being of superior quality.

Five years' time

I would love to develop more products based on the bone-broth. I really love the idea of nutrition and to help educate lots of people about it, not only for adults but also for kids as well. Helping re-establish that connection with where our food comes from. The plan would be get more products out there and continuing to develop the whole nutritional and ethical ethos.

Advice for fellow entrepreneurs

Never ever give up - there's always going to be bad days and the good days, you must hang on to and enjoy. It's also important to enjoy the little achievements just as much as the big ones. Try and keep an open mind, talk to people, research and always be open to new ideas.

Interview by Brendan Byrne