
Harvesting the wild Atlantic waves

The story of Achill Island Seasalt is one with roots that go deep into the history of this wild, untamed island.

Achill is by far Ireland's largest island and the sea that surrounds it has been the lifeblood for generations of people living there. Since returning home, some twenty years ago, Kieran and Marjorie O'Malley have renewed that maritime link, by establishing Achill Island Seasalt on Achill Island in Co. Mayo. It's a simple story but one which continues to resonate with both local and visitor alike.

Marjorie tells how in 2013, this enterprising family became producers of an artisan sea salt, reviving the hand-harvesting of sea salt on Achill - after a gap of some centuries.

Why sea salt?

In 2012, I had been watching a fascinating documentary on sea salt production on the west coast of Wales. It was about a family who had started making sea salt in their family kitchen before turning into a full-time business which intrigued me. I remember telling Kieran about it, and he began reading up on the history of Achill.

In the early 1820s, a missionary gentleman arrived on the island to proselytise the local population. In one of his biographies, he referenced the remnant of a sea salt factory. We researched further and discovered that salt pans were also noted on many historical maps. In an earlier 1700s map, it says 'salt point', so we knew that a history of salt making was here on Achill. It was this, along with help from our daughter and two sons, that provided the motivation to start the business.

Our sea salt is unique to the area around our coast, where you have fresh water coming off the cliffs, mixing with the seawater – creating the ideal conditions for making our Achill Island Seasalt. It has a very high mineral content, and none of it is stripped away, as can be the case with processed salt. We initially made it in our family kitchen and although the process of making it is not difficult, making it on a small scale and being energy efficient can be problematic.

A 10-litre pot of seawater produces 10 grams of salt, which means that it takes a lot of saltwater and energy to create a single jar of salt. We then dried it in the oven and packed it for sale in plastic containers. The salt has a nice soft and flaky consistency compared with the more coarse sea salt you get in some grinding jars. All the family were involved, but at that stage, we couldn't imagine how it was going to develop. We then began test marketing at the local market to see how people would react to buying a product from Achill.

Initial interest

Our first port of call was to the very well-known butcher, Sean Kelly in Newport who put it out on his shelf. I can recall his first reaction when he said, "It's about time somebody did this".

We also got terrific support from Aaron McMahon of Café Rua, Castlebar who introduced it at a chef's symposium in Galway. Jessica Murphy from Kai Restaurant in Galway also began using it. She loved its softness, along with not having to grind it and being able to control the amount when adding to a dish.

In September 2013 we were picked up on social media by Ella McSweeney from 'Ear to the ground' who filmed in our kitchen, and from there it all seemed to take off.

Family support

In March 2014, we moved our production from our kitchen into a Portakabin next to our house, helped by funding from Mayo LEO.

Our eldest son had just graduated from college and qualified for the graduate competitive start fund from Enterprise Ireland, which allowed him to work there for a year. It was a huge help and meant he could trial and work out on how to upscale our production into our own bespoke manufacturing process.

Then in September 2016, we moved into an Údarás factory at Bunacurry where we have been located ever since. In July of 2016, our daughter graduated as a microbiologist from UCD, and she came back to work in the business for a year. She was able to develop all the HACCP plans as well as look after all our social media, and even our youngest son who was still at school at the time helped out with the packaging and labelling of the product.

Creative branding

In April, we changed all our packaging over to the glass and extended our range into smoked salt as we felt we needed to extend the range. One has a blue lid, and the smoked salt has a black lid,

helping them both stand out. Since then our sales have quadrupled, so the changes we made have been very worthwhile.

Along the way, we were delighted to collaborate with Carrs of Killala, Co. Mayo who are renowned smokers of salmon and have been a tremendous support to us. When you open a smoked salt jar of our salt - you get a sweet, strong aroma of the smoke. It tends to flavour or season food a little bit differently, and indeed if used on tomatoes you can really taste the difference.

We had a lot of people calling to the factory, asking could they call in and buy our salt. Because of this, we converted two former packing rooms into a small shop where we also stock and sell products that contain our sea salt. Products such as Lismore biscuits, Noo Chocolates from Ballina, Proper Chocolate from Dublin and Joe's Farm Crisps from County Cork.

We have recently opened a visitor centre to show how we make salt, along with information on the history of salt-making on Achill and further afield.

Our customer base is varied across retail, catering and food ingredient. The food ingredient people have come to us – such as Lily O'Brien's and Wilson Potatoes and we also have a range of distributors from La Rousse Foods, Sheridan's and Taste the View.

Geographically we now supply most of Connacht as well as Donegal through the excellent SuperValu Food Academy.

Biggest surprise

We have won many awards and regularly receive orders from all over the world from places such as the US, New Zealand and Japan. We also have the satisfaction of seeing our salt on sale in the shops, but the reaction from the local community has been our biggest surprise. They really got behind us and supported us and adopted the product as their own.

Tips for fellow entrepreneurs

It's great if you can get the family involved because in the early days it can be tough to get a return on the hours that you put into the business. We also find that it's critical to keep a handle on cash flow. I also think that when startups are trying to raise funds from multiple sources, it's probably best to be as realistic as possible with your projections. That may mean having the first year's milestones as attainable as possible so that if you do need to go back to lenders, they will be more open and willing to help you.

Interview by Brendan Byrne