

An interview with Wexford's Food Producer of the Year

Regan Organic Farm is small family farm that produces oven-ready organic chickens and chicken portions. Here, Mary Regan provides some insight on the successful journey that has led her to farm the way she does.

What initially attracted you to farming and to study agriculture at third level?

These days, possibly due to a faster pace of life, children appear to spend less time outside as compared to previous generations. However, growing up I felt particularly fortunate, being able to work outdoors, developing a love for nature, growing things and being surrounded by animals. Over the years, I have found that nothing beats the peace and beauty of being outdoors and the benefit that it affords me. Nevertheless, you are your own boss and on a farm every day is different, and I believe that this can encourage a certain level of independence. After secondary school, I chose to study agriculture to learn more about the science of farming and to get a job working in agriculture. I wanted to gain exposure across all aspects of farming, as well as to provide an additional income stream outside of my farm.

What insight have you gained from working in agriculture?

An insight from working in agriculture would be that the majority of farmers are passionate about what they do and the way of life they have. All they or that I want to do, is to make a living by getting a fair price for our produce. They put in long hours and are very resilient, however their passion sometimes comes before correct business decisions.

What were the challenges from rearing cattle to farming organic pig and poultry?

My late father Tom was a multi-talented farmer and many of the sheds that are on the farm were built by him for cattle. Chickens require very specific housing, so initially trying to adapt existing sheds to rear chickens was a challenge. In addition, a major challenge was getting information on rearing chickens organically. There were very few people with any knowledge of outdoor chickens and there was very little encouragement or supports available from any government bodies.

What was your initial route to market?

We were very fortunate when we started producing our organic chickens, as it coincided with the start-up of the local Enniscorthy Farmers' Market. We invested in a stall canopy, a refrigerated van and display fridge and we were able to sell directly to customers and get feedback from them. Our business grew by word-of-mouth from there.

Are consumers becoming more interested in organic food?

Consumers are becoming more interested in organic as they start to question how their food is produced and why so many people are getting sick and suffering from allergies. They are also interested in animal welfare and want to be assured that animals are well cared for and are free to exhibit normal behaviours.

What's been the feedback from customers?

Feedback from customers has been hugely positive. We get feedback such as 'chicken tastes like chicken used to taste like', 'what you put into the oven you take out'. Customers also say that although from first appearance, the cost of an organic chicken looks expensive especially in comparison to conventional chicken. However, if utilized correctly there are many meals to be had from one, due to the size and stock or soup made from the carcass. So, it is actually good value for money as well as being completely natural.

What have been your biggest successes to date?

My biggest success to date was this year winning the Wexford Food Producer of the year.

What's next for the business?

I'm in the process of developing an organic pâté using produce from the farm, from the meat, right down to the eggs and onions. I am also looking at doing an organic chicken bone broth using chicken feet which are high in collagen, as a product that can have great healing properties. I also want to open a food premises where produce from the farm is used in menus and the produce and other local produce is available for sale. We also do farm tours and I'm hoping that this side of the business will grow as I think its important for people to see how their food is produced and to learn about organic farming.

How important is networking for business?

Networking is very important for business. However, like many small businesses we don't have the resources of both time and money as large companies have at their disposal. So, to have a network of like-minded people, to touch base with on many aspects of a business is very advantageous.

What trends do you see in farming?

Trends that I see in farming would be a continuing consolidation of farms. I think the smaller beef, tillage, sheep farmer numbers will continue to diminish. The number of part-time farmers will also reduce as that era of farmers' children will not want to continue to work full-time and farm part-time for little or no return financially. Dairy farmers will continue to expand and there will be more zero grazing habits practiced. Large tillage farms will also grow to try and justify the cost of machinery and inputs.

Have you any time for side hobbies or interests?

I like reading and I play some racquetball when I get time. I am also a member of Wexford Naturalists.

What makes it all worthwhile?

Positive feedback and comments from people are always a great boost. The fact that I love doing what I do and the satisfaction that the food produced here on the farm is done the way it should be done. Animals are free to range grass, clover, weeds, herbs etc and get no pesticides, herbicides, GMO products or antibiotics makes it all worthwhile for me.

[Click here to find out how you can grow your farm](#)

Interview by Brendan Byrne

Published: 14 November, 2019