

Cashel Blue cheese ready to dominate Europe

Cashel Blue is a 100pc family farmhouse, focusing on quality cheese production, linked with a desire to keep the family living and working on the family farm. Co-owner, Sarah Furno provides some background to this innovative Tipperary farming enterprise.

What was the light-bulb moment in the decision to produce blue cheese?

My parents, Jane and Luis Grubb, came back to the farm and established the milking herd some forty years ago. I can recall my father travelling to the RDS Spring Show to visit the big dairy co-operative stand, who at the time were importing a range of speciality cheeses into the country. He approached them asking, 'why are you importing blue cheese, couldn't someone make that in Ireland?' In reply they turned and said, 'why don't you give it a go?' Then after some initial market research, my father decided to accept the challenge and to do just that. One of the issues he had to overcome was sourcing the relevant technical advice, as both the Irish cheese industry and academic research were focused on cheddar cheese production. Over the years we have expanded our range, investing in packaging equipment to provide the consumer with a farmhouse product in a convenient format. In addition, to our classic cow's milk Cashel Blue, an organic version has been developed as well as a new hard sheep's milk cheese which goes by the name of Shepherd's Store. We also work closely with other Irish specialty cheese producers to present a range of top-class Irish cheese to buyers at home and abroad.

How important has networking been in helping grow the business?

We work across many different networks such as the Irish Farmers Cheese Makers and the International Guild of Cheese. Bord Bia have also created a great network among Irish food producers and manufacturers. In addition, we ourselves have reached out, creating other networks across family-owned dairies in Europe.

What role does innovation play within the business?

Innovation is important but you need to be careful not to lose focus on your core business. I think you can be innovative in different ways and looking at new markets is a form of innovation. Interestingly, you don't find much Irish dairy produce in Australia, whereas we derive six percent of our businesses from there and we think that's quite innovative of us. We pasteurise but don't homogenise our milk which means that there is seasonality within it. I really enjoy managing the taste and quality of our product and its selection for different markets. Finding a piece of good Cashel Blue, at the other end of the world, indicates that we are really managing our supply chain very well.

We've recently launched our products in an organic supermarket chain in Germany and look forward to further developing the Cashel Blue brand within mainland Europe. As you can imagine, it takes time and perseverance, combined with an understanding of the retail culture there, along with the fact that you're working in different languages. In the US there are always risks around trade and tariffs and for that reason I want to see more growth develop within the Eurozone. We've also developed a good loyalty in France, particularly in the main market at Rungis in Paris, based on building solid relationships over a long period of time.

Who do you admire in business?

I really admire Ballymaloe because it comprises three generations of a family with a range of different businesses. The family have a clear focus on quality and premiumisation and they're so respected, having built a great international reputation which is something I really commend.

What has been your biggest success?

I think our biggest success involved helping create a category for sheep's milk within Ireland. We built up our own sheep flock before eventually selling the ewes outside of the family. We now buy back almost 100pc of the milk produced by 1200 ewes which in addition has created breeding stock for other sheep farmers. I believe there are now a total of 1600 milking ewes in the country which I appreciate is quite small. However, I like to see diversification outside of dairying as it can play a role in helping sustain farming into the future.

What makes it all worthwhile?

I think we are so lucky to have that connection with the land and being able to produce something that's so real. I also like the fact that you can go to into a shop in many places in the world and see our products displayed on shelves, which helps provide one with an amazing sense of satisfaction.

Interview by Brendan Byrne

Published 14 August, 2019

Pictured are Sarah Furno with her father, Louis Grubb. Photo by Brian Gavin, Press 22.