

Durrow Mills' Lisa Larkin: 'Rural start-ups have extra challenges'

In a new series, we talk to female entrepreneurs who are forging innovative businesses in rural Ireland. Today, we talk to Lisa Larkin from [Durrow Mills](#).

In recent weeks we [reported](#) on how women in rural Ireland with new businesses or at least with well-developed ideas are being invited to join [ACORNS 6](#). The ACORNS programme is designed to support early-stage female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland through a peer learning approach.

Thanks to the support of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and the voluntary contribution of time by Lead Entrepreneurs, there is no charge for those selected to participate.

The call is now open for applicants for ACORNS 6 and fifty female entrepreneurs from across the country will be selected to participate. Anyone interested in receiving an application form ahead of the September 21, 2020 deadline for ACORNS 6 should [register their interest here](#)

Today, we speak to Lisa Larkin who changed career and moved from Dublin to Kilbeggan in Co Westmeath to set up [Durrow Mills](#).

What is the problem you are trying to solve and the size of the market you are addressing?

Durrow Mills came about as I was looking for a flour that was gentle on the system, healthy and nutritious and organic. When you start looking at what you eat, you realise that flour is in so many products. So why settle for a lower quality when we eat so much of it? With a huge rise in people experiencing digestive issues related to foods, in particular wheat, I realised that an alternative was needed.

Sprouted flour ticked all these boxes and is on trend State side. While this is a relatively new product to the market, the potential is huge as flour sales in Europe alone are €67.5bn per year. The flour market has also remained relatively unchanged for a number of years and there is definitely potential to shake it up. Timing has been key and we have been lucky that there has been a move away from cheaper processed foods to more local artisan quality products. This trend is easy to see with the big rise in popularity of sourdough bread in the last year and our flours have fit very well into the ethos of this trend.

What is your core product and service about and how does it work?



Our core products have been to produce a range of Organic Sprouted Flours for retail and also for trade such as bakeries and food service. Sprouted flours take a few days to manufacture as the grains need to be soaked, allowed to germinate or sprout, then dried very gently over a long period of time and finally we stone mill them fresh to order. Our most popular flours are our range of sprouted wheat of which we have 3 products – fine milled, coarse milled and a blended bakers mix, while also making sprouted rye, buckwheat and spelt. We sell direct to both retail and trade customers and are also selling through two distributors since the start of the year, and are currently in the process of launching a new e-commerce website to maximise our online demand which has particularly grown since the Covid- 19 pandemic this year.

What are the experiences that encouraged you to become an entrepreneur?

This was my first foray into running a business and it mainly came about as the job I was working in was highly specialised and I was commuting over four hours per day. As I have a family I needed to be more flexible and work locally. Living in a rural area this was more challenging as there were no opportunities in my specialty where we live. Becoming an entrepreneur seemed like the most obvious and exciting solution.

What are your impressions of the start-up ecosystem in your region and in Ireland in general?

I think that Ireland has a very favourable start-up ecosystem and there is many supports there to access. Local Enterprise Offices are fantastic when you are starting out and can inform you of all the supports open to you. I also availed of an excellent programme called New Frontiers run by Enterprise Ireland, which was for six months and helped to really move the project along and realise the scale of where you need to be and also what funding you need. This is where I applied successfully for the Enterprise Ireland Competitive Start Fund which has been invaluable to get the business off the ground. Finally, I found ACORNS which was particularly amazing as it was directed to female entrepreneurs starting businesses in rural areas. There are many supports out there if you need to access them and I would highly recommend doing this as setting up a business is a tough journey.

What are your thoughts on the start-up environment in rural Ireland from the perspective of being a woman entrepreneur?

Generally, I think the start-up environment is challenging for anyone regardless of where you are based. When looking at rural start-ups though there can be a few extra challenges such as access to broadband, availability of skilled workforce, distance to market and also in the early stages, isolation. This makes it all the more important to access any start up supports available to help you on your journey.

How did ACORNS help you navigate the start-up landscape in Ireland?



ACORNS has been one of the keys to navigating the start-up landscape. It has provided membership to an amazing network of people, that are supportive and helpful and have either experience in the journey you are taking or going through the same stresses and strains of an early stage business. It has provided mentoring of the highest quality, peer to peer support and friendship, while also helping to promote businesses in its network. It is run by Paula Fitzsimons who is very inspirational and motivating and you don't want to let her down!

Are you raising funding at present?

We are looking to expand as demand increased dramatically this year with everyone baking at home. We have also started to export and would like to increase our capacity to service all of Europe while increasing our product range also.

What are the biggest mistakes or lessons you have learned so far?

The biggest lessons I have learned from my journey is that just because you have no knowledge or experience in a particular area of the business doesn't mean you can outsource it. You need to have a basic knowledge in all areas so that you can make sure everything is running as it should be. As the company grows you will have to delegate jobs but at least you can keep a close eye on each area and realise if something is not running as it should.

What advice do you have for fellow founders?

My main advice for budding entrepreneurs is to network and access as many supports as possible. Peer support has been invaluable to helping get over stumbling blocks while getting the business off the ground.

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Published: 28 August, 2020