

## Book your place at 'Food Series 2018'

**Blas na hEireann celebrates the best of Irish food producers and more importantly, it has created a network of Irish producers that work together. Pat Carroll looks at the rise of the Irish food awards.**

On Monday, November 12, Bank of Ireland will host the 'Food Series 2018' at its Limerick Workbench. Local Blas na hEireann 2018 finalists will attend and showcase samples of their produce while the *Blas 2018 Buyer's Directory* will be also be launched.

**It's a free-to-attend event and all are welcome to register [here](#).**

### The start of Blas

When people hear the word 'startup' they often think of a tech firm, striving to be the next Stripe or Amazon. However, Ireland has a rich and diverse history of food startups, and more producers are emerging every week.

One person who came from this world and wanted to highlight our best food producers by raising their profiles both in Ireland and internationally is Artie Clifford. Eleven years ago, he established Blas na hEireann and the Irish Food Awards were born. In its debut year, there were 400 entries, this year over 2,500 applied to have their products judged. Initial judging takes place in UCC and is a month-long task which brings each category down to the top five in that category to move forward to the finalist round. The finalist judging brings the very best of food and drinks to a panel of 120 judges, judged over two days.

### Big buyers

Over the years the event has become one of the year's top highlights for Irish food producers, buyers and the hospitality industry. In fact, in addition to all the main Irish supermarket groups being present, buyers from Harrods, Selfridges as well as Fortnum & Mason all now attend, to identify the best of Irish producers so they can secure the best of Irish produce to offer to their discerning customers.

Clifford summaries the three principles of Blas na hEireann as follows:

1. Recognise and reward the best of Irish products and the producers who make them.
2. Create a network of Irish producers to work together, so 'Ireland Inc.' can go out to the world and be proud of what we do.
3. Create the recognition for consumers of the quality of these products and support all Irish producers who work so hard to make quality food.

## The medal that drives sales

The coveted Gold, Silver and Bronze awards across 141 categories are now a well-established feature across all Irish retailers' shelves. Research has shown that the Blas accreditation is hugely respected by Irish consumers with 78% of those surveyed recognising the brand and 65% claiming to purchase based on this reassurance of quality. Here's a short video capturing Blas na hEireann 2018 in Dingle.

"It's great to have the support of Bank of Ireland to bring Backyard at Blas back to Blas na hÉireann for the second year. We saw first-hand the success of the space and talks last year and have received great feedback throughout the year from our producers," says Clifford.

## Finance to help food producers to scale

Even though food producers may win Blas awards, they often face cash flow challenges when wanting to take their products to the next level. Take for example the scenario where a food producer has won a Gold Award and is approached by one of the multiples. In this type of case, John Doyle, from Bank of Ireland Finance and a judge at Blas, advises that they should not proceed too fast, nor be afraid to say no.

Doyle suggests that they put together or revisit their business plan, if they already have one and keep it simple - certainly no more than five pages. They should engage with their bank as early as possible who will then help put together the best proposal for them. It may mean taking three or four months to get to that level, but the food producer will then receive the advice that they really need from a financial perspective.

"In banking circles, if a Blas na hEireann badge is on a product or we read it on a business plan, it shows us that producer has an accolade measured against their peers in Ireland on their produce," says Doyle.

## Backyard at Blas

While the centrepiece of Blas na hEireann's Irish Food Awards is the actual competition, networking at the event has become an integral part of its ongoing success.

Last year Bank of Ireland joined forces with Blas and sponsored, 'Backyard at Blas'. This area was established as space where food producers could attend panel discussions by food writers, and industry experts who offer practical advice and insights. It also acts as a networking space where all these people who share a passion for great food could engage and do business in relaxed surroundings. The look and feel was inspired by Bank of Ireland's Workbenches.

## Using a Workbench

There are over a dozen of them now throughout Ireland. They are spaces where you don't have to be a customer, and you don't have to book. You just come in and receive free Wi-Fi, tea, and coffee. The spaces give food producers, SMEs and startups a chance to bump into other people, network and meet potential business partners and clients. "It takes people away from that lonely kitchen table scenario with their laptop to this space where they can network with other like-minded small businesses," says Pat Carroll, community manager, Bank of Ireland.

For more insights into Blas na hEireann's Irish Food Awards, check out the latest episode of the excellent ['Chew the fat' podcast](#) by GastroGays based on their visit to this year's Blas na hEireann event.