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## Donegal producers unfazed by Brexit

### **We asked food producers in Donegal if they are worried about Brexit. Their answers are both surprising and encouraging.**

The growing strength of the food sector in Donegal was demonstrated clearly when almost 120 food producers, chefs and buyers attended a packed-out event hosted by the Donegal Food Coast – Donegal’s Good Food Initiative.

Local producers, Hugh Wilhare of Mulroy Bay Mussels and Lee Gildea of Gildea’s Butchers also joined a panel for a discussion on how food producers and buyers could make the most of growing opportunities, particularly with Brexit looming.

Eve-Anne McCarron from the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) in Donegal said the purpose of the event was to encourage producers to create more jobs for the local economy in Donegal.

“This came around after producers and restaurants approached us saying ‘we want opportunities to speak to one another and find out what business we can do together’, so we decided to run with it. The big challenge facing producers here is scaling their business and finding the route to the market,” she said.

#### **The benefits of Brexit**

The food industry in Ireland is expected to be massively impacted by the UK's decision to leave the EU, but Donegal's LEO believes that opportunities will come off the back of Brexit.

“Brexit is bringing good business practise if nothing else. We know that more change is likely to come and no one knows what's going to happen. We're telling people to be aware of where their business is at, and that's just good business practice anyway. Understand your suppliers and understand your risk areas and then deal with the rest.

“To me, Brexit gives businesses a chance to stop for a moment and really consider where the business is going and then pursuing that,” she added.

### **'Brexit made us look around'**

Derek Walker, who set up Natnoot – the natural nutrition company which produces certified organic wheatgrass and healthy juices, says Brexit has already had a positive impact on his business. “We worked with suppliers in England but we decided to pull back and source more local suppliers which turned out to be a success for the company. Brexit made us look around and we found Irish suppliers fulfilling our needs at a better price.”

Andrew McElhinney from O'Donnell's bakery, which has been exporting products into Northern Ireland for a number of years, is excited by the opportunities that may arise from Brexit. “I don't see Brexit as a threat. I think it will be a positive for me. I'm seeing a lot of businesses looking to run away from it, but we've decided to run right for it.”

### **Exporting further afield is easy**

Hugh Wilhare, who started Mulroy Bay Mussels over thirty years ago when the mussel industry was in its infancy in Ireland, changed the company's exporting strategy after finding tough competition when exporting into the European markets. Just last year, the company began exporting into the Asian market which Wilhare says was the company's "big break".

With Brexit fast approaching, Wilhare said other exporters should consider markets further afield and that it's not difficult as people think. "Initially, I wasn't sure because I thought it was going to be really difficult for me but it really wasn't. My biggest problem is getting product from Donegal to Dublin – getting it to Asia is the easy part. It's definitely something other businesses should look to do now that exporting to the UK is going to become a problem."

The vision of the Donegal Food Strategy is for the entire community to work together to make Donegal famous for its food production. Having talked to so many food producers it is clear that they are not fazed by Brexit and are instead embracing the uncertainty as an opportunity to look for bigger markets and better ways of doing business.

*By Stephen Larkin.*