

Double diversification: a recipe for success

Organic beef production and a catering contract add up to sweet returns for this Laois couple

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Like many farm families, Tom and Gemma Dunne came to a point where income became an issue. Remarkably, they have been able to increase the family income and improve their quality of life by seizing opportunities and following their passion.

The couple purchased their farm in Ballinaslee just south of Durrow (Co Laois) in 1998; built their family home; and have been innovators and entrepreneurs for 20 years.

"Gemma has had a great interest in food from an early age and studied home economics to leaving certificate," says Tom. "She spent a lot of her free time reading cookery books, experimenting with recipes and adding her own twist to them."

While working off farm, Gemma started to upskill herself by completing a number of cookery courses in the evenings and weekends, travelling as far as England to do a bread making course.

"With the arrival of our first daughter, I gave up my day job but continued to have an interest in food, keeping up to date with food trends and attending short cookery courses as time allowed," says Gemma.

Working locally in the Manor Hotel, Abbeyleix, Gemma focused her skills

on making pastries. She completed a two-year professional chef course through the professional cookery traineeship section of Fáilte Ireland.

Course

Meanwhile, Tom was also "upskilling". Through the Laois Rural Employment Partnership (LREP) he completed a course which was aimed at farm families to identify other sources of employment and income. The course was delivered one day a week over ten weeks. Topics covered included business and financial planning, looking for alternatives and life coaching.

"I was so astonished at how positive Tom was after it, that I joined the next course," says Gemma. Part of the course was to identify your individual skills and strengths. The couple quickly realised that they could turn Gemma's talent for cooking and Tom's "people skills" into a way of generating extra income. "It made perfect sense to us, to try and build on our individual strengths," says Gemma.

Direct-selling

The opening of the Naas farmers' market provided Tom and Gemma with an opportunity to do that and see what type of a cash boost this could provide without having to make any large investments. Together, they could deliver the two key skills needed – baking and selling.

Every Friday saw Gemma baking a range of pastries, brown breads and scones; the following day Tom loading them up travelling the 45 minutes to Naas. Gemma was happy to do the baking and Tom enjoyed the selling and banter with the customers, they quickly established a dedicated following of customers every Saturday at the market.



Sweet or savoury, Tom and Gemma Dunne meet the customer's wishes. Their catering business dovetails well with their organic beef production.

produced grain from a neighbour and he takes land from us to grow organic horticultural crops," says Tom.

Tom is very happy with the transition to an organic farming system and in his own words "has never looked back". Since Tom has changed the system to drystock, it fits in very well with the catering contract he and Gemma fulfil. "I'm back on the farm every afternoon and I am able to do whatever needs doing with relative ease," says Tom.

Advice

Asking the Dunnes if they were to do it all again or would they do anything differently, they both have the same opinion that "grabbing the opportunities and going with their instincts" have worked out for them in the last 20 years.

Some words of advice that Tom and Gemma would give are to "learn and read as much as you can, 'don't be afraid of making mistakes'. Maybe you also have a talent or hobby that you're passionate about, take a look at the possibility of turning it into a recipe for success.

Opportunity

Following on from the farmers' market another opportunity came along for the Dunnes. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in the Government offices in Portlaoise needed someone to run the restaurant in the building. Tom and Gemma won the contract and have been there ever since.

A typical day is as follows: they arrive at 8.15am and fresh bread, scones, muffins and cakes are prepared and baked. Soup is made fresh every day, along with main courses, which could be a choice of beef stroganoff, quiche and a vegetarian option. There is also a salad bar.

Again, this job is a team effort with Gemma very happy in the kitchen baking and cooking while Tom is out front meeting the people.

Organics

Over the years, a suckler-to-beef enterprise had been established on the farm. After a couple of difficult years, Tom "felt that there had to be a new opportunity out there to justify my efforts and input".

He started looking at organic farming as an option and saw it as an opportunity to improve the overall financial position of the farm. After careful consideration, the farm entered organic conversion in 2008.

With the increasing number of drystock farmers entering organic farming, Tom recognised the availability of a supply of quality stock for finishing and the suckler cows were sold.

Animals are bought, fattened and sold directly to the organic processor Good Herdsmen. Most of the animals purchased are sourced directly from other regionally located organic drystock producers. "I source organically

USEFUL LINKS

- Irish Local Development Network: <http://ildn.ie/>
- Local Enterprise Office (LEO): <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/Training-Programmes/>
- Fáilte Ireland: <http://www.failteireland.ie/Business-supports/Upcoming-Training-Workshops.aspx>
- Skillnets: <http://www.skillnets.ie/about-skillnets>
- Education and Training Boards (ETB): <http://www.etbi.ie/etbs/directory-of-etbs/>
- Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine: <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/organicfarming/>
- Teagasc: <https://www.teagasc.ie/organics>