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BUSINESS

A Tipperary farmer who is as busy as a bee on the shores of Lough Derg

Ailbhe Gerrard jumped from building to artisan farming. She has never looked back, writes Louise McBride – July 9 2017

Nine years ago, Tipperary woman Ailbhe Gerrard was working on Dublin building sites as a project manager. Little did she know that she would soon be far from the concrete and cranes of Dublin and instead running her own farm in her native county - where she would become an expert on bees and organic farming.

Gerrard founded Brookfield Farm, which is based on the shores of Lough Derg and specialises in artisan food, about six years ago.

“Brookfield Farm is a farm I bought myself with all my own money,” said Gerrard.

“Before the economic crash, I had been working in Dublin in construction, as a project manager. After the crash, I studied sustainable development in London. While studying that, I thought about what my next big project could be and decided it would be food and farming.”

Gerrard is from Nenagh originally, about half-a-mile from Brookfield Farm.

“I really believe in farming and agriculture,” she says. “Before I set up the farm, I could see the potential for a medium-sized farm that could be economically viable and also provide a place for wildlife to thrive. The old traditional farms did that;



Ailbhe Gerrard, founder of Brookfield Farm: ‘My farm is a little like The Shire in The Lord of the Rings. It gives shelter and food to all its animals and bees’. Photo: Brian Gavin Press 22

they didn’t impact negatively on biodiversity and wildlife. I’m carefully designing the farm to be sustainable environmentally, socially and also economically, so that I can make a living from it.”

Since December 2014, people have been able to buy shares in the farm’s beehives, a product known as hiveshare. “I was trying to think of a way that people could have some ownership of the farm -and that’s where the hiveshare idea comes

from.”

The shares that can be bought range from one-eighth of a hive to a full hive. A full share of a hive in the farm, which is called the ‘Queen Bee’ hiveshare, costs €430. A quarter share, called the ‘Bee Meadow’, costs €260. An eighth of a hive, which is called the ‘Bee Garden’, costs €95. Each hiveshare comes with its own gift box, certificate, and jars of raw honey - straight from their hive.

There is a big demand for the hiveshare product. In the first year that the product was launched, 75 people bought a share of a hive.

“Now I have 120 customers and that’s the maximum I could take,” says Gerrard.

Each year, the customers with hiveshares are invited to a honey celebration on Brookfield Farm, where all the refreshments are themed around honey.

“There are farm walks, treasure hunts for children and a barbecue in the evening,” says Gerrard. “People also get their share of the honey here. I lose money on the honey celebration but it’s important to build relationships with the people who buy hives and this event helps to really connect with them.”

One of the main attractions of the hiveshare is the jars of the farm’s raw honey that come with each share, as raw honey has advantages over the blended honeys bought in shops, according to Gerrard.

“A shop-bought honey is typically a blend of honeys from a lot of different countries,” says Gerrard. “My honeys are not blended and they are much fresher. It isn’t heated above 40 degrees, so all the natural health-giving enzymes and pollens are present in the honey. This is unlike imported honey, which has to be pasteurised, so a lot of its goodness is lost.

“Irish people are big honey eaters but a lot of the honey bought in shops here is imported.”

It is hard to produce raw honey in Ireland and this is largely down to the weather, according to Gerrard. “Summer 2016 was so dull and damp that there was almost no honey.”

To help in the farm’s production of raw honey, she has about 12 acres of bee-friendly plants and plants on her farm, including red poppies, crimson clover, phacelia, cornflower and linseed.

She cites John’s Delight as one wildflower mix which she particularly likes.

“This mix flowers from May and June right through to November, giving a range of forage for bees and other pollinators.”

The farm plans to produce its own ivy honey. “Ivy honey is a very particular Irish honey. It wasn’t sold for years because people thought it was too bitter, but ivy honey has similar qualities to New Zealand’s Manuka honey.”

Brookfield Farm also sells various gifts, such as beeswax candles and beeswax lip balm.

“People love the beeswax candles for burning at dinners as they don’t want to burn paraffin candles around food,” says Gerrard.

The farm’s candles and lip balm, as well as its jars of raw honey, are also sold in gift boxes. Its various candles and gifts are sold in a number of shops, including So Collective in Kildare Village, Cow’s Lane Designer Studios in Dublin’s Temple Bar, the Irish Design Shop in Dublin, duty-free shops in Shannon Airport and in shops in Wicklow’s Kilruddery Estate. They are also sold online (at www.brookfield.farm) and at fairs and shows.

Lamb is the other big product sold by Brookfield Farm. The farm’s lambs have their own distinctive flavour because they eat the flowers and foliage around the shores of Lough Derg, such as wild mint, wild thyme, wild strawberries, and honeysuckle, according to Gerrard.

“The lamb is delivered straight to the customer from the butcher as a half or a whole lamb, generally cut to the customer’s specifications. It’s really popular. I have to increase my lamb numbers next year to meet demand.”

She employs up to 12 people on her farm at any time. “I hire people for different projects,” says Gerrard. “The employment is seasonal and

project-based.

“The area that I am living in is very economically deprived. Part of the ethos of this farm is to bring life back to areas hit hard by the recession.”

One of the projects the farm is involved in recently grabbed the attention of Britain’s Prince Charles. The project involves the meticulous repair of an old dry-stone wall surrounding a wood at the top of a hill overlooking Lough Derg. The farm received a grant from the Heritage Council to cover some of the cost of this project.

“The project is keeping the traditional skills alive and also training others. It has proved to be quite an interest for neighbours too, who drop by to see the work and progress.

“It was because of this project that I was invited to meet Prince Charles on his recent visit to Kilkenny in May. He was very interested in the project.

“My parents had a farm in this area originally but they had to sell it. My dad had cattle and horses. A country upbringing is great for children as you learn skills and self-reliance.

“In farming, you get your share of losses and it’s great to know that you can get through those.”

Although having a farm on the shores of a lake sounds ideal, it can be challenging.

“Distances and getting around can be a challenge,” she admits. “Because the lake is so long, it’s virtually a coastline.”

She clearly wouldn’t trade her farm for anything, though.

“Lough Derg is extremely beautiful,” says Gerrard. “It’s like a hidden secret.

“My farm is a little like The Shire in The Lord of the Rings. It gives shelter and food to all its animals and bees.”

www.brookfield.farm
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