



THE MAKING OF A FARMHOUSE ICE CREAM MAKER

Thomas Baldwin's story

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As a young farmer, Thomas's innovative and dynamic approach characterises some of the qualities needed to survive and thrive in farming today. A variety of factors contrived to bring him to where he's at now, managing a dairy farm and running a successful on-farm business. Having studied at Kildalton and Clonakilty Agricultural Colleges, and having spent six months on placement in New Zealand as part of his training, Thomas earned his farm management qualification in 2004. He faced some choices at this point. There were plenty of opportunities to work abroad or elsewhere in Ireland. However with his father looking to wind down his involvement on the family holding, Thomas was keen to return home to take on the farm.

It was clear from the beginning that a supplemental income would be needed, alongside what the farm could provide. Initially Thomas worked part-time off the farm. He was keen though to take on something else that would bring a greater degree of stability to his farming in a climate where milk prices were constantly fluctuating. He looked to the work of a neighbouring farmer who had been running a successful cheese-making business for many years. He could clearly see that consumers were looking for produce that was locally produced, naturally produced and traceable. They wanted product that they could have confidence in. They would place greater value on a product where they knew the man who made it.

In the meantime, the farm itself needed attention. Thomas wanted to increase his herd. He also needed to modernise. He availed of dairy hygiene, farm improvement scheme and farm waste management grants in order to ensure the farm business itself operated to a high standard of excellence. He upgraded his milking parlour and increased his herd to its current size – 65 Holstein Fresian cows, producing about 80,000 gallons of milk.

It was around this time that Thomas came across an ad from a Dutch company in the *Farmers Journal* for ice cream making equipment. He wanted to learn some more. He travelled to Holland to see the equipment in use and to talk to some producers. Having satisfied himself with regard to the suitability of the venture for his own situation, Thomas returned home to begin in earnest the job of building an on-farm enterprise.

He needed a plan and he needed premises. Waterford LEADER Partnership was able to help with both. With LEADER grant aid of 50% of his costs approved, Thomas set about building premises. By December 2006, he had received training and recipes for ice cream making, and had signed up for back-up and support services through the supplier of the equipment. He made his first batch of ice cream and continued to refine the production process over the next number of months.

Alongside getting the product right, Thomas needed to build a customer base. Again, Waterford LEADER supported him through a marketing training programme. Alongside the programme content, Thomas found the networking within the class was of huge value to him. Although his classmates were involved in different industries, they found that they were all facing similar challenges – staffing, distribution, breaking into new markets, etc. They learned a lot from each other and Thomas managed to drum up some business from one of the participants.

Open for business!

By summer 2007, *Baldwin's Farmhouse Ice Cream* was open for business. Building sales was now the focal point. Thomas hit the road, approaching local restaurants and shops with a proposition for them to buy a local quality product that is fully natural and is made with the farmer's own milk and cream. While the work was hard, it began to pay off with a number of local outlets signing up. A pivotal aspect in the development of the business, Thomas notes, was joining the Dungarven Farmers' Market and the Midleton Farmers' Market. "We had a bad run of weather in the early days so it wasn't great from a sales point of view. But the people I met there, the contacts I made were very good. From there I got to go to food festivals, to meet 'foodie' people and to get my product out there." As things developed and as his own selling skills improved, the Farmers Markets brought in more and more sales. Using the Farmers' Market as a platform, he then got his product into one of the more popular supermarkets in Midleton.

Reflecting on this very busy time, Thomas says "I was learning so much then. I'm glad I didn't get too big too quick. I certainly made mistakes but because the business was small, I could cope with those and learn from them. If you made the same mistakes with a bigger business, you wouldn't get a second chance."

Thomas explained the benefits that his enterprise has brought. "I can get more money for my milk by putting it into ice cream than I could get at the co-op. The ice cream business itself is also profitable so I'm gaining at both the farm end and the business end." Thomas spends most of his time on the ice cream business, particularly during the busy summer months. His father is in a position to pick up the slack on the farm during the day. The business contributes to the local economy and employment, with two part-time workers employed during the summer and one part-time worker for the rest of the year. Looking to the future, Thomas notes "I'm learning all the time, but I'm confident that I can build the business so that I'll be making serious gains over the next couple of years".

Baldwin's Farmhouse Ice Cream is an on-farm business that is maximising the value of the milk produced on the family farm. The sales strategy is built around the fact that the producer is local, producing both the raw materials (milk and cream) and the finished product himself. As such, he can guarantee the freshness, taste and traceability of a quality ice cream that is fully natural with no additives or preservatives. And the taste on a warm summer's day? Delicious!

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