

How ice cream kept award winner Thomas down on the farm

It's hard for young farmers when there is little opportunity to expand, and with both parents depending on the land as well. Ice cream solved the dilemma for

Thomas Baldwin, reports



Center Power

IT ALL started in 2006," says Thomas Baldwin at his dairy farm cum ice cream production facility in Knockanore, Co Waterford.

Baldwin was the top Teagasc dairy graduate in 2004, and a Farm Start Awards runner-up in 2005.

"I got the award in 2006 and I got a scholarship to go to Holland and Belgium, touring around farms in the countries.

"I went to one particular farm where they were making ice cream. The idea caught my eye. After that, I did a bit more enquiring."

He made contact with the manufacturers of the ice cream making machinery — a Dutch company that had developed a device especially adapted to making ice cream on a dairy farm. Baldwin bought into a package which included training him in the use of the machine.

Suddenly, he was an ice cream maker with expensive machinery and a handful of recipes. The idea needed further development and investment. He got in touch with his local LEADER representative, and found that his project was in line for 50% grant aid.

He decided to incorporate the ice cream making facility into plans he already had to build a new milking parlour.

"It took about a year to get set up properly. We were ready to go in early 2007, we were passed in June of that year, and ready to sell to the public in July 2007.

"At the time, it seemed like things were moving slowly, but we had a lot done within the year. In fact, we had the ice cream unit up and running a year before the new milking parlour."

Baldwin's enthusiasm for the idea boiled down to his wanting to stay on the land, and specifically on the land where his home place was. The dilemma facing a lot of young farmers nowadays is how to make that work financially, when there is little opportunity to expand, and with both parents depending on the land as well.

Having graduated with some distinction in farm management, recognition of Baldwin's prowess was manifest in the form of a number of farms giving him the opportunity to bring his talents elsewhere.

"I'd offers to go farm managing up the country, but I wanted to stay put... My father was very active on the farm, and still is. At the time, I was looking at the situation where we had 50 cows, and wondering "where do we go from here?"

Milk prices were down at the time and what I really wanted to do was to make the farm viable for the two of us from the point of view of farm produce, without going down the road of leasing more land, and then possibly not getting paid enough from the whole exercise."

His quest for an alternative enterprise was partially inspired by the success of his near-neighbour, Eamonn Lonergan, who had been running a successful cheese-making enterprise for some time alongside his dairy farm.

What Baldwin found was a product for a niche market that wasn't being filled locally.

Three years on from the start of his ice cream business, his time is split more-or-less evenly between ice cream related activities and the more traditional ones associated with dairy farming.

"My father would have everything to do with the farm, and nothing to do with the ice cream. I'd be solely in charge of the ice cream. At the same time, I'd be very much hands-on in the farm. I'd have a huge say in what goes on in the farm, and it's certainly not a case of me having left the land."

His routines in both ice cream and dairying are based on seasonal factors. As one is picking up, the other is slowing down "Although it's not the ideal situation, I'm very much jumping from one activity to the other at the moment. At this time of year, you could have one day a week making ice cream, another day delivering, and maybe another day doing office work or going out on the road selling or collecting money. "This time of the year, it would lean towards the ice cream, as you get into the middle six months of the year. Towards the fall of the year then, it leans back towards the farm again, so it kind of fits in together, to be honest. From a seasonal point of view, our busiest time on the farm would be December, January and February, and as we come out of the busiest time on the farm, the ice cream starts picking up. Right now, everyone is thinking ahead to the summer months and the holiday season, so it lifts, and then tails off at the end of the year."

Marrying the two activities and running both successfully is feasible at this point in time, and a lot of it is achieved with a typical start-up scenario of help from family and friends mixed with taking on occasional part-time staff.

How things will fare out in the future is another question. "I suppose, as a farmer, you're always thinking ahead in terms of generations to come. It will be interesting to see how things fare out when my parents aren't around any longer. That day will come, so there's no point in saving otherwise,

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AN enterprise like Thomas Baldwin's throws up a very different set of perspectives for someone coming from a line of generations who've worked their farm.

"I suppose farmers are very often asset-rich and cash-poor," says Baldwin of one of the main paradoxes of farming life. "You're in a great position, but your hand is tied behind your back. There is a certain pressure when it comes to farming, trying to live up to standards and to inherit a farm. There's so much money that gets tied up in a farm. For example, we had a Hy-Mac in the other week that cost us €1,500 worth of digging. The work had to be done and the investment had to be made, but in a way, you're still no better off from it.

"What I notice about the ice cream is that it's very much cut-and-dry: you have visible profit and cash-flow. It's easy to see what's happening in it. Where farming can swallow up money without visible return, I've often seen investment in the ice-cream business pay off instantly.

"When I was thinking about buying the ice cream cart (for selling to the public), I scratched my head and wondered about it for a while beforehand. It was over €4,000 but, as someone had advised me, you simply have to sell your product, and it has paid for itself many times over. If I was to go out and spend that sort of money on machinery for the farm, you might never see it back.

"I like what I do and I think that if I was solely farming, I'd feel frustrated and constrained in what I was doing... With the ice cream, there are no boundaries, it's entirely up to me to see where I can bring it. The shackles are off — it's a chance to really do something."

Baldwin's product is a high-value one that's placed at the upper end of the market. With the milk direct from the farm, he uses nothing but natural products. He sells to five-star hotels and restaurants, as well as to the general public through delicatessens and artisan food

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shops. It's also important, he says, to keep in with all the opportunities locally through retail outlets and markets. The latter is a sector that has grown exponentially in recent years, as are the "scoop shops" in shops, cafés and supermarkets — both influenced very much by the phenomenon of people seeing something while on holidays abroad, creating a demand for the service at home.

International giants such as Ben & Jerry's and Häagen Dazs would constitute the direct competition. A relatively small operation such as Baldwin's would not be in a position to take them on head-on, but the hunger for quality artisan Irish food is there.

"There's very good business in selling directly to the public during the summer period too, so I'm finding different markets as I go along... I'm keeping it direct as far as I can at the moment, so we'll see how things will pan out for it in the future. At the moment, it's very much on a small scale — I'd like to think that every batch is a good batch.

"Farming remains volatile. Milk was around 29 or 30c a litre at the time I was going into it. It rose to about 37c and last year it was back at 19 or 20c a litre. Now it's up again, around 26c. So, it's completely volatile, you have good years and bad years. You can be struck down with TB, the weather can go against you... there are so many hard-luck stories that do with farming.

"People talk about farming as a business all the time, but it is a different sort of business. You're constantly putting money back into a farm that you might never see coming out of if. You're constantly doing something for the next generation. Dad is doing stuff now for my generation, work for which he won't see the benefit back. That has happened before me, and it will happen after me.

"So I'm definitely after changing tack and going off-course, and time will tell whether I'll be proven right or not."

