

Small Dairy

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Every aspect of large, industrial food creates a niche for people who want a less standardised alternative, and if the stars align there are producers who are willing to fill that niche. So it is with Big Milk.

Catherine Kinsella runs Saltrock Dairy in the southeast of Ireland. Saltrock operates a mobile vending machine from which customers can buy whole milk in recyclable bottles

Catherine: We started in dairying about ten years ago, and somewhere along the way, I just found it really frustrating, I suppose. I grew up on a dairy farm drinking good quality milk straight from the bulk tank and knew what milk tastes like, and then for the years in between was buying milk in the supermarket and just kind of, I suppose, hadn't paid a whole lot of heed to the quality. I would have always bought full fat, one of the better quality milks, because I knew a lot of them were rubbish. But it was when we started dairy in 2013 and suddenly we were drinking our own milk again, raw and obviously not pasteurised or anything. It was before it went to the dairy and I was going: Why can people not buy this in the supermarket? Like I couldn't. And I knew what we were producing was no different than what every other farmer in Ireland is producing, and yet nobody can buy it. And I just found this crazy.

So it took a good few years for me to get around to it, but two years ago I took the leap and I suppose we were looking at ... We did look at systems of maybe bottling and it was all quite labour intensive. I was working full time and I suppose that was where we needed to be financially with four kids, etcetera, etcetera. And so yeah, we saw a system happening in the UK where it was a milk vending system, where you can leave a vending unit available with the milk pasteurised and in the tank direct from the farm and people can just come and fill their bottles. And I loved it.

Jeremy: So how does that how does it actually work? I mean, if I want to get some of your milk, how does it work?

Catherine: For us, how we're doing it is we have a vending unit in a trailer which is mobile. So I take the milk from the dairy where Paul milks and I pasteurise it in the pasteurising unit. I transfer it into a 200 litre tank, which then goes into this vending unit. And literally you go and you can tap a card, you press a button, point out that you need a litre of milk or a half litre of milk, tap your card or drop in coins and the machine dispenses your milk. It's as simple as that. Now, this is non-homogenised, so you're back to the kind of the cream rising to the top. And I suppose part of that is that the idea is people are using the same bottle all the time to get their milk. So it's eliminating the plastic, it's eliminating the Tetrapak. We have the bottles there, people can buy them. But like that, as long as it fits into the compartment for the bottle, it doesn't matter what they use to fill it. They don't have to use our bottles.

Jeremy: So you don't care whether their bottles are really clean or not?

Catherine: I suppose I don't. I would leave instruction on it, to only use clean bottles because in the long run, are they going to take responsibility when the milk is going off because the bottle was dirty? Or are they going to say: Oh gosh, Saltrock milk didn't last beyond two days. And so yeah. And I would facilitate in the marketing. I do a market once a week in Gorey, which is a really good day for me, and that's where I meet the customers. And there, if somebody came in with a bottle that wasn't clean, I wouldn't actually fill it, because kind of that's my responsibility then. But no, I suppose it is. It is up to themselves. What you find, the people who care enough to come to get fresh, good quality milk care enough to make sure the bottle is clean, do you know?

Jeremy: And you mentioned that your milk is pasteurised but not homogenised, so you get the cream rising to the top. Lovely. Was that a ... I mean, is it too difficult to sell unpasteurised raw milk in Ireland?

Catherine: Oh, yeah. It's very, very difficult. Yeah. No, the regulations are very, very tight. Even to get approval. Yeah. I mean, I know I did just vaguely mention it to my Department of Ag inspector when we were setting up, and he was kind of working with us to set up. And his response was very much: there'll never be raw milk sold on my patch. And so, yeah, there's a huge demand for it. And I don't know the science behind it, but there's a lot of research going into gut health

and the connection between gut health and mental health. And certainly raw milk would contribute to that. And it'll be very interesting to see where that goes.

Jeremy: Yeah. I mean, I don't have any particular feeling either way. I just, as you say, I know a lot of people are very keen on raw milk, but to me, just having unhomogenised milk would be a treat. But there you go.

Catherine: Yes it is a treat, and like it's ... Yeah, I still find it so frustrating when I talk to customers and say, especially new customers who are going: Gosh, Catherine, your milk is incredible, I've never tasted milk like that. And I go: Oh, but this is no different than what's being produced all across the country. Like, dairy hygiene has improved and improved and improved. I'm 54 years of age and I grew up drinking milk from the tank 50 years ago. And it was good. Dairy hygiene was good then, like my dad would have been good at dairy hygiene, but it has increased and increased and increased. And as it has increased, the quality of our milk available to the consumer has decreased. So there's a complete lack of logic there. Like why interfere with a really good quality product? Stop interfering with it.

Jeremy: And yet, although your milk tastes wonderful and people are amazed by it, I read that you also have flavoured syrups that people can put in the milk. Now, why is that a good idea?

Catherine: Why is that a good idea? Because it's a really good marketing idea. It's what draws the younger people to actually come and try the milk. Yeah, I find it hard to stand over it, and what I would always say is — it's parents who are trying to get kids to drink milk and say: look, they'll drink the strawberry milk, they'll drink the chocolate milk but I can't get them ... I said, well look, if you're getting 475ml of good milk in them for the 25ml of horrible syrup, well, you're doing something for them and they will eventually wean them off this or wean them off it. And they will eventually realise that milk is actually a sweet product in itself. Milk doesn't need sweetness, it is an actual sweet product. And so yeah, I find it hard to stand over it really, except that it sells more milk.

Jeremy: Maybe parents can slowly reduce a bit. Like giving up cigarettes. Slowly reduce the amount of syrup in the milk.

Catherine: Yeah. And it's frequently with parents and they can control it. But a lot of it is the older teenagers, young adults, like they don't seem to buy milk in the supermarket except the MooJuice and, you know, all the flavoured milks, they buy the chocolate milks. And so they've never really gotten used to drinking regular milk. And they're the ones I can really kind of pull in to sort of say, look, just this week, will you just fill it with plain milk and come back and tell me what you think next week, You know, and I'll be the piece in the market. I mean, when it's when it's out on the road, you know, when it's out parked in various sites around the area during the week and it's self-service, obviously I have no kind of real connection with the customers. But in the market, I get a great kick out of kind of pushing the young adult to look just this week, fill one bottle with just plain milk and come back and invariably they come back and refill with plain milk. Invariably. But I think they need to be conditioned.

Jeremy: Well, that's great. Let's let's talk a little bit about the cows and the farm. How many cows do you have?

Catherine: At our peak milking, we would be milking 72.

Jeremy: And how do you manage the ups and downs over the year? I mean, the natural sort of cow-calf cycle? Do you have to do anything about that or do you just go with the flow and have less milk in the winter and more milk in the spring and summer?

Catherine: Yeah, you have less milk in the winter, so we'll be starting to, what we call, dry off the cows at the moment. So they milk for sort of ten months of the year. So the cows will be calving in January. We'll say by the end of October they won't be milking. We have some early, some autumn calves who are already dry. So they're not being milked at the moment. So your peak milking is probably, I suppose around May, June. You have all the calving has been done, you have peak milking at that stage. A lot of farmers would actually go fully dry for maybe a month or six weeks in the winter. We never have. And from a from a farmer's quality of life point of view, it's probably a very good idea really, because that's the only break they kind of get in the year. And probably before I started this, my side of the business, I probably was encouraging people to do it. Now I need them to keep producing milk. So I'm not as encouraging. But yeah, so that's how it goes. I mean, a cow will produce between five and seven thousand litres across ten months of the year.

Jeremy: And do you have a special or different market for your calves or are they just ... I mean, I'm trying to get a sense for whether the farm as a whole is innovative in this way or whether it's just the milk selling.

Catherine: Yeah. And, well, we've be very lucky with the selling of our calves. I mean, obviously we keep a certain number of the heifer calves for replacements for ourselves, but really 90 plus percent of our calves are sold at the yard and sold to the same other farmers each year who come back. And some would be buying them for beef. And I suppose, Paul — most of our cows are artificially inseminated and Paul does that himself — so he will choose which ones will sort of have a beef bull to them, and then that will go on to certain farmers. Yeah. I mean is it innovative and yes it's, from from a calf welfare, it's much easier on the conscience to know where the calves are going. And as well as that, from a time-saving point of view, there's an awful lot to be said for somebody coming to the yard and buying the calves rather than Paul having to bring them to a market.

Jeremy: And do your cows have a kind of average long lifespan in the herd? Slightly more? Slightly less?

Catherine: We are ten years now milking and there would still be some of the old stuff that we would have bought in at that stage. But I'd say probably on average about seven, eight years milking and then they probably go on for fattening for beef after that really, they'd be the cull cows. So yeah, I mean we're not, I suppose, and most of our aim would be the same. I mean, if you look at the states or even across continental Europe, some of the really big systems, I mean, you're looking at a turnover of between 2 and 3 years. Like they really pull the goodness out of them in a very short space of time. But I suppose we would be quite. Yeah. A low intensive farming system.

Jeremy: And almost all grass fed.

Catherine: Almost all grass fed. It's totally weather dependent how long they spend outside. But then when they go inside, it's almost totally silage. So it's fermented grass fed as well.

Jeremy: Now, you said that you said that you're still supplying a dairy. So roughly, what's the balance between milk that you sell direct and milk that you send to a dairy?

Catherine: We'd only be selling between six and ten percent direct to the customer. But hopefully that's going to ramp up. I'm looking at moving smaller dispensary units into smaller shops over the coming months and try and increase the volume that we're actually selling direct to the customer.

Jeremy: So you've got a long way to go to use ... I mean, you're probably not thinking of expanding the farm then?

Catherine: No, no. I suppose we're kind of between two stools at the age group we're at in that we're certainly not looking at expanding what we're doing from the farm point of view. But if we could increase the volume we're selling direct to the consumer, obviously the margin is going to be better. So then we could actually look at reducing cow numbers. And as we get older, like we're not really sure where succession is for us and if there's somebody going to come back home, one of the kids, to farm or not. How long do we want to go on farming? If we want to go on farming, kind of in the long run, you obviously want the easiest system possible, so that will be the less intensive system. So if we could reduce cow numbers and still be making the same income, then that would be where the balance would be at from a personal financial level. And then obviously, I mean, this whole move from a climate change point of view and derogation and everything, it's getting more and more difficult for farmers to be intensive. And so we will be much easier because of where we're at. It's not that difficult for us to actually comply with the new regulations. We're kind of within them anyway. It's the farmers who have expanded and expanded and expanded over the last 10, 15 years who are very, very challenged at the moment.

Jeremy: And what about other products? I mean, if you've got a lot of milk, I'm thinking butter maybe, or even cheese.

Catherine: My big passion would be to get to the point of making butter. I make my own butter here as it is. And I've been playing with some Greek style yogurt, which really went down well when I've tested it on the market. So yeah, the next number of months are going to be really interesting for me. I'm going to work with Teagasc, which is our kind of, I suppose, advisory body and in product development. And yeah, I grew up myself with my mom making butter and I just love that. I love butter anyway, but I especially love farmers' butter and the homemade. So yeah, I'm hoping by the spring when

we're going back to sort of peak production and cream will be at its highest, I might have a new product on the market. That would be my dream and but my dream would be like while yes, I wanted, as I said to somebody, yes, I want to make butter sexy again. And I still want to make sure the whole thing remains local.

I suppose my bigger dream is that I can prove that a small dairy system producing multiple dairy products can be financially viable and try and get a model that could be repeated all across the country by other farms. Like I don't want to be selling milk or yogurt or butter to Donegal, you know? I want it to be sold into south east of Ireland.

Jeremy: That's interesting because my last question, have you had any interest from other dairy farmers?

Catherine: Oh loads. Oh, loads. Yeah. No, no, there are ... I'm not on my own and I'm probably the only one that's mobile, as in I'm the only one that actually moves the unit around the area to the customer. But I think there's probably 11 or 12 with vending units at their farm gate around the country. And yes, I've had so many coming and inquiring about it. Hard one to advise them really, because it has taken an awful lot more time. Like, it sounds like a simple process, but it's not because the whole marketing side, the whole paperwork and complying with regulations and everything, it's not something a farmer who's already working full time farming can actually take on board. It needs to be somebody else within the system that can do it. And but look, there is definitely space. There's definitely room for it to happen I think. And I think the consumer is ready to to pay a proper price for proper product.

Like I think there is terroir available. I suppose there's an Irish version, word, of terroir. You know, like definitely, across a year, butter tastes different. I can still remember we always knew the taste of butter for the spring, the taste of butter in the winter. And certainly now, I would imagine as cows go in and they're on silage, I'm not sure butter would taste as good as the spring butter. And then add where we live. It's right on the coast. The salt air, you know, the herbs are naturally growing in the grassland and in our area would be very different to that in Tipperary. And we've lost all of that. Everything became standardised, milk has become standardised and butter is

standardised. Like, yeah, individual flavour seems to have kind of got lost in dairy and that's a shame.

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