

FARMERS' MARKETS CONFERENCE:

*FOOD FAD **OR** FOOD FUTURE?*

Report by: Oliver Moore, Irish Examiner, Sligo I.T., Greenbox

This one day, all Ireland farmers' market conference was held in the Radisson SAS hotel Athlone on Monday the 2nd July. It was organised by the Rural Food Company Training Network, the Western Organic Network in association with Comhar LEADER na hEireann - the Irish LEADER Network and supported by Atlantic Organics. The event itself was very well attended, having booked out well in advance. Along with the conference itself, there were some excellent stalls of interest to delegates ranging from specialist food producers, equipment and seeds to food development and training.

Accel, who is funded this major conference, is an in-company training initiative aimed at accelerating skills of people at all levels within firms in Ireland. The Rural Food Company Training Network and Western Organic Network Accel programmes are funded through the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, The National Development Plan (NDP) and the European Social Fund (ESF). The Rural Food Company Training Network helps management and staff of food businesses avail of very specific training which will assist their business in achieving growth, sustainability and competitiveness. The Western Organic Network organises training courses for organic farmers, smallholders, and small food producers in Ireland.

Opening Addresses:

John Bowman (Broadcaster, RTE), who chaired the conference, opened proceedings. He suggested that the conference agenda was very important. It was about putting resources and wealth back into the countryside, about healthy food and about the health and survival of rural Ireland. In that context, he felt that it was very appropriate that Minister Eamonn O' Cúiv, from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs was opening the event.

Minister Eamon O' Cúiv (Minister of State, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht affairs) began an upbeat event in upbeat fashion, aptly starting as Gaelige. The importance of farmers' markets to development and sustainability in rural Ireland was the topic broached in the native tongue. The minister then switched to English and the new governmental arrangement: he was happy that his new ministerial colleague, Trevor Sargent, Minister of State for Food and Horticulture, would also be attending. Likewise, he looked forward to working with Minister Sargent. Being from the west, he pointed out that Galway market was one of the few to survive from his childhood. He was delighted to see some of the pioneers who spearheaded the drive towards farmers' markets in attendance, including Darina Allen. He also saw growth potential in the sector, which he claimed was a "niche rather than small" sector.

Isobel Fletcher (small food business co-ordinator, CLE – the Irish LEADER network) followed on from the Minister. Isobel spoke of the agri-food sector: While the figures suggest that agriculture is less prominent than in the past, the agri-food sector maintained its importance, both for exports and employment. She also addressed other issues: the need for diversification and the opportunity farmers' markets provide; farmers' markets and the importance of values to consumers; the opportunity for new migrants to contribute; the importance of presentation and traceability; food miles and finally tourist desires for authentic local foods. The need for safe food at farmers' markets got a special mention, both as a necessity and a topic that needed to be broached with discernment.

Minister O Cúiv returned to the podium to make two final points. He dealt with the local context farmers' markets find themselves in. Good planning and local authority buy-in were important. The Clár programme was established to help with the latter, and he was disappointed to see some resistance from local authorities. The need for protocols to insure the local provenance of the foods and the producers was emphasised, otherwise local shopkeepers would be rightly annoyed at the wholesaling of goods. He referred back to a previous speech he made, when he joked about not seeing oranges at a farmers' market he was opening, only to see oranges inside. A quality mark is needed, he suggested, to allow farmers' markets to become a window for all that is good about rural Irish food.

Diane Dignam (Programme Manager - Accel) closed the opening addresses. Along with thanking the previous contributors, she spoke of the training Accel provide, in conjunction with the Eilish Broderick of the Rural Food Company Training Network and Sean McGloin of the Western Organic Network. Diane also mentioned that their work would be further developing with applications for the 2008 programme being sought in September.

Opening presentations:

The first of the main speakers of the day was **Darina Allen** (Ballymaloe House, Chef and Writer). Darina gave a typically impassioned speech about both the historical development and current state of farmers' markets in Ireland. Her San Francisco "light bulb moment" in 1995 when she saw a farmers' market and the opportunities it offered to Irish food producers. The Coal Key market in Cork herself, Caroline Robinson and others established, Midleton market, and then some "thorny issues" were all addressed. She addressed the issue of localness – while you clearly want as much of it as possible, you also need variety, she suggested. The other thorny issues were: Inconsistencies of quality, low standards and the lack of both farmers and homemade goods at some farmers' markets; the need to bring country markets, which maintain high standards, into the loop; the price of stalls at privately-run farmers' markets; inconsistent local authority attitudes and behaviour, in particular in relation to their interpretation of the casual trading act; Environmental Health Officer (EHO) consistency; attracting more farmers in, in particular getting the IFA involved. This latter point got the first spontaneous round of applause of the day, and was emphasised by Darina pointing out that three farmers in Midleton are still on the land because of its market. She then spoke of opportunities and trends she saw in food terms: local, seasonal, rare and foraged foods such as honey, apples,

wild garlic, her best selling organic nettles, rare breed meats and more. Cookery demonstrations were attractive at a farmers' market, while fishermen's' markets were likely to emerge in the near future. Finally, grants for refrigerated trailers and the educational dimension of a farmers' market were presented as opportunities.

Questions from the floor dealt primarily with the issues of the management and the frequency of markets. The use of an employed manager to represent and organise the farmers' market was suggested from the floor. In relation to queries on frequency, going weekly and running through all kinds of weather were suggested as the best options by Darina, for the consumer. She also suggested allowing in seasonal sellers, such as Autumnal soft fruit sellers.

And in response to Darina's request for the IFA to get involved, a representative of the IFA's horticultural section spoke from the floor. He pointed out that the horticulturalists were under severe pressure; their numbers were down to 200 from 1000 just a few years ago. However, literally in the last year, the IFA has started to take farmers' markets seriously. While this has been a solitary campaign, the representative suggested that if they are approached, they will now be supportive.

Michael Gleeson (EIRI Corca Baiscinn) spoke of the practicalities of establishing rural farmers' markets. The four key elements are:

- * Physical location - be central, visible and have good parking.
- * Have a core of dedicated producers
- * Have a solid structure: the rules of the market are a tool to prevent poor quality or unsuitable produce in, but they also need to be somewhat flexible, especially in rural under-populated locations. Shop around for the best group insurance deals.
- * Work hard and decently at it: Have an inability to take "no" for an answer, while keeping key people on-side

Along with these points, Michael emphasised local embeddedness and consumer relations: he referred to consumers as (following the Slow Food Mantra) Co-producers who should get what they want: tofu salad won't go down as well in small isolated rural towns as bacon and cabbage, he suggested. He also suggested that one person could be appointed as a farmers' market development and support officer in each local authority, and that sustainable farming should be taught in Agricultural courses in Educational Institutions.

Questions from the floor brought up the balance between duplication of stalls and healthy competition. While it should be possible to figure out the balance between the two, John Bowman offered a note of caution: what if someone says that their version of a particular product is better? Location also emerged as a discussion point: in towns with no central focus, it can be hard to attract people in, it was suggested. Michael replied that he has had to deal with the same issues, but they are surmountable. Essentially it just takes time, he suggested – three years is the measure, and the second year is often the hardest. The option of evening markets, and the further need for training in educational institutions also emerged from the floor.

Panel Session: Comparing and contrasting different models of markets:

The **open forum discussion** that followed featured a panel consisting of Ray Dunne, Quarry mount free range meats; John Brennan manager, Leitrim organic farmers' co-operative; Jackie Spillane, market manager, Dublin/ Wicklow; Emer Duffy, Vice chair, Country Markets Ltd.

The discussion revolved around the following key issues: the varying degrees of local authority support, insurance, language used to describe markets and, related to this latter point, the presence or otherwise of farmers at "farmers" markets.

With regard to local authority support, inconsistencies were again mentioned with regard to council attitudes to signage. A lack of general support from local authorities, and the need for supports to increase incomes which are otherwise too low received a round of applause.

Insurance and the Casual Trading Act were discussed in detail. It was suggested by a representative of the Irish Food Market Traders Association (IFMTA) that there may be no need for insurance. This representative suggested that the relevant person to liaise with is Will Coventry in the Department of Trade and Enterprise, who has the guidelines to the Casual Trading Act. A representative of the Insurance industry pointed out that we live in a litigious society, and suggested caution. He also pointed out that the company he represents, FBD, have a useful specific policy: if you have farm insurance, you have product liability and you can sell at no extra charge. He also pointed out that if there is processing involved you need to make sure that your processor is insured too. In a point which links the first and second of these together, it was also suggested from the floor that some local authorities want both individual stalls and the farmers' market itself to be insured, with Public Liability of up to €6.5 million required. The speaker suggested that neighbouring local authorities do not require this. Jackie Spillane mentioned that the cost of Insurance does act a useful filter against "flighty vendors". The notion of group insurance for farmers' markets was also mentioned.

Language also caused a stir. Farmers' markets being described as "organic farmers' markets" are bad for consumer confidence, according to Jackie Spillane, if they only have one or two organic stalls present. She also made reference to the fact that the county council run model of farmers' market she's involved in, have a high percentage of producers present as vendors. From the floor, it was suggested that the term farmers' market is often a con. The producer and vendor who suggested this also suggested that the consumer was starting to realise this. She also suggested that the lack of IFA support for farmers' markets put people off getting involved. Others suggested Teagasc also need to get involved in training people to produce for direct selling. John Brennan, however, suggested that the name farmers' market was worth maintaining. The job was to attract farmers, not change the name, in his opinion. He also suggested that certified organic produce on sale at farmers' market has a form of quality assurance, through the organic certification scheme. A discussion also developed on the issues around local slaughtering and waste disposal, on the benefits of co-op structures and finally the need and opportunity for a national representative farmers' market organisation.

Marketing presentations:

Different farmers' markets and farmers' market models were then analysed.

Kate Burns (Senior partner, First Western) examined the Origin farmers' markets. She studied farmers' markets in Boyle, Manorhamilton, Sligo, Ballybofey, Letterkenny, Omagh, Strabane and Ballymoney. Regeneration, encouraging enterprise and the integration of social, economic and environmental goals were LEADER and Action 2's aims in funding these farmers' markets. There were market, production and locational issues, along with marketing/branding issues, concerns around agency consistency and resources. However there were also lessons learned: There is no "one size fits all model": cultural and social factors make farmers' markets in different towns quite different. Kate compared Colrairie farmers' market's circumstances to Ballymoney's: Colrairie is a university town, tourist-orientated, with both retired people and people on relatively high incomes and the council have been very supportive of the farmers' market, through attitude and funding. Ballymoney has had the opposite experience. She also suggested that farmers' markets with small target populations need to be in operation weekly and fish, meat, bread, cheese and vegetables are a must at any farmers' market. Kate also suggested that pricing, selling techniques and labelling tend to need greater consistency; that networking between producers and host communities is invaluable; that markets in areas of a low population base and challenging economic factors probably need on-going support; and that markets do best where host communities are engaged in complementary activities.

Aisling Roche (ARMS food marketing specialists) presented her research on Roscommon farmers' market. She presented a positive 'before and after' story, whereby the farmers' market implemented her recommendations and are benefiting from so doing. A combination of interviews, observation; customer survey of 100 customers, workshop and finally a marketing action plan were conducted. Signage and product labelling were major issues. However the consumer survey elicited many positive responses. Aisling had a range of recommendations for the stallholders: meet regularly, develop an action plan, recruit new stallholders, display information and make it a more cosy experience through the use of music, heaters, lights and improved layout; form an association, use name badges, have a code of practice, tell and re-tell their customers their positive stories, consider their market segments such as local businesses having their lunch there, advertise and generate PR locally and finally use branded boxes and bags. Much of this advice had been taken on board. Novel approaches included inviting the French Market in as guests and placing one stall outside the entrance each week to entice people in.

Una Fitzgibbon (manager, small business, Bord Bia) also presented her research. Her first tip was to let people know where your market is. She then presented some consumer trends: Consumers now want to live life to the full, but are busy; they want to make an ethical difference and choose healthy options; they also want trustworthy, authentic food. She suggested that Irish consumers eat together as a family, that half consider localness and that quality is important to them. Specifically in relation to farmers' markets, her research revealed the following: consumers felt that feeding the family was a complex task, with many mixed signals coming from the media; consumers want good food that is organic in

style – natural, fresh, unprocessed. Various consumer quotes were then presented, featuring adaptable consumers seeking natural foods; busy consumers and consumers seeking simple food without too much hassle. So consumers want simple, unprocessed food and feel that the local dimension has a myriad of positive aspects which induce a feelgood factor. She concluded by suggesting that trust, the quest for natural foods and sociability were the three fundamentals that need nurturing, protection, enhancement and promotion. Una also presented more marketing tips, including providing freshness and quality; using publicity (especially roadside signage, newspapers, visibility/passing by and reputation/word of mouth); being sociable and community-orientated; build direct relations with consumers (from email addresses and phone numbers to other direct selling options). She then pointed out the range of work Bord Bia do for the small food business sector in general and on farmers' markets in particular, including both sponsoring and featuring quality Irish foods at events, publishing a farmers' market guide, and organising the taste council.

Keynote presentation:

Trevor Sargent, (Minister of State for Horticulture and Food) firstly suggested that he was booked in before he became minister, but that he was delighted to attend in this new capacity. He pointed out that farmers' markets are important for regional identity, they excite the public and they excite the department, the later of which he cited as an achievement. He then spoke of his plans for farmers' markets. He wants farmers' markets to be genuine; to create clear a plan to remove obstacles to direct selling; to liaise with local authorities while also encouraging them to be supportive and consistent; to make planning regulations clear, consistent and minimal; and finally to improve food production facilities.

Food production also emerged as a key theme. The steady decline in vegetable growing in Ireland is a particular concern for him, especially in light of food security issues. He notably mentioned that he would press release the seasons, to help people reacquaint themselves with the natural growing times for vegetables. He also spoke of achieving GM free status, of providing local abattoirs and of reaching 5% target of organic production by 2012. He concluded by suggesting that he was ready to listen to and lead the sector.

Questions from the floor revolved around achieving organic status and the misleading use of the word organic at some farmers' markets, as well as the difficulty in being a viable food producer with the costs of food production rising all the time. This latter point struck a chord with many attendees. He minister agreed and emphasised with these floor statements. He also stated that, despite the (selectively interpreted) WTO rules and their effect of food production, farmers' markets were a lifeline for farmers, and food security was bound to become an issue for the future.

Panel discussion: Successful Farmers' Market management for best results:

Annemarie Mullan, (chair, St George's food and garden market, Belfast)

Ted Murphy, (market manager, Midleton market)

Caroline Robinson, (chairperson, Irish food Market Traders Association)

Patricia Golden, (Origin farmers' market, Boyle Una Bhan tourism)

The discussion initially revolved around the need for and availability of training. Then, the focus shifted over to models of farmers' market. From the floor, the notion of having a market or market's manager was posited. Anne-Marie Mullan agreed that this has helped in her situation. Trevor Sargent pointed out that the successful and long running Dublin Food Co-op also has a manager. He also pointed out that local authorities should have a person on this issue and other related town centre issues. Ted Murphy and Patricia Golden pointed to their own situation, where successful farmers' markets have liaised well with local authorities and with funding agencies. However, it was also suggested that funding is no guarantee for success: a LEADER funded farmers' market in Cork was one of the few of the 30 or so that failed, according to Caroline Robinson. Darina Allen suggested that there was too much emphasis on funding: all you need is good produce, a table, boiling water, soap and a towel to get started, she suggested.

Standards, image, price, trading days (traditional town market days or separate days), the price the producer gets and should get, availability of produce, and opening times of the farmers' market were discussed. Hot ethnic foods, strategic use of crafts to fill dead areas, musicians and lobbying tourism agencies to promote self-catering holidays all emerged as positive opportunities for farmers' market development.

When it emerged that two Castlebar town councillors and the town Clerk were in attendance, eager and actively seeking a farmers' market to be established, the crowd reacted with both surprise and enthusiasm.

Remaining presentations:

Oliver Moore (Irish Examiner, Sligo I.T., Greenbox) presented on how farmers' markets deal with the problems of distance and disconnection, and on the important role organic food plays in the farmers' market. Distance and disconnection refer to the effect of inevitable economic processes, especially involving increasing scale, which reduce how local either the people or the produce at farmers' markets actually is. Traded, processed goods sold by vendors rather than farmers are an example. There are, however, numerous ways farmers' markets deal with these otherwise inevitable problems. These include: The cumulative aspect to the development of farmers' markets in Ireland, whereby newer models of farmers' market enrol greater stakeholders, including rural development workers. That said, privately run farmers' market in operation in and around Dublin avoid these issues by simply offering a

huge array of produce; the value-adding opportunity the farmers' market offers to producers – essentially producers can turn their hard work into a good story to help their product sell; the organisational interests of organic farmers - organic farmers have been to the forefront of developing farmers' markets, because they like the idea of controlling the means of distribution; consumers deliberately seeking out ever more local and natural produce as and when it becomes available. Possible problems to consider, however, include inconsistency in the treatment of farmers' markets by local authorities; over institutionalisation, whereby local authorities and rural development organisations become so involved that they control and stifle the farmers' markets; overstretching capacity –many farmers' markets have less than 10 stalls, the UK has 550 farmers' markets for 60 million people, Ireland has over 120 for just 6 million on the island; and broader town planning and retailer-relationship issues. Overall, however, he suggested that the outlook was relatively positive: in broad terms, the interests of producers, organisers and consumers resonate.

Joanne Lorriman (senior Environmental Health Officer with the Health Service Executive) pointed out that the law in relation to food trading had changed from being prescribed to being about guidelines. She suggested that voluntary engagement with the EHOs was beneficial, so stallholders can get advice on what they need to do. Two specific aspects of the responsibilities of food traders were covered: hand washing and temperature control. There are three categories of risk - high medium and low - and each has a different set standards. High risk requires a designated wash hand basin, an adequate and instantaneous supply of hot and cold water at the stall, soap and disposable paper towels or other suitable hand drying facilities. Medium risk requires a designated wash hand basin, an adequate supply of hot and cold water at the stall, soap and disposable paper towels or other suitable hand drying facilities. Low risk requires that the stallholder demonstrate there is adequate means of cleaning hands. She also discussed equipment and training. With regard to temperature control, Joanne stated that the guidance required a 5 degree temperature to prevent rapid microbiological growth and refrigeration or a suitable alternative is needed. Factors to consider include type of food and duration of market, food management techniques, equipment and training. Overall Joanne suggested that the standards were higher than three years ago, but that greater exchange of information was needed.

The first statement from the floor pointed out that some EHOs seem to come with a negative attitude before even the market has opened. A lack of consistency in EHOs was suggested. Joanne replied that they too are inspected, meet to discuss best practice and consistency and have a formal complaints procedure. The need for communication, in the face of a feeling of "helplessness" was emphasised from the floor.

Gareth Jones (Managing Agent FARMA - the UK's national farmers' retail and markets association) presented a practical case study on certification and accreditation of farmers' markets. He first compared Parisian and US farmers' markets, before suggesting that the first of the 550 modern certified farmers' markets in the UK began in Bath in 1997. To be certified by FARMA, the farmers' markets have to either have farmers selling the produce or they must follow the FARMA guidelines: Stallholders sell only their own products; principal stallholder is involved in production; produce must be from the locality. Currently they have 230 farmers'

market members. They offer a certification scheme based on three elements: certification of farmers' markets; verification of producers; diploma for farmers' market organisers/managers. Gareth then outlined the initial 12 week process of certification, as well as the procedures for year two and three, FARMA's training of inspectors, media work, advisory work and so on.

Facilitated discussion: Isobel Fletcher, Trevor Sargent and Michael Gleeson then facilitated a discussion on whether the certified farmers' market approach was possible in the Irish situation.

The first suggestion from the floor pointed out that differing regions in the US have a different experiences: California has a great growing climate, is abundant and has large population centres. By comparison, upstate New York has different conditions, and does not have a certified system. Gareth suggested, however, that these very people have said to him that they now wish they had started with a certified system years ago. He also said that the locality rule is set by the farmers' market itself, not the certification company. Others also suggested that the UK model was based on a country with larger population bases and monthly rather than weekly farmers' markets, whereas some farmers' markets in Ireland are in towns with two to three thousand people and on weekly. It was also suggested from the floor that most of the problems with the authenticity of farmers' markets occurred in the Dublin region. An alternative suggestion was for farmers' market-led certification, and to not only certify farmers' markets, but to tie funding to having a certified standard. Likewise, other speakers suggested that there were too many traders and not enough farmers, that high standards involving farmers or local farmed produce need to be maintained, that people involved in farmers' market are being too short sighted in how they view farmers' markets, and that control and answerability are both missing. The potential for a system of derogations, similar to the certified organic derogations was also suggested, whereby the specific circumstances of each farmers' market could be taken into account: the day of the week, availability or otherwise of various products in the town itself, availability of suitable produce for selling at the farmers' market in the region, and so on.

The activities or otherwise of the producers was also discussed. Certifying producers rather than markets was suggested. It was also suggested that a so called fisherman could have a boat but never use it. The value of a co-operative approach amongst farmers, of giving certified farmers preferential, central locations within the market, and using the skills of regional sellers was also pointed out. Farmers are not always natural sellers, and are busy, it was suggested.

The fact that farmers' markets are in the public good and are often held on a traditional day in a traditional place was pointed out by Michael Gleeson.

The bureaucratic and paperwork potential of yet another certification scheme clearly worried a large number of delegates. A fish monger suggested that there was an "industry in regulation" which was "driving producers to the wall", which resonated with many delegates. Duplicate inspections were also an annoyance. The potential for organisations such as Clár, for local authorities to appoint and support someone to help develop farmers' markets, and a mentoring approach to help develop skills, rather than an inspection only approach, were also all suggested.

Trevor Sargent suggested that these are frustrating problems, but we live in a country with exceptionally high multiple retailer dominance and suffer from the effects of years of poor planning, which makes us very car dependent. Both of these factors lead to a predominance of out of town shopping centres. However, he pointed out that his Green Party ministerial colleague John Gormley was willing to address these issues.

Eilish Broderick (ACCEL Rural Food Company Training Network)

Eilish Broderick is the project manager with the Rural Food Company Training Network (an Accel Project, promoted by CLE – Comhar LEADER na hEireann), which organises training to rural food companies all over Ireland. Eilish's presentation focused on the organisation's training. They aim to strengthen the management and technical skills of those working in rural food and food service businesses, while also giving employers and workers an opportunity to rapidly improve, realign or revise their current skills base. The training the Rural Food Company Training Network provide is user friendly, being funded, organised in conjunction with the food businesses, and done so at a time and place of the food companies' choosing. Training includes areas as diverse as business, technology and products. (e.g. food production, hygiene, brand development, digital photography, product costing, new product development). Eilish highlighted a particular course which the network offers which is Developing and Sustaining a farmers market.

Sean McGloin (ACCEL Western Organic Network)

Sean McGloin of the Western Organic Network (WON) spoke of WON's activities, training, and training needs analysis. Won have been funded under the Accel Initiative. They provide training to organic farmers and those considering converting to organic. WON use formal and less formal methods, including farm walks, talks and demonstrations, case studies, producer-led meetings and events. Organic training with WON includes horticulture, conversion to organics, livestock, marketing, business development, poultry and herbs. They also provide training in other areas including beekeeping, training the trainer and farmers' markets. Recently, they have begun to deliver third level organic training, in conjunction with the Scottish Agricultural College. A training needs analysis will soon be conducted by WON, who intend to expand the area they provide training in to cover the whole of the Republic of Ireland.

Some key themes that emerged included:

- * Farmers' markets as an important and growing part of the retail landscape, both from a rural development and consumer perspective
- * The need for local authority consistency in relation to their treatment of and work with farmers' markets
- * The need for farmers' markets to provide high quality produce with authenticity, but also to be more internally coherent: be aware the benefits of more professional presentation
- * The need for training both in sustainable farming and the specific area of farmers' markets

- * The benefits of working with other stakeholders in a constructive way: e.g. seeking advice and recommendations from EHOs
- * The need for more stakeholders again to start getting involved in a more serious manner, e.g. the IFA
- * The benefits of more people working for farmers' markets, whether as market managers or as local authority representatives
- * The range of consumer wishes: quality, naturalness, simplicity, cheapness, contact with local people and local food, variety and more.
- * There is no clear agreed position on certification of farmers' markets as of yet, though there is a palpable interest in having high standards. Bureaucracy, frequency, climate, regional socio- cultural factors, provenance, population, conflicting consumer expectations, rate paying shops, broader town management issues, a legacy of bad planning, the lack of farmers at farmers' market, and the misleading of consumers in the current, less regulated environment are all issues that feed into the dynamic.

Oliver Moore

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