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IRISH COUNTRY LIVING

Velvet Cloud

Michael and Aisling Flanagan have no reason to be sheepish about the growing success of their alternative dairy business



Hopes rise for sizzling summer beef trade

PAUL MOONEY & NATHAN TUFFY

Fears of price pressure due to a predicted 100,000 head oversupply of cattle this year are easing.

Buoyant export demand for beef, lighter carcass weights and higher live exports are driving mart prices.

An extra 34,355 cattle have been slaughtered this year – yet mart prices for factory-fit cattle are running

higher than last year. *Irish Farmers Journal* MartWatch figures show prices for the average 600kg heifer were up €50 over the last three months, compared with last year. Steers were up €23/head.

Globally, a combination of drought, Brazilian meat scandals and higher prices for pork are delivering €4.20/kg here as opposed to previous predictions of €3.50/kg.

Meanwhile, indications are that

beef supply could be lower than expected for the remainder of the year. Farmers are slaughtering cattle at lighter weights in 2017. The average steer carcass is 9.6kg lighter and average heifer carcass 4.9kg lighter.

If this continues it would equate to 35,000 fewer cattle for the year.

Live exports of bulls and heifers to non-EU markets last summer will begin to have an effect from this autumn onwards. Almost 20,000 head

were exported last year and more than 9,500 so far this year.

An extra 100,000 beef cattle had been predicted for 2017.

But the above two trends, on top of the higher slaughterings in the first six months, has led the IFA to predict that there will in fact be only 5,000 extra cattle for slaughter in the remainder of 2017.

→ See pages 8, 21, 58

Free Crops & Cultivation magazine



HANDS-ON EXAM PREP: Leaving Cert student Eoghan McCabe and his grandfather Padraig McCabe square-baling hay for farmer Thomas McQuaid at Raffony, Virginia, Co Cavan. Eoghan is helping out in between his exams and will be sitting his ag science exam on Thursday.
 \ Ramona Farrelly



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A touch of velvet

Michael and Aisling Flanagan have no reason to be sheepish about the growing success of their Velvet Cloud brand, beloved by Michelin-star chefs and health-conscious consumers

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On a velvet cloud

There is nothing sheepish about the growing success of Michael and Aisling Flanagan's Velvet Cloud dairy range, writes **Maria Moynihan**

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Michael and Aisling Flanagan admit that their decision to start milking sheep has raised more than one eyebrow. "There's a lot of curiosity about it and thinking you're a bit daft," smiles Michael.

"The most common question is: 'How do you milk sheep?' Literally," adds Aisling.

Yet by taking a risk and thinking outside the box – or rather, the barn – after taking over the family farm in Rockfield, close to Claremorris, Co Mayo, the Flanagans have no reason to be sheepish about the growing success of their Velvet Cloud brand, beloved by Michelin star chefs and health-conscious consumers alike.

FROM UCD TO YOGHURT

Michael and Aisling first crossed paths in UCD, while studying agricultural science.

"We only got together at the end," clarifies Aisling. "It took us five years."

But while it was their passion for agriculture that brought them together, they both came from different backgrounds. Michael grew up on the other side of Claremorris, with the land at Rockfield purchased by his father in the 1970s and run as an outfarm for finishing beef cattle, complementing their dairy and sheep enterprise.

"I grew up milking, I grew up with sheep," he says of the foundation for Velvet Cloud. "Best of both; lots of work to do."

Aisling, meanwhile, grew up in Dún Laoghaire, but having spent all her summers on her grandparents' farm in Mitchelstown, was determined to work in the sector.

"It wasn't the kind of thing for a Holy Child Killiney convent girl to be into," she admits. "But there you go, you get the odd one every now and again."



Michael and Aisling Flanagan with their sheep.

Martina Regan

“I had looked into sheep dairying and I remember buying a book on it years ago when I was in college, just out of curiosity

After college, Aisling started her career in Italy with Bord Bia, and went on to manage the Milan office, with a stint in Paris, before returning to Ireland to work with Heinz, followed by a job with advertising agency, Ogilvy.

Michael, meanwhile, started his career with what was then United Meat Packers and ran a rendering plant in Ballyhaunis, before studying for an MBA in Italy and working in IT in France and in Ireland, with companies including Hewlett Packard.

Once the first of their four children began to arrive, however, the draw back to Mayo proved hard to resist.

"We were coming down nearly every weekend and it just kind of happened," says Michael, who worked with a seafood company when they first moved, while Aisling set up her own marketing and training company,

ARMS Marketing, while also travelling to Dublin to lecture at the School of Business at UCD. But while the couple only took their first steps towards establishing Velvet Cloud in 2012, the idea was cultivating for quite some time.

"I had looked into sheep dairying and I remember buying a book on it years ago when I was in college, just out of curiosity," explains Michael, "and when I lived abroad, sheep products were common, particularly in southern Europe."

"And we could also see the trend for clean eating, healthiness," adds Aisling, "but also the trend towards the increase in support for artisan producers."

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While Michael originally completed a

farmhouse cheese course in Moorepark in 2012, after realising that there was nobody producing sheep's milk yoghurt in Ireland, they decided to lead with that instead.

However, there were numerous obstacles along the way; for instance, getting finance.

"I went to one bank, they sent it off to their ag adviser, and anyway got a call a week later and said: 'Well what do you think?' And he said: 'Not much,'" recalls Michael. "And the others were varying versions of the same."

Fortunately, Enterprise Ireland saw differently, and funded their feasibility study, while the local LEO office also came on board towards the production unit, with the Flanagans keeping costs down as best they could by adapting a secondhand goat milking parlour.

Another challenge was sourcing appropriate stock: in the Flanagans' case, a mix of Friesland and Lacaune ewes, which are dominant dairy breeds with an extended lactation period, used on the continent to make products like Roquefort cheese.

With very little advice available in Ireland from the usual authorities with regards sheep dairying, Michael joined the British Sheep Dairy Association, while also picking the brains of the handful of Irish farmers in the business.

Indeed, it was one of these connections that helped avoid the cost of having to import stock, when Henry Clifton-Brown in Co Tipperary, who was supplying milk for Crozier Blue cheese, happened to have surplus for sale.

All in all, the Flanagans estimate it took a total investment of approximately €100,000 to get the enterprise off the ground, using their own funds along with the Enterprise Ireland and LEO support, and received their license to start production in June 2015.

FARM TO FORK

During their research, Michael and Aisling had approached leading chefs to see if they would be interested in using the yoghurt in their kitchens, and once they announced on Twitter that they were open for business, award-winners like Jess Murphy, JP McMahon and Enda McEvoy were on board.

"They're so well known, but they were so supportive, so that really gave us a boost and a bit of credibility," says Aisling.

Next stop were independent retailers like McCambridges in Galway and Morton's and Caviston's in Dublin, before targeting SuperValu. Today, Velvet Cloud is stocked in 65 retailers nationwide, as well as supplying health food stores through the distributor, Irish Independent Health Foods. But while getting it on the shelf was one challenge, getting it into a consumer's shopping basket is more so.

"You get what you call the 'sheep face' if people have never come across it," smiles Aisling, as she acknowledges that many people are initially reluctant to taste a sheep's milk yoghurt.



"But I'm kind of determined and I know if they taste it, they'll be really surprised, because I've never met anybody who isn't."

That said, Aisling and Michael believe that the real selling point of Velvet Cloud is its nutritional value, with a single portion pot containing 7g of protein, among many other benefits.

This appeals to customers who are willing to pay a premium (the 450g pot retails at €4.75, while the 130g pot is €2.39), such as athletes or people following a healthy eating regime, as well as those who have food intolerances.

"We have so many people coming back to us saying: 'I've irritable bowel, I'm lactose intolerant, I've problems with my digestion, I've eczema, I've asthma and I can drink your milk,'" says Aisling.

Of course, as well as building a brand, the Flanagans are also building their farm.

Having started with a herd of 60 ewes, they are now milking 200, with plans to expand to 300 by the end of

2018 if sales continue to grow. Michael explains that they have more in common with a "typical dairy farm" rather than a sheep farm, with the lambs removed from their mothers shortly after birth and reared on milk replacers and then solids, while the ewes go to the milking parlour.

"A decent ewe would be 350-400 litres in sort of an eight-, nine-month lactation," says Michael, explaining that this equates to about half the yield of a dairy goat or 5-6% of a dairy cow.

"However the solids are much, much higher."

FUTURE PLANS

This July, they will launch their first cheese, Rockfield by Velvet Cloud, which they developed with the support of Loughry Campus in Cookstown, Co Tyrone, with the assistance of a €5,000 innovation voucher from Enterprise Ireland. They also sell frozen sheep's milk to chefs, as well as to health shops.

While they currently use distribu-

“ We have so many people coming back to us saying: 'I've irritable bowel, I'm lactose intolerant, I've problems with my digestion, I've eczema, I've asthma and I can drink your milk

tors, including La Rousse, for the restaurant trade, their aim now is to get central distribution for stores.

"We're chilled, so we can do a limited amount ourselves, but we can't be driving around all the time," says Aisling. "Our challenge now is getting into supermarkets that aren't in the west and aren't in Dublin."

Export wise, they are also dipping a toe in international waters, starting with small orders to both the UK and UAE.

To date, they have been able to employ one member of staff on the farm and one on production, while their four children – Ciarán (18), Orla (16), Niamh (12) and Liam (10) – also lend a hand.

And while Michael concentrates mostly on the farm, with Aisling driving sales and marketing, what is it like working together as a couple?

"You should ask the kids that," laughs Aisling.

Visit www.velvetcloud.ie or follow on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram **CL**

A GROUND-BREAKING PRODUCT

One of the very first chefs to back Velvet Cloud was Jess Murphy of the award-winning Kai Café and Restaurant in Galway, who describes the company's yoghurt as a "ground-breaking" product in Irish food terms.

"And I think Mayo for food producers is definitely one of the most exciting counties to watch at the minute," adds Jess, whose most recent accolade includes winning Best Restaurant in Connaught at the Irish Restaurant Awards.

Velvet Cloud is practically a constant presence on her lunch menu, due to its versatility – whether it's used as an accompaniment to squash or pumpkin in a salad, or poured onto soup.

"It's kind of creamy and sharp at the same time," explains Jess. "It makes the most refreshing, beautiful little sorbet and I've made mousse with it as well. With chocolate cakes, instead of using sour cream you can use the yoghurt and it gives it another taste dimension."

Visit www.kaicaferestaurant.com