



John Liston, The Little Milk Co: Being a Brilliant Little Cheese Business

Transcript of Episode #47 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*

Catherine Moran: Hello, and welcome to episode 47 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*, the show where artisan producers tell their brand story and share the secrets of their success. I'm your host, Catherine Moran.

I've just returned from Food on the Edge 2016, a chef's symposium about the future of food that was held in Galway on the 24th and 25th of October. To find out more about Food on the Edge check out foodontheedge.ie. Also, the hash tag #FOTE16 will give you an excellent flavour of the symposium. And, to understand even more about Food on the Edge, check out episode 43 of this podcast, Jp McMahon: Eat Galway and Food on the Edge. That episode features the founder of Food on the Edge, Irish chef and restaurateur, Jp McMahon.

So, back to today's show. We're going to hear from John Liston, an organic dairy farmer based in Co. Limerick in Ireland. I met John in The Artisan Food Village at Food on the Edge, where John generously did an interview with me. John, along with nine other dairy farmers, set up The Little Milk Co to establish a route to market and to add value to their organic milk. These ten farmers supply milk to selected artisan cheese makers who then turn the milk into delicious cheeses.

On the one hand, there's nothing little about The Little Milk Company — its annual organic milk production is 3 million liters, a lot, when you consider that the total organic liquid milk market on the island of Ireland is estimated at 5 million liters. On the other hand, The Little Milk Co is aptly named because in essence, it is 10 businesses in one. Ten family farms who farm organically, take good care of the cows, the soil, the hedgerows and the countryside generally, supply their milk to local cheese makers — cheese makers in close proximity to the farms — to reduce food miles, transport and distribution costs as well as to lessen their impact on the environment. So, mindful "*little* business", not "*big* business". Small in that sense.

Before we hear from John, I'd like to mention the company's cheeses, all of which are beautifully made and all of which are delicious.

Two in particular stand out for me, the Mature Cheddar, which is astonishingly good and Brewer's Gold, again, a taste sensation. So, if you're a cheese lover you simply must try these two cheeses next time you're in Ireland. You can also order on-line and The Little Milk Co exports its cheeses, too. Have a look at the company website, thelittlemilkco.ie to find out where the cheeses are available.

Let's now hear my wonderful conversation with John Liston from The Little Milk Co.

Catherine Moran: I'm standing beside John Liston from the Little Milk Co. Hello John, how are you?

John Liston: Good morning Catherine.

Catherine Moran: It's great to see you. Thanks for having a few words. Tell us a little bit about The Little Milk Co.

John Liston: Okay Catherine. The Little Milk Co was founded about 4 or 5 years ago by 10 organic dairy farmers. Our goal was to find a market for our traditional spring-calving cows, the milk from them. We have... we're mainly grass-based, we have 1 or 2 winter suppliers for our soft cheeses. But, in the main, 90% of

our milk is produced in the summer, the traditional way. So we formed a cooperative and then a company and we are rural in our outlook in that we cluster around existing cheese makers. I milk the cows, and I go to an existing cheese maker who has the knowledge and the skills and all that, and he makes the cheese with our milk and our recipe.

Catherine Moran: So you are a dairy farmer?

John Liston: I am a dairy farmer, yeah. I've been in organic for the last 16 years. It was a gradual change for me; I was getting disillusioned with the intensive confined systems that were being promoted. My cows aren't battery chickens, so they want to be out in grass where they're meant to be, grazing fields and hedgerows and having a wide and varied diet.

Catherine Moran: How many months of the year are they out?

John Liston: Sometimes, if the winter is particularly mild, I can get them out all year round. I'm on a limestone area, the rock is quite near the surface, not the best land to plough, but very dry land. My normal year, the cows would be out 10, maybe 11 months, maybe a month inside, but generally if I can, they can stay out as long as possible, you know.

Catherine Moran: You've got a beautiful selection of your cheeses here. Would you just run through them very quickly for our listeners?

John Liston: Okay Catherine, the first one is a mild cheddar. Now this cheddar is made by a cheese maker in Limerick, his name is Jim O'Brien. He takes milk from my farm and then another farmer, Sean Condon. We are both once a day, we milk the cows once a day. It's more nutrient-dense milk, very high butter fat. So you can see the colour of the cheese is very yellow, and quite creamy to taste. So, that's our first cheese, it's also our most popular, it sells very well.

Our next cheese then is a mature cheese. It's made from raw milk, it's made in Waterford by a fairly well-known cheese maker, Eamonn Lonergan. That cheese is made from milk from Batt Sheehan, Batt is a dairy farmer quite near Eamonn. So, like that we cluster the farmers near the cheese maker if at all possible to cut down on travel and transport and all that.

Also we have a colleague of ours who stores the cheese for us, matures it and packs it. His name is Sean, he's up there in Drumshambo Co Leitrim. Sean, Sean McGlone, he gets the wheels of cheese, he turns them, twists them, and prepares them and stores them for the 6 months and the vintage, then, which is another cheese, up to a year and a half.

So we're working with rural people that have the necessarily skills that are existing and we make the maximum use of them. But that mature cheese is made from raw milk, and then that's kept a bit longer then, and we have a vintage cheese. As you can see it's quite dry, quite hard. It's popular for cooking, it's like a Parmesan cheese. As you can see, if you grate it... actually there's a crisp manufacturer in Ireland, O'Donnell's Crisps, and they use the powder — we make powder out of that cheese —and they use it in their cheese and onion.

So okay, our next cheese then is brie. This is made by Carrigbyrne cheese makers in Wexford. The milk from there comes from a man called John Stephenson. John has a herd of British Friesian cows down in Waterford. He also milks once a day. So you can see the deep yellow colour in the brie.

And our next cheese then is a beer-washed cheese [Brewer's Gold]. This was developed originally by Helen Finnegan. Helen is a famous cheese maker in Kilkenny. It's basically a soft cheese and Helen created a rind using craft beer, craft beer being that it's unpasteurised, so the yeast in the beer reacts with the, for want of a better word, the bugs in the cheese. So you get that zesty flavour just under the rind. So we're quite pleased with that cheese, it's also made in Carrigbyrne now.

And our last cheese, our latest cheese is an organic blue. The milk for this cheese comes from a herd of cows owned by Fintan Rice. He's in Fethard, County Tipperary, and he brings his milk down to Cashel cheese makers, who are quite famous. Fintan only milks his cows once a day as well, so you can see from the deep yellow colour that it comes out in the cheese, you get the creaminess, it reacts well with the blue in the cheese. So it's quite popular. We export a lot of that now

to Germany. So we're delighted to be cooperating with Cashel, it makes sense to use the skills that are there already.

I milk the cows, I help sell the cheese, I would never have had the knowledge that a cheese maker has, so I leave it to those skilled people. They're there in my community, so I use them, we use everybody that's local to us as much as possible, just to keep rural Ireland alive, and keep the organic world thriving.

So that's it. I also supply some raw milk from my own farm, Dysert Farm Raw Milk. My cows are milked once a day, it's quite popular with chefs, quite popular... parents buy for kids with eczema, asthma, even people with autistic children find it very, very good as well. It was sort of slow movement in the start, but people are beginning to realise the value of raw foods again, you know? It's good that that's happening, everything can't be homogenised, pasteurised, and cleansed beyond all taste, so that's my story, and I'm sticking to it [laughs].

Catherine Moran: [Laughing] Absolutely wonderful, John, it's wonderful system you have-

John Liston: Thank you Catherine.

Catherine Moran: Working with the cheese makers, the people who have the expertise, you're the expert on the cows and the expert on the milk, so it's a great system.

John Liston: People are there in your community, they have the skills, they have the experience. So use them and if people cooperate, very much so. Even to raise money, we use tax schemes that our friends, family, could invest in and they're there to fund the company, so it's local money, local milk, local cheese makers, and so far it's good. We export pretty much... Germans and the French like the story of grass-fed animals, very much so. And I think if I was to say to somebody, we should list the ingredients on our packet as the fields and hedge rows of our farms rather than-

Catherine Moran: Absolutely right.

John Liston: -terms, and among our farmers now we do a wildlife audit, and just to let people know that farming and wildlife are compatible.

Catherine Moran: Absolutely. John, what is the website for the Little Milk Co?... there it is, it's thelittlemilkco.ie. Fantastic. And you're on Twitter I see as @thelittlemilkco and what about your farm? What did you say the name of your farm is?

John Liston: I call my farm Dysert Farm. Dysert is the Irish word for hermitage. It was an early Christian settlement founded by a man called Aengus. Aengus was the first man in Ireland to write in the Irish language, and his manuscripts are still in Trinity College, and even in Oxford, as far as I know. He wrote a long-titled book, but it's basically the lives of the saints. He lived in the 8th century and early 9th century. He belonged to a section of the church, they were called Céilí Dé, servants of God. This particular group of monks had settlements in Northumbria, Iceland, Scotland, Ireland, and they communicated with each other before the early Christian church brought the knowledge of cheese making to Ireland, they communicated using the Latin language. They brought the art of milling, they brought the art of making beer, they brought the art of building using lime as a mortar.

So, in essence, we owe our cheese-making here to these early Irish Christian monks, and that's why... the ruins are still there, a round tower still exists. It's not on my farm, but it's in my neighbour's field, and it's currently being restored by the Office of Public Works, and in conserving it they have found old graves and a lot of finds in it. So it's lovely to see, and it's open for visitors, when it will be completed in the spring.

Catherine Moran: And is that d-y-s-a-r-t?

John Liston: D-y-s-e-r-t, there's various spellings of it, it can be spelled d-i-s-e-r-t, but the anglicised spelling would be d-y-s-e-r-t. It's full title is Dysert Aenghusa Hermitage of Aengus.

Catherine Moran: Absolutely wonderful story, thank you very much John. It was an absolute treat talking to you.

John Liston: And very nice to talk to you too. Thank you very much.

Catherine Moran: Take care.

Catherine Moran: I hope you enjoyed hearing John Liston describe his approach to farming and the wonderful cheeses the Little Milk Co makes.

You can find The Little Milk Co on Twitter as @TheLittleMilkCo. As John mentioned on the show, The Little Milk Co's website is www.thelittlemilkcompany.ie and it's Facebook and Instagram name is The Little Milk Co (www.facebook.com/thelittlemilkcompany and <https://www.instagram.com/thelittlemilkcompany/>)

All links mentioned in the show are available at my website, which is www.myartisanbusiness.com. And you can download a free transcript of my conversation with John there.

To get updates on when I publish new episodes of the show, subscribe to my email list and I'll let you know when new episodes are live. So that's all at myartisanbusiness.com.

You can find me on Twitter as @FoodDrinkShow, so please get in touch if you have any comments or questions or suggestions.

Until next time, I'm Catherine Moran, happy cooking, happy brewing, happy fermenting, happy distilling, and thank you for listening.

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