



Olivia Duff. The Boyne Valley Food Series: a Blueprint for the Future of Artisan Food and Drink

Transcript of Episode #45 of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show*

Catherine Moran: Hello, and welcome to episode 45 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.

In today's episode we're going to hear from Olivia Duff. How to introduce Olivia? She's one heck of a woman. She wears many hats. She's a hotelier, she's a farmer and food producer, she's a mother to three children under the age of six and, as you'll hear shortly, she's the linchpin of the Boyne Valley Food Series, and that in itself requires a whole other wardrobe of hats.

The key message I took away from my conversation with Olivia was that the future of artisan food and drink is utterly about collaboration rather than competition or operating in isolation. The Boyne Valley Food Series shows what can be achieved when a group of individuals with a common goal — which is to run successful, profitable, food and drink businesses — come together and support each other rather than compete with each other. To my mind, the Boyne Valley Food Series, and the group of producers, farmers and restaurateurs behind it, and their other food and drink

initiatives in development, present a blueprint for the future of artisan food and drink.

On the show you'll hear Olivia mention the Fáilte Ireland two-day Food Connect food conference that took place in Tankardstown House, a gorgeous country house hotel in the east of Ireland, and bang in the middle of the lush Boyne Valley. Olivia was one of the speakers at this conference and she generously agreed to talk to me at the end of the two days, and this conversation is our episode today. Here, now, is my conversation with Olivia Duff.

Catherine Moran: I'm here with Olivia Duff from the Boyne Valley Food Series. Olivia, how are you? It's great to see you. Thank you so much for agreeing to have a little word about the Boyne Valley Food Series. What's it all about?

Olivia Duff: I'm delighted to be here Catherine. We've had a really inspirational couple of days here in Tankardstown, and of course we are in the heart of the Boyne Valley. The Boyne Valley Food Series commenced four years ago as a *Meath* food series, which was really an immersive, experience-driven calendar of foodie events that would really give prospect to somebody who wished to either get under the skin of a local, everyday activity, that's something maybe you wanted to always do — be a farmer for a day, go on a tapas trail, have a tour of the food producers — but we branded it the “food safari”.

So we started in 2012 with about 30 events in the summer months. There was really a lot of anticipation from the [County] Louth side, and of course Boyne Valley is [County] Meath *and* Louth, but geographically speaking, it's strictly only the full county of Meath but south Louth.

There were producers and there were restaurateurs in County Louth saying we would love to be part of this. So, the next year, 2013, we re-launched it as Boyne Valley Food Series, and, of course, in line with the Boyne Valley brand, which is an area synonymous with heritage, the birthplace of Ireland's ancient east.

Everybody knows Brú na Bóinne, a complex with Knowth and, of course, Newgrange, the Hill of Tara. It's with this amazing landscape and heritage that we have really brought food and heritage together in this experience-led campaign that's all about collaboration.

Catherine Moran: Just to go back to Newgrange. What is Newgrange? We've got listeners from all over the world and they probably won't know what it is.

Olivia Duff: Sure, OK. You're really testing my chronological knowledge here now [laughs], but Newgrange dates back to about 2000 B.C. It's a very significant pre-Christian burial ground, but what's so significant about Newgrange is that on the winter solstice, which is the 21st of December, the sunlight penetrates at sunrise through the open chamber at the front and it penetrates down through a very narrow passageway, illuminating all of the chambers within the mound, which for us says that the peoples of that era so many thousand years ago were number one, incredibly intelligent, but were also astutely in line with all of the elements, and everything from earth. I suppose that's incorporated in our food story, now. We wanted to go back to that heritage and to the land, because we were in such a really great lush, green landscape.

Catherine Moran: Not so much bacon and cabbage, but a true Irish food heritage, which you're exploring. I was very struck — because you were actually one of the speakers at Food Connect — I was very struck by one of the slides you had up, which was a map of the Boyne Valley area, and it's just one amazing site after another, which is a great thing for you to be able to work with.

Olivia Duff: Yeah, it's just phenomenal. I suppose a visitor might regard it as a treasure or a secret of Ireland, and of course we don't want it to be a secret. We want, of course, to protect it and respect it, but it is just such an incredible experience to be had, all within about a 45-minute radius, that you have the birthplace, as we say now, of Ireland's ancient east.

We have the Hill of Tara, which is where the high kings of Meath once reigned and the Hill of Slane where Saint Patrick in 432 lit the first paschal fire and really annoyed Lugh, the king at the Hill of Tara, because Lugh, of course, had the rights to light the first fire. We have the Brú na Bóinne complex. We have Loughcrew, which is just as old as Newgrange as well, and it's just undiscovered. That's based on the spring and autumn equinox.

So, the peoples of this time *really* knew what they were at. They were so in tune with nature and the lush surroundings that we have. We're just utterly blessed.

Catherine Moran: Off the top of your head would you list off... just tantalise us... with just a few of the food and drink producers in this area, what they make?

Olivia Duff: OK. We have a vast array of food producers within the valley. For example, from poultry I'll start with my husband at Maperath Farm doing free range and really ethically slow-reared goose, turkey and now rabbit. We have amazing pork producers from Peter and The Whole Hoggs doing his rare breed pork. We have a new producer there doing new Irish authentic charcuteries. We have the purple heritage potatoes, the purple Violetta and the pink fir apples and a full selection of heritage potatoes from Ballymakenny Farm. We've Ireland's only garlic farm, which is Drummond House Garlic, run by Marita Collier, and she's also starting asparagus next year.

Catherine Moran: The sweetest garlic I've ever, *ever* tasted. I had some of her elephant garlic as well. It was mind-blowingly good.

Olivia Duff: Yeah, and for the visitor, that's such a *perfect* example, because when Marita said, "We'd love to get involved with the Food Series," you're inviting producers like Marita to open their farm gates, sometimes for the first time ever, and to have the confidence and to try and instil confidence with them to invite visitors in.

And sometimes it's the things that we take for granted. For Marita there, I said to her, "Well, tell me what you could possibly offer?" And she said, "Well, we have this elephant

garlic, and it's the size of a gentleman's fist. And it has to be hand harvested, so I was thinking if we had visitors to the farm that we'd walk down through the garlic fields. I'd explain to our visitors all the different types of... traits of garlic and the growing process and we'd look at the different types of garlic and we would harvest some elephant garlic.

And then we would walk down to the beach and we would have a barbecue and cook it". I thought "Oh my word, that's exactly the immersive experience that we want our visitors to have", but yet she thought that as quite a-day-to-day, ordinary experience, but that's just exactly what it's about. It's about getting under the skin of the producer.

Catherine Moran: Absolutely terrific. You've mentioned a few of the food producers. What about some of the drink producers?

Olivia Duff: Yeah, so it's a really exciting time. I suppose we were reminded at today's conference that food and drink go hand in hand and they compliment our food as well, and we have to remember that; that it's part of a full-circle experience.

So, on the brewing side, we have amazing success stories like Brú Brewery, who are based in Trim, and are now opening their own craft pubs across the country, just serving Brú, and with a menu inspired by Brú as well, so Brú sausages and brew battered fish, et cetera.

We have the amazing Boyne Brewhouse, as well, which is going to offer a fabulous visitor experience over in Drogheda, run by the Cooney family. They are also going to distil their own whiskey and launch their own gin called Silk's because it just looks over the racecourse at Bellewstown.

Then, going over to Slane we have the new whiskey distillery, going to launch next year in Slane by Alex Mountcharles and his dad, which of course is in the amazing grounds of the rock venue of the world, Slane Castle. And we have Ireland's first gin school. It was launched this year, as well, in Louth, called Listoke Gin School by Brona Conlan. You can go to Brona for the day and make your own bottle of gin and bring it home with you that evening.

Catherine Moran: Yeah, I'd be quite interested in that, in looking into that, funnily enough.

Olivia Duff: Further education.

Catherine Moran: Yes, yes. Research purposes, as we say. Lots happening on the food and drink side here.

Olivia Duff: I suppose one of the great things about the person who comes to the Boyne Valley when we look at the target markets or who our customer is, really, is as they were pointing out here yesterday... Fáilte Ireland were saying that it's the *culturally curious* and the *great escaper*. And that person who loves heritage in general terms, research would say they also love food. So food and heritage are a really great match and there's also great stories to be told by bringing people back in time or augmenting the heritage experience through food. So for example, one of our Boyne Valley Food Series events was an ancient grains adventure, where you got into a kayak and actually kayaked down the Boyne and stopped and went through the fields and looked at some of our really great ancient grains and finishing up at the distillery, so bringing the story the whole way down, but at the same time traveling through the valley and appreciating the landscape. So it's about that marriage. And it's also about looking at great events that are already happening in our region.

For example, the Irish Maritime Festival over in Drogheda, which won a major national award this year. Paying tribute to our — we actually have a small coastline and we have a port in Drogheda — and so they bring in the tall ships for the weekend. But food has become a really critical visitor experience as part of that festival, so it's about looking at all of the different events and festivals that we have on and incorporating food as a major component. But not just any type of food; experiential-type food, food that represents our region and its landscape, so again back to the great lush landscape that we have.

Catherine Moran: It seems to me that the Boyne Valley Food Series is very sophisticated and well thought out and very professionally presented, but I guess this didn't happen overnight, did it?

Olivia Duff: No, it didn't. As I say, it started in 2012, and you'd probably be surprised to know that it's still a fully voluntary effort. It's only this year that we've had strategy commissioned and that's going to be launched in a few weeks. We're hoping for a full time officer to come on board.

I visited Canada in 2012 and we visited, as part of the Food Champions' Network, we went on a benchmarking trip to Prince Edward County, which was just outside Toronto, and visited a really inspirational area that had transformed itself from being the world's second largest canning district — so the antithesis of exactly what we wanted to achieve. Total process, total industrialisation and capitalisation to turning its head to becoming a really fantastic food tourism destination. They were lucky that their soil type was relevant and suitable for viticulture.

Again, so many of the lessons learned over there were brought home. They harnessed their landscape and their people, and that's what we have done as well. But it has taken three years. We're in our fourth year now. It's just in the last couple of years it's been kind of frustrating at times. We've had a couple people who have come and go and said, "This isn't for me," or "I'm not ready," or "I don't want visitors on my farm," or "This isn't maybe our model," but this year, all of a sudden, it's starting to gain traction. People are sitting up and listening, and it's *so wonderful* to hear a small producer saying, "*This* is making a difference to *my* business. *This* is making a difference to *my* livelihood, and I've made so many connections." This sharing of information amongst small businesses.

But it takes time to build up that trust, because that information sharing and the transparency just doesn't come naturally to people. Some businesses in general can be a little bit insular in thinking that you might be down on their backs to try and... Maybe they've pumped a lot of investment into branding or digital marketing or something like that, and so they don't want

their ideas, maybe, popping up somewhere else, but there's now this food culture where we're all helping each other. We're referring to each other.

This year we've formalised that in a new initiative called the Place on a Place Initiative, which is just, I suppose, cementing our commitment to the local producers in the area. This new initiative asks that each restaurant, eatery, or even tourist attraction, if hosting a menu, must, *at minimum*, showcase one dish on their menus that showcase and stage, if you like, a Boyne Valley producer.

Now, for some of our restaurants in the area, this is what they do. That *is* their culture. That *is* how they write their menus, but for a lot, it is a departure from the chef at the end of his long shift on a Sunday night, reaching for the catalogue, and getting their order to the back door at 8:00 in the morning. They have to reach out and they have to forge a relationship with the producer, but the rewards are 10-fold, because they're telling the story and suddenly they have a new, unique selling proposition, as well.

So, if there is evidence of that across the region, then we're lifting it also for everybody and it's the greater good. It's the sum of the parts. The ship, rather, sails then, when everybody is aboard.

Catherine Moran: It shows the importance of collaboration, particularly important for an area like artisan food or drink production, which can be very solitary or lonely existence. Yeah, it just seems like just a really good idea to get on board with everyone else and collaborate rather than see yourself as being in competition. You mentioned the Boyne Valley Food Officer earlier... Project officer or food officer...

Olivia Duff: Yeah. I'm not that mad about that... But I think we're going to have to come up with a nicer job description than officer. It sounds quite military, but this has been really a labour of love by a few of us in the region for 3, 4 years now. It's been like my baby with my laptop on the couch at night late [laughs] into the night sometimes. My husband screaming at me, "Come on. Put that laptop down." It's come to the stage now where

there's so many strands and so many levels of participation from producer to restaurant to hotels and accommodation providers, that it really does warrant a full professional effort.

It needs to have a full time office space, even for our own professional perception, it needs to have its own branded base camp, if you like. I'm hoping that on the back of the Boyne Valley Food Strategy, which is our roadmap for the next 5 years for food in general in the region, that we're very close to hopefully having the funding and recruitment of that person.

Catherine: And what would this person do... Apart from everything that you're currently doing?

Olivia Duff: Well, we founded a company and we have a board, so that person would be answerable to the board, but at the moment, my daily life, I mean, I run the hotel in Kells, the Headfort Arms Hotel, with my brother and I also have the farm at home. I have three kids under 6, and so there's a strain there. I suppose it's to become that "go-to" person, and that's aside from having a formalised structure, as well. That person, even coordinating the calendar of events for the food series is like playing a game of chess for about 3 months.

You're trying to give everybody the date that they really yearn to have on the calendar. You're trying to keep geographical events away from each other. You're trying to keep like events, seasonally, away from each other as well so that everybody has the optimum opportunity for PR and they all have a level playing field. That takes a *massive* effort. Also, this year we have a new website. We have new branding and just updating that website and keeping digitally active all the time.

We have a consistent social media campaign, a PR campaign happening all the time, coordinating all the press releases and everything, as well. Then we have a new producer directory, so it's about coordinating the producers, as well. There's a mammoth bank of work there.

Catherine Moran: Sounds like it. Sounds like a dream job, actually. Should be wonderful. Yeah. Where do you see the future for the Boyne Valley Food Series?

Olivia Duff: Our strategy, even though it's just still in draft stage, it's many months of hard work and consultation. We've had a great guy called James Burke come on board with us. We only see the Boyne Valley Food Series as one strand of an overall food plan. Really, we foresee that there would be an overall food network, an *umbrella* organisation formed so that the food series really remains, if you like, as our collaborative marketing campaign for the region, and hopefully that will become — it's edging closer and closer to becoming year-round now — and I'm quite confident that it will be year round, which is great. It's what Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland really want — to gather visitors and children at off-peaks times.

On the other hand, we need to provide business supports. There needs to be management there. There needs to be skill sets and workshops and formal collaboration supports there for smaller businesses. And that would be through a food network. So hopefully, in the next year or two we will see that forming.

Also, working with our biodiversity plan, which is quite strong for the Meath/Louth area, in creating things, great initiatives like, for example, Edible Beds. There's a great pilot project at the moment in Kells, where that, you know, instead of local authorities thinking of planting, just regular beds in public spaces, that they make them edible beds and they become an educational tool then for our schools and our children, because everything for the future, as we know, is all going to be about our junior foodies and how we nurture their appreciation for the food and landscape.

Of course we want to be the number one go-to food destination when you think of champions of visitor experience in an Irish context. That, for us, at the moment, nationally, we see a huge opportunity in the visitor coming out from Dublin. I mean, the Boyne Valley, really at very most from the outskirts of the very northern tip of the Boyne Valley region, which will

be down at Oldcastle, you're at very most one hour from Dublin. Areas like Slane, Drogheda, even Navan, you're really only 30 minutes. You're only 30 minutes to the airport, as well. So there's a huge domestic opportunity there to capture that day tripper.

Now as part of the Ireland's Ancient East brand, it's all about "dwell time." We have always been an area that has suffered from transiency, so people passing through stopping for the lunch off that bus or the fit traveller getting out of their car and having a quick stop or going to Newgrange or walking the Hill of Tara and then going on again. Where we need to get to... and what we're looking at, and what we're starting to achieve is itineraries of two, three, five days, because there's *just so much to do* in this area, but that food would be a central component of that experience as well.

Catherine Moran: You mentioned earlier another venture that you're pursuing, and is it to do with farm tours?

Olivia Duff: Yeah. Sure. Our farm outside Kells is just a small farm, but we ethically rear — very slow rear — goose and turkey as well. We do lamb direct from the farm in a box as well. My husband's actually doing a pilot project now on rabbit, because there's no grass-reared rabbit in Ireland at the moment. He also runs a mobile farm for Agri Aware, which is an educational mobile farm, and we've just seen that people are yearning just to, again, get underneath the skin of what happens on a farm, visit the animals, but not in a petting context, more in a educational and know the journey of food from farm to table.

We just saw this opportunity of, again, I suppose, embracing our heritage with food and rekindling those forgotten skills like so many children now and even people of our age group have just... they don't make a correlation between the processed chicken fillet to what kind of a life that chicken has had, where it has lived, what it has been fed, so we are starting an experience called Ireland's Ancient Eats.

Catherine Moran: Ancient *Eats* not Ancient East?

Olivia Duff: Yes.

Catherine Moran: Ancient Eats. How clever!

Olivia Duff: Of course, you know, especially if it's somebody who's on their holiday, it has to be a fun element, because it's not just what we're listening to over the past two days — all about authenticity and experience and immersive. We hope to create that out on our farm where we'll have a medieval herb garden, which, for example, I've just been fascinated learning this, even. The medieval herb garden was divided in four, so: magic, medicinal, flowers, and kitchen. And so we're going to have a potting bay, as well, so you'll come and we'll teach you about the different values of the different medieval herbs. Then we'll pot some with you and then you'll bring some home. Again, we'll be working with Maria from Ballymakenny on her heritage potatoes. We'll be looking at ancient grains. We'll be doing pop-up events like mead-making workshops and coming to Halloween, you know, Samhain, looking at, an ode to the apple. Doing lots of visiting talks and things like that as well. Yeah, watch this space.

Catherine Moran: As they all say, “ask a busy person if you want something done”. Before we sign off, would you give us the digital addresses of the Boyne Valley Food Series? But firstly, your own hotel, which is the Headfort Arms. What's the website for that? Having spoken to you for the last several minutes, I think you'd take care of visitors very well and I think people should really go and try to stay with you when they're in this area.

Olivia Duff: Yeah, I would absolutely love that. We spoke in the last couple of days about a “Made in Ireland” brand, and the hotel has been in my family for 43 years and we actually have signed up to the “Guaranteed Irish” charter. We're only one of 26 hotels in Ireland to have done so. Everything we endeavour to do in our business we try to keep it as — do I dare mention the word authentic again? — as Irish as possible. It's traditionally Irish, and by saying traditionally Irish, I don't mean bacon and cabbage. I mean that you're getting the real Irish welcome and really proud to say that that is given to our visitors through an amazing team of long-standing members.

We have staff there who are there 30 and 40 years with us, and that's what the Irish welcome is about. We're in Kells, so we're only about 45 minutes from the [Dublin] airport and that's www.headfortarms.ie. H-E-A-D-F-O-R-T. Headfort. Yes, because Headfort was the estate and our hotel was the townhouse of the Marquis of Headfort, so it dates back to the mid-1700s.

Catherine Moran: Lovely.

Olivia Duff: The Food Series is www.boynevalleyfoodseries.ie. Maperath Farm, we will be launching a new website, which will be www.ireland'sancienteats.ie. Eats not east.

Catherine Moran: Absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much for your time. What time is it now? It's 10 to 7 in the evening. Mid-ish September, I suppose. The sun pouring on us and we're sitting on the steps of Tankardstown House near the gorgeous front door, and it's just glorious, and I'm just so grateful for you to having had this wonderful chat with me. Thank you so much, Olivia.

Olivia Duff: Thank you, Catherine. So lovely to meet you and what a great couple of days we've had and here's to many more of them.

Catherine: Let's hope they do it again soon. I'll certainly be back for one.

Olivia Duff: Great. Thanks so much.

Catherine Moran: Take care. Bye-bye.

Catherine Moran: I hope you enjoyed finding out about the Boyne Valley Food Series. Did you notice how Olivia is fizzing with food and drink ideas? And I bet we 'aint seem nothing yet. You can find Olivia on Twitter as [@olivia_duff](https://twitter.com/olivia_duff) and you can find The Boyne Valley Food Series on Twitter as [@BoyneValleyFood](https://twitter.com/BoyneValleyFood). As Olivia mentioned on the show, The Boyne Valley Food series now has a new website, and the address for that is www.boynevalleyfoodseries.ie.

All links mentioned in the show are available at the show's website, which is www.myartisanbusiness.com. And you can download a free transcript of my conversation with Olivia 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](https://twitter.com/FoodDrinkShow), so please get in touch if you have any comments or questions or suggestions — you can always reach me there.

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

Related Episodes of *The Artisan Food & Drink Business Show* You Might Find Interesting

Episode 42 is a wonderful conversation with Liz Hill, founder of Rural Concierge. Liz talks about her ventures in culinary tourism and you can listen to that episode here: <http://myartisanbusiness.com/podcast/rural-concierge-cider-tours-and-tipple-trails-the-business-of-culinary-tourism/>

PS

If you're enjoying the show and/or finding it useful, what I'd love you to do is:

1. Please subscribe* on [iTunes](#) (iOS) or [Stitcher](#) (Android) and, if you're feeling extra generous...
2. Please leave an honest rating and review on iTunes.

*According to the podcasting gurus, the best way you can spread the word about a show is to subscribe to it. Thank you for doing both if you feel so inclined.