

LEADER 2014-2020 NRN CASE STUDY

Blackcastle Farm Food Processing Unit

Summary

In 2005, John and Ann Commins, suckler farmers from Two Mile Borris in County Tipperary decided to try a new venture to enhance the viability of their fourth generation family farm, by farming pure-bred Piedmontese cattle. Today Ann & John have 80 pure bred Pedigree Piedmontese cows. Piedmontese cattle are native to the Piedmont region in the North-west of Italy and are known by their snow-white colour. Aside from their striking features, the meat they produce is particularly unique in that it has only 1% fat, is high in protein and omega 3, and is flavorful. This project sought to support the development of an on-farm processing unit to allow John and Ann to process their own unique products to supply the Irish retail, restaurant and direct selling trade with their premium Piedmontese beef.

Context

John and Ann initially became interested in Piedmontese cattle after they learnt about the price the breed commanded in the Italian market place. This prompted them to take a trip to Italy to learn more about the breed back in 2005 and this developed into a plan to breed Piedmontese cattle on the home farm in Tipperary. Initially the plan was to export their beef to Italy to capture the price premiums associated with

Project name: Blackcastle Farm Food Processing Unit

Date: January 2018 – July 2020

Local Action Group: Tipperary Local Community Development Committee

Implementing Partner: North Tipperary LEADER Partnership

Type of Beneficiary: Farmer

Priority & Focus Area: Theme 1: Rural Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation / Sub theme: Enterprise Development

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: John & Ann Commins

Address: Blackcastle, Two Mile Borris, Thurles, Tipperary, E41TK65

Further information:

<https://www.blackcastlefarm.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/blackcastlefarm/>
<https://mobile.twitter.com/blackcastlelife>
<https://www.instagram.com/blackcastlefarm/?hl=en>



*John Commins with his Piedmontese cattle
Source - Blackcastle Farm*



the breed in the Italian market place. However, two issues became apparent; Firstly, they didn't have a big enough scale to make exporting to Italy cost effective, but also because the cattle were produced in Ireland and didn't have an Italian tag they didn't hold as much value in the Italian meat market and so didn't command the predicted price premiums. Not only this but the Irish meat factories considered Piedmontese cattle too lean and were discounting prices based on this. It was at this stage that John and Ann came to the realisation that they needed to create a market for their own unique product to make their enterprise viable.

focused on the marketing end. The logistics of continuing to process from this unit, along with changes in personal circumstances, meant that processing products and orders away from the farm was becoming more and more difficult.

"We weren't going to be able to go much further working from Rearcross" Ann Commins

Also in 2018, cattle prices took a tumble across the board, which had a knock-on effect on their business whereby many of their customers were able to pick up commodity beef products much cheaper. Alongside this, their business partner, decided to leave the business at this time. With this, John and Ann decided to try and re-brand the business in line with their own farm, Blackcastle Farm, and focus on premium value added products to differentiate themselves from the commodity markets. As part of this they sought LEADER funding, among other supports, to develop their own on farm processing unit to drive the business forward.



*The herd of Piedmontese Cattle at Blackcastle Farm
Source: Blackcastle Farm*

Objectives

- Renovate existing farm buildings and a section of new build to provide space for the processing of beef
- Construct HSE approved units for the processing of cooked & raw meats
- Develop a space to cater for visitor experiences and traditional skills workshops, along with visitor's toilet facilities and an outdoor entertainment area

John and Ann decided to team up with a friend who was also breeding Piedmontese cattle to try and promote the meat in Ireland as a healthy low fat, low cholesterol, tasty beef product under the name "Irish Piedmontese Beef". They did this to a reasonable success and got shelf space in numerous supermarkets and restaurants and even picked up a Blas na h'Eireann award for their cooked pastrami.

However, to process their beef they had to rent a food unit an hour away from the farm, in Rearcross, and hire part-time butchers to do this, while they mainly





Activities

Because Ann had previously worked as a development officer with LEADER, she was very familiar with the LEADER programme. To start the LEADER application process, they got in touch with the North Tipperary Development Company, who deliver the LEADER Programme in their area, and were very supportive of their project idea and guided them through the application and tender process.

"LEADER were superb, the guys on the ground in Nenagh just could not have been more helpful and more open to what we were doing" John Commins, Blackcastle Farm

In December 2017, they got approved for LEADER funding and started works in Spring of 2018. They decided to do the works by direct build, manage the building process themselves, and retain as much as possible the character of the traditional buildings they were renovating. To ensure these traditional aspects and finishes were maintained significant private funding from the Commins family was used alongside the LEADER grant.



*John Commins outside newly renovated processing unit
Source - Blackcastle Farm*

At the same time John and Ann worked with a mentor in the Tipperary Local Enterprise Office (LEO) to help them develop their business plan and re-brand as Blackcastle Farm. This process was helped along with input from University College Cork (UCC) who helped them develop a very successful beef 1% fat sausage for the ALDI Grow programme.



*John Commins in the processing unit with the
Blackcastle Farm Beef Sausages
Source - Blackcastle Farm*

Results

Control of whole supply chain

The construction of their own on-farm processing unit allows them to process their own produce on farm without having to rent other premises and allows them to manage their whole supply chain. Because everything is now on farm and they can process on farm, they have gained a lot more local customers where people can call and collect orders directly. They have also launched their [newly rebranded website and online shop](#) to direct sell their produce to consumers, and also employ part time staff to help them process meat and orders, having a wider impact on the local economy.





"I think it appeals to people a lot when they hear the story and they hear the whole package is here on farm...I think since COVID people have got a lot more appreciative of where their food is coming from" John Commins, Blackcastle Farm

Creation of value added products

Having used LEADER funding to construct the processing unit with kitchens for processing cooked and raw meats, this has allowed Blackcastle Farm to expand their product range into more value added products e.g. cooked meats, pastramis, and sausages.

"The unit is brilliant it allows us to do the value added stuff which we couldn't in Rearcross because we didn't have access to a kitchen in Rearcross" Ann Commins, Blackcastle Farm

Most recently, on the back of this, Blackcastle Farm was a member of the Aldi Grow Programme which was a huge success for the business and this product is set to return to the ALDI shelves by mid-September.



*Blackcastle Farm Sausages branding featured as part of the Aldi Grow Programme
Source - Blackcastle Farm*

Agri-Tourism, Food Tours & Workshops

The additional spaces such as outdoor visitor and entertainment space and toilets developed as part of this project also opens up the business to a range of other opportunities including agri-tourism, food tours and workshops. Workshops John & Ann are hoping to run include how to make your own sausages, how to cure or smoke your own meats and also tours on the biodiversity on the farm. Ann is also a textile artist and has many connections with experts in traditional skills and applied art skills that are interested in running workshops from Blackcastle Farm.

"It's only because we got LEADER funding that we would can even consider that, so it's great really" Ann Commins, Blackcastle Farm

Development of a Piedmontese Co-operative

Not only does this processing unit allow them to process their own Piedmontese meat, but they could now purchase and process meat from other Piedmontese breeders in Ireland. The number of Piedmontese breeders in Ireland is quite small so they could potentially develop a business to process Piedmontese cattle for other breeders (who fit with their product specifications e.g. killed at 18months, no castration and reared on a biodiversity friendly sustainable farm) for their customers to ensure sufficient supply for their markets and a fair price to farmers for their premium product.

"I would love to develop a business where there would be 10 or 20 farmers that could really buy into the end product and feel appreciated with their cattle and they are rewarded with what they are paid" John Commins, Blackcastle Farm





Lessons

Application Process

While Ann had previous experience with the LEADER programme, it was noted that the application process can be quite arduous. However, she encourages potential applicants to approach the staff on the ground who will help guide you through the process.

*“Go and look for the support, because they are brilliant on the ground...if you go, they will get you through it”
Ann Commins, Blackcastle Farm*

Utilise a range of Supports

To get Blackcastle Farm up and running Ann and John utilised a range of supports. For example, LEADER helped with building the processing unit, while the LEO helped with mentoring, business planning and marketing in tandem with UCC. John also completed a postgraduate certificate in Entrepreneurship and Innovation from Trinity during this and support was also given by the Tourism Officer and various personnel in Tipperary County Council. John and Ann stress that without LEADER funding and all the other supports they received it would not have been possible to get up and running. They are also planning to work with Local Institute of Technology, Limerick (LIT) to develop other value added beef products in the future.

“No one agency has made this all happen, we were supported by the LEO, by LEADER, the County Council – the Tourism person in the County Council has done a good bit of work with us, then we had the training from Trinity, the mentors, all of that. So the agencies do work really well together” Ann Commins, Blackcastle Farm

Innovation and LEADER

LEADER has been key to the re-branding and development of Blackcastle Farm, however Idea Generation and Innovation is one aspect Ann has suggested which could take more of a focus for farmers in particular, in the next LEADER programme.

“Really it’s because we went to Italy and saw this, you know if farmers are staying at home doing the same thing all the time. I think LEADER should really focus on bringing them places, because it’s hard to come up with ideas sitting in your own farm” Ann Commins, Blackcastle Farm

Funding

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	€147,905.05
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€147,905.05
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€92,884.37
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€55,020.68
+ (iii) Other funding sources	n/a

Contact details

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