

The ingredients for success in speciality foods

With the right ambition and education, it's easy to take a tasty idea from the kitchen to shop shelves. By Daithí Ó hAnluain



Dr Angela Sheehan of UCC's Food Industry Training Unit, at the English Market, Cork

Related Articles

- [Cows will sing a Lullaby thanks to UCC](#)
- [Growing sector about more than just saying cheese](#)

Irish Independent, Tuesday October 05 2010

Speciality food production has been growing for some time and in recent years the trend has accelerated as consumers worry about food miles and seek locally produced, high quality and traditional foods.

Bord Bia had just 60 small-client businesses when it was founded back in 1994, but it now works with more than 350 artisan companies, with an annual estimated turnover of €475m.

It is a reflection of the tremendous opportunities speciality food offers, but perhaps the key lesson is that many of the country's top speciality food producers began as small enterprises in the farmhouse kitchen.

Companies like Ardrahan Farmhouse Cheese and J&L Grubb, makers of Cashel Blue, began life as farm-based experiments. Now Ardrahan has a turnover of €700,000, while J&L Grubb has a turnover of €2.3m.

Such sums show that speciality food is well established in Ireland, but opportunities remain, and there is a constant stream of newcomers to the sector.

"Farmers are very interested in moving into the speciality food sector," says Angela Sheehan, a programme manager at UCC's Food Industry Training Unit and coordinator of the UCC's Speciality Food Production Diploma.

"Many of them just want to produce food on a small scale, while others have much larger ambitions, but even small-scale producers can make a good living," Ms Sheehan adds.

Started in 2005, UCC's speciality food diploma is tightly focused on developing real-world products.

"Most of our students are farmers or smallholders who have a product they want to develop, and so they use the course as an opportunity to develop a business plan, or perfect a production process," explains Ms Sheehan.

There are 20 places on the nine-month course, running from October to June. For the first time, the course will be held in Athlone, Co Westmeath, at the Hodson Bay Hotel.

"Up to now we have run the course at UCC, but we wanted to make it easier for students from other parts of the country to attend."

Classes will take place on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9am to 5pm every three weeks.

There will be about 26 days in total, plus some field trips to established speciality food businesses. Some classes will be run in UCC.

Professors and lecturers from UCC's Faculty of Food Science and Technology will run the majority of lectures, with occasional talks by external specialists.

The course costs €3,100, though there is part-funding of 25pc for eligible students.

There are nine modules that cover every aspect of speciality food production, from microbiology to marketing. One module looks at local food production systems, while another looks at food business management.

Other modules cover food processing technology, food chemistry and packaging, nutrition and sensory science, and risk analysis.

The practical upshot is that by the end of the course students can confidently create a business plan, develop a marketing campaign, perfect a food process and comply with food safety regulation.

But the heart of the course is a speciality food production assignment, which accounts for 25pc of the year. Here, students get to work intensively on a real-world project, using all the skills and knowledge they acquire in the other sections of the course.

Ger Burns, of Ardrahan Cheese, used the course to perfect the packaging for his Lullaby milk line.

Other students used the assignment to develop micro-brewing processes or to develop business plans or marketing strategies for new ventures.

The material taught can be applied to any type of food production.

"Some want to produce farmhouse cheeses, but students are interested in almost every kind of food, from smoked fish and meats, fresh and specialist meats including charcuterie, poultry and pork products, honey, sauces, condiments and confectionery," Ms Sheehan says.

"The passion of these students is unbelievable. The people on the course are so diverse, but they are all passionate about what they do. Most of them have no interest in being famous or making anything on a commercial scale, though some students will go on to create significant businesses.

"But most students want to be able to support themselves and their family by doing something they love to do. If they can give a job to one of the family as well that's a nice bonus, and that's about as much as they want out of it."

The course kicks off on October 12 and places are still available.

Further information can be obtained from www.ucc.ie/fitu