

PETER YOUNG



Producing cheese fit for a queen



Mary Walsh of Free Range Kilkenny Poultry.

Free range Kilkenny

MARY Walsh started producing geese over two years ago and moved into free range chickens a year ago.

"One of the restaurants in town asked if I could supply free range chickens last year so I looked into it," said Mary. "I picked up the phone and started calling the restaurant until I got to speak to the head chef to ask if they would buy Kilkenny free range chickens."

"Being part of Trail Kilkenny has really helped me get into restaurants and raised the business profile locally. We are seeing more and more people calling for chickens and they buy up to six at a time for their freezer," said Mary.

Mary rears the slow growing Hubbard chicks from a

day old and bought in mobile rearing houses from the UK.

"The biggest threat is the fox, although rising feed and diesel prices are starting to eat into margin," Mary told me.

Orders have grown and she is now supplying 150-160 chickens a week with the target set at 200 a week.

WORK

"There is a lot of work but it is a business that allows you to do most of the work from home," said Mary.

As part of Trail Kilkenny, she is looking at ways people can stop off and look at the chickens and geese.

"We already have school tours coming and people often stop at the gate just to look in," said Mary.

How do I get to you?

SIGNAGE is one of the biggest challenges for rural business and can be a constant battle. One of the most important features of Trail Kilkenny is the finger post signage that has been developed.

"We realised that people needed to know how to get to the start of walks or different producers, so we set about getting signs erected," said Eoin Hogan of Kilkenny LEADER Partnership.

The council erected signs off the main routes for the different businesses.

They are also looking at a new project that will see larger, permanent Trail Kilkenny event signs erected.

The idea is that local festivals will be able to put their events up on signs that have a back drop of Trail Kilkenny.

In Kilkenny, the city is the real honey pot for visitors. Buses and cars filled with people arrive every day to walk the narrow streets and visit the castle.

"Many people see it as a half-day trip and pass on through the county," said Declan Rice.

The challenge for the people at Trail Kilkenny is to make them realise what is outside the city so they will stay longer.

A new innovation that is being put in place is an information centre in a prominent position, beside where the farmers market is held.

Two students have been employed for the summer to try and make visitors aware of what Trail Kilkenny has to offer.

THE food trail brochures were on the table in Helen Finnegan's small cafe in Stonyford when we dropped in. You could see the customers opening them and reading about the different local producers.

"They are really great in raising awareness which is reinforced when they see the different producer's food on the menu," said Helen.

Helen started producing cheese over five years ago, buying in milk from local goat and dairy farmers.

There has been plenty of hard work but one definite high point was when her cheese was served to Queen Elizabeth II.

"When you start a food business you go to every event and festival to get your name out there.

"You might make sales but unless people can buy your products in their local shops it can be a waste of resources," said Helen.

Helen has worked hard to get into the different supermarkets but said you have to be careful not to build your business solely on the back of this.

She started finishing pigs to make use of the whey and two years ago developed a cafe and farm shop in the centre of Stonyford village.

That is one reason why she immediately saw the potential of Trail Kilkenny.

"I have a trail map outside the shop and many tourists will stop to look at it.

"There was a lot of work in the run-up to the launch of



Eoin Hogan of Trail Kilkenny with Helen Finnegan, Knockdrinna Cheese, who sees real potential in the Trail Kilkenny initiative.

the food trail in April 2010.

"Since we started, we have developed a network where the different producers feed off each other and work together," said Helen.

"We need to do more to give visitors a food experience," she added.

Helen is looking at devel-

oping a room into an interpretative centre where visitors can watch the cheese-making process and taste her products.

"Having Eoin as a point of contact is vital as people can be too busy in their business at certain times of the year," she said.

However, she believes that much more can be done if producers work closer together.

"We have great local businesses but getting more tourists and visitors to leave Kilkenny city is the biggest challenge," says Helen.

Linking with technology



TRAIL Kilkenny has been very innovative and has developed a smart phone application that is now available free online.

This not only shows people where the different trails are, but also directs them to the parking area and has videos and pictures to help people find their way around.

It also highlights local businesses that are close by. New garden trails and even ghost trails are in the pipeline.

Trail Kilkenny is all about making people's experience in the area better and making them spend more time and hopefully more money in Kilkenny. "People are moving more towards smart phones and we have to adapt. With broadband still variable, we have designed the app that it can be fully downloaded at the start so people are not depending on getting a signal as they walk around the trails," said Eoin.

Trail Kilkenny have started using QR codes on map boards (see above - download QR Reader for iPhone or Android and use your smartphone to take a 'picture' of the QR code above) to direct people to their website where they can download the special applications or get more information about the trails or business in the local area. QR is short for quick response and is a barcode that can be read quickly

by a smart phone. They are used to take a piece of information from a page or board and put it in to your phone by taking a picture of it. The idea was developed in Japan and in some cases QR can be used to give coupons which can then be used in a local outlet, an idea they are looking at. The reason why they are more useful than a standard barcode is that they can store (and digitally present) much more data.

TRAIL KILKENNY CONCLUSION

Every county should be looking at what Kilkenny is trying to achieve. It is not a case of trying to copy. They should start by looking at what their county has to offer and getting LEADER, local businesses and county councils to work together to develop trails and awareness. One thing that the Trail Kilkenny template has shown is that it does not happen overnight. By taking a long-term approach, there is real potential to bring extra visitors and generate extra income from everyone in the county. It also highlights the need to focus on an overall brand and use modern technology to send out a clear, compelling message.

Your say

Should the sale of raw milk for human consumption by the general public be banned in Ireland?

