



## **Mileeven Fine Foods is the bee's knees**

Set close to the peak of Curraghmore, on Owing Hill, the Gough family are regarded as the best example in Ireland of a home-grown food producer which developed into a world leader. Eilis Gough and her daughter Sarah explain to Sean Keane why their Mileeven honey is the best.

ONE of the most successful niche food companies in Ireland started when a woman moved house to an idyllic part of South Kilkenny and brought her six bee hives with her in the back of the car.

It spawned Mileeven Fine Foods, the Owing based company which produces honey based products that are sold all over the world.

Set up by Eilis Gough and now run by her daughter Sarah, Mileeven is now the sole supplier for Harrods' signature brand range in London. Employing nine people in one of the most beautiful (and hidden) parts of Ireland, the Gough's have created a little bit of magic and their problem is getting enough Irish honey to satisfy the insatiable appetite of the Japanese and other foreigners wild for Irish honey.

Like other food and craft people in Kilkenny, they are finding it hard to source local ingredients and have taken to importing honey from Spain, Hungary, Argentina, Tasmania and New Zealand to fulfil their orders and to ensure their honey is of the best quality possible

Part of the success of Mileeven Fine Foods is based on a good quality supply of Irish honey but last year the Irish summer was so bad that very little honey was collected simply because the bees did not bother coming out of their hives.

So between now and the middle of July they will be hoping for good weather; at least 20 degrees centigrade each day with little rain. If that happens they will have a bumper crop of one of the most sought after honeys in the world because of the natural flora in the area, the honey has a richness and aromatic taste that no other honey possesses. the abundance of wild flowers bushes and shrubs has to be seen and I would recommend anyone to drive up Owing Hill to see the richness of the flora in that small, particular part of the world.

The pure gold coloured honey, is partially so because of the hawthorns that grow around Owing and Piltown. "The honey produced from the nectar of the hawthorn is really good and has a slightly nutty taste," Eilis explains. Not a lot of people know that bees will not fly beyond three miles of the hive to find the pollen and they will pollinate wherever is closest.

Changes in agriculture have given the Goughs another product. Farmers are now growing oil seed rape as an alternative to the main cereals crops because it can be used as the raw material for the production ethanol as well as food stuff.

Its unmistakable yellow flower is a common feature of the countryside. The bees take the nectar from the flowers of the plant and return to the hive where it is turned into honey. The oil seed rape nectar produces a very white coloured honey which, while not of the same purity as other Irish honeys, still has a niche market.

The company was founded in 1987 a few years after Eilis moved to Owing from Dublin. Mileeven (which translates as beautiful honey from the Gaelic) was one of the first ever specialist Irish food companies to make its mark. It set a trend which has been copied by many other home-grown industries which are prospering but Mileeven led the way.

It all started in 1982 when Eilis and her husband Joe, originally from Dungarvan, Co Waterford wanted a "way out" of Dublin. They saw a property ad for an old two storey house in Owing and within a week of seeing the enchanting house on the hill, they had bought it. "It was really just a feeling we had that we belonged here," Eilis said.

They certainly do. Their two daughters were born in Owing and they have given a lot to the community and are the first to say they have also been the recipients of much in terms of support and friendship from the people of Owing who still display that natural tendency to look out for their neighbours; a character trait that seems to be missing from town and city enclaves.

When Eilis moved from the capital, she placed her six bee hives in the back of the car and brought them with her. She started producing honey and exhibited at Iverk Show on the first Thursday of every September.

A number of crucial things happened in the period 1987-88 that helped sow the seeds of success.

First the Goughs produced a bumper crop of honey and they began to sell it locally and realised there was demand for it. At the same time, the main companies in England involved in the honey business were re-organised. The move failed and suddenly there was a gap in the market. Eilis, backed by her husband Joe, took full advantage.

Having worked for Fs and having graduated from college with a social science degree, she went about doing a survey. She picked six main urban areas in the country and sent a questionnaire to one big shop and one small shop in each place. She included Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny and two other places which she cannot recall at present in the scheme

From the responses she found there was demand for Irish honey and that it was not a price sensitive product. On the negative side, she was told that the shops did not like the packaging and that there was a problem with supplying the product on a regular basis. Armed with this information, she decided to concentrate on key shops and supply them regularly.

She received another break when Aer Lingus stocked Mileeven honey, in little pot form on its flights. Not only was it a massive boost to the fledgling enterprise but it provided Eilis with great free advertising to a huge customer base.

She also got into the Superquinn chain of stores and of course, she received the support of Kilkenny Design store opposite Kilkenny Castle, where she still is to this day.

Her first big export contract was to Brittany in France and this was through the Celtic connection. After that things mushroomed and Mileeven has never looked back. It was a lot of hard work but like in almost all things, the hard work paid off.

As we enter the plant where the honey is processed and jarred I have to fill my own questionnaire about my health and if I have contagious diseases or not. I have to take off my watch, put on a hair net and a white coat before entering what looks like a lab from Space Odyssey 2001.

I am amazed that at the end of the machine which pours the honey into jars is a metal detector, which identifies any foreign elements in the honey. Of course there are none. It's part of the new strict hygiene and security regulations.

When we return from the tour, we sit in the office overhead and chat. Sarah who completed an International business degree at Carlow IT is delighted to be working with her mother and says that from 9 to 5 every day its business and that the mother-daughter thing is put to one side.

It was never a foregone conclusion that she would work in the family business, it just happened that way although others felt she was always destined to join in, especially having spent summers and other holidays working with the honey. "We get on well and she is great to work with," Sarah said.

Eilis seems a little surprised and equally thrilled that her daughter should think so much of her and say it publicly. There is a close bond as there seems to be with husband Tom and the couple's eldest daughter Siobhan, who is a chef based in

Shanghai. Siobhan is working on getting the Chinese export market for Mileeven going.

The range of products coming from Mileeven has grown and adapted with time and with market needs. A Japanese customer wanted honey with a ginger taste. He got it and another range of products was created and there is now Mileeven with cinnamon, walnuts, sour cherries and orange.

Because of the scarcity of Irish honey, the Goughs were forced to look elsewhere for the best quality honey. They have Manuka honey from New Zealand, Spanish orange blossom honey and Hungarian Acacia honey. One of the biggest sellers is honey from Tasmania, produced from the nectar of the Leatherwood tree.

On leaving Mileeven, you drive down the hill and the view is breathtaking. In the distance Corbally wood stands out and you can make out the Sweep, Rogerstown and the high Monavinnaun. The incredible beauty of this area of Kilkenny on a summer's day is magnificent.

As I drive away, I am struck by the easy atmosphere at Mileeven Fine Foods which belies the huge achievements of the Goughs and their crew.

Setting a trend from humble beginnings and becoming a specialist food producer with links stretching into four of the five continents is the stuff dreams are made of, but in an enchanting place like Owing Hill, you realise that anything is possible, provided you have the will and get a few lucky breaks along the way