

Sheep prove their versatility in Tipp

'First find your market' is the rule for sheep milk producers in the Premier county, writes **Claire Mooney**, Teagasc drystock advisor, Nenagh

The Golden Vale is synonymous with lush grass and highly productive dairy cows. Michael Crosse is a local but also a rarity: a sheep milk producer. Michael has a leased farm where his 400-ewe flock supplies Cashel Blue Cheesemakers, whose 2015 Crozier Cheese won the Super Gold Cheese Award in France. "Virtually all of our milk is processed into Crozier Blue, which is a premium cheese," says Michael.

"The key thing to know about sheep milk production is that there is no co-op waiting to buy your milk. Before you produce a litre, you have to know who is likely to buy it from you.

"Continental producers mostly keep their sheep indoors where they are fed largely on concentrate. Our advantage, as for dairy cows, is our ability to produce milk from grazed grass. That's a better message in terms of the environment, animal welfare, etc. As with dairy cows our sheep are continental breeds where ewes have been bred for milk production."

Michael uses the Friesland and Lecaune breeds. The Friesland is the Holstein Friesian of sheep and the Lecaune is the Jersey cow equivalent. 250 ewes are lambed down in January and a further 150 in mid-March. In 2016, all ewes were bred to AI following a synchronisation programme which resulted in an 80% conception rate. Rams mopped up the remainder.

"Lambs remain with the ewes for four days after which they are grouped together in pens of 20 and are fed whole milk with a teat feeder for a week, after which they move on to milk replacer on an automatic teat feeder," says Michael. "Some of the ram lambs are sold as pets and the remainder are fattened for slaughter



Michael Crosse with Teagasc advisor Claire Mooney.

at 12 to 16 weeks of age. Ewe lambs are retained as replacements for the dairy flock.

"Lactation length is on average 220 days, where ewes have access to the best grass. Grass is managed in a paddock system. We take cattle in on a B&B basis while we are increasing sheep numbers and there is land available. Each ewe will eat 1kg of meal per day (totalling about 250kg annually). As for dairy cows we want to produce milk from grass rather than concentrates and we aim to reduce our meal bill."

The milking parlour is a 24-unit parlour consisting of 12 clusters at either side of the pit. Every second ewe is milked and then when she is finished clusters are moved to the ewe next to her. Milk recording also takes place on

this farm. Ewes are noticeably more placid around people than conventional sheep due their greater interaction with people in the parlour.

"Accessing new and high-value markets is vital," says Michael. "Our aim is to ultimately develop extremely high-quality products for national and international markets. For example, we are currently investigating with MTL at Teagasc Moorepark whether we could work with them and their facilities to develop a dried sheep milk powder product.

"The low volume of production compared with dairy cows makes this a challenge in terms of cost but we may be able to develop a niche either here or overseas. The key thing is to develop the market before producing the milk."

Continued
on p22



Cheese from sheep milk

Located near the shores of Lough Derg in the very north of county Tipperary, Barry and Lorraine Cahalan have been milking sheep since 2013. Leaving University College Dublin in 2010, the pair decided to come back home and farm.

In 2012, Barry's parents Paddy and Anne had decided to retire from their tillage and drystock farm. Barry and

Lorraine were interested in dairying but found that the setup costs were prohibitive, so they looked to diversify. Eventually, Cáis na Tire, a hard cheese made from sheep milk, was born.

"We had worked and forged a friendship with Marion and Haske Roeleveld, who produce Killeen Farmhouse Cheese at their farm in

Portumna, Co Galway,” says Barry.
 “Marion agreed to produce a cheese using our milk.” The cheese is based on the Tomme recipe from France.

Twice weekly, the Cahalans’ sheep milk is delivered to Marion and made into cheese. After three to four weeks, the cheese wheels are returned to the Cahalans’ farm, where it is matured in a dedicated store where temperature and humidity are carefully regulated. The maturing process lasts for six to twelve months depending on the flavour that is required. Each cheese wheel must be turned and wiped on a weekly basis.

“We are currently milking 200 Friesland sheep,” says Lorraine. “The top 60 milking ewes are bred to Friesland rams and the remainder of the flock is bred to Charollais or Beltex rams. Charollais and Beltex are used to increase the meat value of the lambs.”

The diet is predominantly grass-based, with 1kg/day of meal fed for the lactation. The couple have invested a lot in establishing paddock systems to help with grassland management.

They had a new shed constructed which includes milking parlour, housing, meal store and cheese store. Their parlour is a 20-stall parlour, with 10 ewes being milked at any one time.

“Milking takes 1.5 to 2.5 hours depending on whether there are one or

two people milking,” says Lorraine.

There is no co-op for sheep milk in Ireland, so finding a market for their product was critical to the success of their farm. Cais na Tire is sold mainly to local markets, cheese shops, hotels, restaurants and also to Sheridans Cheese Mongers.

Cáis na Tire has won a number of awards since its establishment, including a silver British cheese award, and also two bronze Irish cheese awards. Another independent cheesemaker also purchased some of the milk in 2016.

“There are some unique challenges,” says Barry. “The breeding pool in Ireland is relatively small and bringing in new rams or ewes can be highly expensive. Also, some pest control products are not registered which means ewes may have to be shorn several times in a year.”

Despite the challenges, Barry and Lorraine are enthusiastic and aim to develop and grow their business over the coming years and would eventually like to be in a position to make the cheese themselves.

“The business is a challenge but a cheesemonger in Settle, in the UK, just asked to double his order and when things like that happen you can have confidence in your product and future,” says Barry.

Further information on Cáis na Tire is available on www.caisnaitire.ie facebook and twitter.

HISTORY

In the Middle Ages sheep were valued exclusively for their wool. By the twentieth century wool and mutton were prized here and in the UK. Germans preferred pork and finding grain for their pigs proved a strategic problem during WW2. Now the circle has turned again and sheep are valued not only for meat and wool but milk too.

Sheep milking facts

- Average milk yield is 1.5 (peak of 2.4 l/day)
- Average Yields per Ewe 300kg/year
- Lactation Length 220- 240 days
- Average Fat 6.5 to 7.5%
- Average Protein 5.5- 6%



Barry in the milking parlour.



The cheese maturing process can be as long as a year.