

McGeogh Connemara Fine Foods

In a purpose-built unit in Oughterard, Co Galway, James McGeough and his son Justin produce speciality meats which are unique in the country. In fact they are one of only four producers of air-dried lamb in the world.

Raised in Oughterard, where his father owned a butcher shop, James followed his inclination for innovation by moving to Germany. During six years there, he trained and qualified as a German master butcher and is the only Irish butcher to have this respected qualification.

"When I was back home in our family butcher shop, I began to experiment with local ingredients, including Connemara lamb, to produce products that could be described as inspired by products of German-Swiss origin," he says.

His son Justin, who is completing an apprenticeship in butchering in Ireland explains the process: "We always start with top-quality locally sourced meat. We start the process by marinating the de-boned meat in its own



Justin McGeough with air-dried lamb.

juices with garlic, rosemary, juniper berries and curing liquid."

After a number of weeks, the meat is removed and enclosed in a tight

net (which helps to form the desired shape) and hung in an air-drying facility. The climate is carefully controlled and the racks of beef, pork and lamb are surrounded by bay leaves and heather which infuse the meat with local flavours.

"The meats and salamis take up to six months or more to cure," says Justin, who monitors the meat several times each day. Production is tightly controlled but has its own unique character. During the hay-making season, for example, outside air is filtered through the drying room to further infuse the meat with local aromas.

Result

The result is a fabulously flavoured savoury meat frequently featured as a starter by Irish celebrity chefs. In particular, legs of boned Connemara lamb, cured and air-dried, have huge potential. "It is particularly good for export markets," says Justin.

"The meat will lose up to half its weight during the air-drying process, and that concentrates the flavour of the meat in an easily transportable product."

McGeogh's unique products have been winners in the internationally renowned Great Taste Gold Awards.

Castlemine Farm

The Allen family has been farming Castlemine Farm for five generations. The 250ac farm, located at Four Mile House in Co Roscommon produces pasture fed beef, lamb and free-range pork. Brothers Derek and Brendan now run the farm. Derek qualified and worked as a carpenter and part-time farmer while Brendan became a scientist. The recession beginning in 2008 swept away both off-farm jobs.

"We quickly recognised that rearing and selling beef, lamb and pork to the factory was not going to generate enough income," says Derek, who spends much of his time running the farm but is also involved in the farm shop they developed to boost income.

"We have sheep, free-range pigs and Black Angus and Hereford cattle," says Derek. "The aim was always to "sell all of the farm produce direct. The shop has outgrown our own production, so we also buy in animals from neighbouring farms."

Initially, the farm shop was located across the road from the farmhouse but due to increased demand they opened

a farm shop in Roscommon town. There, they make their own sausages, dry-cure their own hams and bacon and dry age their own farm Angus beef and lamb.

"One of our newer products is Pastrami, an Italian-inspired silverside of beef," says Derek. "The beef is brined, partially dried, seasoned with herbs and spices, then smoked and steamed."

In 2013, a production kitchen was built at the rear of the farm shop, which has increased the range on offer to include cooked products such as ready meals, cooked hams, sausage rolls and Castlemine pies, famous in the town and beyond. They also stock a wide range of other suppliers to give customers a greater range of products. "You have to make it convenient for customers," says Derek.

Larder360, delivering fresh local produce direct to the consumer's door, is another initiative that Castlemine Farm has become involved in, in association with other producers such as organic producers, fish mongers, cereals and sauce-makers. This initiative is managed by local producers to connect with consumers. "Local consumers want the best fresh produce available at



Derek Allen in the family farm shop with Anne Kinsella.

competitive prices while the local producers want to be fairly compensated, as well as having a closer connection to their consumers following seven years of research and development." With others, Brendan initiated Larder360 using the latest technology to advance the current food system and complete the local consumer-producer connection.

"Our first love is practical farming, but there's also great satisfaction in delivering top-quality produce to consumers," says Derek.