

An additional link

Constant innovation and focus on customer needs has led to success and national recognition for this family of Galway farmers/butchers

Anne Kinsella
Teagasc Rural Economy Development Programme



Mark Geraghty studied agricultural science in UCD, graduating with an honours degree in 2006. He returned home and spent the next year working between the butchers and the family farm. "I always had a keen interest in the butchery business, helping out since the age of 13. I received excellent training in all aspects of the business within the environs of the family farm and butchery business," Mark says.

"Being able to select the right animal for slaughter, to breaking the car-



Mark proudly showcasing award-winning products.

cass down into all the various cuts is where it all begins. Displaying all the various cuts and products in an eye catching way is key." His parents Pat and Margaret, along with their other long-time resident butcher Padraic McHugh were his mentors.

After spending a year in the business, Mark decided to spread his wings; Australia beckoned and to gain further insight into how butchers and farmers operated down under Mark worked at Weir's butchers in Perth.

"It was a real eye-opener to see all the different products that were created in store. There was a team of four butchers on preparation – boning beef, lamb, chicken and pork. Another four worked full-time on the counter; a team of two were based on added-value products with a further full-time chef on ready meals," Mark says.

"While the raw materials – beef, lamb, chicken and pork, were the same as at home – they were creating many different products that were ready to cook or ready to heat, with a wide range of marinated products also made in store by the chef."

"One major difference was the distance the beef, lamb, pork and chicken had to travel to reach the shop. In Perth there was up to a four hour journey before they got to the butcher's shop. A big contrast to our own shop in Mountbellew where all the beef and lamb comes from our own farm, a few miles out the road."

The next stage of his trip was spent working on a beef farm three hours north of Perth. The farm produced Angus, Hereford and Wagyu cattle. The scale of the operation was huge, over 6,000ha, but it was still regarded as a smaller operation in this part of Australia. A large proportion of the Wagyu and Angus cross cattle were destined for the Japanese market.

"Apart from the size of the farm the next most noticeable difference was to see cattle produced in a feedlot system, in stark contrast to the grass-based system used on our own farm."

Once weaned, all stock was drafted by breed weight and sex into different areas of the feedlot with diets consisting of oaten hay. Every couple of weeks buyers would come to the farm, select the stock they wanted, which would then be transported the five hours journey to the abattoir by road train.

In early 2009, Mark returned home



having decided to put all his energy into the family business. It was the height of the recession and he hoped that if he continued to build upon what his parents had built up, coupled with what he had learned while working in the Perth butchers he could get through this difficult time.

"One major advantage we had in our business was that our farm supplied 100% of the beef we sold in our shop and a large proportion of the lamb. The remainder of the lamb we use comes from farms within a 10km radius of the shop," says Mark. "In the years since my travels, we have focused more on Angus and Hereford breeds; they produce a carcass with a nice cover of fat which is vital to produce good-quality high flavour beef."

"All our beef and lamb are slaugh-

in the value chain



Butcher Padraic McHugh.



ABOVE: Where the meat comes from.

LEFT: Mark with his parents Pat and Margaret outside their butcher's shop in Mountbellew.

tered in Athenry, beef is aged on the bone for 21 days and our lamb is aged for seven days before sale." Mark comments that this is one area in particular where the difference in production from his family butcher shop differs to the shops in Australia. "The 'Food Miles; we have compared to Australia is minimal."

"Trends and tastes are always changing so to keep up with the times we are always trying new products. Over the course of a year you will find different trends occurring.

Demand

"Early in the year, people are more health-conscious and the slimmers' product range tends to do best, while in the summer, weather permitting of course, barbecue products are most

popular," Mark says. With the heat-wave last summer there was a huge demand for barbecue products. Mark and his team tried and tested many different types of burgers, kebabs and sausages which proved very popular.

The success of the business and the quality of the products they produce has been nationally recognised.

Geraghty's Family Butchers was recently the recipient of three national awards for what are their best selling products. "We received a gold award for our Ballymaloe relish and red cheddar steak burger, a silver award for our Geraghty's signature steak burger and a bronze award for our lamb burger.

"We received these awards in the Butchery Excellence Ireland, All-Ireland Sausage, Burger and Pudding

awards presented in March 2019. It was extremely satisfying to win such awards especially as the beef and lamb had come direct from our own farm," says Mark, proudly.

There have been huge changes to the business over the years, with many people "now more time poor" and hence wanting quicker meal options after a long day at work. "Ready-to-cook products have become more popular over the years since I returned home and these customer needs have to be catered for," he comments.

While sales of the traditional Sunday roast have declined over the years, sales of products ready to cook have kept increasing. Trends and tastes are always changing. "We will have to keep adapting to keep up with these changes," he concludes.