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Organic Diary – David Storey - THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2004

IT could be said; jokingly of course that Deirdre Hilliard career change has seen her move from cooking the books to cooking for real.

In her new designer kitchen, at her home in Ballybrassil, Cobh in Co Cork, the former accountant now runs her own organic food company.

After 12 years working as an accountant, some of which were spent in Holland, Deirdre has thrown in whatever it is you throw in when you give up accountancy and take up pots, pans and ladles instead.

"When I came back to Ireland, I decided to take three months off to do a cookery course at Ballymaloe," says Deirdre. "I reckoned it would be an investment, as I would be cooking for my family, anyway."

Deirdre enjoyed the course so much she decided to have a go at selling some of her soups at a farmers' market.

Darina Allen was generous enough to give her a bit of space on her stall in Middleton. All went well for Deirdre, and her soups were in great demand. As a result, she went into the food business full time.

Two years later, she's happy with her decision. "It's easier to make money as an accountant, but I wouldn't go

back," she says. "I missed the first three years of my son Sean's life, because I was so busy working. Now, I probably do as many hours, but I can fit them in with family life."

Deirdre has extended her market outlets to include Douglas and Cobh, and a few local shops. She makes soup exactly as your mother made it, in a large pot. She produces about 30 liters at a time, enough to fill 60 packets for sale. But her food production doesn't stop at soup.

She also makes salads, pesto and a variety of pasta sauces. Her latest venture is chicken liver pate, made with organic chickens provided by fellow stall-holder Dan Aherne.

"It would be easier for me to focus on making just one product," she says. "But, as I'm a small producer, I have to produce as much variety as I can. They say that the most successful organic farmers are those in mixed farming. Well, I'm the processing equivalent of a mixed farmer.

"Deirdre's products might be produced in a traditional home kitchen, but her products are a few steps up from your basic bacon and cabbage. Where else would you get sweet potato and lemon grass soup, Thai chicken soup or roasted red pepper pasta sauce?' 'Many people have jaded palates,'" says Deirdre. "They are tired of over processed supermarket food. They are

looking for something different.

She is happy to say her processing is both basic and traditional. You won't find any additives or preservatives in her products. "I only use what the ordinary housewife would have in her own kitchen."

In our booming economy, it is jobs such as economists, accountants and financial advisers who are both socially revered and financially rewarded. Although food is one of our most vital needs, those who produce it are generally way down the financial scale. That doesn't bother Deirdre.

"I was one of those people who are described as being cash-rich and time-poor," she says. "Monday to Friday was one long blur. I just lived for the weekend."

But that's all changed since May, 2002. Now Deirdre is her own boss. She loves her work and has a better family life.

"I'm a lot happier with my work and my life," she says. "What I'm doing now is much more worthwhile. I'm giving people fresh food, the sort of food that many haven't had since their childhood."