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Organic Diary – Oliver Moore - THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2008

Food with a lovely Blas is Just what punter ordered

FOUR years ago, the late David Storey wrote in this column about a fledgling organic soup company selling at the Middleton Farmers' Market in Co Cork. I met Deirdre Hilliard and her husband Kevin from the Just Food Company a couple of times recently, and discovered that the story of the growth of their business is as warming as their soup.

I met them at the SHOP trade and retail event in the RDS, and at the Dingle Peninsula Food and Wine Festival. At both events, Just Food scooped awards.

They received an incredible five medals in four categories for their products at the inaugural National Irish Food Awards, Bias na hEireann, which were part of the Dingle event.

This included both the gold and silver medals in the soup category; as well as awards in the sauces and dressings, healthier options and specialty meats categories.

A commended award was received by the company for their organic chicken liver pate at SHOP, in the frozen/chilled category.

Like so many other businesses, they found their first farmers' market was the classic business incubation unit. Just Food was available only in the Middleton Farmers' Market back in 2004 — today, 50 outlets stock their produce.

Now based in a dedicated unit in Cobh, Co Cork, they employ six extra staff. While expanding, they have tried to maintain a quality focus.

"We believe that food cooked in small batches tastes better, and is better. Smaller batches also cook quicker and closer to the time of consumption, which has taste, nutritional and food safety benefits, and allows us to respond to natural differences in ingredients," according to Deirdre.

Their product range effortlessly spans the spectrum from healthy to gourmet — a difficult trick at the best



of times.

In fact, it was their spicy lentil soup which got the highest of their five Bias Na hEireann awards, and that was in the -soup rather than healthy foods category.

Believe me, it is no mean feat to convince a table full of food critics and chefs that lentils are tasty.

Deirdre and Kevin are constantly listening to their customers.

"Our restaurant customers and regular customers at Middleton farmers market provide us with very valuable direct feedback on the products we produce, allowing us to fine tune recipes and develop new products."

Local and organic have been important to them. "We have always tried to source our ingredients from local suppliers when possible. As Just Food has grown, we have found this easier, as we are buying larger quantities and are able to use our own product distribution network to collect ingredients."

Just Food suppliers' list is like a who's who of the quality organic food sector.

Dan and Ann Ahern supply the chicken livers for their pate. When Deirdre started selling at the Middleton Farmers Market, she shared a stall with Dan and Ann, and she has continued to use their organic chicken livers. They also use the produce of Colum O'Regan, Kinsale.

Slightly further afield, their basil is

supplied by Pádraig Fahy and Una NI Bhroin of Beechlawn Organic Farm and Green Earth Organics, in Co Galway also supply ingredients.

Deirdre was quick to point out how important the retailers are in all of this. "Our retailers and distributors agree drop-off points where we can collect our growers' ingredients on our way home, having dropped off our prepared produce."

She was particularly complementary towards Tommy Grimes, manager of the Middleton Supervalu store adjacent to the farmers' market. They were the first store to stock her produce.

"We're expanding, and are looking for more local ingredients again" Deirdre reveals. On what was a blue sky day that Sunday in Dingle, I asked Kevin about the effect the economic downturn has been having on their business.

He thought for a while, and couldn't really come up with anything. "We're growing all the time, and I can't say I've noticed any real change, even in recent times. People will always come back for good, simple, honest ingredients in food."

• For more information email to deirdreh@justfood.ie or call 021-481 2367