

A short case-study on a LEADER funded natural drinks company which was chosen by Munster Rugby as part of their nutritional programme.

Munster rugby goes wild for local smooth operators

Limerick man Diarmuid Crowley has come a long way from making smoothies at his kitchen table in Glanmire and having them taste-tested by neighbours. Today he runs an award winning smoothie and fruit juice company 'Wild Orchard', which operates from a small factory at the foot of the Galtee mountains. 'Wild Orchard' products have become so popular they were recently chosen by the Munster Rugby team as part of their nutritional programme.

Paul Darbyshire, Munster's Head of Strength and Conditioning Coach previously said, "We have selected Wild Orchard smoothies because they are a highly enjoyable means of providing the Munster squad with their fruit requirement. They are fresh, natural, and completely free from additives...".

The Munster squad will consume up to 300 smoothies every week, with flavours ranging from strawberry/mango bio smoothies to a blackberry and blueberry mix.

The idea for a smoothie and fruit-juice company came to Diarmuid when he was working for Pepsi. "I was travelling the world, buying fruit juice concentrate for use in soft drinks when I began to see a shift away from carbonated soft drinks and towards healthier options. This change in market trends gave me the idea of producing a healthy completely natural drink, out of this 'Wild Orchard' was born," said Diarmuid.

Diarmuid left his well-paid job with the idea of setting up his own company. “I purchased barrow loads of fruit and experimented with formulas in my kitchen. It was a leap of fate, but I really believed in my idea and knew from trends there was a growing market for healthy fruit drinks,” he said.

The first batch of Wild Orchard’s products flew off the shelves and orders came in briskly as production began in their own factory

‘Wild Orchard’ differs from its competitors because “each fruit drink is made up of two servings of premium quality fruit, all our products are Irish made and free from additives,” Diarmuid explains.

For example, a ‘Wild Orchard’ 330ml blackberry/blueberry smoothie is made up of 26 blueberries, 17 blackberries giving the full daily requirement of Vitamin C. The body does not manufacture vitamin C on its own, nor does it store it. It is therefore important to include plenty of vitamin C containing foods in your daily diet.

Smoothies are also high in antioxidants and provide a natural source of energy, consequently smoothies are a firm favourite with many sports people.

However Wild Orchard’s success did not happen over night and there were many obstacles along the way, especially in the early days.

“One of the first problems we faced was the short-shelf life of our juice products, for distribution purposes alone we needed to extend that shelf-life through pasteurising the product because we didn’t want to add any preservatives or additives. Juice is similar to milk or cream in the sense that pasteurisation extends its life,” Diarmuid explains. “We approached Ballyhoura LEADER Partnership with our problem,

explaining that we needed funding towards a pasteuriser. They approved a grant of 25,000 euros and they also went on to support us through training and marketing. I've found dealing with LEADER people is always a positive experience, they're quite proactive and always keep us well-informed of opportunities and training which might be of use to us".



“I would advice anyone thinking of starting a business in rural Ireland to contact their local LEADER group, because they can be of help in lots of ways, from providing contacts, training as well as just giving general advise.”

LEADER is the EU Community Initiative for rural development, they provide financial and practical assistance to start-up businesses like ‘Wild Orchard’.

As well as the LEADER grant Diarmuid invested all his savings including cashing in his pension and Pepsi shares as well as taking out a bank loan.

“Some days I spend the whole day in production and maintenance overseeing the product. Other times I go out to meet customers and suppliers. I like to be involved in every aspect, from raw material selection, to product development and even sales,” he said. “You do tend to work longer hours when you’ve your own business but the rewards are far greater. For example, I like the fact that I’m my own boss, standing or falling based on my own decisions and actions.”

“We have been affected by the recession. We would have done a lot of business in the convenience food side, the downturn of the whole breakfast roll culture affected us because these customers may have also bought our smoothies, this business is now gone,” he said.

However, this does not mean that ‘Wild Orchard’ will stand still, “there are opportunities every where, even if a company’s budget is slim for marketing there are things any start-up business can do to create awareness of their brand – social media is a quick and easy place to start. What I like about it is that even if you’re a small company you can still compete with larger competitors because social media is about being creative rather than having huge budgets,” he said.

He added, “The positive side of operating a business in a recession is that we’re now running much leaner, there’s no waste, there’s a lot more efficiency so when things turn upwards we will be in a better position”.

Written with the generous assistance of Diarmuid Crowley, Wild Orchard.