

A TASTE OF HONEY

In Tipperary, a former project manager has returned to her hometown to start a hive sharing farm that connects people to food production. We visited to hear more ...

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Mizzle: the feathery raindrops that drift on a cloud of mist across Lough Derg. It's a cool day on Brookfield Farm and summer's wildflowers – cornflowers, daisies and phacelia – have withered, with scarlet berries and russet leaves the last lingering splash of colour. It is a scene worthy of a postcard, and only the muted drone of a passing tractor or bleating sheep disturbs the quiet. Even the bees are still, the cold weather having sent them scurrying for their hive.

This peaceful idyll is a world away from Ailbhe Gerrard's former life as a project manager in Dublin's construction industry. Her hometown of Coolbawn in County Tipperary was slow to release its grip, and five years ago she took the leap into farming. "I felt I was done with construction. I always loved where I am from; there is always a pull back, but I never thought that I would be in a position to live in the country."



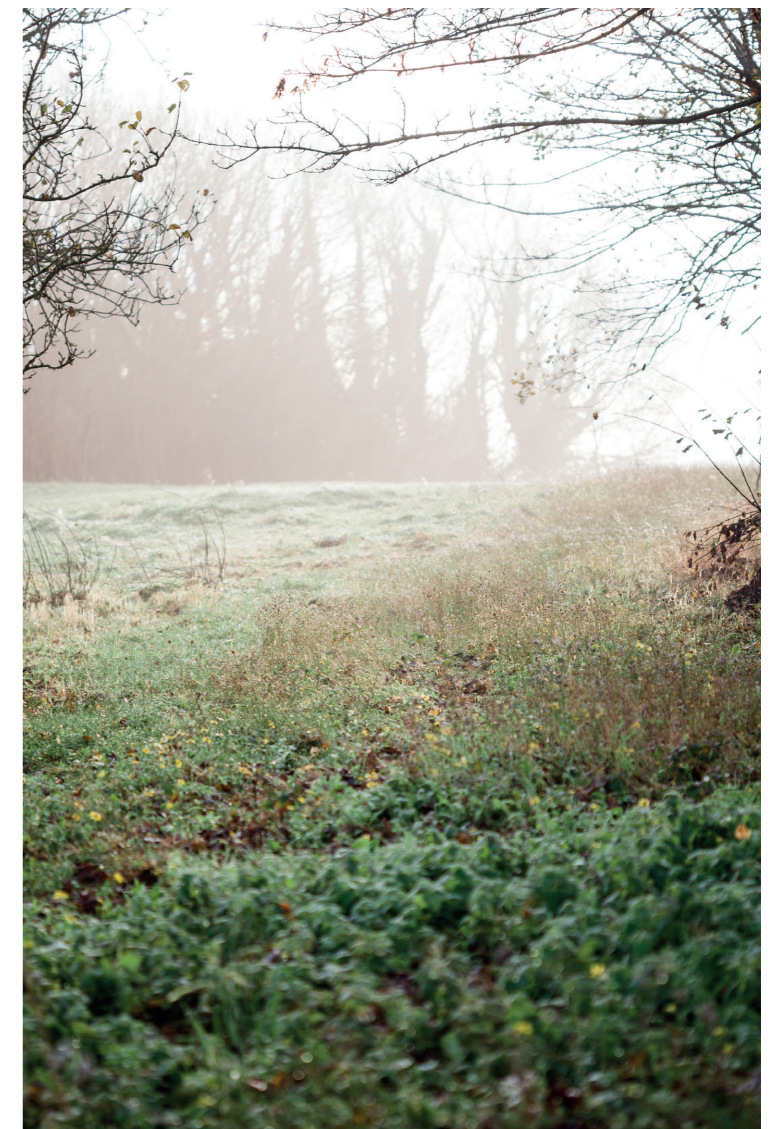
RIGHT Ailbhe keeps Irish black bees that are hard at work throughout the summer. "The bees have three months where they can collect nectar, and in the autumn, we take the extra honey." **BOTTOM** This native variety is more suited to our cool damp climate than the other types favoured by commercial keepers.



ABOVE Brookfield Farm's Pure Irish Honey. **BELOW** Ailbhe has planted 12 acres of wildflowers, including: cornflowers, white thorn, tree blossoms, clover, triticale, Gold of Pleasure linseed, phacelia, mustard, crimson clover and red poppies.



RIGHT New to the art of beekeeping, Ailbhe has mentor beekeepers to teach her the secrets of the craft. **ABOVE RIGHT** The array of wildflowers that the bees visit affect the colour and scent of the hand-dipped taper candles. **FAR RIGHT** Ailbhe showing fresh yellow honeycomb superseding old dark comb from a hive box.





Brookfield Farm reposes over 72 acres of meadows, crops and native trees. “King’s Hill is the highest in the area and it’s topped with ancient forestry – oak, beech and a bit of ash and sycamore – and the land falls down through mint and barley, rolling through the sheep fields to the lake. On this slope, we get these big skies and expansive views – it lifts your heart.”

Learnings from her former career inspired the direction she took on the farm. “I worked in Pakistan, after the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir, and became interested in sustainability.” She discovered that while commodity crops are grown by men, most of the food that is eaten by people is actually grown by women. “That really inspired me. So I was researching and writing how we have problems with agri-business and I thought, I can either sit in academia and write about this or I can go out and practise what I am thinking. I was very lucky because land is incredibly hard to buy, and I got this piece that is only about half a mile from my family home.”

Armed with a desire to connect people with the food they eat, she embarked on an ambitious plan for her new homestead, beginning with the bee. “I have always been interested in the farm as a place for biodiversity and wildlife – a sanctuary for insects and bugs. I got a local beekeeper to put one of his hives on the land. I was so interested I did a beekeeping course, got my own hive and got stuck in.”

Staying true to her heritage, Ailbhe keeps the Irish black bee. “A lot of commercial beekeepers have foreign bees, as they are more productive. Though the Irish bee doesn’t produce as much, it is nice to have the native one, and they are much better at flying in cold and wet weather.”



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Brookfield Farm in the beautiful Coolbawn countryside overlooking Lough Derg. The waxy, sticky and delicious honeycomb. A box of hand-dipped taper candles ready to go to a hiveshare member.

“ Bees are under a lot of pressure, and I always wanted to have somewhere that would be like a sanctuary spa for insects and bugs. It’s a very complex circle of life. I’ve always been interested in the farm being a good place for biodiversity and wildlife. ”

Determined to share not only the produce, but the knowledge, Ailbhe launched her hiveshare scheme, allowing people to buy a portion of a hive. As well as honey, owners enjoy handmade beeswax candles and seasonal updates on the hive. And visitation rights, of course. “I love hive sharing, connecting people with food production. We have open days and show people in the hiveshares their honey and hives. It’s a bit of a celebration.”

Candle-making was a natural offshoot of honey production and the range is handmade and scented with honey and essential botanical oils of lavender, bergamot, and sweet orange. “I love making the dinner candles. You start with a deep container of melted beeswax – the melted honeycomb. It’s a golden colour that varies depending on what the bee has been eating. The candle is built up layer upon layer; you can’t be in a hurry.” A lipbalm made from beeswax hand blended with almond oil, vitamin E and a little raw honey, in a pretty metal tin, rounds out the gift offering.



Brookfield Farm is also home to a band of curious and clever lambs. “I have a small flock, and the plan is to build up a breeding flock. They eat lovely lakeshore herbs and organic grass. They have a great time and are happy. When they are ready to go, I take two or three at a time to a craft butcher. There are no other animals there, and they’re not stressed.”

If rearing animals and insects wasn’t enough, Ailbhe teaches farm management to agriculture students three days a week, has a stonewall project funded by the Department of Agriculture and The Heritage Council on the property, and is dabbling in apple pressing. “I just made apple juice, and it is delicious. And I’m making 300 or so pints of cider.” Clearly, it isn’t just the bees who are busy at Brookfield.

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT A bundle of Brookfield Farm goodies; Ailbhe on Lough Derg, “I never thought I would move back to live in the country,” says Ailbhe. “But when the construction crash happened, I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be amazing to embark on another big life project?’”. Wildflowers cover 12 acres of Brookfield Farm. The lambs on the farm get names, like Bulgy Eye, Scaredy One and Speckly Ears. “They make sense when you know the lambs,” she laughs.