

# THAT'S FARMING



## Women in Ag: Fancy a share in an Irish Hive?

Meet Ailbhe, whose hives and organic meat & veg on Brookfield Farm are reconnecting consumers with the land:

In the next installment of our Women in Ag series, we chat to Ailbhe Gerrard, a lady who has established the fabulous Brookfield Farm Hiveshare. Here, you can buy as little as an eighth of a hive and receive fresh honey from your own busy bees.

Ailbhe has established an intriguing way of producing honey. Her hives aren't just her own; they've been divided into shares for people interested in bees, beekeeping, and simply the honey itself.

The hiveshare of Brookfield Farm has piqued the interest of people from all walks of life. Those who want a share for themselves or those who want one as a gift for a friend all come

to Ailbhe. Her business idea has taken off since December 2014 after flying through a series of awards, competitions and business development initiatives.

Now hives can be a part of anyone's life, without having to get your hands too sticky!

Brookfield Farm was developed by Ailbhe, who grew up beside Lough Derg in Co. Tipperary. She studied in University College London and at the Scottish Agricultural College, with both of these preparing her for an exciting career in agriculture.

"I came up with the idea just out of my own head," explained Ailbhe. "I wanted to find a way to sell honey, but there's a lot of competition with jars on the shelf in supermarkets already, and the international honey brands. So, I said what about a double hit. I'll reconnect people



with food production, and I'll add value and an experience to the purchasing of honey!"

When you buy a hiveshare from Brookfield Farm, you get a welcome pack, honey products like lipbalm and candles, jars of honey from your very own bees, and an invite to Ailbhe's Honey Celebration party in autumn.

The products are simply beautiful, and Ailbhe has the awards to prove it. When she

as a gift for a newly-wed couple as part of the 'honeymoon' theme. They also buy it for themselves too," says Ailbhe. With the Brookfield Farm experience, people can have their own honey without the huge work involved in beekeeping.

"There's no such thing as a standard day; there's a lot of work and the equipment can be very expensive. We do a lot of the work by hand too. Ev-



came up with the idea, she entered an artisan food producer competition. She won, and within five weeks had to bring her business from concept to reality. Brookfield Farm and Hiveshare was born!

Part of the prize was a stall at the National Crafts and Design Fair, and it was for this fair that Ailbhe had to decide how her business was structured.

"I needed to work out whether someone could buy a third of a hive; a half of one; what exactly was going to be available," explained Ailbhe. "Having a deadline was good though!"

It's no one kind of person buying a share, either. There are people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds buying shares, including people from the countryside and the city.

"There's actually a huge wedding market, which I didn't expect. People love to buy a share

every nine days when bees are producing we have to check on them and make sure there are bees at every stage of development there. Eggs, larvae, pupae. We make sure there's no disease."

"There are 60,000 insects in one section and they all want to kill you!" Ailbhe laughs. "They're protecting their nectar and themselves, so you have to be prepared."

"The smallest share you can buy is an eighth of a hive. With extra costs for posting the member welcome package and all that, it works out at about €90. I wanted it to be accessible to lots of people."

The purchase of an eighth would mean you get a minimum of five jars of honey, and candles and lip-balm made from Brookfield Farm beeswax! You get it all in a presentation tin, as well as regular updates on



your hive.

"It's like a mini co-op. I have ten hives, but we work with beekeepers from the Irish Beekeepers of Ireland, and they have about 100 hives! They've been really supportive of my idea because it adds great value to Irish honey," explains Ailbhe.

It's not just beautifully Irish honey being produced on Brookfield Farm, however. Ailbhe has 12 acres of wildflowers, a small flock of organically-reared sheep, a tillage section, and she even opens her land for farm walks!

"I wanted the farm to be integrated; I wanted the lamb and the honey and everything to work together. My sheep will be certified organic in January 2017; so you're getting chemical-free meat from land that has no chemicals, and honey from bees on that land."

Ailbhe is also working with the GLAS scheme, which she thinks is beneficial despite the heavy paperwork. Starting a business is hard of course; but Ailbhe has had excellent support in the form of ACORNS.

"I cannot speak more highly of

ACORNS. The scheme helped me so much; when you're going through a rough patch, you have a group of like-minded women there to support you. The monthly meet-ups were great, it pulls you through the difficult times."

We've written about ACORNS before, and you can find out more about the female entrepreneur rural-development programme here.

Ailbhe also won a Nuffield Scholar award for 2016; she got to travel on the global tour in June and July with other talented scholars, and next year she'll have to come up with her own research presentation. She hopes to cover a theme of 'farmer-direct-to-consumer', with a focus on community-supported agriculture.

Her honey-goods are available not just online, but also in Kildare Village Shopping Outlet, Rathmines, Temple Bar, and Kilruddery Estate.

Make sure you check out Ailbhe's innovative farm on Facebook, Instagram, or at Brookfield Farm's official website.

