

Smoking Kilns

In the wild west of Ireland, the European Economuseum network is putting fisheries' artisans on the map

Most people would take umbrage at being called a museum piece. But Graham Roberts says he and his family leapt at the chance when the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority (Teagasc) approached them about becoming Ireland's first food 'Économusée'.

In late April 2013, the Connemara Smokehouse and Visitors Centre was incorporated into a growing network of Économusées across the North Atlantic. This family business was started over 35 years ago on Ireland's wild-west Connemara coast by Graham's mother and father.

(ENE) project. The ENE is establishing 17 Economuseums across seven north European countries, with two in Ireland. The ENE, in turn, is part of the European Commission's Northern Periphery Programme (NPP), which aims to help peripheral and remote communities on the northern margins of Europe to develop their economic, social and environmental potential.

The diverse communities in these remote regions share such common features as harsh climatic conditions, low population density, and remoteness. The wild Connemara coast of Ireland certainly fits this bill. In Bunowen Bay, where the Smokehouse is situated, in winter storms, with a rising tide and a following wind, waves have been known to carry away rocks from the pier and toss them up on the beach; once or twice they have even been seen breaking over the Smokehouse roof.

An 'Economuseum' is defined as a craft business open to the public that features educational materials designed to introduce the artisan and his or her craft, and promote cultural tourism.

To meet these objectives, Economuseums tell the story of their cultural history and foundations, open their workshops to the public, and display traditional and contemporary examples of their craft.

Artisans

A boutique is the final element and must pay for the whole operation. Today there are more than 500 artisans in Canada presenting and promoting their crafts through the Economuseums initiative to more than 900,000 visitors a year. All

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'Économusées' were initiated in the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec in the 1980s to promote and sustain traditional artisanal craftsmanship and know-how.

They have come to be called 'Economuseums' in the English-speaking world. "What Teagasc proposed was exactly in line with our thinking, and would help take us in the direction that we wanted to go", says Graham. "Over the past few years, we have been developing our own product range, direct selling, and the educational and tourism aspects of the business. Becoming an Economuseum won't change what we do, but it will enable us to do it much better".

Teagasc is a partner in the Economuseum Northern Europe

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the Economuseums are private companies that fund their daily operations by themselves.

Through its combined focus on culture (presenting traditional crafts and trades), education (passing on traditional knowledge) and business (supporting artisanal entrepreneurial ventures), the network intends to foster cultural diversity in the regions, especially in remote areas. It aims to preserve living heritage and promote sustainable development. The European project, which also focuses on rural or remote communities, is assisting with the transformation of artisanal businesses into Economuseums to showcase their indigenous crafts and traditions, as well as to provide new jobs and training for young people.

Teagasc, through its involvement in the NPP, aims “to facilitate and promote the development of aspects of marine tourism, including fisheries tourism and seafood-based experiences”.

According to Teagasc, such industries “are essentially new industries for many peripheral communities, and are innovative in that they aim to fuse together local marine-based knowledge, culture, heritage and products with tourism and business-related skills and knowledge”.

Not that fishing and rural livelihoods, with their associated artisanal skills and traditions, are new; but, until relatively recently, the links with tourism were tenuous, and fishery activities were traditionally meant for not much more than subsistence.

Today, the Connemara Smokehouse and Visitors Centre welcomes at least 15,000 visitors a year from all over the world, with around 60 per cent arriving from France. On a peak day as many as 300 visitors drop in at the Smokehouse, with queues of up to 70 to 80 people at a time lining up in the shop. They produce over a dozen different products from locally sourced fish, and their business and products have received national and international acclaim and awards for

their high quality, innovation and exemplary practices.

Graham and Saoirse Roberts, the current owners of the business, reckon that at least half of their visitors would not come to this part of Ireland were it not for the Smokehouse.

Undoubtedly, the enterprise is making a huge contribution, both directly and indirectly, to the local economy, providing, as it does, eight full-time, and up to six part-time, posts, adding value to locally caught and reared fish, and producing high-value products for local, national, regional and international markets.

The Economuseum project aims to boost this. According to Graham, Teagasc’s support in developing the educational and outreach side of the business is proving invaluable. Besides helping to develop interpretative panels that portray and explain the artisanal processes and skills, Teagasc will integrate the Smokehouse more centrally in tourist and small-enterprise networks.

When John and Bridget Roberts, Graham’s parents, came to Ireland in 1978 to set up a fish trading company, they found a rocky outcrop and a marshy meadow where the Smokehouse now stands. In those



The Connemara Smokehouse’s product range includes Honey Roast Smoked Salmon, Honey Roast and Cold Smoked Tuna, Gravavlax and Smoked Mackerel

GRAHAM AND SAOIRSE ROBERTS



The Connemarra Smokehouse produces over a dozen different products from locally sourced fish like these albacore

and sales marketing. Maintaining high standards of hygiene and quality demand abundant potable water supplies as well as reliable three-phase electricity for powering the chill and cold stores, and the freezing units.

Over a 10-year period, John and Bridget built up a thriving processing, retail and export business. Along the way they acquired an Afos smoking kiln, originally built in 1946, which proved highly successful.

Initially, the wood chips used for smoking came from oak shavings discarded by coffin makers, and ash shavings from the makers of hockey and hurling sticks. Then, in 1990 disaster struck when a fire completely demolished the factory.

Ironically, the only piece of equipment to survive was the smoking oven. But the business had to start from scratch all over again. The fire caused a total loss, and insurance monies cannot bring back the business; and markets find other suppliers.

The early years of the Smokehouse coincided with the salmon farming boom in Ireland in the 1980s, and, initially, much of the business was smoking on contract for the big salmon producers and processors.

While that provided the much-needed bread and butter to get the business up and running again, today the Smokehouse prioritizes its own brand, based on fish it sources itself from the locality.

Graham explains that the move away from contract smoking was mainly to focus on developing his own brand and product line. "We decided to work more on our own brand as we found that the returns from contract smoking did not reflect the amount of time and effort needed. Our contractors often expected us to work miracles. Time and time again, we found ourselves going out on a limb for other people. That made no sense, businesswise."

Wild fish

Today, the emphasis is on wild fish, which provides 50 per cent of the supplies. Farmed salmon is

days, the water supply fell from the sky and was gathered from roofs into storage tanks; drinking water was available several miles down the road from a stand pipe.

There was no electricity supply or phone connection; fuel for heating and cooking was dug out of the turf bogs; and candle flames and gas lights lit homes at night.

The fishing fleet consisted essentially of small open boats; in the main, traditional boats like currachs, punts and 26-footers operated out of rocky coves, off sandy beaches or from small harbours on a seasonal basis to supplement farming and the dole.

Relatively few larger boats also caught fish for tourist hotels in the summer, and shellfish for export. Most of the rich fishery resources were either left in the sea or thrown back because there was no market for them. The Roberts family business aimed to change that by providing the market linkages and the knowhow to develop and diversify a product range into a variety of niches.

In today's high-tech, market-driven world, the Smokehouse could not survive without the Internet; at least 40 per cent to 50 per cent of sales are made online. Businesses increasingly depend on the Internet for social and business networks, and for advertising

controversial and has a bad reputation in many places.

But Graham sees it as an essential component of his product mix. “Today about five per cent of our product is farmed salmon, and 45 per cent is organically reared. For most people, farmed salmon or organically reared salmon are their entry points to smoked salmon. For example, our farmed smoked salmon sells at Euro7.50 for a 200 g pack, whilst organically reared sells at Euro13, and wild salmon at Euro25.

By providing a range of options, we can start up a conversation with customers, so thus enabling them to make an informed choice. If we just did wild salmon, a large segment of our customers would simply walk out of the shop if they had to pay Euro25 for their picnic lunch, without knowing why. This way, we link commerce with education and tourism, and we all benefit.”


The European Economuseum project will also form a tourism-based network or trail, which will assist the businesses to expand sales and sustain employment. Graham explains how the initiative is also linking with other initiatives like the Wild Atlantic Way project, for which he is an ambassador.

The Wild Atlantic Way is a long-distance driving route from Donegal in the north to Cork in the south that will take in some of Ireland’s most incredible experiences: its coastline, seascapes, history, culture and people. This is a coast which Vikings raided; it is a coast steeped in myths and legends, linked to the Brendan voyages and the Spanish Armada, rich in marine biodiversity, with iconic marine mammals and rare avifauna.

The Roberts family is also looking to the future, and training up the next generation. Graham and Saoirse’s children are taking a keen interest in helping their parents with the tours, packing the products, and learning how to fillet.

The Connemara Smokehouse and Visitors Centre features in most of the good food guides, at national and European levels, including in the French Guide de Routard and the

Guide de Gourmande. The awards won by the Smokehouse include the Bridgestone Guide Award, Good Food Ireland’s Best Use of Sustainable Local Fish Award, Great Taste Awards, Favourite Speciality Producer at the BBC Good Food Show, and Graham is listed as one of Rick Stein’s Super Food Heroes.

The Connemara Smokehouse’s extensive product range includes Honey Roast Smoked Salmon, Honey Roast and Cold Smoked Tuna, Gravavlax and Smoked Mackerel; its website has pages of recipes, both modern and traditional. 

For more

www.smokehouse.ie

Connemara smokehouse

www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/economusee.asp

Agriculture and food development authority

www.economusee.eu

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