



PETER YOUNG



The community kitchen can be leased out for €15 an hour by small start-up businesses.

Kitchen 'timeshares' in Drumshambo

THE community kitchen is one of the most unique innovations that the food hub has to offer. Based on the idea of a 'timeshare', a concept that was first pioneered in the US, the facility can be leased out for €15 an hour by small start-up businesses. Filled with the latest kitchen equip-

ment, it provides the first stepping stone out of the home for many small businesses. The use of the kitchen has proven immensely popular with local and regional producers involved in farmers markets.

The kitchen is open six days a week, from 7am to

11pm, and time can be booked in advance. The kitchen is also used for cooking demonstrations and training by Fáilte Ireland, FÁS and individual hotel and service companies. Adjacent to the kitchen, there is a separate training classroom complete with 10 dedicated Internet

access PCs. The Food Hub also boasts another exciting innovation; the Origin Farmers Market Showcase which will display the foods produced in the centre and also in the region. Consumers will be able to buy the products grown and manufactured by local farmers.

One stop agribusiness hub

THE food hub is aimed to address the growing needs of two distinct target markets:

- Entrepreneurs who do not have the money to invest in start up production facilities
- Existing food businesses that need to increase their production capacity in a cost effective way.

No expense was spared during the planning and developmental phases of the project. Every effort was made to ensure that all 'mod-cons' were accommodated and stringent regulations, as laid down by the environmental health authority, were strictly enforced. The 14 units vary in size from 600sqft to 3,100sqft. The leasing charge, set at €7/sq ft for each unit, is very reasonable.

Each unit is independently metered for water, gas and electricity. A separate roller shutter door ensures each unit has its own entry and exit points. High emphasis

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– Fergal McPartland

was placed on installing high risk and low risk drainage systems. Each unit's effluent runs out separately to a parameter wall on the property, underlining the fact that these units are independent of one another.

This access ensures that should one specific unit have a drainage problem nobody else will be affected.

"The individual drainage was put in at enormous expense but was vital from an environmental health point of view," said Noel.

Noel's son Fergal (who also works voluntarily for the

project) looks after much of the day to day running of the centre. A number of the units have already being leased out with more business prospects coming on board.

"We lease the units out as a shell on a four or nine-month lease, with all services in place. The main criteria for evaluating potential candidates in terms of viability to pursue a lease is a well constructed and well presented business plan," said Fergal. Knowing that not everyone possesses these skill sets, the food hub offers the service of business plan consultants to develop the project. In many cases, the new businesses will look for up to 50% funding from LEADER or the County Enterprise Board, so having this expertise on site is a huge help for them.

One of the biggest strengths of the Food Hub is that it is simply more than a food production facility. On site expertise is available to

work with fledgling businesses from the start.

Food technologist, Louise Kennedy, is based at the food hub and is available to help clients at all stages of the process. Louise hand-holds potential clients through the entire set up phase, from concept, design to fully kitting out the unit to maximise work flow and efficiency. She also assists with product research and design and packaging.

There is also 6,000 sq feet of office space available for rent, and as the centre fills up, it provides the perfect 'hub' for different businesses to network together to pursue common goals, such as establishing lucrative distribution channels to increase volume sales.

"We realise the challenge that a new food business has and there is huge potential to work together in sourcing raw material or in distribution," said Louise.



Stephen Dowd and Jacinta McNiff Lough Allen foods.

Turkey dinner - four minutes, no more

Lough Allen more than ready

PING! The microwave sounded after four minutes and out came the steaming traditional turkey and ham dinner with all the trimmings. Stephen Dowd, owner of Lough Allen Foods, had handed it to me as I left.

Lough Allen Foods was the first company to rent out a unit in the hub. Stephen, a chef by trade, made the bold decision to go out on his own to produce a range of traditional chilled ready meals. "When we first looked at the food hub they were only putting the floors in, but we saw what they were trying to achieve," said Stephen.

Helped by funding from Enterprise Ireland, they took a 2,100sq ft unit and kitted it out at a cost of over €600,000. The company now employs 10 people and produces 400-500 meals a day. "We source most of the produce locally, and sell mainly through independent retailers. The biggest challenge for the company has been sales and distribution," he added.

They have had to put their own distribution fleet on the road. They are looking into the option of going through central distribution to some of the larger retail groups. "We see potential to expand and are already looking to take a lease on a second unit in the food hub," says Stephen. "One thing is for sure, we are excited about exploring the possibility of developing a strong network with the other producers, who will take up residency in this space over the coming

months" There is huge potential to learn from each other and we simply can't wait".



POSITIVE QUOTE

What can be counted seldom counts. What can't be counted is often what really counts.

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