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# MARCHING TO HER OWN BEET

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COVER FEATURE

# Marching to her own beet

Anne Marie Feighery is bringing her family's passion for vegetable growing to consumers in bottled form, and the whole clan are rowing in behind her beetroot juice to do so, writes **Anne O'Donoghue**

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When Anne Marie Feighery was spending significant amounts of time going in and out of off-licences analysing bottles of red wine, people either thought she was studying to become a sommelier or, well, drew their own conclusions you could say.

In fact, it was neither of the above. Anne Marie was actually doing product research. But the Feigherys – tillage farmers from Co Offaly – haven't started growing grapes. She was looking to see what kind of labels are used on bottles of dark red liquids. You see, Anne Marie has started bottling beetroot juice, using home-grown, hand-picked beetroots from her family's farm in Kilcormac.

Feighery's Farm Beetroot Juice hit shelves in March of this year, and in that short time the product has achieved recognition. At the Blás na hÉireann food awards in recent weeks, the juice was awarded a Silver Label in its category as well as Best in Farmers' Market and Best in Offaly.

Anne Marie was accompanied at the awards in Dingle by her mother Anne, father Billy and some of her brothers and sisters (there are six siblings altogether in the family). This was very apt, as the beetroot juice is very much a family affair.

Billy and her brothers Alan and William marshal the growing side of things, while Granny Anne – as she is affectionately called – does the local Offaly deliveries in her sporty grey mini.

Sitting down with them in front of the fire, their jovial family dynamic is immediately evident to *Irish Country Living*. They correct each other on details as they weave the story together and of course, tease each other too when the opportunity arises.

Anne Marie Feighery. \ Philip Doyle

## FARMERS' MARKETS

The Feigherys grow grain, vegetables and also keep sheep. Billy started farming in 1967 at the age of 14. They have been in the veg business since 1987, now growing a broad range from cabbage to cauliflower, broccoli, turnips, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, beetroot and more.

The story of the beetroot juice's inception, if you trace it back far enough, starts with the Feigherys' mindset of bringing their veg directly to the consumer, fostered in a needs must fashion.

Originally the Feigherys sold their veg to small shops, but when they began to close, this caused a conundrum. Starting to sell at farmers' markets in 2004 was the saviour of their veg business, explains Alan.

"If we hadn't started at the farmers' markets we wouldn't be at veg today. The vegetable shop in Kilcormac closed down, the following Saturday we started the market in the Square."

That first Saturday they found themselves standing alone in the Square, but the market took off quickly and they are now joined by many others. They have expanded too, now selling at farmers' markets in Kilbeggan and Portumna also.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Billy in particular was always fascinated by the connection between food, nutrition and health. It was this interest that was that catalyst for the beetroot juice, reflects Anne Marie.

"Daddy is always reading up on his health. He is well versed in trying to be as healthy as possible. Unfortunately, he had slightly elevated blood pressure levels at one point, so he wanted to look for ways to help. He said, 'I'm after coming across a couple of articles about beetroot juice helping to lower blood pressure levels naturally'.

"I used to get the job of buying Daddy all of his health food. He wouldn't be into shopping, but anything health-wise he'd give me a list and I'd go and source it. Anyway, I went off looking for Irish beetroot juice and I couldn't find it anywhere."

Anne Marie was curious then to see exactly what offering was out there for beetroot juice, so she searched in both supermarkets and health food stores. She found that most existing Irish brands only had been 20% and 30% beetroot, the rest of the mix being made up of mainly carrot and apple juice.

Like any good business person, she spotted a gap in the market, a juice with a high percentage of beetroot and had it growing at home to boot.

## SOIL TO SHELF

Anne Marie was initially stumped as to how she was going to turn the beetroot in the ground into juice and then get that on shelves.

**William, Alan, Anne Marie and Billy Feighery.** \ Philip Doyle

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"The ingredient was there, but how do you get a product that you have no background in producing to retail? How do you get it from a field to a shelf-life product that's ready to go to market?"

Her first point of call? Teagasc.

"I got in touch with Teagasc Moorepark. Eddie O'Neill is the artisan food specialist there. I told him briefly over that phone why I was in contact with him and I came down to meet him. After sitting down and chatting through it for an hour he was going, 'You know what, there could be something in this'."

From there, they came up with a plan as how best to extract the juice and how to make it more palatable. That's where Con Traas of the Apple Farm in Cahir comes in. He agreed to press the beetroot and also add 30% apple juice to 70% beetroot juice to enhance flavour.

After considering a number of different processes, the option they settled on was to harvest the beetroot, top, tail and wash them. They are then sent to a commercial freezing unit, because when they start to thaw the fibres are broken-down more naturally, making it easier for the machines to press them. The apple juice is then added, it is bottled and the labels are attached.

From first coming up with the idea July 2018, the product was on shelves by March 2019. At present, the Feigherys grow two acres of beetroot. The vegetable has a very high yield of juice and there are two and a half beets per bottle.

**Research has shown that beetroot lowers blood pressure due to the presence of potassium, and is also a source of folic acid and protein.** \ Philip Doyle

## HEALTH BENEFITS

As we've said, to begin with it was the health aspect that attracted Anne Marie, via Billy, to beetroot juice. Known to be a superfood, beetroot has a number of health benefits. Juice, Anne Marie says, is a good way of accessing these.

As well as research showing that beetroot lowers blood pressure due to the presence of potassium, it is also a source of folic acid and protein.

"I think it appeals to a few different people. Sports people, people who are conscious of elements of their health and then people who are just trying to be good on a daily basis," says Anne Marie.

"A lot of athletes take beetroot juice because beetroot contains a lot of naturally occurring nitrates that convert to nitric oxide in the blood. Nitric oxide then expands your blood vessels so your blood is pumped around the body more efficiently, transporting oxygen and nutrients to all the vital places."

Billy, in his wisdom, stresses that although beetroot has health benefits and is known to lower blood pressure, it is not a substitute for medication and he doesn't want any readers foregoing their prescribed medication on his account.

## BUSY WITH BEETROOT

Naturally, the last few months have been a very busy time for Anne Marie. Although her roots are firmly in Offaly, she lives in Fethard, Co Tipperary, as she works full time for Primus, an advertising and marketing company located in Coolmore Stud.

The Feighery family have few connections to horse racing. They owned Kiladante who had four wins, three of those ridden by Aidan O'Brien. Kiladante was their first racehorse and they say their luck was of the beginners variety. Anne Marie rode out for Aidan up to two years ago.

With a degree in science, Anne Marie's role in Primus is in the pedigree and research department, nothing to do with advertising or marketing. *Irish Country Living* jokes that her business colleagues must have rubbed off on her.

"Well I'm surrounded by it, so even though it's not my day-to-day work I'm around a marketing team, so I see the tricks of the trade. You would be picking up little bits as you go along. I hope I am anyway," she says.

The beetroot juice is her second full-time job, laughs William.

Anne Marie has just started Acorns, a programme designed to support early-stage female entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland. She also took part in the SuperValu Food Academy, which helps small businesses get their products on shelves.

The juice is currently stocked in SuperValu in Birr, Banagher, Athlone, Mullingar, Portlaoise and Moate. It is also in select Avoca stores and the Happy Pear in Greystones, among others.

Not bad going in eight months since hitting the market.

With the whole family involved from different angles, Feighery's Farm Beetroot Juice is benefiting from a variety of inputs.

Billy remarks that cabbage is another one of his favourite veg, as it has a range of underestimated health benefits too. Could we be seeing bottled cabbage juice soon? We'll concentrate on the beetroot for now, Anne Marie quips with a smile. **CL**