

Ireland is open for business

Irishfood speaks with Michael Creed, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, as he prepares to lead a trade mission to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia

With a seventh year of consecutive growth for the agri-food industry recently announced, the Minister is keen to acknowledge the ambition of the industry. “It’s important, particularly in the context of a lot of challenges that people see ahead, that these results give people the confidence to renew their endeavours. The figures shouldn’t be taken in isolation. They are part of a trend now, a well established trend, since 2010, of consecutive, year-on-year growth. They are also underpinning the ambition that is in the Food Wise 2025 document.”

Launched in 2015, Food Wise 2025 is an industry-led, 10-year growth strategy for Ireland’s food and drinks sector. The Minister says it is important to have a clear path for growth against which progress can be measured. “We are doing quite well,” he says, commenting on the success to date. “We are making progress. I chair an implementation committee where we regularly bring in the various sectors and check the progress they are making against their stated objectives. We look at what impediments they are coming up against and how we might address those. So, we are making progress on Food Wise 2025 and we would be very happy across the various sectors.”

Sustainable growth

The Minister says Food Wise 2025 has an important role to play when exploring new markets and agreeing trade contracts. “We have a planned expansion strategy across all of the various commodity sectors. If you look at Food Wise 2025 it has its ambitions for beef, dairy, pork, seafood across all of the sectors.” He says it is a valuable tool to demonstrate to companies and countries that are looking to secure supply into the future.

“We are growing our business and we are doing it in a sustainable fashion.” However, he adds, Ireland is not just about volume. Delivering higher, value-added products is also central to the Food Wise 2025 strategy. The Minister notes the success of Ireland’s dairy industry in this ambition. Ireland produces close to 15 per cent of the globally-traded

infant milk formula, and is home to three of the biggest global names in the infant formula industry, as well as indigenous exporters. “It’s not exclusively what we do but it is the highest value-added area we can be in and we are one of the biggest global players in infant formula.”

Collaborative approach

One of the great things about the Irish agri-food community in Ireland, according to the Minister, is the mix between large multinationals and smaller, emerging brands and artisan producers, which all share the same ambitions. “The real story of the Irish food industry, in all its manifestations, is the differentiation in scale. You have the global players, like Kerry Group, but you also have all of the smaller players too. It’s great to be on trade missions with these and to see the interaction between them and the collaborative approach. With big players there is always some competition but, overall, we are successful because we work together. That template is well established and it will continue to drive our performance into 2017 and the years ahead.” The Minister will be demonstrating that collaborative message during his visit to the UAE and Saudi Arabia in late February and early March with State agencies within the food industry – Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM – the Irish Seafood Authority), Enterprise Ireland, Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board), and embassy staff – all participating. Also travelling as part of the trade mission will be Sustainable Food Systems Ireland (SFSI). Established in 2014, SFSI’s mandate is to provide technical assistance to Ireland’s trading partner countries internationally. The Minister says SFSI, along with the country’s sustainability commitments, differentiates Ireland as a trade partner, because it doesn’t “just tell the story of Ireland and sustainability”, its role is to identify partnership opportunities with other countries and companies, which are supported by the quality and sustainability credentials set out under Origin Green.

“What SFSI brings to the table is the evidential basis for the claims we make and the possibility of arranging partnerships between food businesses in these countries

with partner companies in Ireland that have those credentials on offer. It is a relatively newly established body in Ireland but it is doing a lot of good work in creating awareness of our green credentials, and that is very important.”

Trade mission

The Minister says the Middle East presents an important opportunity for Ireland to continue growing its export base. “Export figures for Saudi Arabia were up 80 per cent last year. It was quite extraordinary growth, particularly in dairy formula and infant products.” He also believes there are opportunities to build on Ireland’s reputation for high-quality beef exports with the opening of a new Chefs’ Irish Beef Club chapter in the market (read more on page 44). The Minister’s visit will coincide with Gulfood in Dubai and, he says, events like this are an important international showcase for Irish producers. “The fact that Bord Bia now feels obliged to double our space at Gulfood is an indication of the confidence in the industry and the ambition it has in this market. That is hugely important. Bord Bia puts a lot of effort into this and the message that we would be selling there is that we are open for business.”

Market access activities

Irish food and drink exports are now destined for 180 world markets. “The markets we want to be in are where the value-added sector is, where the informed consumer is.” The market access unit at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is constantly working with agencies and industry and governments in other countries to progress veterinary approval, market access conditions, certifications, protocols, memorandums of understanding, etc. “We have a product that we believe is unmatched in terms of its safety, traceability and sustainability, and that is not an idle boast. We have international evidence to suggest that. The European Research Centre audits our sustainability, we are number one in terms of dairy sustainability, we are fifth in Europe in terms of beef sustainability, we are doing an awful lot to improve that and not resting on our laurels.”

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