

Data-driven growth

In January 2017, Tara McCarthy took up the reigns as CEO of Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board). Having worked with the organisation for more than 20 years, building a strong understanding of the dynamics driving Bord Bia, Tara is committed to supporting the agri-food industry in its ambitions for growth

Tara says her time at Bord Bia was hugely valuable and has given her an immense understanding of the organisation's remit and way of working. She returns to Bord Bia from her role as CEO of Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM – Ireland's Seafood Development Agency) and believes moving away from Bord Bia for 18 months has yielded fantastic benefits. "It gave me some distance and a different perspective, which is important if you are going to evaluate things strategically. I had an opportunity to reflect on what works well and areas where we could increase our focus."

Pillars for growth

According to Tara, Bord Bia's strategy statement for 2016-2018, Making a World of Difference, identifies the strength of the organisation. "The five fundamental pillars that we have set out in our strategy are the right pillars for the organisation. They are based on the needs of the industry and I am very committed to meeting those needs." The five pillars are: being informed by consumer insight; valuing people, talent and infrastructure; Origin Green; effective routes to market and business conversion; and strong brand communications in the digital age.

Staying focused

This is an industry that has huge ambition. In 2015, in Food Wise 2025, it set a target to increase exports from €10 billion to €19 billion by 2025. These were ambitious targets even considering the growth trajectory of the industry, which has seen





PROFILE

Tara began her career with *Córas Beostoic agus Feola (the Irish Meat and Livestock Board), which was amalgamated with the Irish Trade Board to become Bord Bia in 1994. While at Bord Bia she worked in Germany and France, where she held the role of director of France and Belgium from 1999 to 2001. She returned to Bord Bia's Dublin headquarters in 2001 as senior manager consumer foods division (2001–2011), and then director food and beverage division (2011–2015).*

Most recently, Tara was chief executive of Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM – Ireland's Seafood Development Authority).

Irish food and drink exports increase by 41 per cent or €3.3 billion between 2010 and 2017. "There is an expectation in our industry of a significant step-change in growth and a step-change in ambition. It's not just business as usual."

While the result of the UK vote to leave the EU may be asking questions of the industry, it hasn't been diverted from its course. "These are ambitious targets, with or without Brexit. I guess the scenario has completely changed but the view from industry and Government is let's not change our ambitions, let's stay focused on being the best that we can be and putting all of our energy on achieving our target."

Data-driven approach

Tara's role is to ensure the industry is supported in meeting those ambitions, and central to that objective is data. Bord Bia is collating data to better support

and guide Ireland's food industry, as well as to better understand the markets in which it operates. Its own three-year strategy was built on data commissioned to research what market landscapes would look like in 2025 and to identify the major macro drivers of change. Consumer and market insight work is an ongoing project within Bord Bia through its consumer insights team.

Toolkits

Bord Bia is using this data to deliver supports for industry, such as sector-specific toolkits, designed to respond to Brexit. "We are starting with a sector deep-dive to understand what the needs are. Everyone is talking about the agri-food industry but, within the industry, beef is very different from dairy, which is very different from seafood."

Bord Bia's research will identify the specific needs, exposure, challenges and opportunities of each sector and work on a one-to-one basis with companies, using the toolkit it developed with PwC. "This will give companies a traffic-light system on the areas of focus and vulnerability." Bord Bia piloted the toolkit with nine companies. During the pilot, it found that this was the first time most companies had gathered all members of senior management together to discuss Brexit. "Companies need to identify the strategic issues to work on. This is a holistic, personalised resource. The answers aren't ready for you. It's your business and what we are looking at is how we can customise our supports to help you get over these hurdles, whether that is a deep-dive on insight, logistics or mentoring support."

International success

While Brexit presents the industry with important challenges, it has, in fact, been Ireland's international markets that have delivered the strongest growth over the past seven years. And exploring further opportunities in international markets is an important pillar within the Bord Bia strategy for growth. "Since 2010, 50 per cent of the growth of the Irish food industry has come from international markets. This is a journey of affirmation more so than than a new discovery." Again, a key element of this success has been driven by data and market insights. "We look to understand customers and

what they are looking for. It's the same thing as consumers shopping for beef or dairy or porridge, their mind is changing and priorities are evolving. We are looking to answer those needs on a global scale." Those needs vary depending on each market and insights are helping Irish food companies respond accordingly. "The fact that we are coming from a sustainable island, and have a national programme that is committed to meeting the world's needs in a sustainable way, is a very attractive proposition within our developed markets. When you are looking at poorer countries, the environmental elements of sustainability aren't as high on the pecking order. They are concerned with consistency of supply and value for money. Ireland can meet those needs because we have a huge portfolio of products and we export 80-85 per cent of everything we produce. The vastness of what is available in the Irish basket makes it attractive to a multitude of other audiences."

Sustainable offering

Tara describes the Irish agri-food industry's commitment to sustainability, under the Origin Green programme, as "our huge differentiator." Ireland has always had a reputation for being a 'green island'. However, the industry must provide the data to prove that. "Origin Green succinctly does just that. It's the evidence behind the imagery and Ireland now has a fact-based approach to communicating its green message." The Origin Green model was based on strong data and research, which is reflected in the industry buy-in to the initiative, as well as the support of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc, and all the arms of the State. "It's a fantastic legacy for Aidan Cotter [Tara's predecessor as CEO] to have given to the industry. The research that was undertaken at the very beginning was to understand our potential and our current customers' needs." Operating nationally, Origin Green tracks and reports on the progress of all members, at both farm and industry level, which provides Ireland with a database unlike any other country in the world. "This is not about image, this is about content. This is about changing the way a country produces its products and it's about continuous self-improvement. We have a whole country behind this programme and now it is a case of building the communications behind that. That's the focus as we move into the next phase."