

MARL ALUMNI TRAVELING TO IRELAND



Thirty-two alumni of the Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership program traveled to Ireland in August to learn about the country's agriculture and to do some sight-seeing.

The trip encompassed travel around the country, beginning in Dublin and traveling by coach bus from this city on the country's east coast and heading south and west. Essentially, we circled Ireland during this 10-day in-country tour. We made stops in the Republic of Ireland (the majority of the country) and the Northern Ireland. All of the farm stops were in the Republic of Ireland.

Agricultural stops included:

- a family dairy farm in Tinahely that produces milk for Bailey's Irish Cream
- the Tullamore Show, Ireland's National Livestock Show
- Cashel Blue Farmhouse Cheese, located in the heart of Tipperary's dairy country
- an organic farm near Tullamore that raises beef and oats and markets its own brand of oats and oatmeal cookies
- Faughart Dairy, a family farm in County Louth, just five minutes south of the Northern Ireland border
- a family beef farm located near the Irish Sea about an hour north of Dublin

Ireland encompasses 6.9 million hectares, or 17 million acres (one hectare is 2.47 acres). Of that, 4.5 million hectares, or 11 million acres, are used for agriculture. Eighty-one percent of the ag land is in pasture, hay and grass silage. Predominant crops are barley, wheat, oats and potatoes. The country has about 6.9 million cattle, 4.9 million sheep and 1.5 million hogs.

There are around 130,000 farms in Ireland with the average size being 32 hectares, or 79 acres. The average farmer age is 57. About half of the farmers and/or farm spouses also have off-farm employment.

Tour stops

Dairy farmers Joe and Michael Hayden, Tinahely

The Hayden brothers are fourth generation family farmers. 2015 was a landmark year for dairy farmers in Ireland and other EU countries: Milk production quotas, introduced in 1984, were eliminated. With quotas gone, Joe sees the Irish dairy industry expanding with more cows and more milk. He said the country's dairy sector increased 15% just in 2013. Right now, Ireland has about 1.1 million cows with an average per cow production on the low side-- 4,600 liters, or 10,450 pounds of milk per cow per year. On his farm, his 155 Holstein Friesen cows average 7,500 liters, or 17,037 pounds of milk with 4% butterfat and 3.4% milk solids. Cows rotationally graze nine months out of the year.

Joe took us on a tour of his pastures and dairy. A fen bog and stream on his land are located across the road from where his cattle graze. He had the bog evaluated and was told it was more than 5,000 years old and that once it was a small lake. The small stream also has historical significance. It is the site of St. Patrick's Well, where St. Patrick is believed to have stopped, blessed the water, and refreshed himself as he traveled across the country.

After the farm tour, Joe took us inside a Bailey's Irish Cream visitor's center on his farm called Orchard Center. Here, we had the opportunity to taste-test a few Bailey's refreshments--original, hazelnut, biscotti and chocolate luxe.

Tullamore Livestock Farm Show

Picture Farmfest. With 60,000 visitors in one day. On 260 acres. Add cattle and horticulture judging, sheep dog demos, horse shows, food cooking demos and a sheep-shearing contest. Toss in an official ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by the Minister of Ag, Food and Marine, a 'Bonny Baby' contest, and 'Best Dressed Lady' and 'Best Dressed Man' competitions. Add in countless food and merchandise vendors. That's Tullamore! One plus over Farmfest? Temporary 'sidewalks' laid down to make it easier for all those kiddie strollers. This is a major family event for the locals. Ask anyone on this MARL tour and you'll get a different answer on what they saw and liked at Tullamore. What stands out for me? The eclectic mix of meaty-looking beef cattle, an Irish celebrity cooking show featuring pork tacos (really?) and farmers watching television screens set up throughout the grounds, watching an Irish rugby game.

Cashel Blue Farmhouse Cheese

Louie Grubb once milked cows but wanted to do something different. In the 1980s, he did some research and learned no one in Ireland was making blue cheese. So he decided he would. Today, his cousin milks around 300 Friesians that provide the high protein milk needed. Louie and his wife Jane operate the cheese business and their daughter Sarah is chief cheese taster. Each batch is taste twice--once at three weeks and again just before it is released for market.

We learned the basics of cheesemaking and how they get those unique-looking blue-mold veins in their cheese--they use a set of stainless steel needles to pierce the cheese. This allows oxygen to get into the cheese and encourages the blue mold to form. By the way, Cashel Blue is available in Minnesota! My husband bought it for me at Syrdyk's in Minneapolis. Louis said it is also available at Whole Foods stores and he was talking to Trader Joe's, too.

Organic beef and crop farmer Pat Lalor

Pat, a fourth generation farmer, manages about 300 acres and raises around 200 organic beef cattle and oats. To improve his bottomline, he started selling Killbeggan Organic Oats, an organic porridge, in 2011 and that business went better than expected. So earlier this year, he started selling organic oatmeal cookies, based on his wife's cookie recipe.

He raises a few varieties of oats. He showed us the newest variety he planted last October, called Vodka. He planted that on 4-1/2 centers at a seeding rate of 65 to 75 kg/acre. He plants it thick to control weeds.

It sounded like he would like to get out of the beef business and focus solely on oats. But he said he needs the cattle manure for his fields. He likes to focus on niche marketing. He's looking at raising a Japanese breed called Wagyu, which is known for its intense marbling that disappears when cooked. And with those organic oats, he's looking at building a micro-distillery and making gin.

Faughart Dairy

Gerard and Anne McArdle and their family own a 100-cow dairy family near Faughart. He'd like to grow the herd up to 120 to 140 cows. We learned more about Irish dairy farming here and how the industry is poised for growth now that the quota system is gone. His cattle are housed in freestalls when not on pasture. A section of the barnyard was in concrete slats so manure could be scraped into an underground pit and pumped to above-ground slurry storage in a corner of the cattle yard. Silage was packed in bunkers covers with plastic and old tires.

The family was very welcoming and noted that we were their large first large group on a tour bus to visit.

Joseph O'Reilly, Togher

Joe owns and manages around 650 acres within a seven-mile radius located near the Irish Sea on the east coast. Half of his land is tilled for barley, wheat, canola and oats. The other half is for cattle. He's involved with a small group of farmers that pooled resources and contract with slaughter plants. Together, they sent 3,000 cattle to slaughter this year.

He raises and sells steer and heifer beef, the latter is a premium beef in Ireland. Plus, he sells bulls marketed with 'pink meat and white fat,' that are feed grain and not pasture. Those bulls head for Italy and France.

He has built a couple of barns to help with housing and handling cattle. The idea for the barn for housing came from a trip to Colorado. It has pens and a slatted floor with an eight-foot underground manure pit. The second barn has animal handling facilities at one end.

Those are the agricultural highlights of Ireland, fellow MARLites.

To learn about the social aspects of the country, I suggest discussing them with tour participants over a glass of Guinness. Or a shot of Jameson.