



Michael and Aileen O'Neill from Irish Atlantic Sea Salt pictured near their salt production facility at Cahermore on the Beara Peninsula, West Cork.

Picture: Niall Duffy

Michael and Aileen O'Neill are the first sea salt producers in Ireland, and their business is expanding from Ireland to markets in the US and Britain, writes **Trish Dromey**

Taking a risk and finding niche bears fruit for 'salt of the earth' business

THE export possibilities of Irish sea salt are now being explored by a small West Cork company which has set up a processing plant close to the coast on the Beara Peninsula.

Over the last two years, Irish Atlantic Sea Salt has built up a business selling to retail outlets around the country. Now undergoing expansion, it's increasing its capacity and is about to relaunch in time for the Christmas hamper market.

Winner of a UK Great Taste Award in September, it has been selected for the West Cork Enterprise Board's company of the year award and has also been nominated for the National Enterprise Awards, being held next month.

The O'Neill family who run the business believe they are possibly the first company to start harvesting sea salt in Ireland. Michael O'Neill runs an abalone farm on Beara and it was while operating machinery for this that sea salt came to his attention. He says: "My father, Bernie, handed me some dried sea salt and said we should be able to do something with this."

The O'Neills did some research and found that sea salt was produced in quite a number of countries, but not in Ireland. They also discovered that there was a good market for gourmet sea salt,

especially in the UK.

Explaining that sea salt crystals are produced by evaporation, Mr O'Neill says that demand for sea salt has grown in recent years due to the fact that it contains natural trace elements and is considered a healthier alternative to processed table salt.

During his research, he found that sea salt was being imported into Ireland and decided that this offered the opportunity for some import substitution. "We knew that we had excellent water quality and could produce very high quality sea salt, we saw this as a unique selling point."

A few months later, he visited a sea salt processing plant in the UK and got some information about how it worked.

A fisherman for 16 years before he set up Tower Aqua, an abalone company, he previously qualified as an engineer. "I set about developing a small processing unit which could be used to recover sea salt and could produce 50 or 60kg a week," he explains.

In early 2010, the company was set up in a converted unit on the family farm by Michael's wife Aileen and by his late father.

They developed packaging, a 250g box which retails at €4.99, and brought the product to shops in late 2010.

"We got good support from retailers, who welcomed an Irish product and we began to sell in small volumes," says Mr O'Neill — explaining that Aileen took over the role of managing the company while he helps out from time to time. Irish Atlantic Sea Salt also took on one staff member in 2010, to handle production.

During 2011, Simply Wild took on the distribution of the product.

"Within a year and a half, we were selling to 100 independent retailers, 18 Superquinn's and 33 SuperValu stores. We are now selling to a lot of speciality food shops mostly in the cities."

Having started out with a small production unit, the company quickly reached its limited capacity.

"We couldn't grow the business any further and we couldn't deal with any export requests," says Mr O'Neill.

Deciding to upgrade the facility,

the O'Neills got support from the West Cork Enterprise Board and Cork County Council. Involving a "substantial" investment, renovation work started earlier this year at the 3,000 sq ft premises.

Scheduled to recommence operations on Nov 1, the facility will have the capacity to produce a tonne of salt per week.

"We are hoping to get into all the main multiples [chains] and are now in advanced negotiations with some of these," Mr O'Neill says.

The O'Neills have also started investigating export possibilities and will be focusing, in particular, on the UK and US markets. They believe a product produced from the clear waters of the Atlantic on the West Cork coast is one that has the potential to sell very well in both markets.

"We are looking for a distributor in the UK and we plan to take our product to the US for St Patrick's Day next year," says Mr O'Neill.

As part of an Intertrade Ireland programme, the company has now taken on a marketing graduate — bringing the staff number to three. The O'Neills aim to sell 50 tonnes of salt in 2013 and hope to increase the staff size to seven or eight within the next four or five years.

Meanwhile, the company aims to make inroads on the hamper market for Christmas.

Fact file

- **Company:** Irish Atlantic Sea.
- **Location:** Beara, West Cork.
- **Directors:** Michael and Aileen O'Neill.
- **Product:** Sea salt.
- **Staff:** Three.
- **Website:** www.irishatlanticsalt.ie