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## This Atlantic salt has a sweet future

By Siobhán Brett

From its beginnings in a small production unit on the Beara Peninsula in Co Cork, Atlantic Sea Salt has developed into a steadily growing business with a bright future, producing high-quality sea salt from the fresh water of the Atlantic.

"I was involved in the fishing industry for years, but that was beginning to get a little tighter and more difficult," said company founder Michael O'Neill. "The fewer opportunities that arose, the more I contemplated a shore-based business, and other more viable opportunities in marine and aquaculture."

For some time, O'Neill had been aware of processes resulting in salt crystals in the region, but it wasn't until four years ago, while working in consultancy in Britain, that he came across an impressive new facility for salt creation. Upon realising there weren't any salt producers in Ireland at that time, O'Neill got to work on de-

### Atlantic Sea Salt

**What it does:** naturally-harvested sea salt

**Why it works:** "The taste profile of our salt is unique, and it comes from the clearest waters in the world. I can stand over that both as a shellfish farmer and because of tests that have been carried out."  
— Michael O'Neill, founder

veloping the concept in Cork.

"I am an engineer and so this started as a keen interest that became a hobby that became a business," he said. In what he described as the "pastime" stage of development, O'Neill worked closely with marine engineer Michael Cotter to come up with the best, most efficient and effective means of production.

"Initially, we were more concerned with the integrity of the process and the challenge in-

herent in its development than we were with the route-to-market," said O'Neill.

"Once we had tied the process down, we began identifying a target market, first at home, but also abroad. We have strong, unique selling points that can certainly hold their own in the UK and US. Our salt is of an exceptionally high quality – unbleached and totally free of caking agents."

The Irish Atlantic brand launched to consumers at the Shop trade show in 2010 and began selling to speciality stores shortly thereafter. It now supplies more than 100 independent retailers and 50 supermarkets across Ireland.

"There are a large number of high-end gourmet stores, and there's a significant Irish diaspora, which is in itself a worthwhile reason to export. The taste profile of our salt is unique, and it comes from the clearest waters in the world. I can stand over that both as a shellfish farmer and because of tests that have been carried out," said O'Neill.

O'Neill's wife Aileen runs



Michael and Aileen O'Neill, co-founders, Atlantic Sea Salt

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the business day-to-day, which employs three people at present. O'Neill said that figure would be built on in the new year, with positions to be filled in production, sales and marketing. A five-strong range of flavoured salts, currently under development, should hit the market in 2013. Earlier this month, Irish Atlantic Sea Salt won West Cork Enterprise Board's Local Company of the Year award.

The company has invested more than €200,000 into the development of a new 3,000 square-foot premises. More than half of that funding came from the West Cork Enterprise

Board and Cork County Council.

The new premises will allow the business to upscale production, producing more than one ton of salt weekly. This will enable it to explore the export market, unbounded, from early next year. "It isn't easy to set up a business these days, and it is even harder to grow a business to its full potential," said O'Neill. "We have been extremely fortunate to have the support of our local enterprise board, which saw the potential of Irish Atlantic Seasalt from the beginning. I am proud that we are continuing to prove them right."