

## diversification

## Buffalo or bust in Wexford

“Behind every great man’s idea is a great woman’s suggestion,” says Liam Byrne of Macamore Buffalo

**Martina Harrington**  
Beef specialist, Teagasc  
Animal and Grassland  
Research & Innovation  
Programme.



**Bob Sherriff**  
Teagasc drystock  
advisor, Gorey, Wexford



**L**iam, his wife Sinead and their three children, Rebecca, Matthew and Peter, farm water buffalo just outside Ballygarret in Co Wexford. Not a familiar sight in the wilds of Wexford – so how did it come about?

In 2015, Liam, a well known singer, was traveling the length and breadth of the country, playing in pubs and festivals. Sinead was working from home and taking care of their three children and they were also running a drystock enterprise.

Liam and Sinead wanted to develop the farm, but were looking for something different, something new to get their teeth into. They were really interested in the whole concept of “farm to fork”, selling directly to customers. They knew that to compete, they would need a product that was different, that had an edge. They looked around to see what new and innovative businesses were out there, but nothing excited them.

Then, one evening, Sinead was watching a cooking show featuring Steven Mitchell and his buffalo farm in Scotland. Sinead noticed that the land they were on was heavy like their own and Steven spoke with great enthusiasm about the venture. So, they decided to investigate water buffalo.

Originally from Asia, water buffalo have been domesticated for over 5,000 years and are used for draft, meat and milk. Currently, there are at least 130m domestic water buffalo, and more people depend on them than on any other domestic animal. But what perked the Byrne’s interest was their meat. According to literature, buffalo meat is:

- Lower in cholesterol
- Higher in mineral content



Liam Byrne.

• Has less than half the fat content of conventional lean beef.

The animal itself is also very healthy, requiring no dosing or antibiotics. The target market could be the health-conscious meat eater. Was this the unique product they were looking for?

Liam contacted Steven Mitchell, who put him in contact with John Lynch, a buffalo farmer producing Mozzarella cheese in Macroom, Co Cork. They got talking and in January 2016, the first four buffalo calves arrived in Ballygarret, Co Wexford. Later that summer, 16 in-calf cows, along with two bulls, arrived from Wales and Macamore Buffalo was born.

#### What’s in a name?

The name Macamore Buffalo quite literally comes from the ground they graze on. The farm is on Macamore soil, which, if you like your geography, is actually a sea mud that was pushed up by the glaciers in the last Ice Age. It has a high clay content, meaning it’s poorly drained and hard

to manage, providing an ideal habitat for the wallowing buffalo.

Upon visiting the farm, the buffalo really are a sight to behold. Huge black beasts with large heads and fantastic horns, they are also incredibly friendly.

“The buffalo are very docile – they love company and a good scratch. They love water and mucky spots and I often come down and two or three would be wallowing in mud. It’s like something on a nature programme – they would be covered head to toe in muck. They are, however, a huge animal and you must always be aware around them. They may not mean to hurt you, but an animal that size with those horns demands respect.”

#### Raised and grazed in Wexford

The buffalo calve in the autumn and always on their own. Liam has never actually seen one calve and has never lost a calf. They have a long gestation, around 10 months, though some may go longer. After calving, the mother is very protective of her calf, as is the whole herd, so Liam doesn’t interfere.



Liam Byrne says water buffalo are hardy and well-suited to his Macamore soils.





As their name suggests water buffalo just love any body of water, however small.

The cow is a large animal and costly to keep, so Liam is moving more towards buying in bull calves and finishing them. As the buffalo's milk is very high in fat and protein, lamb milk replacer, rather than calf milk replacer, is fed. Each calf gets 2.5 bags (25kg) to bring them to weaning at 12 weeks. After weaning, they graze the Macamore until they are housed for the winter. While housed, they are fed good-quality silage and a kilo of meal. The following spring, when the land is dry enough, they return to grass, their large, wide hooves helping to keep them up on the Macamore soil, another bonus of the buffalo.

They are fit for slaughter at around 24 months of age and weigh 600kg+. On average, the meat yield is 180-200kg of saleable meat. At the moment, Liam is killing one bull a week. "I use O'Gorman's Meats in Castledermot as my abattoir and Richie Doyle's & Sons in Wexford do all the butchering for me. I like to keep everything as local as possible."

In 2018, with funding from Wexford Local Development, the Byrnes were able to develop their Farm Shop, which opened its doors in March. They also invested in a refrigerated van to transport the meat from the butchers to the on-farm shop.

Starting a business like this is not for the faint-hearted.

"We worked day and night to build up a customer base. We went door to door to hotels and restaurants, talking to chefs and owners alike, to try and get my buffalo onto their menus. We approached shops, supermarkets, and developed a website. Today, we stock 42 outlets between hotels, restaurants and shops."

Macamore Buffalo is a member of the Wexford Food Family, which was set up in 2011 to promote Wexford as a food brand locally, nationally and internationally. It is also a member

of Neighbour Food, an organisation that allows you to buy online directly from local producers and pick up at a collection point.

"It is important to use all the outlets available to raise awareness of your product. Farming is the easy bit, selling it is the difficult part."

All the hard work has not gone unnoticed. Macamore Buffalo won silver at the 2018 Blas na hÉireann awards for their Buffalo Burger and can

claim Michelin star celebrity chef Derry Clarke as a customer and fan.

So what does the future hold? In the Byrnes' eyes, it's "buffalo or bust". They have a real sense of pride in the business they built, and can see the potential to expand and find new markets.

"It's all about exposure and getting the message out there that buffalo is a great quality product and a healthier alternative to conventional beef."

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