

LEADING THE FIELD

The Man Who Helped Put West Cork on the Map

By Tricia Tyson

Back in the day, every town in Ireland had a family-run business, usually a grocery shop, around which life revolved. The name was synonymous with the location. Madden's of Cork, Leonard's of Limerick, Clifford's of Tralee, Haslam's of Birr. Most are long gone, their names consigned to history. The changing rhythm of rural life, the advent of shopping centres and supermarkets, economic and market pressures all contributed to their decline. Yet Field's of Skibbereen retains its iconic status almost eight decades after Jack Field first opened his doors for business in 1935. Jack's nephew John now runs the family firm. Under his canny stewardship, Field's has not only survived, but prospered in spectacular fashion. John has long been a champion of artisan food producers in West Cork. Yogurt from Glenilen Farm, Gubbeen cheese and salmon from the Woodcock Smokery all

made their public debut in Field's before going on to win international acclaim. The foodie's bible, the Bridgestone Guide, describes a visit to Field's as a 'Wow experience' and John Field played no small part in turning the region into a mecca for food lovers. Little wonder then, that Field's of Skibbereen SuperValu Supermarket has just won the *Checkout* 'Best Large Supermarket in Ireland' Award, with its Deli and Bakery, finalists in the competition. So how did Field's go from being a corner shop to a cornerstone of the Irish food industry?

The company motto is 'Driven by Passion, Inspired by Tradition'. John Field says, "We are proud of the fact that we are probably the oldest bakery in Ireland. There are very few businesses in Ireland more than 30 years old, but there's been a shop on this site for 175 years and it has always been at the heart of the community. Jeremiah Cullinane baked here in 1840 during the Famine and when he was finished in the

morning, he allowed the local people to come in and bake their own bread because they did not have facilities at home. We are still baking bread from scratch in the same premises, doing handwork as was being done during the Famine."

Took over from his uncle Jack

John Field was always destined for the family business. After studying Commerce at UCC, he went straight onto the shop floor of his uncles' shop in Skibbereen in 1966.

"There's only one way you'll learn, and that's on the floor selling. You can't do it from an office. You need to know your customers. Like all shops in that era, we had two counters. The men were to the left and looked after the bacon, fruit and veg, the bread, the cooked meats, the sausages and rashers and puddings. On the right, the ladies had all the cake ingredients, confectionary from the bakery, and tea and sugar. The customer came in and called out their list.



John Field at the forefront in promoting local produce in Skibbereen.

You wrote it in your docket book and went away and got it while they chatted to whoever was beside them. When you had it all made up, you checked it, put in your prices, and totted it up in your head. No calculator! Then you'd pack it up and the customer went away. A nice way to do business, but very different from today."

Nice though it was, there were already changes afoot as supermarkets began to capture the public imagination. His uncle was slow to embrace the new phenomenon out of respect to his more traditional customers. Jack's premature death in 1972 left John with the dilemma of how to move the business from counter to checkout while keeping everyone happy. He found a solution Jack would have approved.

"We put two benches just behind the checkouts and everybody has to pass those benches, so we get elderly people who will sit there and nobody will forget them. They'll meet 101 different people and they are happy out. It's nearly like the old custom where everyone could have a chat to their neighbour while waiting for their order."

Until 1988 Field's also operated a wholesale business, delivering bread and groceries to hundreds of local shops throughout West Cork and the Islands. As these small businesses started to fold, John made the difficult decision to concentrate instead on expanding the retail side. Field's today

Section of the impressive Field's SuperValu that won the Best Large Supermarket Award

