



WHEN
YOU START
EVERYTHING
FROM ZERO,
EVERYTHING
IS
INTERESTING
AND
EVERYTHING
IS A BIG
CHALLENGE



Mother and daughter team
Tiina Laas and Liisa Keränen.

The Quail Farmers

Tiina Laas & Liisa Keränen

"Find what you love and it will give you wings."

That is the motto – quite literally – of Estonian PR executive-turned-Leitrim quail farmer, Tiina Laas.

"If you love what you do, you see less obstacles," says Tiina.

"Most people are put off because they are afraid of obstacles. But love gives you wings and you kind of go over all obstacles and still are happy because you don't even notice these obstacles."

And Tiina has met more than her share with her journey at 12 Quail Farm, which she runs with her daughter Liisa in Foxfield, Co Leitrim, supplying 14 counties nationwide.

A "city girl" with a successful career with the Port of Tallinn, Tiina explains that while she had learned English since childhood, she never had the opportunity to live abroad as a young woman while Estonia was part of the Soviet Union.

"And this has been bugging me all my life," she says of her decision to move to Ireland in 2003 after visiting on holiday. "I realised I'm not getting any younger and if I wanted to try and have that experience in my life and not get old and whine: 'Oh I could have – but I didn't.'"

Having fallen in love with Leitrim, Tiina got a job with MBNA and moved to a house on a hill with one acre. "I was dreaming about a rose garden," she recalls. "I had no intention of becoming a farmer."

The recession, however, led to redundancy, with Tiina's health also suffering after what started out as a frozen shoulder left her unable to do basic things, like drive her car or comb her hair.

"I was in a very bad place," says Tiina, who as well as chronic pain, also suffered the emotional fallout of being unemployed for the first time in her life. While doing some research online, however, Tiina came across information on the nutritional value of quail eggs and decided to buy 12 birds in 2013.

"The 12 quails literally saved my life," she states. But not only did she feel the health benefits, she also found a new purpose by setting up 12 Quail Farm from very modest beginnings. "The 12 birds lived in the house with me," she says, explaining that as she was on Jobseeker's Allowance, she did not have the money for dedicated cages, instead keeping the birds in her spare room using a recycled box from a local florist.

"I had some plastic trellis for climbing plants, so I put that trellis on top of the cardboard box so that there was light for the birds and put that in and they were happy," she says.

In the same step-by-step manner, Tiina found her first customers for her quail eggs, starting with Beirne's Filling Station in Ballinamore. However, she knew she needed to increase her flock to be taken seriously, so bought an incubator and began to hatch her own chicks.

"By the end of 2013, I was covering, single-handedly, five counties," says Tiina, who received support from Leitrim Development Company for special housing as her flock multiplied, but also credits social welfare staff in Carrick-on-Shannon and Ballinamore, Leitrim LEO, Leitrim County Council, Orla Casey from Momentum Consulting, food safety consultant Louise Kennedy, business consultant Brian Dolan, Grant Connections and friend and environmentalist Noel Kiernan for helping her on her way.

The fledgling business received another boost when Tiina's daughter, Liisa Keränen, came on board and after joining the Food Academy programme, 12 Quail Farm now supplies its GMO-free quail eggs, enriched with Omega-3 and Omega-6, to 36 SuperValu nationwide, as well as to independent shops. They also supply eggs and whole quails to restaurants, such as the award-winning Oarsman Restaurant.

Today, Tiina has over 2,000 birds, with breeds including Estonian, Texas A&M, Italian, Japanese and English black quails. She does most of the farm work, as well as contacting new customers and designing promotional material, while Liisa looks after online activity, logistics, accounts, deliveries – often driving over 4,000km every month – and building and fixing equipment when required.

"The very first item she bought when she moved to the farm in Ireland was a proper circular saw," says Tiina, though adds that her other daughter, Ingrid, who lives in the States, also writes and tests recipes for their website.

And at 66, she says she is finally "living my dream".

"Life is short," she states, "and it is up to us to do something with it."

For further information, visit www.12quailfarm.com