

Industry professionals sink their teeth into food conference where Brexit theme is dominant



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Louise Kelly

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Thousands of food industry professionals have gathered in Dublin's Citywest Convention Centre on Wednesday for the 4th National Food and Drink Conference.

Some 3,000 delegates are attending over the course of the day, joining 200 speakers and 170 exhibitors at the annual event, where over 20 conferences are taking place.



As Ireland's largest industry gears up for likely disruption as UK leaves the European Union, a new Brexit Food Summit will be ongoing throughout the day.

Speakers such as Karen Tyner from Bord Bia and Simon McKeever, CEO of the Irish Exporters



Association are joining other experts to discuss the impact of Brexit on the industry at large and what a hard divorce could mean for our food producers.

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Speakers

Shortly after midday, a panel including Dragon's Den investor Alison Cowzer, Tony Gordon of Atradius and the IIFA's Tom Thornton gathered to discuss 'Brexit - Navigating the Risks'.

Taking to the Commercial Kitchen Live stage, Owner of AOK Coffee Austin O'Keeffe spoke about the health benefits of coffee - and its significance in history.

"Coffee has its place in history; a number of historical events including the stock exchange French resistance, I believe, started in a coffee shop," he told independent.ie.



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independent distributor for Malaysian company DXN, O'Keeffe said that it is the key ingredient, the mushroom Ganoderma, that ensures the firm's coffee success.

"Although it's a mushroom, taste-wise you actually wouldn't notice the difference," he said.

"It's one of the most alkaline herbs, it actually neutralises the acidity of the coffee. But it also has a lot of health benefits, it helps the body rejuvenate and improve itself.

"While it gives you a more prolonged alert feeling than other brands of coffee, it has actually been proven to aid restful sleep also."

Managing & Creative Director of Sadie's Kitchen, Sarah Kiely, spoke on the 'Food Start Up Expo' at the 4th National Food and Drink Conference.

Dragon Alison Cowzer was so impressed with her presentation of her bone broth brand that she invested €50,000 into the young health food company in return for a 20pc shareholding stake.

Ms Kiely shared a few of the tools of the trade - and showcasing her passion to succeed - with some of the 3,000 delegates that have turned up to the annual event at Dublin's Citywest Hotel.

With a background in public relations and freelance journalism, Ms Kiely realised all too well how late nights, bad diet and a dollop of stress can play havoc with digestive health.

Having tried a number of supplements and treatments to try and balance her gut imbalance, Ms Kiely happened upon bone broth "and Sadie's Kitchen was born".

Brexit is a dominant theme

Senior industry executives from across Ireland and Europe will also be there visiting summits and expos such as Tourism and Hospitality, Grow Your Food, Forecourt and Convenience Retail, Craft Beer and Spirits, to explore business opportunities.

The importance of technology in food production, retail and business marketing is recognised at many of the seminars today including IT, Data and Technology and The Digital Foodie Stage.

Organiser Colin Murphy said that Brexit is a dominant theme at the conference this year.

"This is an important event for the food industry in Ireland. It's taking place at a time when there is a significant amount of apprehension ahead of Brexit," he said.

"The food industry in Ireland alone accounts for 230,000 jobs and contributes €25bn to the economy and Britain is a major part of that success. At the moment it's not business as usual as businesses on both sides of the border are left in limbo until we know what happens next."

This afternoon, five leading food startups will have the opportunity to battle it out in front of a panel of well known business leaders.

The 'Lion's Den' competition, which takes place for the second year running, is offering a top prize worth over €5,000 at the event next month.

These export ready food startups are fighting for a chance to increase their international exposure, with a free exhibition stand at the International Food Exhibition (IFE) in London next March up for grabs.

The IFE attracts over 30,000 key food and drink buyers from 108 countries, and the winning firm will also receive €1,500 cash for expenses.

The top five chosen firms will each be given ten minutes to impress the panel of judges which include co-founder of Applegreen Joe Barrett, Dragon's Den investor Alison Cowzer, co-founder of Freshly Chopped Brian Lee and Cully & Sully's Colm O'Sullivan.