

The Ballymaloe Story

By Rose Leahy & Nollaig O’Sullivan

Introduction

Ballymaloe has grown over the past decades into one of Ireland’s most recognisable and successful brands. From its beginnings as a house hotel run by Ivan and Myrtle Allen it has developed into a brand with an extensive product range competing across various industries both at home and abroad. The success of the brand extension strategy is largely as a result of the popularity and celebrity of Darina Allen, Ireland’s most famous tv-cook. Darina lectures and travels extensively and has been lauded as the food ambassador of Ireland. Her outstanding work as both teacher and cook has firmly placed her on the international culinary map. In more recent years the success of her daughter-in-law Rachel Allen, has also contributed to the brand recognition and strong brand reputation of Ballymaloe. Indeed, women emerge as central to the Ballymaloe enterprise, with Darina crediting much of the success of Ballymaloe to her mother-in-law Myrtle Allen, who she says pioneered the style of cooking for which Ballymaloe is now famous. When Darina started the Ballymaloe cookery school with her husband Tim Allen in 1983 it is unlikely that they foresaw the success that the cookery school would enjoy, success that enabled the Ballymaloe brand to grow over the decades. On closer examination it emerges that not only did the Ballymaloe brand grow, many other businesses developed and grew with strong links to the Ballymaloe brand and the Allen family. A review of these businesses and brand extensions reveals a business that is truly family based.

Family Business

Ballymaloe has always been a family affair, started by Myrtle Allen in the 1960s and expanded by her daughter-in-law, Darina, who opened Ballymaloe Cookery School in 1983. Another generation on and Darina’s daughter-in-law, Rachel, is now upholding the family tradition and keeping the Allen name prominent in the industry. Less well known however, are many other family members who hold key management positions in the

business and who have developed and grown other businesses, some of which carry the Ballymaloe brand name and others which thrive on their links to the Ballymaloe brand. Appendix 1 outlines the Allen family tree and the organisational chart.

Review of Key Personnel in the Ballymaloe Enterprise

Myrtle Allen

Myrtle Allen's name has become synonymous with Irish cuisine. She is one of the key personalities who has brought about a change in how we view and use the products of Irish soil and its potential for cookery. She was recently awarded a lifetime achievement award in recognition of that fact, at the annual Bord Bia International Specialty Food Forum.

Myrtle Hill married Ivan Allen and as Myrtle Allen she moved to her new home with her husband on the farm at Shanagarry in East Cork. Myrtle Allen always had an interest in food – she took cookery courses in the School of Commerce and taught herself from the text books of the day. She developed her skills and knowledge of cuisine so that by 1962, she had become cookery correspondent of the *Irish Farmers Journal*, while at the same time opening a restaurant in her new home at Ballymaloe. Myrtle's philosophy has always been to cook fresh, locally produced food in season.

For most people, a life of journalism, restaurateur, hotelier and teacher as well as being a homemaker and raising a large family would be more than sufficient, but not for Myrtle. She was convinced that the food produced in Ireland was as good as any found throughout the rest of the world and as a result she became a tireless propagandist for Irish food. In the 1980s she organised and cooked for 'A Taste of Ireland', an Irish food promotion in the Café d'Egmont in Brussels. This initial event was so successful that it was repeated in Bloomingdales in New York and the Marriot in Amsterdam. From 1981 - 1985 in collaboration with Farmer Business Development (FBD) she ran 'La Ferme Irlandaise' in Paris (which was rated amongst the ten top foreign restaurants in Paris).

As her reputation grew she was asked to head the Irish branch of EuroToques, an organisation started by a Belgian chef 20 years ago to give chefs a voice in the legislative process. “Chefs were shocked at food laws being passed which would industrialise how food was produced, and reduce its quality” she said. Myrtle also founded an organisation closer to home, the ‘Cork Free Choice Consumer Group’, which provides a voice for consumers and helps to support local producers. Myrtle Allen has published two cookbooks – *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* (1984), and Myrtle Allen’s *Cooking at Ballymaloe House* (1990).

Allen’s crusade for quality Irish food was she said, a fight that had gained ground but has still to be won. Now 83, Myrtle has been one of the main figures behind the turnaround in the production and popularity of Irish artisan food over the past 50 years. She has been joined by her now famous daughter-in-law Darina Allen in imparting her knowledge in the form of cookery courses.

Darina Allen

During Darina’s last year at school, she agonized about which career path to follow. It was a toss up between Hotel Management or Cooking and Horticulture. Cooking was her real love, but in the mid sixties cooking wasn’t considered quite posh, so she opted for a Hotel and Catering Management course at Cathal Brugha Street. This lively, vibrant school was run by several deeply committed, matriarchal women of whom one was Mór Murnaghan.

Towards the end of the course, most of Darina’s friends had organised management jobs but she was frantically trying to get into one of the top restaurant kitchens. Good restaurants were few and far between in Ireland then and she soon discovered that none of them were interested in having a woman in the kitchen! Darina longed to find a job which involved cooking with fresh food and making home-made ice cream and breads, cooking with seasons etc. After speaking with Mór one day, she found out about a farmer’s wife down in the wilds of East Cork who had opened a restaurant in her old

country house and who wrote a menu everyday based on what was available in the locality, in the garden, greenhouse and from local fishermen at Ballycotton. This woman was Myrtle Allen. Darina sent a letter to Myrtle and was offered a job. The first person she met when she arrived at Ballymaloe was Tim Allen (Myrtle's son) to whom she is now married.

Ballymaloe was exactly what Darina was looking for. Myrtle had no time for tins or packets. She used farm-fresh and local food. Darina was totally inspired by her and soaked up everything she told her. Using this knowledge, Darina went on to establish her own cookery school and become the very successful chef/business woman she is today. The idea for the cookery school originated from Myrtle Allen. She began giving winter cookery classes but was too busy to continue and encouraged Darina to take it on. Having secured a loan with Ivan and Myrtle Allen acting as guarantors, Darina and Tim opened the Ballymaloe Cookery School in September 1983.

In the late 1980s Darina made her first appearance on television, and to date has presented nine series of her cookery programme "Simply Delicious". This, in addition to 14 highly acclaimed books has earned Darina Allen the title of celebrity chef. Some of these books include, *Simply Delicious Recipes* (1986), *A Year at Ballymaloe Cookery School* (1997), *A Simply Delicious Irish Christmas* (1998), *Festive Food of Ireland* (2001), *The Ballymaloe Cookery Course* (2001), *A Simply Delicious Christmas* (2002), *Irish Traditional Cooking* (2004), *Healthy Gluten Free Eating* (2004), *Easy Entertaining* (2005) and *A Year at Ballymaloe* (2007). Darina extended her portfolio in 1998 with the launch of a range of ice-creams under the Darina Allen Food Company label.

Today, the Ballymaloe Cookery School is world famous. People come from all over to learn how to cook food the Ballymaloe way. Over twenty years on, this woman who planned a school in a piggery has emerged as a beacon of inspiration to those who might once have regarded the kitchen as a dead end rather than an area of unpatted commercial opportunity.

Rachel Allen

Rachel O'Neill came to Ballymaloe in January 1990 when she was just 18, to undertake a short cookery course. Rachel admits that even she was surprised when on her first day at Ballymaloe, something inside her just clicked and she almost instantly knew that cookery was the career for her. "At that time I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted to do something creative. I remember my first day at Ballymaloe, I was listening to Darina talking about good food and something just clicked inside me and I thought to myself, this is amazing," she recalls. The course drew to an end but by then Rachel had met Isaac (Darina's son) and that helped her decision to take up a job cheffing in the kitchen at Ballymaloe.

She honed her skills in the kitchens at Ballymaloe House and the Crawford Café in Cork (run by Fern Allen). Then, extensive travels in Asia and Canada increased her repertoire and added to her excitement about food. Today, she not only looks after three children but also teaches at the cookery school, writes regular food columns for national publication, presents highly acclaimed television programmes and writes best selling cookery books with the media tipping her as the Irish Nigella.

Specifically, Rachel has appeared in four television series: Rachel's Favourite Food, Rachel's Favourite Food For Friends, Rachel's Favourite Food At Home and Rachel Allen: Bake!. She has also published a book for each of her TV series, carrying the same name. Rachel's other books include *Rachel's Food for Living* and *Rachel's Diary*. These extremely popular television series for RTE and the BBC have been broadcast internationally and she frequently appears on *BBC's Saturday Kitchen*.

Rachel has written for many Irish publications, including the lifestyle magazine *Image*, and now has a weekly column in the *Sunday Tribune Magazine*. She has also contributed to the BBC's *Good Food magazine* and Anthony Worrall Thompson's *At Home Magazine*, and is often featured in articles and interviews in the media. Recently, she has collaborated with Tipperary Crystal and together they have created a new crystal and porcelain collection. The initial offering comprises of a range of crystal stemware, a

dinner set as well as bowls, and serving dishes. In addition a range of linens, wood related products (chopping boards etc) and an enamel canister collection is also available.

Second and Third Generation Businesses

Both nationally and internationally, the Ballymaloe name conjures up tantalising thoughts of good healthy food and is synonymous with the Allen family for whom homecooking is the recipe for unparalleled success. This success, dating back to Myrtle's arrival in Ballymaloe appears to have filtered through the blood lines with second and third generation enterprises flourishing. Below they are listed.

Second Generation Enterprises

- Ballymaloe Cookery School and Gardens – Tim & Darina Allen
- Ballymaloe Shop – Wendy Whelan
- Ballymaloe Farmlands – Rory Allen
- Ballymaloe Music Weekends – Rory Allen
- Ballymaloe Country Relish – Yasmin Hyde
- Jim Whelan Tours – Jim Whelan

Third Generation Enterprises

- Sacha Whelan Furniture - Sacha Whelan
- Crawford Gallery Cafe - Fawn Allen
- Rachel's Website - Rachel Allen
- Feidhlim Harty Wetlands - Feidhlim Harty
- Jobs for Cooks - Toby Allen
- Cully & Sully - Cullen Allen
- Malachy Harty Photography - Malachy Harty

As is evident from the family tree (Appendix 1) and the list of second and third generation enterprises, the Allen family has grown both the Ballymaloe brand and related businesses with much success. The Ballymaloe farm, shop, café, house and accommodation have all experienced significant success over the years. Stretching the brand even further and it is evident that the range of Country Relish on offer has captured a substantial share of the market. Undoubtedly however, these enterprises which are

marketed using the Ballymaloe brand name have largely built their success on their links to the cookery school.

Ballymaloe Cookery School

When you step through the little wooden side gate and into the courtyard of Ballymaloe Cookery School you enter a different world; a world where the loudest sounds are the sounds of the countryside and maybe, if the windows are open, the quiet chatter and gentle clatter of people at work in a kitchen. A world where the whole emphasis is on food - growing it, preparing it, cooking it, eating it and, crucially, enjoying it. A world that feels wonderfully cut-off because it is in the middle of ten acres of organic market gardens, orchards and greenhouses which are, in turn, surrounded by a hundred acres of organic farm.

According to Darina Allen, the best cooking comes from using the best ingredients, which in this case are all located on the farm grounds at the cookery school. Teaching is Darina's first love and along with her brother, Rory O'Connell (formerly an award winning chef, now teacher at Ballymaloe House) and her daughter-in-law, Rachel Allen they offer a wide array of cookery courses at the school. They offer a number of short courses covering a host of specialist areas and lasting anything from half a day to a week and they also offer over 200 afternoon demonstrations spread throughout the year for those who have less time. The *crème de la crème* of the courses on offer however is their comprehensive 12-week Certificate Course. The 12-week Certificate Course is aimed at anyone with a passionate interest in food. Some of the students use it as a springboard to becoming a professional chef (literally, hundreds of former students are now running their own restaurants or catering companies) – others to provide themselves with a marketable skill (for instance, cooking for private parties) – and a third group to maximise the pleasure they get from cooking at home. There's no one age group (there are students who have just left school, others who are happily retired) and no particular level of experience (some are absolute beginners, others already accomplished).

In summary the 12-week course covers:

- Every aspect of the Ballymaloe style of cooking.
- French classic, regional and modern innovatory styles.
- International styles of cooking from India to Mexico and from Japan to Italy.
- Menu planning.
- Wine.
- Choosing ingredients.
- Food costing.
- Food hygiene.
- Keeping food fresh. Preserving.
- An opportunity to see the Ballymaloe House restaurant kitchen in operation.
- Copies of all recipes taught during the course together with invaluable notes and advice.
- Excursions to food producers including a cheese-maker, a fish-smoker and other specialists.
- The opportunity to pick and use fresh herbs and vegetables from the enormous variety grown in the school's organic farm.

During the practical sessions, students work together to produce a three or four-course meal for lunch each day, discovering in the process the essential disciplines of time management and task prioritisation in the kitchen. There is much time devoted to specialist demonstrations and cheese-tasting or to illustrated wine lectures. Through the latter, students learn how to choose, serve and store wine correctly and how to compile a wine list. They will also learn about wines from all over the world and wine-making. In addition, there are lectures on food-related subjects and guest lecturers, experts in their fields, talk to students on such diverse subjects as outside catering, managing a business and specialist butchery. Practical and written examinations are held at the end of the

course and certificates are awarded to students who have produced satisfactory work throughout and have passed the examinations.

The course provides the basis for a wide variety of culinary careers and an illustrious roll-call of former pupils includes many chefs in top restaurant kitchens, caterers for dinner parties or boardroom lunches, food journalists, cooks on yachts in summer and in ski resorts in winter. The school also operates a job information service for both students and prospective employers on www.jobsforcooks.com (this service is operated by Toby Allen).

The 12 week course costs approximately €9500. Many students on this course travel from all over Ireland and the world. To accommodate these students, Ballymaloe offer a number of self-catering cottages on the premises. Bed linen and towels are supplied in all the cottages and each cottage has a dishwasher, multichannel television, fridge, cooker, payphone and central heating.

Of particular interest to the Ballymaloe Cookery School are overseas students. While the Allen name is distinguished in Ireland with many years, much effort has been invested by Ballymaloe in marketing the brand overseas. Attracting international students to the school and building the strength and reputation of the cooking certificate in the culinary world is a major objective. The celebrity of internationally renowned chef Darina Allen and the increased popularity of Darina's daughter-in-law, Rachel Allen has most certainly enhanced the appeal of the cookery school to students all over the world. Additionally, in recent years the overall appeal of the cookery school has been enhanced by the 100-acre organic farm in which the school is situated. Here, all the 'hungry' plants receive a generous dose of good farm yard manure early in the spring to set them up for the season. Never one to let an opportunity slip her by, Darina has opened up this farm and related gardens to the public. Those who are interested in visiting can sign up for a tour of the farm and garden, and those interested in combining gardening with a pleasant stay in Ballymaloe House can sign up for a two-day gardening course. Some of the individual garden attractions include the water garden, the herb garden and the ornamental fruit

garden. In addition to this organic farm, Ballymaloe have a 350 acre tillage farm owned and run by Rory Allen and his son Darren.

Ballymaloe Farm

Ballymaloe Farm is a 350 acre tillage farm amongst rolling green fields where wheat and rape seed are grown in the rich fertile soil. Traditionally much of the farm's business was in sheep and beet farming, however, today's economy requires diversification from traditional agriculture. Rory and Darren are restoring the old stone buildings in the farmyard into attractive self-catering apartments for guests wanting to stay on a longer basis. They have renovated other out buildings into a gallery and workshops for artists and craftspeople. Darren currently keeps free range pigs and hens for a guaranteed supply of fresh eggs and delicious pork.

Ballymaloe House and all the out-buildings are heated by a wood chip boiler which replaced the old straw bale boiler that Ivan Allen installed in the 1970s. Darren's business Scanboiler Ireland now specializes in providing wood chip boilers as an alternative fuel heating system for large country houses, hotels and estates.

Ballymaloe Shop and Café

The craft shop at Ballymaloe is situated in a charming old farm building. The shop features a carefully selected and competitively priced range of Irish designer goods, crafts and specialist kitchenware including a huge range of pottery by Nicholas Mosse and other leading Irish potters, Irish Handknit sweaters, handblown glass from Jerpoint, modern Irish Furniture by Sacha, rugs, throws, leather goods, Irish linen, tweeds, mohairs and lots more. The Ballymaloe shop is run by Wendy Whelan (see Appendix 1) and according to John Mc Kenna - *The Bridgestone Irish Food Guide* (1997) it "is the best kitchen shop in the country". The shop is open all year, seven days a week and both a world wide mailing service and VAT refunds on visitors' purchases are on offer.

At the end of the shop is the café appropriately named "The Café at the end of the Shop". The Café use fresh, local, organic ingredients whenever possible and endeavour to make

the most of seasonal produce. They serve tea and coffee all day and light lunches between 12:30 and 4pm. The café offer a full range of coffees from espresso to latte, fresh fruit juices and a selection of teas, including some herb teas freshly picked from the gardens at Ballymaloe. Also on offer is red and white wine and beer to quench that lunch- time thirst!

Ballymaloe House & Accommodation

For more than 40 years, Ballymaloe House, has been a popular restaurant in Ireland with reservations made well in advance to dine there. Those at Ballymaloe pride themselves on offering a warm welcome, tastefully decorated bedrooms and award-winning cuisine which celebrates the best of local, seasonal produce. Ballymaloe House has received a range of awards and distinctions, including:

- The Cesar Award in the Good Hotel Guide (1984)
- The Ackerman Martell Guide Award for excellence in all aspects of the hotel and restaurant business (1988)
- Distinguished ratings in Michelin, Egan Ronan's Good Food Guide and the AA Guide.
- Inclusion in Harpers and Queen 'The one hundred Best Hotels in the World' (1991)
- Inclusion in the Courvoisier book of best hotels (1988)

Ballymaloe House is a building that has evolved and grown with the passing centuries, and the accommodation varies from a 15th century Norman tower to modern luxury rooms. There are 33 bedrooms in total, including the courtyard rooms. All of the rooms are decorated to the highest standard, combining modern comforts with timeless elegance and an eye for detail. Each room has its own name and own distinct character, and all have private bathrooms as standard. Also available are a limited number of self catering apartments situated in the farmyard (as restored by Rory and Darren).

Upstairs, in the main house the rooms retain many original features and have enchanting old-world charm. Downstairs, new, more spacious rooms at the back of the house have views over the river and gardens. Each has its own private terrace, for afternoon tea or relaxing with a book. In summer, they also have quick and easy access to the swimming pool and tennis court. The courtyard rooms are situated in an independent building, beside the main house. This is an attractive old building where three of the rooms have small adjoining conservatories.

Ballymaloe Country Relish

Ballymaloe Country Relish commenced production in 1990 with Yasmin Hyde, daughter of Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe House at the helm. The company started in a small way and gradually grew, and today Ballymaloe Country Relish is available nationwide. The range now boasts an exciting product portfolio including salad dressings and pasta sauces.

Central to the growth of the Ballymaloe brand has been the availability of fresh, local in-season produce. To this end, the Allen family and in particular Darina are largely responsible for focusing attentions on sustainable organic food production. Farmers Markets, the Slow Food Movement and relationships with local producers are fundamental to this philosophy.

Farmers Markets

In Ireland, as elsewhere in the world, Farmers Markets operate all over the country selling fresh food and vegetables, including the more traditional home-baked produce like chutneys and jams along with exotic foods like bok choy and tortillas! Farmers markets are now playing a key role in the Irish market – all over the country there is a resurgence of fresh food, vegetables, homemade breads and cakes, chutneys, fresh and smoked fish and meat coming out of farms, rivers and kitchens, direct to us to touch, buy and eat. Darina Allen is a founder of the first farmers market in Ireland and is involved on an ongoing basis in helping to set up new markets. Darina had visited the farmers market in San Francisco and brought the idea of a local market home to Midleton. Along with John

Potter Cogan, a board member of the Chamber of Commerce, and others, she realised there was potential for a local food initiative in East Cork. Establishing the farmers market took time and it was two years before the market was properly established. Since then however the market has been very stable and is a huge draw to the town. Darina Allen is currently the Chair of the Midleton Farmers Market Committee. Notably, the interest in farmers markets does not stop with Darina. Rubert Hugh Jones and his wife Lydia Allen (see Appendix 1) organise the Farmers Market at Mahon Point in Cork, and also operate a stall at this market.

Local Producers

Quite apart from depending on the wealth of food from their gardens, much of the work at Ballymaloe would be impossible without the support of their local producers, for example the floury new potatoes come from Patrick Walshe and Willie Scannell in Shanagarry and Ballycotton. Other local farmers supply poultry, ducks, geese, guinea fowl, chickens and turkeys. All the lamb and beef is grass-fed, reared on neighboring farms and slaughtered by local family butchers. The fish comes from small boats in Ballycotton and shellfish from Kenmare Bay. The cheese board at Ballymaloe celebrates the remarkable rebirth of Irish cheeses from small farms all over Ireland. In keeping with the family enterprise Rupert Hugh Jones supplies organic vegetables and Darren Allen rears free range pigs and hens to ensure a guaranteed fresh supply.

Slow Food Movement

The Slow Food Movement was founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy as a resistance movement to combat fast food. It claims to preserve the cultural cuisine and the associated food plants and seeds, domestic animals, and farming within an eco-region. Darina Allen is the leader of the Slow Food Movement in Ireland and is seen as instrumental in the international Slow Food Movement. Whilst now commonly known as the Slow Food Movement it could be argued that in practice this was the cooking style pioneered by Myrtle Allen in the sixties.

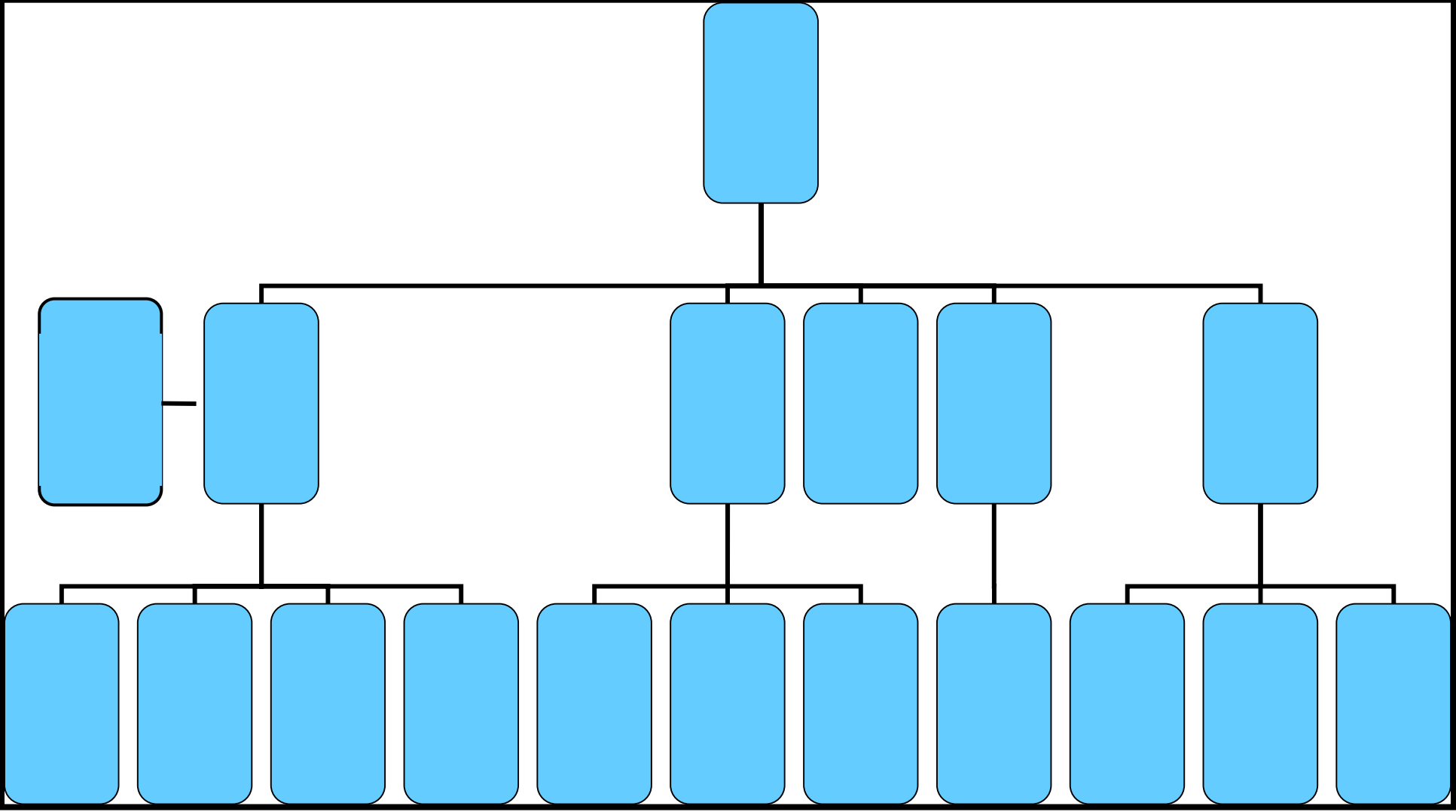
The Slow Food Movement believes in the sustainable use of resources. They work ceaselessly to avoid waste. They use seasonal produce and are extremely conscious of 'food miles' (the distance travelled by food between the farmer and the plate) and keep to a minimum the use of imported ingredients. They believe that good food, good health and good farming practices are an inseparable part of the same process, and this is essentially the driving force behind Ballymaloe.

Conclusion

While there are many interesting aspects to the Ballymaloe story, perhaps one of the most notable has been the influence the women who married into the Allen family have had on the business. Mrytle, Darina and Rachel are largely responsible for the success of the Ballymaloe brand and the growing influence of the Allen family. A vision to move away from large industrialised practices to a reliance on quality organic food grown and reared in an uncontaminated environment can be regarded as the hallmark to much of their success. The drive and determination to change the way we think about food and farming which is a priceless part of the Irish heritage underpins the ethos of the Ballymaloe brand. This ethos has enabled many extensions of the Ballymaloe brand as well the flourishing success of many related second and third generation enterprises.

Despite the success to date, the company undoubtedly faces challenges moving forward. In an economy that is facing recession, the Ballymaloe enterprise is vulnerable to tighter economic conditions where consumers might move away from quality organic produce and return to mass produced cheaper alternatives. There is also the possibility that a reduction in disposable income might reduce demand for accommodation, dining, cookery courses etc and that the shop and café might see a slow down in sales. These concerns are all the more relevant to an enterprise such as Ballymaloe which is built on family ties and connections. In this context, decisions made to move the enterprise successfully forward must be made with both the organisational structure and the celebrity of Darina and Rachel very much in mind.

Sources: Based on information contained on www.ballymaloe.ie, www.cookingisfun.ie and other published sources.



Appendix 1: Organisational / Family Structure

