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WORLD TRENDS

INTELLIGENCE/HELENA MULKERN

# In Ireland, Celtic Salmon Stirs Again

WEXFORD, Ireland

Despite encouraging signs of a slow but steady return to a healthier economy, the recession still haunts Ireland. It slouches with Yeatsian dread around our ghost estates like a nasty emission left by the so-called Celtic Tiger. The boomtime branding — borrowed from an Asian buzzword — was never an accurate or lasting symbol for Ireland.

A more appropriate one might be the Salmon of Knowledge, or an breadán feasa. In the ancient Celtic sagas, Fionn MacCumhaill became a great warrior by acquiring the pure knowledge of the salmon, which gave him the skill and wisdom to defeat his enemies.

Today, Ireland faces the challenge of emerging from its slump in a fickle global economy that is more competitive than ever. How can a salmon compete with a tiger?

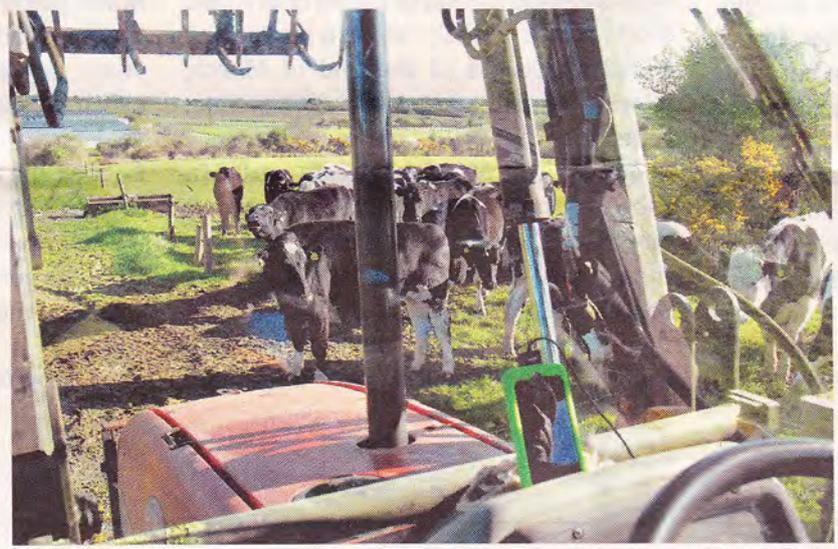
Young, entrepreneurial Irish are picking up fast on the potential of new online opportunities. The cost-effective tools offered by cloud computing, marketing fuelled by social media and accurate analytics can all help small businesses grow.

With this in mind, Innovate Wexford and FUSE, two local organizations in a relatively small business community, set up Techovate, a conference that took place last month at the Wexford Opera House, in the southeast of Ireland.

To add star power, Techovate brought in senior executives from the Irish diaspora who now work at Microsoft, Google, IBM, Facebook, Cisco and LinkedIn to advise local entrepreneurs.

“The Techovate Conference is not so much about the technology itself,” said Brendan Ennis, its main organizer, “but about how small and medium-sized businesses in Ireland use that

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To combat the isolation of farm work, Seán Kiely uses Facebook and Twitter on his iPhone, which is mounted on his tractor.

technology to drive business growth and to expand the outlook abroad.” Mr. Ennis pointed out that they have little choice in the matter. “Let’s face it,” he added. “If they don’t — they’re going to be left behind.”

One goal is to transcend the heady buzz of the conference chambers and reach Ireland’s more traditional mom-and-pop concerns, which are often surprised to find themselves in a world transformed by technology.

Wallace’s general store in Wexford has been in business for more than 70 years, located on a rural river bend at a junction between three major towns. Its family-run drapery, food and hardware departments have thus far thrived on local shoppers, and a traditional marketing policy heavy on regional radio and print media.

“These days, your competitor is no longer the shop in the next town,” notes Chrissie Wallace, a family member running the store, “but the Web site two continents over.” The family invested in a consultant to develop a comprehensive online strategy for the store, which will include a more social-media-focused Web site, cross-platform campaigns, a community focus section and Facebook and Twitter presences.

Lorna Sixsmith has embraced the new media with IrishFarmerette.com, her popular blog that brings the business of Irish agriculture to life online. “All business people should be blog-

ging, no matter what their industry. We should be showcasing to potential buyers abroad the fact that our animals are mostly grass-fed, that they are outside for much of the year,” Ms. Sixsmith said.

“It would do so much for the sale of Irish food abroad if readers could identify with the real story behind the food they are buying and see the pictures,” she added.

Seán Kiely, a farmer, uses social media to combat the isolation of his work. “I’ve rigged up my iPhone to my tractor, in order to stay in touch on Facebook or Twitter through the day,” he said. Elsewhere on the farm, cloud technology helps him keep track of animal births, deaths and movements, and a small virtual weather station provides crucial facts about the soil and the weather on his land, so that he knows when to fertilize or plant.

The lessons that Irish companies, shopkeepers and farmers are learning about navigating and taking advantage of the world of technology can be applied by their struggling counterparts in Greece and Spain, Portugal and Italy, and beyond.

If the boom’s fallout has left countries across Europe flailing in murky economic turbulence, Ireland’s ancient salmon of knowledge may provide inspiration yet. A symbol of wisdom, skill and determination, the salmon rarely fails in its journey upstream.

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7 of 17