

The Cargill Master Series

Who are the people behind Cargill's innovative ingredients, beverages and food? Here's an inside look at the experts who work every day researching ingredients and developing recipes, beverages and foods that feed the world.



Q&A with John Sweeney

Director of Shared Capabilities at Cargill



John Sweeney, Director of Shared Capabilities at Cargill, grew up in Derry, Northern Ireland, during “the Troubles” (conflict between the British and the Irish over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland). He attended Queens University, Belfast, earning a Bachelor’s degree in food science. He then went on to get a Master’s Degree in Food Science from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where he met his wife, who was also a graduate student in food science. Sweeney began working at Cargill in 1993. The couple have three children: a 19-year-old daughter who is studying occupational therapy, an 18-year-old son who is studying business, and a 15-year-old son who is still in high school. We caught up with Sweeney recently for a chat.

What was it like, growing up in Ireland when you did?

There was a lot of conflict and fighting going on when I was growing up. Stuff that’s not normal became normal. You got used to the way that it was. There was an army base close to where we lived, and a border with a checkpoint. There were bomb scares. However, there is peace there now. When I go back, I’m always so impressed with the progress in that country and also a little jealous I didn’t have that when I was a kid.

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There's an awful lot of beauty and history there. Derry is a walled city with cannons from the 17th and 16th centuries – one of the best examples of a medieval town in Europe.

Do you think you were shaped by the war-zone mentality?

I was impacted by it, but I did not want to participate in the violence. I don't know that it shaped me particularly. Despite all that, I led a normal life. It made me determined. There was high unemployment. You knew you had to work hard to succeed. At the same time, there was a vibrant culture there. People were funny and engaging despite all the challenges. There was lots of music and lots of fun.

What was the first concert you ever attended?

My first real music concert was Queen, in Dublin. I saw Freddie Mercury in an outdoor concert when I was 17. My most recent concert was seeing U2 here in Minneapolis.

What is your Irish family like?

I have one sister who is a year older, a younger sister, and a twin brother. We're fraternal twins — really close. I loved being a twin. We always had each other's backs; we looked out for each other. We're still great friends today. Obviously, once you get married, you get close to your wife, but I could pretty much guess what my brother would think of anything. We once sent each other the same birthday card, even though I was in America and he was in England.

My parents were both teachers. The Irish have a different respect for teachers; it was different times back then. My father was the headmaster of an Irish school, and the people would call him "The Master." He went across the border every day to teach school in Donegal in the South of Ireland. He died early of a heart attack when I was 18. My mother was also a teacher, and she's still going strong at 87.

Did your family have a special interest in food and beverage?

My mother was a great cook, but she really did not know anything about food science. When I started to be interested in that, my parents were confused. Was I going to be a chef? This further confused them because I wasn't a very good cook.

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John Sweeney in the bakery lab.

What were some of your favorite Irish foods?

The Irish diet I knew focused on the flavor of the food – good food, well-cooked. We'd have really good meat or fish with vegetables or potatoes. I remember grilled salmon with butter at my grandmother's house, and the cats going crazy on the windowsill. We'd go to individual places to get our meat or fish. There was a butcher. You would go somewhere else to pick up the dairy, the vegetables, the potatoes. You'd look at which potato was in season, which one was the best. My mother liked to make jam from the different fruits. I remember her making blackcurrant jam, blackberry jam, or gooseberry jam. We loved being her taste-testers.

Did you have any special interests or hobbies growing up?

I liked practically any type of sport. I mostly played Gaelic football, which is a sport only played in Ireland. They call it the GAA – the Gaelic Athletic Association. It's more like Australian rules football, where you play with hands and feet. I also play table tennis. I went from playing in the backyard to finding a local club and starting a team, where we played in a table tennis league. I still play table tennis today in the Minnesota Super League. I'm going to the table tennis World Veteran Championship in Las Vegas in June 2018. I'm not expecting to win it, though.

How did you become interested in food science?

In the English education system, which was the system in Northern Ireland at that time, you do not have as much choice as you do here in universities and degrees. You have to get accepted into the university to get a scholarship. Maybe about 5 or 10 percent get in, but then your tuition was free. It was quite competitive. I went to a careers day and was told there were lots of jobs in food science, which was ironic because later when I graduated with a good degree in food science at an economically black time, in 1989 in Ireland, there weren't any jobs.

And from there you came to the states?

When I graduated, I couldn't get a permanent job, so I started working for Guinness on quality in their manufacturing plant in Belfast. It was hard work; it wasn't glamorous. A professor I knew from Queens was talking to a professor out there at the University of Nebraska, and suggested I apply for a scholarship to do further research. Beer making was seasonal. The week Guinness told me they didn't have any more work for me, Nebraska called and said they had a scholarship for me. I didn't even know where Nebraska was, but I knew I'd be unemployed if I stayed in Northern Ireland.

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What was that transition like?

Nebraska was a real shock, culturally, weather-wise, in every way. All the other foreign graduate students – a lot of Asian, Indian, Malaysian people – arrived into communities of folks who had been there before. When I showed up there from Ireland, it felt like I was beating a path that no one else had taken, or at least not for a hundred years. The clothes I had didn't match up to how cold – and then how hot – it was. There was confusion about the program, too. I thought I could get a Master's in one year. Turns out, for that type of program, I needed to be there for three years. But the facilities in Nebraska were fantastic. We had access to all of the equipment; we didn't have to share it with anybody. I could plan my own research and execute it; I had all the tools available.

How did you land at Cargill?

After I'd been in Nebraska for three years, Cargill came to campus. I wanted someone to give me a chance to prove what I could do. I wanted a company that I thought stood for the right things, that I could grow with, and learn from. Cargill impressed me with the safety and the ethics and the different things they were trying to do. It felt like a company that offered a lot of opportunities. The "a-ha" for me was that Cargill was looking for people who could get stuff done – and if you could get it done the right way, you'd have a great future with Cargill.

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What are some of your favorite foods and food trends?

I have a wide range of interests. I could spend hours in the supermarket looking at the labels trying to understand which products are winning and why. I worked in the chocolate business for a number of years, and have a personal interest in the confectionery trends. Chocolate, in general, fascinates me.

What's your favorite chocolate?

Peter's® milk chocolate. It was one of the first milk chocolates. It's got a nice, clean, lightly caramelized chocolate taste. It's high-quality chocolate. A lot of the mom-and-pop chocolatiers use it to make their chocolate. Knowing how Peter's® milk chocolate is formulated compared to others, I really get chills.

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What have you learned at Cargill that's helped you in other parts of your life?

When I joined the quality department at Cargill, they did a tremendous job teaching you how to evaluate risk and manage that from a quality perspective. You can also apply that to your personal life. Ask yourself: "What is the best that could happen and what is the worst that could happen?" Look at different scenarios and play them out. See if you could live with it.

How have you continued to evolve and grow in your career?

Patience. I wanted to try new things in my career and looked for positions that interested me, in order to learn and grow and take risks. But things don't always go as fast as you'd like. So many people become impatient and jump to another company. Instead, wait. Be a little more patient. I reminded myself I came all the way over to Nebraska from Ireland. If I did all of that to make a successful career, I was willing to be patient. Sometimes that is what's needed to get the work experience necessary to move forward. I continue to learn new things at Cargill every day.

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