

# THRIVE Q&A: Ali Easson from Hemp it Up

**Ali Easson runs Hemp it Up. A farm-based business selling Hemp seed oil, hemp protein, hemp seed and hemp soap all made from hemp grown by her husband John on their farm in North-East Scotland. Ali attended THRIVE in 2023 as an early stage entrepreneur.**

## **Why hemp?**

It's all about the health benefits for me – hemp is a versatile, mega-healthy product. It can be grown in Scotland, is good for soil, captures carbon, improves yield for the following year's crop, creates great products, and we can feed the leftovers to the cattle.

## **What market opportunity led you to build your own business?**

With background in precision agriculture and agronomy, hemp was on my radar for its carbon-capture qualities and that fact that it is a solid, healthy sustainable crop. Every part of the crop can be used. I took part in the Rural Leadership Programme (RLP) and that got me thinking more and gave me the confidence to follow my passion. Everything came together at the right time – hemp was in its infancy, we created a 'co-op model' and through my RLP project I was able to further develop my business idea, undertaking research and reinforcing initial ideas. It gave me confidence in myself, and others confidence in my business idea. Hemp processing has enabled me to create a home-based job that I love.

## **What have been your biggest wins so far?**

Just getting a product to market and knowing that I've done this myself. I love my branding and think it looks good on the bottle! A key win was realising how much local support there is. My local events are usually as good as any other events outwith Angus. The support available locally is really encouraging.

## **What have been the biggest obstacles you've had to face and how have you overcome them?**

Learning all the things you have to do as a food producer and the level of analysis you have to do. Spending hours on the computer, speaking to different people, knowing which lab to use for which product tests and which tests should be done. This was a real challenge as you could easily miss something. People often say to pay for expert advice, but this is often expensive. In hindsight, paying someone might have speeded up the learning, as learning through mistakes takes longer. The question is 'How do you know if you don't know?'. A step-by-step guide would be useful.

### **What did you gain from attending THRIVE?**

One thing that stays with me is the idea of the 'ugly baby.' Not everyone will tell you if your idea is an ugly baby, so gather feedback from those who don't support you unconditionally and love everything you do. I have talked about this so often since. This forced me to postpone launching my dressings. Another thing I learned is that no matter how healthy a product is it comes down to taste. I also gained a lot of valuable knowledge on the science of product development. The networking was invaluable, and I got a lot from pitching my product to the industry panel. Having to pitch pushed me out of my comfort zone, made me stand up and be scrutinised and I know this will make me better prepared for the future. So, there were lots of elements from the THRIVE programme that I found valuable.

### **What are your next steps?**

I'd like to get on *Landward!* This would raise publicity and help to drive demand for what is an amazing product. I want to drive my protein product forward and will be targeting a new audience – health food shops and people passionate about health and what they eat. Health-conscious people who cook from scratch using healthy ingredients. I'd like to demonstrate my field-to-fork concept and to carry the 'gluten free' status.

### **What are your top tips for budding food & drink and rural entrepreneurs?**

1. Food safety and hygiene is paramount. Always be clean and tidy.
2. Research, research, and research your product and market.
3. Trust your own gut feeling – if something doesn't feel right then don't do it.
4. Understand and manage your costs, don't rush into things, beg and borrow at the start. Don't buy things like expensive equipment until you're really sure of everything because at the beginning of a venture you can't see failure.

**To find out more about Hemp it Up: [www.hempitup.co.uk](http://www.hempitup.co.uk)**