

How to start your own food business

Is your pickle popular? Think your chutney's got what it takes? Here, we talk to the UK's leading food producers to find out how they took their recipes from the kitchen table to the high street



Everyone has a recipe all of their own. One that they've worked on, adjusted and tweaked over the years, one that's likely to command coos of admiration from all who try it, and one that perhaps you make in batches to share with friends, family and colleagues. For some, it's a pickle, a dressing or a sauce and for most, it's a recipe we dream seeing on the shelves of farm shops, delis... even supermarkets! But how do you go from washing out old jars and spending weekends stirring bubbling jam pans, to carving a career out of their food skills? We asked top UK foodie entrepreneurs for their advice.



It starts with an idea...

It sounds simple but to launch a product, or even a range of foods, you'll need an original idea to stand out from the thousands of other foods available. This inspiration can come in many forms, including sheer luck. Praveen Vijn, founder of Eat Natural, chanced upon some delicious chewy fruity and nutty bars while travelling in Australia. "The moment we got home, we tried to recreate it," he says. "My partner Preet Grewal and I worked in our home kitchens for months trying to perfect it, even purchasing an old cement mixer to get the mixing technique just right – and it worked!"

For Philip Evans of Pelagonia, it was his job that provided the brain wave. "I was living and working in Macedonia as a chef and my remit was to introduce Macedonian people to recipes and cuisines from other countries," he explains. "But the more I learnt about Macedonian food itself, the more I wanted to introduce it to the UK."

People were the driving force behind Amelia Rope's chocolate business of the same name. "I always knew I would run my own business, but there were a few key players who really helped me come up with the idea," she says. "My life coach (Merry Graham) made me believe in myself, the editor of *Food Illustrated* (William Sitweel) opened a 'chocolate door' in my mind, the co-founder of *www.sofa.com* (Patrick Reeves) who consistently told me to make chocolate bars and even commissioned 1,000 to ensure I got going, and the CEO of Fortnum & Mason (Ewan Venters) for spotting the brand and selecting it for Selfridges."

The first step on a long journey

Taking that idea to the next step can often be the hardest part, and where most people stumble. It can be difficult to know how to get going. Charlotte Knight, founder of G'Nosh dips, agrees that this for her for the most challenging part of the setting up. "I'm obsessed by quality, it's our raison d'être, so finding the right manufacturing partner was a key piece to this next step. Once I had the recipes nailed, we moved into commercial kitchens which was great because it meant we were close to production for the launch, before looking for a the right manufacturing partner. It's important to be passionate about quality when you're a start-up food brand, so don't be too quick to outsource producing your food."

If Edward Perry of Cook ready meals had known how hard this next step would be, he's not

sure he would have done it. "I was a cakes salesman," he begins. "I used to see a chef called Dale Penfold from time to time through work and when I used to see him, I would tell him about this idea I had for creating a line of readymeals that tasted homemade. He was a Cockney so he never had a moment's doubt about it, or indeed anything, in whole life. He seemed to be able to see exactly how to do it, and one day, when he was going through a bad spell at work, we agreed to go for it. We borrowed £10,000 off HSBC and £10,000 off NatWest and we set up a small kitchen in Rainham and a tiny little shop in Farnham."

"The key to it all was that we were profoundly ignorant of what we were trying to do. If we had had the slightest inkling of what lay ahead, or any experience, we never would have dreamed of doing it like that. It's not enough money to set up a manufacturing company. I suppose in some ways we were blessed by our ignorance though."

However, for some people, this next step wasn't quite as tricky. Adeline Towers of coffee company Weanie Beans kept her '9-5' and sold coffee at the weekends from a market stall using equipment she bought with her wages. "I sold cups of coffee to drink and takeaway," she says. "People liked the coffee so much they wanted to buy the beans too, so I started selling those. I sold more and more and began to get asked to do events and parties. I didn't have any information to give out so I set up just a holding page online."

"Fortunately at the time, my brother was learning web design. He needed the practise of building an online shop for another project he was working on so he built my website up completely free of charge, which was nice."

Do your research

But before you leap head-first into production, it's important to remember market research to ensure you're not about to produce a batch of food that's not going to get bought. Charlotte Knight tried out her dips on small focus groups. "There is nothing like real customer feedback," she explains. "It was important to do this in and outside of London to capture a broader opinion on flavours and uses. Now 'edible advertising' is at the heart of our marketing strategy and we do a lot of in-store sampling not just to show off our products, but to find out what customers feel about them, and how they use our products in their own home cooking."

George Bennell's first company's name, The Fresh Olive Company, didn't fit the bill any longer when he started sourcing new products ripe for his customers. "We hired a company to come up with the new company's (Belazu) name," he explains. "To ensure that it would hit the right note with customers both here and abroad. From the get-go, we were planning how to expand internationally."

Market research doesn't have to be costly, especially if you have a lot of friends. Lisa McAllister of Soupa Juices had lots of willing volunteers for her cleanse diet. "A lot of our friends and family did the cleanse and gave us their honest feedback on how their body reacted and on the flavour of the drinks which we found incredibly helpful."

It's what's on the outside

When it comes to what to place your loving-made food product in, it's important to get it right first time. Your box, packet, tin or bottle's design needs to work just as well now, as it will in five years time. It's vital for start-up companies to keep their packaging similar in the first few years, to ensure that consumers are able to spot and recognise your product.

Camilla Stephens came up with Higgidy Pies after years spent working in food publishing. She went on to develop high-end pies and cut her teeth supplying the food service industry, and finally, in 2006 went about developing the Higgidy brand. "We approached several design agencies and ended up going with one of the smaller ones, which allowed us to have a lot of involvement (and was cheaper!)", Camilla says. "After that, we were able to set about looking for a distributor."

Put yourself out there

Some food companies start off small but Camilla and Higgidy Pies went straight to the top. "Our decision to build the brand coincided with an approach from an organisation called Food From Britain, who had been commissioned by Sainsbury's to find small local suppliers for their 'Supply Something New' scheme," she reveals. "After a Dragons' Den-style meeting we were selected by Sainsbury's and initially launched two lines into 80 stores on Valentine's Day 2007."

But securing time with the supermarkets can be very difficult, or you might want to start off a little smaller. "Definitely approach your local market," says Adeleine of Weanie Beans.

Edward Perry, Cook



Lisa McAllister, Soupa Juices



Amelia Rope, Amelia Rope Chocolate



Adeline Towers, Weanie Beans



"Markets always want local traders who are selling things that have been manufactured locally and the initial overheads are really low. The most you have to spend out on is a gazebo to keep you dry and even then, a lot of markets rent them out. You haven't got the risk of buying a commercial kitchen. Don't forget to approach local small, independent shops also. They too will be looking for something different because they want to be able to offer their customers something they won't find anywhere else."

And finally...

We asked our experts for one top tip for all our readers who think one of their recipe has what it takes. Charlotte Knight tells us simply to "Stop talking, act now" while Lisa McAllister explains how important a business plan is: "We found this really helpful for structuring ourselves, and also figuring out exactly what we needed to achieve in order to have a viable business."

Meanwhile, Adeline Towers stressed the importance of spreadsheets. "The amount of people that I've spoken to who have said, 'I've got this product, and I think I'll sell it for £4.50'. And I say, 'Oh that sounds like a reasonable price, how much did it cost you to make?' They don't have a clue! It's very easy to work out just by costing up the recipe using a spreadsheet, so make sure that you're always making a really decent margin on everything you sell."

Amelia Rope emphasises the importance of having a USP in not just your recipe, but in your packaging and story too, while Praveen Vijh warns against growing too quickly. George Bennell insists on only using the best ingredients and advises potential food start-ups to do the same, Camilla Stephens reminds entrepreneurs to stand by their values and finally, Philip Evans says it's important to really love what you do. "You're going to have to work really hard, and a love for the project is what will see you through."

CASE STUDY

PANJABAN CURRY BASES

When company founder Charanjit Sapal's son Gurjeet left for university, she packed him up lunchboxes of her Punjabi-style curry bases. He loved being able to enjoy his mum's home cooking in halls and pretty soon friends were drawn by the aroma to the kitchen, and Gurjeet started sharing his dinners with his friends. Gurjeet's mates were quickly hooked on the delicious dinners and word spread of this phenomenal base that tasted so fresh!



Putting two and two together, he started selling them and using the money to buy a few beers down the student union! Unbeknownst to his mother, a business was born.

After a couple of weeks, the penny dropped with his mother. Far from being angry, Charanjit realised there were people interested in her bases, so she started distributing them to her friends too, and her husband did the same with his colleagues.

By the time Gurjeet graduated, the family knew they were onto something. They developed packaging (and improved it over the years) and worked on branding. Gurjeet began phoning round farm shops all over the UK and telling them the story of Panjaban. Once interested, he'd insist on sending out samples and Gurjeet together with his sister, got listings in hundreds of farm shops and delis.

Today Panjaban has six curry bases which, true to their Indian roots, are all naturally dairy-, gluten-, wheat-, yeast-, sugar-, coconut-, ghee- and nut-free. With no additives, preservatives or colours, they're perfect for whatever curry you're cooking from lentil or chickpea, to paneer or vegetable, or use them on jacket potatoes, cheese on toast... even as a pizza topping!

Panjaban bases are £15 for six sauces of your choice. Visit www.panjaban.co.uk.



Bruce McMichael, author of *Cook Wrap Sell*, shares his top ten tips for bringing your product from the kitchen table to the high street

RESEARCH Sell the food and drink your customers want, not just what you like to make. Test recipes on your family, friends and potential customers. Look for a special niche, like gluten-free or vegan sausages perhaps.

BUSINESS PLAN Treat this as a route map to success. Refer to it regularly and keep it fresh. Plan for growth from the start.

NEVER STOP LEARNING Absorb everything and keep asking questions. Take start-up business and inspiring catering courses; you'll learn as much from your fellow start-ups and entrepreneurs as you do from the tutor.

RULES AND REGULATIONS For health and safety reasons, rules and regs are unavoidable, so talk to food and hygiene officials at the local council as soon as possible, and get registered. The sooner you're in touch, the more advice you'll get and the friendlier they'll be.

PACKAGING AND BRANDING Get professional design advice early. On the crowded shop shelves, it's the packaging that sells.

SOURCING INGREDIENTS Again, plan for the future. Find good reliable suppliers, consider wholesalers and specialists who can handle delivery and allow you to simply cook and sell. Build a rapport and you'll be rewarded.

PRICES Tricky to get right. When setting prices, consider everything, from ingredients and your time, to packaging and delivery costs. Research and price accordingly.

CUSTOMERS & CONSUMERS Food festivals and farmers' markets are great places to meet customers and consumers.

COMPETITION Focus on what makes your food special, from product and taste to packaging and sales. Learn from others, but make your own success.

SELL, SELL, SELL Spread your message using social media; rent stands at farmers' markets and food festivals; organise tastings in farm shops; and finally, use your website or blog to let the world know you're in business.

Cook, Wrap, Sell by Bruce McMichael costs £12.99 and is published by Brightword.