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## **Bringing a career to the table**



*Some of the Norwich market food options*

Exploring Norwich city centre market on a typical East Anglian windy day, the amount of tempting food and drink stalls and pop-ups that whet my appetite is impressive: homemade cakes, locally produced ice cream, organic fruit and vegetables from local smallholdings, and many varieties of hot/prepared dishes; Indian street food, chips and bacon butties, falafel, and more.

According to the Norwich City Council the market has had a

“fantastic year” with occupancy rates soaring from 76 per cent to 91 per cent, with many new food stalls joining up and a more diverse range of eating options than ever before.

Moving from the market to the cobbled streets, I become aware of even more small, independent food businesses; coffee roasters, tofu makers, bakers and more. And when I order a drink from a local cafe there is a high probability that what arrives will be locally roasted coffee, locally bottled soft drinks, or beer brewed in a range of micro-breweries springing up around the region. In informal conversations with proprietors, it seems that these food and drink entrepreneurs are often pursuing second careers, deciding to start up a foodservice or small-scale food and drink manufacturing business as a new start.

Embryonic enterprises that are providing a platform for new beginnings for many individuals seem to be popping up everywhere, and it’s likely the trend is not only limited to Norwich or East Anglia but is replicated across the country. This plethora of choice and flavour seems a good thing for consumers, what about the people behind these businesses? Given this climate of re-invention, and society’s engagement with it, it seems worth exploring which qualities entrepreneurship in the food sector requires and what the prevalence of food entrepreneurship means for customers and diners. Being a self-made food and drink research consultant, these questions also hold some personal relevance.

## ***Escape to the food sector***

Starting up a business in the food and drink sector combines creativity and business sense. Inventing your own product, brand, service can be psychologically gratifying in most areas, but when it comes to food there seems to be something much more core to do with our history, values, memories, and culture. Food is a very visible area, where it is possible to encounter new ideas and examples of success all around us. These might be the café around

the corner where you buy an energising flat white each day or be about the big success stories we all live with – for example, the path of companies like Innocent and BrewDog are the basis of modern fairy tales.

On a local level, smaller foodservice and food manufacturing businesses can represent a fresh start for former public sector or other employed workers. A background in the health professions, teaching or social work gives the awareness, listening skills, and empathy that can help build relationships with customers, clients and suppliers. An ability to work under pressure, make things happen with limited resources may have been learned within a community service role.

Alys Duberly is the founder and owner of Broad Table, a multi-cuisine micro business offering pop-up food events, private catering and food consultancy in Norwich and the surrounding area. Broad Table's strap line is 'World food from a Norfolk kitchen'. Recent events and ventures include themed and fixed menu Swahili and Catalan meals as part of the Supper Club, as well as pub-based World Curry nights. Duberly describes Broad Table as "an accidental business" saying she came into the catering world from a completely different background, having worked previously for social services for 15 years. After attaining what she describes as "a well-paid corporate job" she thought "Is this what I really want to do with my life?". Duberly came up with the idea of going into catering while doing voluntary work in Kenya for 6 months.



*Alys Duberly founder of Broad Table*

Duberly says her supper club started almost as a hobby or a side project; when the café she was working in had free space in the evening, she decided to rent it, and started with just one evening a month. She describes how she would rent out the space, put together a menu, cook it, and invite people along. "It was a very basic concept; like a restaurant but you don't get to choose what you have. You just come and you have the set menu of the evening and that menu was different every time. For the first year or so, hardly anybody came, mostly because I didn't tell anyone about it!" Gradually over the last few years the business seems to have grown of its own accord and become more popular.

### ***Food and drink is serious business***

"I started to think I ought to actually do some marketing and set up a Facebook page, and at that point I didn't even have a business name or anything. It has taken me the three or four years to have what feels like a proper business," says Duberly. Now Broad Table runs two or three events a month as well as private catering for one-off parties and events. According to Duberly, one thing she had to learn very quickly was to do with costings and this is an area she sees as quite difficult for many people who run a catering or food business; "I think one of things that motivates a lot of people is making people happy – you want to put some

beautiful food down in front of someone and have them go ‘Aaah it’s amazing’ – but if you don’t ensure that your ingredients come in at 25% of the price that you are charging for that meal, you are never going to be able to make a living. You are restricted quite a lot by the market and what people are willing to pay – there is a ceiling price.”

Tofurei (pronounced tofu-rye) is a newer Norwich-based vegan coffee shop and ‘grab ‘n’ go’ which showcases output from the UK’s first shop based micro soya dairy. The dairy features a deli counter with plant-based substitutes for fresh meat products, including ‘soysages’, burgers, and fresh, loose tofu for use in cooking – all produced on site. Fresh soya milk is also made in the shop twice a week with several changing flavours. And in addition to all of this, there is range of tempting vegan cakes, made to a ‘secret’ recipe, that involves soya milk, and according to co-founder Steve Lepper, “some alchemy”. All products are plant-based, and the shop also sells a small range of complementary retail products. And the business has announced a range of expansion plans in 2018, including new production and retail premises.

The drive, passion and life experiences of those running small food manufacturing businesses, often is what creates the strong brand and community bonds these companies need to succeed. Lepper describes his Tofurei co-founder Jenny McCann, as a “passionate and committed vegan”. He himself comes from a varied background having a politics degree, and previously being employed in the public sector as a teacher, a local authority adviser, and a school inspector. He has also been involved with the private sector as a project manager, trouble shooter, and problem solver.

### ***Following the trends – with a difference***

Lepper explains that the idea of setting up a vegan outlet was enforced by the knowledge that veganism is a growing trend that is moving into the mainstream, with even established traditional retailers and restaurants offering vegan options. He adds that McCann’s original concept for Tofurei was somewhere that “You could just go in, and everything was vegan. You didn’t have to ask, you didn’t have to look at labels, you just had the assurance that everything was vegan.”



*Steve Lepper and Jenny McCann co-founders of Tofurei: image credit Isabel Johnson, City of Stories*

Lepper also felt that the café would benefit from selling vegan ‘comfort food’ including drinks, cakes and snacks. He looked into making traditional foods such as sausage rolls with tofu, and then came up with the idea of making tofu on site. He says he knew of small retailers sourcing their tofu from wholesalers but none making their own; “There are

microbreweries, there are coffee roasters ... surely someone must be running a micro soya dairy ... and we looked, and we looked, and we looked, and couldn't find anything". Lepper and McCann felt it would be good to have some control over their raw materials to ensure quality and control costs, and that a micro soya dairy would provide a special appeal to their concept.

A key to success for food businesses in a crowded market can be differentiation. Although there may be a maximum price that most people will be prepared to pay for familiar meals or products, they may be happy to pay a bit extra for something novel or something they can't get elsewhere. Broad Table, for example, features adventurous foods from a range of geographies and different cultural traditions. When asked how she researches such varied menus, Duberly replies, "When I am running out of ideas, I have quite a big globe at home. I just spin it around and stop it and think – have I had the food from that country? ... And then I go on the internet. And the internet is a wonderful thing. There are so many people around the world who are enthusiastic about their home cuisine."



*Preparing an international dish - courtesy Broad Table - credit Alexandra Bone Photography*

When I enquire how she sources all the ingredients needed to create such varied dishes, Duberly says, "Norwich is fantastic! I was amazed. I think the first time I ever decided to do a Supper Club it was Ethiopian food ... and then I thought where do you get Ethiopian food?" But, it turns out you can buy almost everything for every cuisine you can think of from somewhere or other in Norwich. She says one of the only exceptions is South American, "That is one of the only cuisines where I have to plan well ahead." She goes on to point out "There are not really that many unusual ingredients: The world is not quite as diverse as you think. For example, something like tamarind: It is very easy to buy because it features very heavily in Indian cooking. It's also one of the major spices in all African cooking, in quite a lot of the Caribbean, in South America it's used a lot, in South East Asia it's used a lot."

### ***A rewarding path – but beware: dedication needed!***

It appears that in the mind of the UK population, starting a local business can be a good idea: According to the 2016 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) survey, 42% of the UK working age population surveyed see good opportunities in the next six months to start a business in the area where they live, while 48% believe they have the required knowledge and skills to start a business. Compare this for example to France, where the equivalent figures are 29 and 36% respectively. Entrepreneurs in general can be categorised based on whether they want or need to start up a business. According to the GEM survey, approximately four times more working age early-stage entrepreneurs or owner-managers of businesses in the UK can be classified as motivated by opportunities as compared to by necessity (no better alternatives to work).

When asked if her new role running Broad Table is more or less stressful than her previous managerial job, Duberly says “I’m not sure how to compare it to the kind of job I had before. It’s just like apples and onions ... just different really ... a different kind of stress. This job is much more physical and there is more of the adrenalin type stress.” She tells the story of how the first time she ran a Curry Club event she expected a maximum of 120 people over the whole evening, but in the end 100 people turned up in the first hour. She says, “I have never had that kind of stress in any other kind of job before!”.

Most agree that starting up a new business of any sort takes dedication, perseverance, and a sort of stubbornness that helps entrepreneurs to keep going and follow their vision even when difficult challenges come along. They need to be able to push themselves and persuade others to help them when it is necessary. Although they are normally extremely dedicated to their projects, individuals who start up new business often have a ‘living in the here and now’ type attitude, accepting that their current ventures may not work out, but it won’t mean that they can’t pick up again and start something new. This is a sort of confidence in the self and our natural ability to survive and prosper.

***Passionate flexibility - with a pinch of business sense!***

Lepper feels the main driver behind start-ups is “having a passion for something”, so from his perspective this could be food, but doesn’t need to be. But he sees that food is something that “it is easy to get passionate about”. He thinks it’s important for food entrepreneurs to start out making something they like, but also to be aware of how customers react to this and be flexible and “not just be self-indulgent; you are not just cooking for yourself anymore”.



*Tofurei deli counter*

Those running small food and drink businesses may face unexpected problems and issues. Local competition for smaller food and drink businesses can be fierce, and there is a ceiling of how much customers are willing to pay for standard items such as a sandwich or a pizza. This defines a price ceiling regardless of the cost of goods sold. Duberly thinks the trend to start-up small food businesses does benefit the wider community, giving choice and variety. But she says, “As someone running a small food business in a very hand to mouth way, who really needs to make money and make enough money to live, I have a distinct impression that there are a lot of people who do it as a hobby rather than a business. Whilst I would never blame them for that, that sits a little difficultly sometimes because it feels a little bit like unfair competition.” She has found that the one way to succeed alongside local businesses that appear to be running at a loss is to sell “very unusual food”.

Although Lepper says he is “very very happy” with how the business is going, life running a small business is not always straight forwards and there are frustrations. These include keeping equipment the business is dependent on working and dealing with administration

and issues related to owning and running a business in the centre of a busy city. But being central has many benefits in terms of passing trade and increasing awareness in a range of demographics. He says, "I've never worked anywhere before where people come and shake my hand just for being here. And that is so nice." He also says that it is a nice experience when other successful local entrepreneurs and business owners (not necessarily from the food and drink sector) are complimentary about what has been achieved.

### ***Going local ...***



*Tofurei cakes - courtesy Tofurei*

According to Lepper, some of the driving force behind the trend for pop-ups and localisation in food is "the general disillusionment in mass production of food, the sort of ubiquity of the high street, the identikit places ... that kind of identikit branding ... People are now craving something different. Something that doesn't look like it has come out of a packet". He also thinks there are push factors that may be side-effects of austerity, which has taken away other options for a lot of young people. He says, "And especially you see that here because Norwich is a great place to live. People come through and they want to find a way to stay." So, becoming a food

entrepreneur may mean young people can have more destiny over where they end up, but Lepper agrees when I make the point that there are potentially unhelpful impacts on local market structures, and uncertainties about job security and living standards in the future for these individuals.

Many UK consumers feel that supporting smaller, local businesses is a good thing for them and a benefit to the local community and the country. In an online survey conducted by market research, insights and data firm Nielsen, 55% of UK respondents said they preferred buying local brands because they support local businesses (which can help the economy), while 41% said local brands are usually more trustworthy, and 36% said local brands are more attuned to their personal needs and tastes. Food and drink categories tended to be among those that showed consumers' strongest preferences for local brands.

Provenance is a powerful food and drink trend that appears to resonate with most UK consumers. Small producers and foodservice establishments can be optimally placed for delivering fresh and locally sourced offerings. These smaller establishments can change the shape of the market and add to the pull factors at the beginnings of new local supply chains. As an example, Lepper says how one of his long-term ambitions for Tofurei was to make tofu from UK grown soya: "It's appealed to me that we could have somewhere where we've got the complete food chain ... where we could get the beans that go right through to the finished product ..." Lepper established communication on the topic with farmers and seed suppliers

saying that they were “quite enthusiastic about it, having been initially cautious”. And as of the beginning of 2018, Tofurei has partnered up with Soya UK, meaning the business will be using Norfolk grown beans.

### ***Enriching lives by taking risks***

So, is it all worth it? Lepper says it is hard to compare what he is doing now with his previous roles because there are so many variables that have changed. He feels that running the business leads to unexpected experiences saying, “It is just so completely crazy” and “It helps keep you young, you can’t say you are going to get stuck in a rut ...”

In my opinion, those individuals who start up small foodservice establishments are courageous. Many people who have not taken that sort of a risk don’t understand the sacrifice entrepreneurs take and their level of dedication. Their entrepreneurship has enriched my local community and my friends’ and family’s everyday lives, offering many affordable new products and food and drink experiences to enjoy.

And maybe the entrepreneurs benefit too ...When asked if she is happy with how Broad Table is going Duberly replies “Yes – I think I am. As business people go, I guess I am at the less ambitious end. So, the aim always was to do something that will earn me a living – like everyone else I need to be able to pay my rent and I need to be able to clothe and feed myself. But once I’ve done that, I’m not terribly worried about earning oodles of money. I had a well-paid job – I did that, and I wasn’t very happy. And now I’ve got a terribly badly paid job, but I’m much happier than I was.”

*Carol Raithatha, Carol Raithatha Limited, [www.carolraithatha.co.uk](http://www.carolraithatha.co.uk)*

*Carol Raithatha is a food and drink research consultant based in Norwich. She enjoys investigating how context, business, society and culture impact on how we perceive; and what we eat and drink.*