

HOW TO LAUNCH A FOOD BUSINESS!

**Becoming your own boss isn't easy.
But it just might be
the best decision of your life**



HERE ARE THIRTEEN WAYS TO

TURN YOUR

LOVE

OF FOOD

INTO A

CAREER,

FROM WOMEN WHO'VE MADE IT WORK



Dress It Up
Sophia Maroon
launched a line of salad
dressings—and a
full-time job. Turn the
page to read more.

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Dress It Up is available nationally.

1

Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Help

SOPHIA MAROON,
Dress It Up

► My mother, Suzy, had long been celebrated for her homemade salad dressing, a delicious garlicky vinaigrette. She created the recipe after my dad was diagnosed as prediabetic and had to change his diet. At holidays we'd inevitably say, "You should sell this!" It became kind of a family jest until my brother dared me to actually try.

I was a newly single mother with three children under the age of 10 and my job as a documentary filmmaker wasn't going to cut it. I needed flexible, close-to-home work. So I began mixing dressing in my Maryland kitchen and sharing it with friends. I named my company Dress It Up because that's exactly what my mother's dressing could do: effortlessly elevate any meal. I invested \$7,000 in July of that first year. Soon orders came in from complete strangers. By November it was stocked in my local Whole Foods. But I couldn't afford to make more.

Seven family members and friends each pitched in \$5,000, enough for a second, bigger order and part of the third. I wouldn't be where I am now—founder of an award-winning company with six dressing flavors available nationally—without them.

Last year the community helped us out again. We'd planned to launch individual dressing packets designed for salad bars. Then came the pandemic and a warehouse full of product with nowhere to go. For several years we'd partnered with D.C. public schools to sell them our dressing at reduced cost. The school system, which has continued to provide subsidized meals to students throughout the pandemic, happily put the packets to use. At every step along the way, community relationships have made our work not just meaningful but possible.

ROSE-COLORED GLASSES FOREVER
Believe that what you are trying to do can be done. Every entrepreneur needs that level of conviction.

FIGURE OUT WHAT MOTIVATES YOU
After my unexpected divorce, I had a "say no to nothing" mantra, and that helped my business succeed.

NAIL YOUR NONNEGOTIABLES
Here are mine: ingredients (no canola oil and no xanthan gum), family first (it's only salad dressing!), and financial responsibility (I'd secure a loan against my house, but I won't touch my IRA).

ASK FOR MONEY... AND MORE
Last year Dress It Up was fortunate enough to be a Stacy's Rise Project winner (see opposite page). In addition to a \$10K award, we got access to a cohort of fellow hyper-optimist female founders and top-level brand advisers who can provide tactical advice about sustainable growth.
—AS TOLD TO JEN MARSHALL



2 FIND THE APP THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Minimart is an app that allows very small business owners like me to manage a menu, fulfill orders, and accept payment. It doesn't saddle you with fees—and that's a huge deal. Right now, anything that cuts into a restaurant's profits needs to be stripped away, especially when you're trying to start something new.

● BRONWEN WYATT, Bayou Saint Cake bakery

Want to support these founders? Check out Sourcebook (p. 86) for buy info.

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Always Know What's in the Bank



STACY MADISON,
Stacy's Pita Chips
& BeBold Bars

► Stacy Madison thought she was starting a sandwich cart, but the free chips she passed out (cut and baked from the previous day's pita bread) turned out to be the bigger draw. Soon the cart was in the garage and Stacy's Pita Chips were on shelves nationwide. Since then, Madison has started two more ventures, including a line of energy bars, and she's the spokesperson for Stacy's Rise Project, an organization supporting other women founders—like Sophia Maroon (see opposite page)! —AMANDA SHAPIRO

How did you finance Stacy's Pita Chips at the beginning? We self-funded all the way through. We didn't want to give up equity to investors, and luckily we never had to. We relied on credit cards and bank loans instead. You're chasing money at first, but once you start generating, the banks come to you.

What's one thing you did differently from your competitors that paid off? We put a higher value on our product. We knew we couldn't compete with a \$3 family size bag of tortilla chips, so we got our chips in the deli section instead.

You've started three companies now. What's gotten easier and what's still hard? I know how to assemble a team I trust, and I'm a professional at crisis intervention. The harder part is managing expectations. I feel like I have to create another successful company overnight.

What's one thing that new founders don't think about enough? Cash. Everything takes twice as long and is twice as expensive. Know what you have in the bank. Make sure it's enough.



4 Build a Village, Not Just a Business



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KEITRA BATES,
Marddy's

► When a sudden rent hike forced her to close her pizza shop in Atlanta's historically Black and rapidly gentrifying Westview neighborhood, Keitra Bates opened Marddy's, an affordable kitchen space and incubator for Black-owned food businesses. "My mission is to make sure that, no matter how much this neighborhood changes, we never have to seek permission to exist," says Bates. Here are five businesses that call Marddy's home.

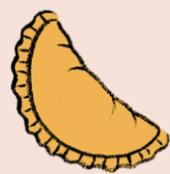
—HILARY CADIGAN



YES CHEF VEGAN CHEESE SAUCE
Desmond Miller created this dairy-free, nut-free, soy-free sauce so that even folks with allergies could dig into a bowl of mac 'n' cheese or a plate of nachos.



JUICED UP INC
Fueled by her father's poor health and a son born with autism, Georgette Reynolds began selling fresh-pressed juices to provide health and healing to others in her community.



V'S TASTE OF 700 ISLANDS
Vera Browne has been whipping up these coconut and pineapple tarts from her grandmother's Bahamian recipe for decades—now she sells them frozen.



RAVARRE+CO
Partners Cris Ravarre and Megan Leigh offer catering, meal planning, small-batch spice blends, and dehydrated fruit garnishes for making fancy cocktails at home.



DEAS NUTS
Inspired by his grandparents' backyard pecan tree, Louis Deas (pronounced "Deez"—get it?) coats his cashews, almonds, and pecans in flavors like cinnamon sugar and red velvet.



5 TELL A GOOD STORY

It wasn't until I dove deep into *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* by Toni Tipton-Martin that I realized I wanted to tell the history of Black food through ice cream. I've made over 320 flavors. Each one has a voice and intention behind it. Some are historic flavors that spark nostalgia—like 'Nana Pudding, Strawberry Pretzel Salad, or Peanuts and Coke. And, oh, my gosh, Sun Drop! Sun Drop is like 7UP here in the South—it's a big deal. People went crazy for it.

• LOKELANI ALABANZA, SATURATED ICE CREAM



6 Put Your Profits Right Back In

•
ANGEL GREGORIO,
The Spice Suite

► Initially, I was ordering spices online for my spice shop. But they weren't flavorful enough for me, so I began custom-blending them, which entailed traveling to over 26 countries to personally source ingredients. The flavors were better, and the customers took notice. I learned that I needed to reinvest my profits into the business so I could have the brand match my vision. Another example: I hired a boutique branding agency called Household,

which redesigned our labels and helped me tell my brand's story. Yes, it cost money, but it was a game changer in terms of visibility and impact. And this past year, at the height of the pandemic when everyone was cooking more than ever, I hired a co-packer to mix, bottle, and label my spices. It was expensive too but so worth it because we were able to increase our capacity and inventory, which of course, all translates into sales.

—AS TOLD TO DAWN DAVIS

7 Do One Thing and Do It the Best

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NALLELY,*
Facebook Marketplace
flan vendor

► Nallely makes a hell of a flan in her kitchen in southeast Michigan, a region that is, truth be told, not exactly flan country. She sells her flan on Facebook Marketplace, a place where anyone can sell anything (within the confines of the law). The photo: two flans on her glass dinner table sporting irresistible caramelized tops. The caption: "Flan para mañana: Mañana tendré flan."

She racked up her busiest day ever last Thanksgiving: 15 flans. A two-can limit on purchases of sweetened condensed milk (COVID-19 rations) meant she had to go to three different grocery stores to collect ingredients. The things we do for flan!

The things I'll do for flan: Scour Facebook and drive an hour to retrieve it. Which is how I met Nallely. She doesn't sell flan full-time, but the extra cash helps pay the bills. "People are struggling financially in this pandemic, and we're seeing them turn to Facebook Marketplace in lots of different ways" says Deb Liu, the founder of Marketplace. Home bakers are one of many side hustles on the app.

Nallely's flan is thick and luscious, outrageously creamy, eggy, and rich but with proper wobble and plenty of caramel sauce for each slice to swim in. She's mastered her craft—and has never worked in a bakery, by the way.

"A lot of people don't know what flan is," she told me. We had a moment of silence for everyone still unaware of flan, the greatest dessert of all time.

Nallely isn't sure how long she's going to sell flan on Facebook. She loves it, has fun making it, and right now, that's enough. —ALEX BEGGS



*Nallely requested that we use her first name only; laws for selling homemade food vary by state.



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Make a Mistake...Really!

I HAD KIMCHI DREAMS

I love making kimchi, but mail-order kimchi wouldn't work—it could explode when you ship it, it gets weird and warm. So then I thought, How can I shift this into something that's shelf-stable, that I can ship, because that seems to be what the market needs and wants right now. So I started to sell noodle kits. I want to make it easy for people to cook dishes they love at home. Now I'm selling six different sauces and a spice mix—you can add on noodles—that sell out within four hours of listing them on Instagram Stories. It's exciting, but it's also a sh*tshow. If you have an idea that you really strongly believe in, just keep pushing even when it seems like nothing's going to work out. At the same time, be open and flexible enough to change.

● JAMIE LIU,
@OnlyPansLA

I DID DOOR-TO-DOOR SALES

The worst and best mistake I ever made was signing up to sell NBA tickets door-to-door. But I learned persistence, how to find a yes in a stream of nos, and how to find connections in the sales process. Now when I go into peoples' houses to educate an entire family on vegan eating, including, say, an 85-year-old Black woman who has been cooking the same family recipes since 1944, it's about respectful communication and finding that point of connection. If I ask her for a favorite recipe and she says fried chicken, I say, "Let me teach you about mushrooms and how they take on a meaty flavor, and how you can batter them in aquafaba and spices." It's a way of saying: "I see you, I hear you, I'm with you, I've got you." We have to set up a relationship that feels attainable, relevant, and guided.

● ROBIN BELTRAN,
The Black Vegan Company

I FORGOT THAT ZOOM ≠ IRL

One of the biggest mistakes I made when I launched Seco Cocktails, my online cocktail-making classes, was that I assumed that all my restaurant skills would automatically apply to this virtual world. Building experiences has always been my number one thing, making sure that when you leave my restaurant, you're going to be like, "That was the dopest experience I've ever had." And that's what I wanted in these classes. But I needed to get a whole new skill set: reading a Zoom room, setting up my station, positioning the camera and lights, making sure to look into the camera. I needed to come up with a whole new set of rules that genuinely could not be googled. Like telling people to keep their mics on so I could hear when they laughed at my jokes.

● CARLIE STEINER,
Seco Cocktails

9 FRIENDS ARE YOUR BEST P.R.

We've never had a marketing budget, and we didn't have P.R. until recently. The fact that other women in the industry were willing to buy our spices and promote them was truly a godsend. We were a tiny company hyped by women all over the U.S. Now I'm trying to give other founders the same leg up.

● SANA JAVERI KADRI, DIASPORA CO.



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Don't Quit Your Day Job (Maybe Ever)

● TIFFANY HALL,
Empower Cocktails

► I wanted to create a product for women that's as easy to drink as wine. Just chill and serve. And I wanted to do it without quitting my day job—because there are financial realities to living in New York City! And even with a great product, it can take time to see a financial return. Empower Cocktails' first drink was a Cosmopolitan Martini made from sweet-potato vodka, white cranberry, triple sec, and lime. As for the name, I always thought it would feel fantastic to walk into a bar and order "a glass of empower." Six years later I still feel the magic when I see the bottle on shelves.

PICK A PATH THAT WORKS FOR YOU

They say successful entrepreneurs have to risk it all. But you don't have to. I still work full-time as a corporate lawyer. My entrepreneur journey has supported my corporate journey and vice versa. I make better decisions in both places.

YOUR NETWORK IS GOLD

Your own personal and professional network is your most valuable resource. These are people who will be

helpful to you at no cost. Find out what and who they know.

GET SPECIFIC ABOUT COSTS

How much you need to get started varies wildly. Get specific numbers for your product.

SHARE YOUR SUCCESS

Positive engagement matters, and it's exciting for people to meet a female founder. Women sip my cosmos and ask who I work for. Their eyes light up when I say "myself."

—AS TOLD TO
JEN MARSHALL



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Look to Your Foremothers

I don't need to tell you that Harriet Tubman was a Boss Lady on the Underground Railroad, rescuing 60 to 70 people before the Civil War began. But did you know that after the Underground and before she worked as a spy for the Union Army, she was employed to nurse soldiers back to health? There was only one problem: Uncle Sam didn't compensate her for her work. So, like any enterprising entrepreneur with a flair for baking, she sold homemade pies and gingerbread. Historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar, author of *She Came to Slay: The Life and Times of Harriet Tubman*, says Tubman worked through the night, baking "upward of 50 pies an evening and produced large quantities of gingerbread" to support herself. The funds supported her until she successfully sued to get her wages. Queens must be compensated for their work. —DAWN DAVIS

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SOLVE A PROBLEM FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS

AZORA ZOE PAKNAD, GOLDUNE

Seeing her friends and family struggle to navigate the rapidly growing, earth-toned universe of sustainable shopping (seriously, is everything made from bamboo?), Azora Zoe Paknad launched Goldune, an online store aimed at making the low-waste lifestyle more accessible. "I wanted a solution that could work for people who don't have a ton of time to explore, say, reusable toilet paper," she says. Here's what's at the top of our kitchen wish list. —ALIZA ABARBANEL



RECYCLED RUBBER TERRAZZO TRIVET
\$78

Protect your table with a heat-resistant rubber trivet from Slash Objects, made from recycled tires.



CREAMY ORGANIC OAT MILK
\$23 for four

Unlike most brands, Willa's uses the entire oat in its milk to eliminate food waste and maximize nutrition. Plus it steams and foams like a dream.



TIE-DYE LINEN FOUR-PIECE SET
\$72

Atelier Saucier reincarnates deadstock (unsold and unused fabric from other vendors) into psychedelic napkins, minimizing energy and water consumption.



PLASTIC-FREE POP-UP SPONGE
\$18

Most sponges contain plastic, but this ultra-absorbent alternative from Sqwishful is made from a biodegradable by-product of wood pulp (but still wrings out easily).



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Get the Law on Your Side

DANIELLE MICKELSON,
home cook and business owner

by MELEYNA NOMURA

► Danielle Mickelson sold around 2,000 quarts of pickles, 650 loaves of bread, and 225 pies last year—all made in her kitchen in Rolla, North Dakota, a small town about 10 miles from the Canadian border. Though she runs a farmers market with her husband, Mickelson is able to earn additional income from her cooking thanks to cottage food laws, laws that allow people to sell food products cooked in their own homes rather than in commercial kitchens. Every state has its own cottage laws, and while the exact legislation varies, it typically covers the sale of nonperishable baked goods and snacks only—things like nut mixes, granolas, and pickles. But in 2017 the North Dakota

legislature passed the Food Freedom Act (HB-1433). Modeled after a Wyoming bill passed two years earlier, this new law extended the list of approved foods to include cooked dishes made with vegetables and poultry (no red meat), perishable baked goods, and more.

For Mickelson the new law was life-changing. "My family and friends weren't the only ones who liked my products; I had regular customers and increasing demand," she recalls. "And that's when the exponential growth started." She began making pies and soups with her homegrown vegetables to sell alongside her freshly baked bread. The success of these new products made Mickelson look into

buying a commercial kitchen and encouraged her to join the local job development authority to help others in the community take advantage of the same opportunities.

HB-1433 was a huge win for anyone with cooking skills but with limited or no access to traditional avenues of entrepreneurship—especially women and immigrants, along with Black, Indigenous, and rural communities. These groups have always been responsible for feeding their communities, and the new law enabled them to do so in a legal and profitable way. It also allowed them to expand their offerings and share their food with a broader swath of customers. Since the law was enacted, the North Dakota Department of Health has been pushing back, asking the state legislature to again legalize nonperishable foods only. Its requests were denied, but in late 2019 the health department circumvented the system and implemented new rules that prohibited home producers from selling perishable meals. "A lot of health departments, not just in North Dakota, think the solution to everything is to regulate," speculates Erica Smith, a senior attorney with the Institute for Justice, a nonprofit civil liberties law firm, who represented Mickelson in a recent lawsuit. "When you have the hammer, everything looks like a nail."

The department's rules hugely impacted Mickelson's business as well as her work in local job development. Throughout the state, some producers lost their entire businesses due to the restrictions; COVID-19 put many families in precarious economic positions. But Mickelson fought back. She, along with four other plaintiffs, worked with Smith to file a lawsuit against the North Dakota Department of Health. In December they won and home producers were able to resume sales of all food covered by HB-1433.

Smith believes that laws like these are the future. "Cottage food laws have only been around for about 30 years," she says. "But people have been selling homemade food for hundreds of years. And since COVID-19, home-based businesses are taking off. It's the shared-economy model: People want to buy locally and they want to buy from their neighbors." Winning the case provided not only relief for Mickelson and her budding business but an opportunity to empower her community in a new way. "We all have our niche, but we all grow together," Mickelson says. "[This law] gives us the chance to expand."

To check your state's cottage laws, go to forrager.com/laws.