

# “Don’t give up your day job just yet”

Many of us have probably fantasised about setting up our own food business. Perhaps using a traditional family recipe or resurrecting a family business that was closed decades ago. Surely running a food production business is a lot more fun and lucrative than most jobs and how difficult can it be? The boys who set up Innocent seemed to have fun and became millionaires in the process whilst if a teenager can launch SuperJam it must be easy.

The last 20 years has seen a food revolution in the UK. Artisan food businesses are “on trend” and it is fantastic that there are so many small food businesses offering unique and high quality products. Previous generations raised on Vesta Curries and Arctic Rolls now have an unprecedented choice of food. In many food categories there is actually too much choice with supermarkets reducing the number of products sold because of the confusions caused to customers.

During this revolution, food heroes have been created. Individuals and brands have prospered. Green and Black’s, GU desserts, Levi Roots, Pieminister, Tiny Rebel and Brew Dog have taken on iconic status with numerous individuals and companies wanting to emulate their success. “I want to do an Innocent” is an all too frequent brief for brand and marketing agencies.

As the barriers to entry are low, table-top food businesses are relatively easy to set up and there will always be a demand for food (unless Soylent really catches on). Inevitably it is the success stories (and often the resulting business’ sale) that attracts the interest of the media and potential food entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, the majority of food businesses do not achieve the successes of Innocent et al.

Sorry. This is probably not what budding food entrepreneurs want to read but in our experience the food industry is a very tough sector in which to create a successful and sustainable business. Many of our clients

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The ZERO2FIVE Food Industry Centre at Cardiff Metropolitan University, provides food businesses with technical, operational and commercial support to enable them to compete more effectively.

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will testify to this. Industry margins are wafer thin, trade customers are demanding and there is always a new competitor about to launch. With hard work, a great idea, some good advice and a bit of luck success is possible but the odds are stacked against a start-up food business.

There is something unique and special about the food industry. Unlike nearly every other product we buy, we actually put food in our mouth. This presents a number of challenges. Firstly, it has to look and taste good enough to eat. Secondly, humans have a long and complex relationship with food resulting in the brain often being hard-wired to like or dislike certain foods (why didn’t purple Heinz Ketchup succeed?), so product development and branding is complex. Thirdly, food has the capacity to make us ill or even worse. Therefore, food safety and manufacturing processes have to be controlled which introduces a level of complexity and responsibility that cannot be avoided.

If you are planning to set up or grow a food business, the Food Industry Centre is keen to support you with commercial, technical, marketing and NPD advice. But please be realistic. It is a competitive industry and requires commitment. Maybe have a chat with us before you decide to give up your day job so that we can help improve the odds of your business succeeding.

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Martin is Head of Business and Marketing and his role is to work with ambitious food companies to help them grow.

Martin’s career in the food industry started as a University lecturer in food marketing at Aberystwyth University. Since then he has held senior marketing and commercial roles with McVitie’s, Tesco, Somerfield, Bon Bon Buddies and Pieminister.

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