

MEMBER PRODUCTS ON THE COOP'S SHELVES

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By *Oluwakemi Aladesuyi*

It may have crossed your mind once or twice: opening a cafe, elevating your bread baking to the next level or selling some pickles in a jar. It is hard to be a lover of food and not want to share it in some shape or form. And in this economy, who isn't thinking about launching a small side hustle?

The *Gazette* was curious about the members who took the ethos of the Coop to heart and brought their goods to our shelves. Here's what we learned from five current (and former) members who have braved the entrepreneurial waters, distilled into ac-

tionable takeaways for anyone who might be curious:

Community as a Model (Chez Chrystelle)



@chezchrystelle



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🔔 Ringing the Dinner Bell 🔔

We are beyond excited to bring the Stoop to Krupa one week from tonight... same great food, same great vibes! 🥰👩

The first thing to know is that “Chez” of Chez Chrystelle is literal. During the pandemic, Chrystelle Seidman hosted BBQ “stoop dinners” on Tuesdays as a way to bring her love of grilling to friends and neighbors. In a period of such profound isolation, stoop dinners became about something more than food, they were as much about community. Seeing people come together around the meals she prepared (after vaccines were rolled out) ignited something in Seidman.

Inspired by the desire to create something filling, balanced, healthy and delicious for her friends and family, she landed on salads—a reprieve from the \$30 salad desk salads of the office workers everywhere. Word of mouth spread and Seidman began making dishes for friends of friends and salads for parties. One such friend, also a Coop member, thought her ready-to-go salads would be great at the Coop. And they have been—she now sells over 700 salads a week.

Advice: Having a partner like her husband has been essential. Tap your loved ones to make things work.

Labor of Love (Mentis Estate Olive Oil)



Anastassios Mentis is a photographer, but he knew that the olive oil being sold at many gourmet shops was incomparable to the olive oil from his family groves in Greece. At a time when consumer taste for olive oil has been spoiled by artificially low prices and cheaper imitations, it can be tough to compete. Anastassios recalls labeling a thousand bottles in his first run by hand, and going to 100 stores one by one—only to have 90% reject him. But the remaining 10% was enough for his labor of love, fueled by memories of the sounds from his grandfather’s factory, summers har-

vesting olives in Greece and the warmth in his heart of keeping his family legacy alive.

Advice: Even if nine doors close, the one that opens can be enough.

The Coop Is a Special Place (Hany's Fire Cider)



Hany's Fire Cider

It's possible to grow by making your core values central to your strategy



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Hany ElDiwany of Hany's Harvest made his first batch of Fire Cider in a jar, then a

pail, then a rented space at a community-minded commercial kitchen. When enough friends wrote suggestions in the book at the front of the Coop (a relic from the before times), the supplements buyer reached out and brought Fire Cider to the shelves. Coop members love their dried mango, fancy olives and ramps, but they're also open to education about new products—something that gave ElDiwany a real morale boost since not many people knew about Fire Cider in 2017. For a long time, the Coop was the number-one customer for his Fire Cider.

In the consumer packaging space, there can be pressure to grow fast. ElDiwany has seen it happen to businesses that take venture capital money and then lose their values. One compromise would have been to ship in plastic versus glass—at the cost of introducing microplastics. Adhering to values may not generate the most dollars, but it makes the most sense in the long term.

Advice: It's possible to grow by making your core values central to your strategy.

Old Worlds Can Meet New Markets (Masala Mama)



Masala Mama by @foodcoop



foodcoop



foodcoop Thanks for the tasting today! @masalamamafoods ✨ Masala Mama sampling at @foodcoop 3-6 pm today! #exciteyourmouth with Vindaloo Nachos—they are sensational! Try our amazing Tikka Masala and Coconut Curry as well. #foodcoop #cooplife #parkslopebrooklyn #masalamama 297w



theplantiful 🍌🍌🍌 296w Reply



nicoleatsoup It's super yummy! Can't wait to make it at home. (Also love the label!) 297w 1 like Reply



31 likes

October 3, 2019



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Post



masalamamafoods

Nidhi Jan describes the journey to Masala Mama as a typical immigrant story. Miss-

ing the taste of home and the depth brought by complex, unique spices to Indian dishes, she saw an opportunity.

She started with a spice-blends business but found that what the market needed was convenience. Nidhi pivoted and launched a line of simmer sauces and recently added ready-to-eat beans like rajma, dahl and channa. While she built the supply chain to source ingredients in India during the spice business, these days she finds everything she needs from suppliers in Canada—from jars to specific spices. She thought there might be synergy with bean suppliers in Mexico, given the overlap in legumes as staples of both Indian and Mexican cuisines, but the red beans and yellow lentils were hard to source for her needs, so she switched production of the new ready-to-eat line to India.

Advice: Flexibility is the name of the entrepreneurial game.

Don't Let Distribution Be the Death of You (Granola Labs)

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ALEX CROSIER



@granolalab 🌈🌱 Since 2010.

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granolalab Smiling ear-to-ear while sampling our granola at the Park Slope Food Coop! So excited to share Granola Lab with my fellow members. 🍌🌱 Activation Energy and Get Gingersnapping available in the bulk bins @foodcoop !!! #cooplove #psfc #granola #shopinbulk

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click the link in bio

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Alex Crosier had a desire to open a coffee shop called Citizen (and yes, the slight polit-

ical/socialist undertone was intentional). Wanting a cafe that would sell granola, she created Granola Labs. The “lab” part was inspired by the periodic table and the experiments Crosier did to create flavors beyond the base of cranberry cashew.

In 2010 and 2011, artisanal food businesses in Brooklyn were booming—there were lots of people pickling, for example—but that meant that Crosier easily found community in fairs and markets as well as the confidence to get a small production space in Sunset Park. Initially, she hit a stone wall when she approached the Coop about stocking Granola Labs. The buyer at the time was adamant that the Coop didn’t need more granola. But she found her champion in the next buyer, who stocked Granola Labs in the bulk bins.

And it was time to make granola. The new Whole Foods had just opened in Gowanus and was eager to stock local items. Granola Labs did well, enough to be distributed regionally, and to become 50% of her sales, ultimately an Achilles’ heel. While the volume was there, the margins from working with a major third-party distributor were slim, which led Corsier to wind the business down.

Advice: Think about having a better mix of sales channels. Crosier would consider getting back into the granola game if she grew an online business as well.

Lessons Learned

These accounts of members who sell their goods on our shelves should disabuse readers of the notion that a food business is a “side hustle” — anything successful is going to have to tap into a reservoir of hope, heart and community. Thankfully, the Coop has the community part covered. At some point, these entrepreneurs found that the Coop community was helpful in small ways (encouragement and enthusiasm) and big ones (being that stepping stone for a small business).

Oluwakemi Aladesuyi is a journalist and a creative strategist. Sometimes she daydreams about building a puff-puff empire.