

‘I used to give away my salad dressing to friends... now I sell it’

A favourite family recipe was transformed into a thriving business for Gillian Foreshew, a mother of five from west London

WORDS SALLY MORRIS

PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON WHEELER



Selling at her local farmers' market in Chiswick, west London, enabled Gillian to meet fellow food-producers



Gillian Foresheaw, who runs The French Dressing Company from her west London home, has five children – twins Kate and Anna, 23, Jessica, 15, Simon, 8 and Isabel, 4.

WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

‘Quite literally over the kitchen table. My husband, Jonathan, and I always used to make a favourite salad dressing which our children loved and guests used to ask to take away with them. We just mixed oil, vinegar, mustard, sugar and lemon together in a jam jar, but we were using – and giving away – so much I thought it must be possible to sell some. I’d worked in secretarial jobs before having the children and had no experience in the food business, but felt I had nothing to lose.’

HOW DID YOU START?

‘By making mistakes! We worked out the ingredient quantities carefully however I ordered a whole pallet of 500ml bottles, not realising you could get smaller quantities. My mother, bless her, had 1,300 bottles in her garage for about three years until Isabel was old enough for me to get really started. We called the first dressing No 14, after our house number. It felt like a name we wouldn’t get tired of and also reflected the fact that it was a whole family enterprise.’

WHERE DID YOU START SELLING?

‘Amazingly, I went straight to Harvey Nichols and Fortnum & Mason and pestered their buyers until they saw me. I’m actually quite shy, so this was quite a test of confidence. They were very helpful, loved the dressing, but didn’t like the labels I’d drawn and had printed. Luckily I had a friend – a graphic designer – who came up with the design we still use.

‘At the same time I went to Mortimer & Bennett, a local deli in Chiswick where I live, and they agreed to take some bottles – they’re very encouraging to local producers. I took a stall at the local farmers’ market, too, where I sold a grand total of ten bottles! But it introduced me to other local food producers which was the important thing.’

HOW DID YOU RAISE THE MONEY?

‘I didn’t want a bank loan and a business plan as I was determined from the start that this should support itself. I think I spent about £400 initially on labels, bottles and ingredients and every penny of what I earned went straight back into the business. I increased my turnover threefold in the second year and it’s going from strength to strength – although I wouldn’t say it’s making me rich!’

WHO DID YOU ASK FOR ADVICE?

‘Everyone! The first Speciality and Fine Food Fair exhibition I did at Olympia, in London, was a revelation as I discovered so many people happy to help. Before that, we’d struggled along using the internet to find out how to get a bar code. We also won a Bronze Award at the Great Taste Awards at that first trade show, which did wonders for my confidence. I joined a local food producers’ group, too. And I listened to potential customers. A few found No 14 a bit sweet so we developed No 9 which was slightly sharper and more lemony (we just all liked the number 9!). We make four altogether now with a new one in development.’

DO YOU USE SPECIALISED EQUIPMENT?

‘Not unless you call my ten-year-old Magimix special! I’ve bought myself a new one recently and I have a spare, but I still prefer my old one. The bottles come sterilised from the factory and we wash them in extremely hot water before we start. The seals around the neck need to be heat-sealed and when we started we used a hair-drier. Now we’ve graduated to a heat gun, but it’s still very simple – and labour-intensive. We used to hand-pack every bottle in bubble-wrap then wrap again, but another specialist producer introduced me to a company which makes better boxes and packaging.’

IS IT DIFFICULT TO WORK FROM HOME?

‘Storage is the main problem. We’ve lost the sitting room as it’s usually full of bottles, although my husband has built an outdoor store for the oil and vinegar. I have been inspected by the environmental health people, but I’m a low-risk category because I’m just blending rather than cooking from raw materials like meat or eggs. I did a Food Hygiene Course and the Trading Standards people visit me and have been very helpful. With a family around I often don’t get started until 10pm and I have been known to work all through the night when I’m preparing for a food show.’

WHAT MAKES YOUR DRESSING SO SPECIAL?

‘I think it’s because it tastes handmade at home – which, of course, it is. I use good ingredients, extra-virgin olive oil, freshly squeezed lemon juice, freshly prepared garlic, etc. At first I bought lemons from the local fruit stall, but now a lovely man from Covent Garden, who supplies local



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restaurants, delivers to me. The oil and vinegar come from wholesalers. A lot of my customers at shows say the dressings taste just like freshly made. I buy the bottles as I need them now and we changed over to a smaller, 250ml bottle quite early on as most people prefer this size, although we do sell both quantities.'

WHERE DO YOU SELL NOW?

'I supply about 40 independent delicatessens throughout Scotland and England and still sell at the farmers' market. I now also supply 10 branches of Waitrose as a specialist local supplier. We deliver direct to the store for their local supplier section, but only to branches where no local deli stocks the dressing. Waitrose are very supportive, but I haven't considered large-scale supermarket distribution. It's important to me that I retain the individuality of the dressing and I don't think it would be the same product if it were made in a factory to supply supermarkets on a bigger scale.'

WOULD YOU EVER SELL UP?

'It would have to be an amazing offer to make me give up my baby. It's something the whole family enjoys: Kate and Anna have been fantastically encouraging, Jessica now does the market stall for me, Simon likes to collect the money and Isabel washes the lemons. I still get such an adrenaline rush from it. If I outgrow the kitchen I'll get a small unit, but I still want to be in control of it all myself.'

The French Dressing Company sells three dressings all year: No 14, No 9 and No 21 ('a grown-up number for a more grown-up tasting dressing'), plus a seasonal Christmas dressing, No 25. All available in 250ml (£3.99) and 500ml (£7.50) bottles (prices approximate). Also supplied by mail order: call 020 8747 4089 or visit thefrenchdressingcompany.co.uk



GILLIAN'S SET-UP TIPS

- Have confidence in your product, and you'll have the commitment to see you through.
- Imagine how much hard work setting up your own business could be – and then double it. It's labour intensive and there's more to learn all the time.
- Ask for help. Most people will answer your questions or put you in touch with people who can help. There's probably someone out there who can supply what you want.
- Have faith in your ability to multi-task. Making the product is just the start, you also have to market it, deliver it and make the figures add up!
- Don't be discouraged by rejection. Not everyone may like your product, but some may have valuable suggestions.



No 21 – 'a grown-up number for a more grown-up tasting dressing'

TRY THIS QUICK RECIPE WITH ONE OF GILLIAN'S DRESSINGS

Runner bean & tomato salad

READY IN 20 MINS SERVES 4

EASY

- 450g/1lb runner beans, cut into fine slivers
- 100g/4oz good-quality streaky bacon, cut into strips
- 6 tbsp No 14 French Dressing from The French Dressing Company (see above to order)
- 1 tsp coarse-grain mustard
- 140g/5oz cherry tomatoes, halved

- 1** Blanch the beans in a large pan of boiling water for 3 mins, then drain and cool under cold running water; transfer to a serving bowl.
 - 2** Heat a frying pan, add the bacon and sizzle until crisp; remove and set aside. Stir dressing into the hot pan and warm through, then whisk in the mustard. Pour the dressing over the beans.
 - 3** Toss in the tomatoes, then season well with coarse sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Garnish with the crispy bacon and serve warm.
- PER SERVING 204 calories, protein 6g, carbohydrate 5g, fat 18g, saturated fat 4g, fibre 3g, added sugar none, salt 1.22g



Crisp and fresh