

A MUSHROOMING BUSINESS

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When it comes to starting a business, there are a number of obvious considerations to be made; is my product viable, is there a market and do I have the resources to grow the business? Imagine if you were able to make these crucial decisions with your partner?

That is the situation for a growing number of business owners in Ireland. One of these couples is **Marita and Peter Collier**, founders of Drummond House, a high-end garlic producer.

Marita and Peter Collier founded their business in 2006 after Marita had taken seven years off to raise their two young children. Her husband Peter is a qualified architect and has worked at Dublin Airport for 27 years as a Project Manager, and continues to do so. Peter's family has had Drummond House, a 100-acre farm, for several generations, and it was passed down from his uncle to him. Historically plots of the farm were rented out to farmers to grow produce, but the farm had become dilapidated in recent years. Shortly after getting married and starting a family, Marita and Peter, as one would expect, started thinking about the future and how they would manage and maintain the farm with what seemed to be ever increasing overheads.

Marita says that having children spurs you on to think about the future. "There's no real pressure without children, and

you don't have to think about college fees, piano lessons, school trips etc. Beyond that, we've seen families torn apart because of disagreements over land and we didn't want the farm to cause any turmoil for our family."

Marita, whose background is in sales and marketing, also discussed her concerns of re-entering the workforce after seven years out. "In the time I took out to have the children, technology had transformed dramatically, I was totally intimidated by it – and this bothered me. Sales had always been my gig, and I know that is what I can do. But now I was going back to a workforce in the midst of a technology revolution where I was going to want summers off, two weeks at Easter, mid-term holidays and the flexibility to cope with the odd tummy bug...it didn't seem like a viable option".

It was from here that Marita and Peter sat down and analytically weighed up their options. Marita was very open about the limited possibilities they had. It was at this time, they took a family trip to India where they had their eureka moment.

"I'd always wanted to visit India and here we were at the top of a mountain and we could see something growing – garlic! It was then I thought, if garlic can be grown at the top of a mountain in India, why can't it be grown in Co. Louth?"

Marita and Peter embarked on a journey of discovery, well,

of discovering garlic. They found mentors throughout Europe, invested in infrastructure and planted a few acres of garlic in their home farm. However, not all things went according to plan.

"A bit of garlic will be lovely, I thought, and then the real world kicks in. I made every mistake you could possibly make in year one. But luckily we were in a position to learn from our mistakes and make another go of it in year two, thanks to advice and guidance from our mentors. They proved invaluable to developing a business that seemed foreign to us at the time."

Almost 10 years on, Drummond House garlic is thriving with the top restaurants in the country loyal customers of Marita and Peter. Their skillsets combined to make a very successful high-end enterprise. Yet, where Marita and Peter differ from the classic "power-couple" is the roles they play in their business. Peter, who still works full-time as a project manager, covers the technical and labour intensive side of the business. Marita, is the face of the brand and manages all sales and promotion.

Marita expands, "I was lucky with the industry I was in – sales. I was even luckier to have Peter with his experience in agriculture, a fairly male-dominated industry. What was better, we were both prepared to take a gamble on a venture we knew very little



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about. But we had faith in each other’s abilities to succeed. I’m glad we were so naïve, it’s what has driven our success and discovery”.

When asked about their defined roles in the business, Marita recognises it’s best to stick to what they know, but there’s always room for growth. “We really do complement each other’s skillsets. Everyday, and every season, I’m learning something new about the production of garlic we didn’t know the year before. Agriculture is a business where you have to be open to failure, and we’ve learned to accept this.”

On the growing role her husband plays, Marita notes, “Peter was very intimidated [of venturing into sales and promotion], as he’s a back of house guy. But as the business has grown, he got into the flow, and we’ve both learnt enormous amounts. By doing this we have much greater understanding of each other and ourselves – shared experiences give renewed perspectives. I can stand back and watch him sell our brand to new customers and suppliers. I’m immensely proud of him.”

Listening to Marita makes you wonder, why wouldn’t you want start a business with your partner? The shared challenges breed the shared victories. The inherent understanding of the commitment to your work, and the common goals you strive

towards. Of course, working with your other half brings its fair share of challenges. She agrees, “It’s challenging in the sense you have to care for the relationship, but don’t we all have to do that? I will say I miss curling up on the sofa with the fire and TV off and just chatting.”

She continues, “There can be a lot of tension when things are on top of you – agriculture isn’t the sort of business you can turn your mind off to. You’re constantly at the mercy of mother nature”. And what about at the end of a busy day? “You kind of compete with each other – you had an easier day than I had – but with this brings much more understanding. Most importantly, the kids ground us, and give us another purpose for our evenings or we would end up spending our nights talking about garlic as well!”

Marita shared her thoughts on working in a sector, agriculture and food services, that has been a predominantly male-dominated industry, “At home, we have no issues there. We know we are a partnership, and we work toward the same incentives and goals – to build a future for our family and ourselves. When the business started out, it was me doing all the selling, and I became the face of the company. But without my husband’s help I couldn’t have done it. It’s now starting to become Peter and Marita and there’s no one I’d rather share the success of the business with.”