

Green Saffron - the perfect blend of spice and ambition

In 2004, Arun Kapil left the UK music industry to start a new life in Ireland. He started his business by selling spice sachets at a farmers' market and now has plans for global expansion.

Arun Kapil grew up in Lincolnshire and always had a love for cooking, instilled by his Hindu father and Yorkshire mother. Following a friend's recommendation, he enrolled on a 12-week course at the Ballymaloe Cookery School in Shanagarry, Co. Cork. He arrived in Ireland with little money but within just two years began producing sachets of fresh spice, sourced directly through his cousins in India, to sell at his market stall in Mahon Point Farmer's Market in Cork City.

His company, Green Saffron, founded in 2007 and located in Midleton, Co. Cork now enjoys sales of almost one million euro a year, spread across the retail, ingredient and commodity markets. Here he tells the story behind his brand's success and outlines plans to help shake-up and disrupt the spice market, by selling into a continent, with probably one of the biggest markets for spices and herbs in the world.

Stepping into the spice trade

Working in the kitchen at Ballymaloe, I had a real hankering for spices, and I suppose to some extent, I missed my dad's home cooking, along with the home-food culture of the UK.

I felt that the spices were, and to some extent still are, under a bushel. Not everyone understands the need for spices to be really fresh and vibrant, to really appreciate just how beautifully fragrant and delicious they can be. I suppose that's why I called my Dad with an initial order to get a 15Kg package of spice sent over from my cousins in India.

The brilliant thing about farmers' markets is that it's all about word of mouth, where sisters or brothers begin telling each other that 'there is this new chap in the market selling spice'. Customers soon became familiar with our products such as 'Rogan Josh' and began cooking the recipes I devised for each of our blends. Then when they cooked it at home, they enjoyed it and felt they were getting something - that was that little bit different. So that's how we started Green Saffron, by filling sachets and running around to as many farmers' markets as we could each week. It was all about working hard, listening to and understanding our customer. I was able to validate my products, get feedback and that's the main reason I will never give up on farmers' markets. Our customers became loyal consumers who kept coming back to me because they really enjoyed our product.

Funding

Selling to supermarkets meant learning about packaging, branding and marketing of food products. For us, it also meant taking full control of the whole supply chain piece. For people to buy our spices and to know what to do with them, we needed to make sure that they receive value-added at every point in the chain. This took a phenomenal amount of effort on behalf of the whole team including, Pdraig Brophy our operations manager and Olive my wife.

By 2011 we were supplying 140 shops including Tesco, Supervalu, Superquinn and Independents and three farmers' markets every week. I never had a business plan until 2012 which was a seminal point in the life of Green Saffron and helped us raise €500,000 in funding. By 2013 we had expanded across 225 stores in Tesco, Supervalu, Dunnes Stores, Avoca including the EU and the UK and in 2014 we followed this with a second round of funding.

From responsible farm to discernible fork

Provenance and freshness have been the key to our success. The spices we purchase are always single origin, new season, containing the highest volatile oil content for maximum taste and flavour. We set out to achieve this by working with local communities in India.

Even though we are a small company, we have spent the last four and a half years devoting huge resources to prove our point of difference, which is where we buy our spices directly from family farms in India. So in India, we work culturally on the ground and directly with the farmers and the heads of villages, the 'sarpanches'.

We now have a retail brand and a commodities business, and we are also vertically integrating our supply chain with an Irish, a globally trading meat company, as part of our burgeoning ingredients business.

Milestones

The brand is all-important to Green Saffron, and I really want to make a point of difference and take Indian food into a different, more accessible space. We can now show the absolute security of our supply chain. To help us we have been fortunate to have made an association with an international expert in this area called, Professor Chris Elliott who is based at Queens University Belfast; who has now put his considerable university resources, into the herb and spice industry, to prove provenance and traceability.

Recently I wrote a cookbook, with a second book on the way and fortunately, some people appreciate my unique way of looking at and blending spices. Following negotiations, I have also brokered a deal to have my own TV series, hosting an Indian cookery program, as part of an exciting co-production between RTÉ and Zee TV; which are based in India and SE Asia and looking to expand into the West. The plan is to start shooting the show this October and go to air, sometime in September 2019.

Another milestone from my perspective is that we have Pat Kierans on board, who is a former marketing director with Patak's, the most prominent Indian brand in the world. Pat is originally from Cork and globally took Patak's from a market share position of 14% to 41% from the '91-'95 period and as our new marketing director, I am delighted to say that he is now helping steer our ship in conjunction with our strategic partners.

Advice for fellow entrepreneurs

Here in the West, we are all familiar with the term, entrepreneur. However, in the Punjabi language, there is a word called, 'jugaard' which roughly translates that if there is a job to be done, you just get on and do it without moaning because it's down to you - and no one else can change your situation.

As I was starting out every consultant and business advisor under the sun, was telling me how wrong I am by pursuing more than one objective at a time – and of course, they are correct. They

all said that even Napoleon didn't fight a battle on three fronts. Clearly, I am fighting a battle on three fronts, but I am willing to take the pain and the hit now because in India I have some significant associations, along with a phenomenal network of resources, strategic partnerships and the team built up in Ireland.

I am a firm believer in this whole 'jugaard' concept, and it was this spirit that I used when establishing Green Saffron in Ireland. I also believe you should listen to your heart, listen to everybody, assess their opinion - but if you don't have creative ideas, then you shouldn't be in business.

Interview by Brendan Byrne.