

FOOD, HOME, AND ALL THINGS DELICIOUS

# Comfort Zone

## COOKING UP A BUSINESS

EVER DREAM OF BOTTLING AND SELLING YOUR GRANDMA'S LEGENDARY SPICY SPAGHETTI SAUCE OR MASS-PRODUCING YOUR SECRET-RECIPE GRANOLA? MEET SEVEN WOMEN WHO TURNED THEIR PASSION FOR FOOD INTO A LIVING.

*Rachel Saunders, 32*  
Oakland, California  
**BLUE CHAIR FRUIT**  
[bluechairfruit.com](http://bluechairfruit.com)



**THE GOODS:** A French major makes a career out of jam, creating vibrant flavors with seasonal fruit.

**HER DISCOVERY:** When Saunders, a native of upstate New York, moved to California after graduating from Smith College, she became enthralled with the farmers' markets (who'd ever heard of a tayberry?). She made fruit desserts while she pondered her career plan. "One day, instead of baking another pie that would quickly go bad, I experimented with jam," she recalls. "I was instantly hooked. There's something so magical about being able to preserve fruit for another season, or send it to my parents on the East Coast."

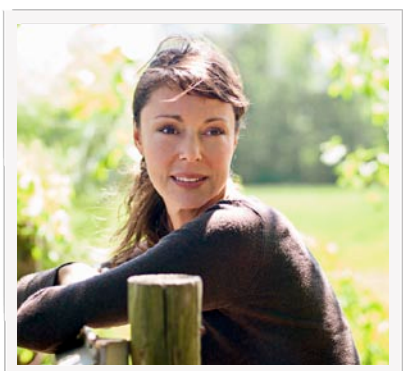
**HER BIG DECISION:** Saunders enrolled in >

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA REMINGTON

STILL LIFE: KATE SHAUGHNESSY

a course at a small-business training center and worked in restaurants for five years before finally striking out on her own. “I wanted to make sure I was ready to commit to it as a life, not just a hobby,” she says.

**HER SLOW BUILD:** Selling her jams in local cafés, Saunders raised the money to rent space in a commercial kitchen. “Now I cook 300 jars a day in six big copper pots!” she says—and her jams are sold online and at Williams-Sonoma. “My husband calls me the ten-year overnight success.”



**Tasia Malakasis, 40**  
Huntsville, Alabama  
**FROMAGERIE  
BELLE CHÈVRE**  
bellechevre.com



**THE GOODS:** A high-powered executive moves home to Alabama to give gourmet goat cheese a down-to-earth makeover.

**HER AHA MOMENT:** Nine years into a career working with software start-ups on both coasts, Malakasis enrolled in classes at the Culinary Institute of America and began wondering how she could forge a new path for herself—in the food business. One day when she was in New York, she “popped in to Dean & DeLuca and picked up a tiny, special-looking cheese called Belle Chèvre,” she says. “It said, ‘Made in Elkmont, Alabama’—15 miles from where Malakasis grew up and still had a home. “I took it as a sign,” she says. “Maybe *this* is what I should do.”

**HER FRESH START:** Six years later, Malakasis finally made the change: She left her ailing marriage, quit her demanding job, and moved permanently back to Alabama with

her young son, where the two lived off her savings. “I apprenticed for six months at the Belle Chèvre creamery for free, cleaning the floors and learning how to make cheese,” she says. “The owner was in her 70s and ready to retire. After many long talks, I convinced her to sell the business to me.”

**HER PLAN:** As the newly minted big cheese, Malakasis wanted to expand aggressively. Belle Chèvre was already in the top gourmet shops in the country—but nowhere else. “I wanted to make goat cheese more accessible and fun,” she says. “Something you’d find in an everyday supermarket, not buy once a year for a fancy wine and cheese party.” Experimenting in her kitchen, she concocted a new line of “breakfast cheeses” in flavors like coffee, fig, and cinnamon and sugar, and pitched them to executives at big grocery chains. “Sometimes I think being the village idiot helps,” she says. “When someone says, ‘Oh, you’re not supposed to call on the president of Costco or Kroger,’ I say, ‘Well, why not?’” Both stores now stock her cheese.



**Veronica Bosgraaf, 40**  
Holland, Michigan  
**PURE BAR**  
thepurebar.com



**THE GOODS:** A stay-at-home mom concocts snack bars full of fruit and nuts for her vegetarian daughter—and countless others.

**HER INSPIRATION:** Six years ago, when Bosgraaf’s daughter was 6, she connected the chicken on her plate to the animals at the local petting zoo and became the family’s first vegetarian. “I wanted to support her

decision, so I researched what she should eat for proper nutrition,” says Bosgraaf. For lunches, she started playing around with dates, almonds, and cocoa powder, mashing them together and cutting out shapes. “I brought them to school and sports events as snacks, and soon I was getting requests,” says Bosgraaf. “A business idea was born.”

**HER MOTTO:** Persevere. “So many manufacturers laughed at me and said, ‘That’s cute, but our minimum runs are 50,000,’” recalls Bosgraaf. She eventually found a plant in Oregon willing to make 4,500 bars, which she financed with \$15,000 of her savings.

**HER STROKE OF LUCK:** Bosgraaf asked a friend at the *Grand Rapids Press* to write “a little blurb.” Instead, she got a full-page feature in the business section. “That’s when the CEO of the Midwestern supermarket chain Meijer decided he wanted the bars,” says Bosgraaf. “Suddenly I needed 20,000!”



**Irene Costello, 50 (left),  
and Joan MacIsaac, 49**  
Hyde Park, Massachusetts  
**EFFIE’S HOMEMADE**  
effieshomemade.com



**THE GOODS:** Two friends turn an old-fashioned family recipe into a best-selling cookie-cracker hybrid.

**THEIR IDEA:** MacIsaac and Costello, a chef and a financial services professional who taught cooking classes together on the side, had talked for years about selling MacIsaac’s mother’s “perfect” oatcakes. An old New England staple, “they have the perfect balance of sweetness, butter, salt, and toasted nuttiness,” says (*continued on page 122*)



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(continued from page 120) MacIsaac—and everyone who tried one loved it. When the pair got wind of a local holiday fair in 2006, they baked a few trays of the oatcakes in MacIsaac’s kitchen. “They sold out in an hour,” she recalls. A few fans even called to request additional batches.

**THEIR FIRST STEPS:** Emboldened by their success, MacIsaac and Costello consulted with food industry contacts on a business plan. Then they borrowed money from friends and family (“Banks aren’t going to lend you any money!” says MacIsaac with a laugh) to help cover start-up costs like computers, a Web site, and packaging.

**THEIR BIG BREAKS:** In 2008 the duo took their oatcakes to a trade show in New York. There, they impressed a sales rep from Vermont-based Grafton Cheese, who ordered 45 cases for gift baskets. (“Grafton’s two-year-aged Cheddar on our oatcakes is pretty awesome,” explains MacIsaac.) Months later, Effie’s was featured in the *New York Times*’ holiday gift guide after a reporter tried the oatcakes at a store near her vacation home. “We still have people calling and referencing that article,” says MacIsaac. The oatcakes are now sold in specialty stores all over the country.

**THEIR DILEMMA:** “Our kids”—they have four between them—“were always asking for handfuls of those popular gummy vitamins,” recalls Swanson, “but you’re supposed to eat only two at a time, and they’re full of high-fructose corn syrup and artificial colors and

*Unable to find a more nutritious substitute for gummy vitamins, the moms decided to invent one.*

flavors.” Unable to find a more nutritious substitute for their kids to snack on, Weintraub, who’d been a local TV reporter, and Swanson, a former cook at one of Wolfgang Puck’s restaurants, decided to invent one.

**THEIR PROCESS:** The pair took their idea for organic gummy candies to a local manufacturer, where they worked with a food scientist to devise a recipe. “If we loved a flavor, we gave it to our kids to try,” Weintraub says. “If they liked it as much they like Doritos, it was in.” To court taller customers, they devised an electrolyte-spiked “sports” gummy, which was quickly embraced by skateboarders, triathletes, and distance runners. Swanson and Weintraub eventually hired eight full-time employees to help meet the demand; the company turned a profit this year, four years after its founding.

**THEIR MANY HATS:** For these small-business owners, there is no typical day on the job. “One morning I’m in Whole Foods meeting customers,” Swanson says, “and the next I’m at Costco helping move boxes of our products with a pallet jack—which is *not* something I ever thought I’d be able to do.”

—RACHEL MOUNT



*Shannan Swanson, 37 (left), and Liane Weintraub, 42*  
Los Angeles  
**TASTY BRAND**  
tastybaby.com



**THE GOODS:** Two best friends dream up an organic, health-conscious take on fruit snacks—and win fans of all ages.