

# 5 lessons I've learned

Who hasn't dreamed of ditching the day job and turning a passion into a profession? These food pros gave it all up to start from scratch - here they share their top tips for success

Words EMILY KERRIGAN Photographs STUART WOOD

## THE DELI OWNERS

Before leaving London for Hertfordshire, Damian Caldwell was a tailor; his wife Kirsty worked in PR. In 2006, they took over Hitchin landmark Halsey's, transforming the 1850s grocers into a modern-day deli. They've since started offering corporate catering and have added a café.

### 1 SEIZE THE DAY

**Kirsty** Running a deli was our dream. We were keen cooks but lacked catering experience so Damian quit fashion to manage a Shoreditch bar. Meanwhile we'd set our hearts on raising a family outside London; on a whim we Googled 'deli for sale, Hertfordshire' (I grew up there) and up popped Halsey's. We had to act quickly and the timing was bad; we were signing mortgage papers the day I went into labour with our first child, but six weeks later we'd upped sticks, new baby and all. No regrets.

### 2 GET TO KNOW PEOPLE

**Damian** We were fortunate enough to retain several staff who'd worked loyally at Halsey's for years - their experience was invaluable. And forging good relationships with local growers was crucial. Now, if someone gives us a glut of their beautiful veg, they know we'll say thanks with goodies from our shelves. Scratch people's backs and they'll scratch yours.

### 3 DIVERSIFY AND ADAPT

**Kirsty** We're forever trying fresh ideas - something as simple as olive oil refills can add real value. Our slow-roasted meat rolls were instant bestsellers but other things, like takeaway porridge, never took off. Sometimes you have to acknowledge mistakes and change tack.



### 4 PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

**Damian** Kirsty's experience of PR events was vital in setting up the corporate catering and my bar days helped massively with things like stocktaking. But we leave the accounts to my mum - she's a qualified book-keeper.

### 5 KEEP SMILING

**Kirsty** A punter once hurled his roll back across the counter but we laughed it off. Know your regulars, so you're ready with their sandwich just the way they like it, and a smile.  
[halseysdeli.co.uk](http://halseysdeli.co.uk)



## THE FOOD PHOTOGRAPHER

Londoner Gareth Morgans was working as an engineer when he took time out to travel, cementing a love for photography en route. Today, he shoots food and chefs such as Gordon Ramsay for a host of high-profile publications.

### 1 FORGET OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

Mates told me my photos looked professional but it was only when I went backpacking that I got the self-belief. I also got some great shots – but a rookie portfolio of travel pics isn't enough. I took evening classes, eventually quitting engineering to study photography full-time.

### 2 GET A THICK SKIN

Tutors warned me that breaking into such a competitive industry meant cold-calling photographers for work; even so, the inevitable rejections hurt. I assisted for four years, developing real resilience – and a taste for food photography. I met the right people and was rewarded with my first solo job for a supermarket magazine.

### 3 BE EVERYONE'S BEST MATE

People skills are everything. On shoots, you're choreographing a room of time-pushed stylists and creatives. If you want to nail the shot of the ice cream before it melts, you have to lead with confidence and build instant rapport. Though you can't go into Gordon Ramsay's kitchen and start firing off orders – a little tact makes all the difference.

### 4 FIND YOUR OWN SPACE

Nothing beats having your own studio but overheads are high even before you've invested in a fully equipped kitchen. I did my time working from home, with food stylists slaving on my stove, two toddlers nipping at my ankles and my wife going slowly spare.

### 5 GET YOUR OWN STYLE

Commissioning editors tell me they value the graphic quality of my work. These people see a huge number of portfolios every day. You have to find a niche and stand out. [garethmorgans.com](http://garethmorgans.com). Turn to page 32 for Gareth's latest shoot with John Torode.

## THE B&B OWNER

Jilly Sharpe swapped London for the Kent coast when she bought Belvidere Place in Broadstairs, converting the down-at-heel Georgian townhouse into an upscale b&b that has won glowing reviews.

### 1 TAKE ON A CHALLENGE

I wanted my son to grow up by the sea. I was house-hunting with vague notions of catering for a living – I've been a follower of the organic movement for years and used to grow my own veg – when I saw a shabby b&b. Beneath the chintz and peeling paint lay a new calling. I didn't know the first thing about plumbing or plastering, let alone running a hotel, but I bought it and began mucking in with the builders.

### 2 BE YOURSELF...

People admire Belvidere's quirky interior but it's just my own style – it wouldn't have much soul otherwise. Much of the furniture came from my London home; other pieces winked at me from junk-shop windows. I don't put on a role for guests and there are no rules. If your room's ready before noon, of course you can check in.

### 3 ...BUT BE DISCREET

Someone once called Belvidere 'the Priory-by-Sea'. I get my share of strung-out high-flyers needing peace and quiet – you can tell when someone just wants to be left alone.

### 4 PROVIDE A SANCTUARY

A little luxury and a lot of thought go a long way. I put silky sheets on the beds and buy local, best-quality bacon for breakfast. I lay on treats like baked apples with muscovado sugar, and if someone's got a cold or needs spoiling, I'll bring out mugs of hot ginger or extra-large slices of cake.

### 5 REMEMBER TO ENJOY IT

I want for nothing here – I have the sea at the end of the street and a son with sand between his toes. If I'm happy, my guests are, too. [belvidereplace.co.uk](http://belvidereplace.co.uk)





### THE BISCUIT MAKER

Armed with a knack for baking and a mascot in the form of her pet Jack Russell, Rebecca Scarlett Hedley gave up life as a lawyer to start Scarlett & the Spotty Dog Cakery in 2010. Within months, delis were selling out of the old-fashioned goodies she'd baked in her family's Northumberland farmhouse.

#### 1 BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

I was 26 when I started my biscuit business. It took nerve to concede that after years spent qualifying, law wasn't the creative role I craved. If I'd listened to doubters telling me the market was saturated, I would have lost faith. But I knew my brownies and flapjacks would stand out because I used free-range eggs from my hens and best-quality chocolate, and wrapped my biccies with scarlet ribbons and spotty-dog stickers.

#### 2 ACCEPT ALL OFFERS OF HELP

My family was fantastic. My parents suggested I move home and run the business from their country farmhouse – I earned my keep helping with DIY. My brother, an accountant, offered gratefully received advice.

#### 3 SET ACHIEVABLE TARGETS

I stuck to small goals – the first was persuading my favourite local café to sell my biscuits. Bit by bit, word spread and the Spotty Dog made its way onto deli shelves across Northumberland. The ultimate dream is to open my own shop – in the meantime I'm slowly working my way further south.

#### 4 GET ONLINE

The internet is a tremendous tool. The biscuits are sold in cafés as a direct result of contacts made on Twitter, and two of my biggest stockists – loveyourlarder.com and notonthestreet.com – are online retailers. I only wish I'd had the confidence to approach them sooner.

#### 5 GET THE RIGHT KIT

I struggled to meet demand with my little Kenwood mixer but with support from a brilliant small regional business fund I've been able to invest in an industrial-sized one. Everything else is the same – me, my ethics and my dog – except that these days, the baking sheets are bigger and the order book a bit fatter. [scarlettandthespottedog.blogspot.com](http://scarlettandthespottedog.blogspot.com)

### THE RECIPE WRITER

Jennifer Joyce is a telecoms manager turned recipe writer who learnt the ropes testing recipes for Notting Hill shop and café, Books for Cooks. She has since written eight cookbooks, contributes to many top food publications and runs weekly cookery classes.

#### 1 MAKE A MASTERPLAN

I had a fantastic foodie upbringing in rural Wisconsin and by the time I hit London in my 20s, writing a cookbook had become a serious ambition. Before quitting my 9 to 5 I worked weekends at Books for Cooks, learning from its resident chefs. I was holding down two jobs but never happier. Each shift brought me closer to my goal.

#### 2 WORK YOUR CONTACTS

Authors often popped in and I'd ask them the secret of a successful book proposal. I made great friends, not least with Victoria Blashford-Snell, who to my delight suggested we write a cookbook together. She was already published, but I pitched to countless publishers before getting our 'yes' – I grew alligator skin.

#### 3 TAKE THE ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH

Seeing your first book in print is such a buzz but you have to think beyond the launch. Next I wanted to write recipes for magazines – which meant styling the food, too. Initially it's intimidating: you're slaving over unfamiliar stoves, the photographer's waiting on your hollandaise and suddenly it curdles. You're forever lugging around groceries and storing them ahead of 6am starts.

#### 4 MANAGE YOUR TIME AND MONEY

I love the variety that comes from writing, styling and teaching but it's really about keeping income regular. Royalties don't hit your account overnight – it's literally years from pitch to publication.

#### 5 PRACTISE AND PERFECT

If your ganache keeps splitting, find out why, then make it till it's foolproof. If your food doesn't taste good enough, no editor will commission you. [jenniferjoyce.co.uk](http://jenniferjoyce.co.uk). Jennifer's latest book is *Meals in Heels* (Murdoch, £12.99). Visit [bbcgoodfood.com](http://bbcgoodfood.com) to find some of Jennifer's recipes. 🍓

