When the pandemic hit, these ambitious nine-to-fivers abandoned their desk jobs for gourmet start-ups

AS TOLD TO
ADRIENNE MATEI AND ANDREA YU

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CAROLINA ANDRADE, CHRIS DONOVAN, JACKIE DIVES, KELSEY MCMILLAN AND OUMAYMA BEN TANFOUS
For decades, my mom and stepfather ran NorCliff Farms, a fiddlehead business based in Niagara with a plant in Quebec. I remember helping to plant 300,000 fiddleheads when I was 17. It was exhilarating work. But I wanted to pave my own path. In 2008, I moved to Toronto to study business and finance and ended up working with a global asset management company as an ETF specialist. The job taught me a lot about perseverance, but it wasn’t my passion.

By the time the pandemic arrived, my stepdad had suffered a stroke and my mom had taken over the entire fiddlehead business. I began helping her out again. I was juggling two jobs—working remotely in finance and for the farm in whatever spare hours I had. I often pulled 18-hour days. During the pandemic, all the social aspects were removed from my corporate job. Without all the fancy dinners and work travel, it was just me and my laptop. I discovered that I was more passionate about the fiddlehead business. And so, in June of 2020, I resigned from my corporate job and started working full-time at NorCliff.

Six months later, I purchased the business in an asset deal. It was definitely scary to leave the corporate world to work for myself. There was no safety plan. And yet it was empowering to not only to have complete control over my life and work but also have so much potential ahead of me.

I decided to rebrand and refresh the business. We gave it a new name, ForageGirl Fiddleheads, designed and sourced plant-based packaging and created a new business plan. We would sell in bulk as well as in small packaging. We were already in Canadian grocery stores, and I wanted to expand our reach into the U.S.

In the spring of 2021, I went into my first fiddlehead season as president. I spent six weeks at our Quebec plant, working seven days a week at all hours. Most days, I’d meet with our head office staff and then pop over to the plant to oversee the day’s harvest and observe employees washing, packaging and preparing the fiddleheads for shipments. That season, we picked 90,000 kilograms of fiddleheads, which was the most we’d ever picked. We also signed with five new buyers in the United States, including Giant Eagle and Albertsons—two of the largest grocery store chains in the country. That was a huge win for us.

This past May, I was in a grocery store in Quebec and saw our little fiddleheads there. It was my first time seeing our new label in a store. That was really exciting. I snapped a photo and sent it to the team. I got that feeling of accomplishment, that feeling of “this is why I do what I do.”

All my years working in finance helped prepare me for this moment. I wouldn’t be able to manage this business as well as I am if it hadn’t been for all the grit that I went through over the previous 10 years. Before I left Bay Street, I was the specialist for 13 different teams. That taught me how to build trustworthy relationships, to be organized and to share my time wisely. The financial and agricultural industries aren’t all that different. In both fields, it’s my responsibility to service clients and be an expert on the product.

Next year, we’re looking at expanding sales outside of North America and partnering with some international distributors and grocers. We know fiddleheads are a delicacy in Asia. We’d also love to team up with a frozen-food company so we can provide consumers with fiddleheads year-round. I think about fiddleheads all the time—not because I have to, but because I truly believe fiddleheads are something people don’t even know they love. I am genuinely passionate about this little vegetable.
My dad emigrated from Uganda to Canada as a refugee when he was 19. He always tells the same story: He arrived in Montreal with his mom and brothers, and everyone was lined up at booths for different provinces, but there was nobody in the line for the Atlantic provinces. So my dad, as the oldest brother there, made the decision: “Hey, let’s go stand in that line.” And that’s how they ended up in Nova Scotia.

I was born and raised in Halifax. I went to the Sobey School of Business at St. Mary’s University. I began working at TD part-time in 2001 while I pursued my bachelor’s of commerce. I always thought it would be a smart idea to understand commerce and finance. After I graduated in 2004, I started working full-time at the bank as a personal lending specialist.

Eventually, I became a commercial and small business lender. That job opened my eyes to the possibilities of entrepreneurship. I was meeting business owners in many different industries, and they were so passionate about what they did. It really spurred something in me. I thought, “Man, at some point I’d love to start my own business.” I wanted to do something different—I just didn’t know what or when that opportunity would come.

A friend of mine is a broker who sells businesses, and I was on his email list. One day, I got an email about a winery for sale. Avondale Sky Winery, in the Annapolis Valley, is on 44 hectares of land and has nine hectares of vines. It grows a dozen different varietals, including the unique Drops of Amber and several grapes that make up Tidal Bay, the province’s first appellation wine. Nova Scotia is an emerging wine region; the industry brings in $218 million to the province each year, and there’s plenty of tourism to bolster it.

I’ve always enjoyed wine, but my real passion was doing something with my family. So I brought the idea to my brother, Sean, my recently retired parents, Louis and Avila, and, of course, my wife, Jaime. We bought the business for a few million dollars in November of 2019. It was worth it.

First off, we looked at the assets we were acquiring. There were the people, including our winemaker, Ben Swetnam, and vineyard manager, Peter Smits. Then there was the real estate, which was comprised of three structures, including the barn on the acreage. Finally, we had inventory, both in tanks and already bottled, that we could still sell in a worst-case scenario. When the pandemic hit, we had to shut down production but were able to get that reserve of wine to the market by starting a complimentary delivery service. That immediate pivot during lockdown gave us some exposure. Once people were allowed to visit, we got new guests coming in to see us. We also have a cross-country membership for people who want their wine shipped to them.

We’re in a cold climate here, so we really excel at white and sparkling wines.

For the first year and a half, I worked both the winery and my bank job. In June of 2021, I hit my 20-year anniversary with TD. It felt like a good benchmark, a point when I could look back and say, “I did that.” So I took an early retirement from TD at the age of 38. But I definitely haven’t stopped working.

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Karl Coutinho

THE WINEMAKER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLINA ANDRADE
grew up in the food industry. My parents owned a restaurant and inn in New Brunswick, and I later ran my own sushi restaurant. In the late ‘90s, I started an audio-visual company called Sono Clefs with a partner; we did corporate events, cultural festivals and conferences. In 2018, I started teaching part-time at Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick. I took on a range of courses: marketing, social media and food and wine service.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Sono Clefs’ business dropped by 70 per cent. Everyone was calling to cancel or postpone their events. That left me with a lot of time for cooking at home. I’m an avid barbecuer, and I’ve always had a passion for barbecue sauces. I probably have 15 or 20 jars between my fridge and my cupboard.

I decided to make my own sauce using local beer as a base. In December of 2020, I reached out to Les Brasseurs du Petit-Sault, a brewery in my hometown of Edmundston, to see if they wanted to collaborate on beer-based barbecue sauces. The owner loved the idea. In January and February, I started testing barbecue sauce recipes in my own kitchen using the brewery’s Louis XVII amber ale as a base. There were definitely some missteps along the way. I once added cranberries to a barbecue sauce and it tasted horrible.

I invested about $30,000 of my own money to start the business. In January of 2021, I joined a kitchen incubator space in Riverview, N.B., where I could produce bottles of sauce. Then, in May, I launched my first barbecue sauce with an event at Les Brasseurs du Petit-Sault. I sold all 150 bottles. A few weeks later, I launched a new sauce with Picaroons, which is the biggest brewery in New Brunswick. I now have nine sauces on rotation. My company is called Mad Q Sauce.

The breweries love the partnership. It helps them sell more beer, and they use the sauces in food pairings in their kitchens. Other restaurants in New Brunswick have started using my barbecue sauces in their menu items too.

Last summer, I also started approaching grocery stores. I went to my local IGA, and they bought four cases. They sold out and bought 12 cases the following week, then 20 cases the week after that. I’m now selling the sauces in 30 supermarkets.

It takes about 15 hours to do three batches, which amount to 650 bottles. Last summer, I produced more than 8,000 bottles. My girlfriend and aunt often help me out in the kitchen, and I hired someone to work with me on production days. I’m also doing all the deliveries across the province. Sometimes I drive six or seven hours in one day.

My goal is to work with as many micro breweries in New Brunswick as possible. There are about 30 of them, so I’ve got my work cut out for me.
In 2015, I moved from my hometown of Vancouver to St. Louis, Mo., to work for a company that was developing a smart thermostat. That job took me all around the U.S., and I became obsessed with trying all the regional burgers. In Oklahoma, they do a cheeseburger with fried onions that was earth-shaking for me when I first tried it. In Missouri, I was introduced to the guberburger, which is dressed with peanut butter and pickles.

When I was in the States, I was making more money than I ever had in my life, but I was miserable and burned out. After two years, in 2017, I moved back to Vancouver and started doing freelance web design and marketing. When the pandemic set in, I saw that everyone was baking bread and making cookies. I thought to myself, “What's my bread? What are my cookies?” People were doing meal kits, so I thought, “What about a burger kit?” I wanted to specialize in smash burgers, the original burger-cooking technique that's currently having a renaissance.

Before long, opportunities came my way. In February of 2021, I rented a kitchen space near Strathcona Park so I could test recipes. I partnered with local suppliers, who helped me source grass-fed organic beef with the perfect fat ratio and grind.

We launched Burgerland Smash Up in May of that year. We offered three burger kits: the Classic American Cheese, the Oklahoma Fried Onion and Cheese and the California Up-and-Down, which is my take on the In-N-Out burger. The kits cost $40 and include everything you need to produce four smash burgers at home. In our first month, we only sold 150 kits, but we got lots of positive feedback.

I leased a trailer, and that summer and fall, I did pop-ups at breweries and Keefer Yard, an outdoor tented bar and mini-golf course. Things built up from there. I started serving up burgers at Main Street Brewery seven days a week, and I also took over their small kitchen space, where we made regional sausages—chorizo, bratwurst, English sausages and hot dogs. I hired a butcher and we were butchering, grinding and stuffing our own meat and cooking in a tiny oven. It was a lot harder than I expected. In March, both my butcher and I got Covid, so I temporarily shut down the sausage brand. Luckily, the burger trailer was still doing great business. We were bringing in $30,000 a month, including $10,000 to $15,000 of revenue from Uber Eats and Door Dash orders alone.

I've recently bought a new food truck, and I've been able to get back to the tiny Main Street kitchen with our butcher. We're back up and running.
joined the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation in 2013, eventually working my way up to marketing director. It was an opportunity to work with a dynamic team on a big mission, which was to make Edmonton a place where people want to grow their businesses, raise their families and invest in what’s happening next. I learned all these crazy things, like the fact that we grow a ton of raw products in Alberta—including a big portion of Canada’s peas and chickpeas—but we don’t do much with them. We just export them to different countries, and then those people make something out of them, and then we buy those products back. That always seemed ridiculous to me. We’re giving up all this potential for jobs, for money, for innovation.

By 2017, I had left EEDC, and I was thinking, “What can I do to better understand what’s happening in agriculture?” Then it occurred to me to get some first-hand experience of what it takes to launch a food business in Alberta.

I connected with Lindsey Good, a farmer in southern Alberta, and together we tested a few different products, including a pea milk as a dairy alternative. But we had a couple of challenges. First, it’s hard to separate peas into their individual components of protein, starch and fibre. We would have had to import the pea protein from China. Second, we couldn’t find a partner to help us package a shelf-stable milk. We were figuring those things out when the pandemic hit. Like everybody else, we just thought, “Oh, this Covid thing is going to pass in a few weeks. We’ll just put this on ice for a bit and see what happens.” Then I read an article about some folks who were turning beans into beer. Peas have the same components as beans and wheat, so I began to wonder if we could turn them into alcohol. I eventually found Nathan Flim, who owns the Fort Distillery in Fort Saskatchewan. He said, “Hey, I’ve never tried making pea alcohol. But let’s give it a shot.”

I called the company Field Notes and decided to model the liqueur on an amaro. We named it Don’t Call Me Sweet Pea. I told our distiller that I wanted it to taste like the Canadian Prairies: fresh herbs, flowers, plants. The most prominent flavours in our amaro are sage, black tea, gentian and Alberta honey as well as elderflower, which gives it an amazing fragrance. The goal is to have at least three flavours over the next two years. The next one we’re going to do will be citrusy, and then we’ll have one that’s more of a warm spice.

We’re making tweaks as we go. Because we use real herbs and plants instead of extracts, our liqueur has sediment that falls to the bottom of the bottle, like with a natural wine. To make it easier for bartenders to use, we’re adding another level of filtration to make for a clearer liqueur. That will be the major change in our next batch.

We have a co-packing agreement with the distillery; they help us execute the product formulation, manufacturing and bottling. I distribute through Liquor Connect, a platform managed by the Alberta Liquor and Gaming Commission. I was able to bootstrap this business pretty easily because I made decisions based on growth instead of covering costs.

Our sales started off strong and have been steadily growing. The most rewarding part is all the support from rural parts of Alberta—farmers who have sent us emails or asked their local liquor stores to carry our product.

Now that we’ve got the liqueur on the shelf, we want to go after some investment to see how we can scale. As we move forward, I want to stay focused on the mission, which is to figure out how we can build a more complete food ecosystem in the Prairies.

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