

No kitchen, no experience, no cash: just an obsession with chocolate

Russell
Lynch



GROWTH CAPITAL HOW LONDON'S ENTREPRENEURS ARE BUCKING THE ECONOMIC GLOOM

Chocolatier Amelia Rope is a dream interview subject for a hack whose sweet tooth has left a little extra timber around the midriff. Succulent, aromatic delights are offered at regular intervals as she forces upon me - with little difficulty - the flavours wowing the customers of Selfridges and Liberty: rose, lemon and sea-salt, mandarin and a gorgeous, crackly coffee-bean dark chocolate. It's a tough assignment.

Rope is utterly obsessed with chocolate. Obsessed enough that she's given up almost everything: sold her flat, slept on friends' floors for more than a year, and scraped together cash from friends to fill orders when the banks shut the door on her. It's a journey that's seen her end up on a sofa opposite the Business Secretary Vince Cable angrily pushing the case for small businesses.

She's still running the fledgling business from her brother's attic in Brixton, but things are finally beginning to take off. Her eponymous chocolate - which sells for more than £6 a bar - is one of the most fashionable brands in Britain right now. In quality terms, it's mentioned in the same breath as Gerald Coleman's Artisan du Chocolat and Notting Hill-based Melt. We're not talking Dairy Milk here.



"My name's on the chocolate": Amelia Rope's high standards have helped to create a quality product LUCY YOUNG

Rope's love affair with chocolate has been running for more than 30 years, back to when she was an eight-year-old tasting the "amazing" truffles given to her grandmother by her father. They were from Presdat, the chocolatier with a royal warrant from the Queen for more than 35 years and a favourite of children's author Roald Dahl.

Her interest took her on to Masterchef in 2006; she didn't win, but after encouragement from John Torode, she went back on in 2007. Frustrated by her job as a PA in a doctor's surgery, she decided to go part-time with some spare cash from the sale of her flat and go on as many courses as possible.

A five-day course at Valrhona's Ecole du Grand Chocolat was the epiphany. "I was just mesmerised by the depth and potential in it, although I still didn't imagine I'd be running a chocolate business. I wanted to be a food journalist. I went to see a food editor and took some truffles with me. Bear in mind I'd only been on a five-day course. He said "forget journalism, you're the next Juliette Binoche (star of Chocolat)".

The stunning favours come from noodling in the kitchen and her training as an aromatherapist. "The way I create the recipes is seeing where the oil 'sits' within the chocolate - some sit at the bottom and are more subtle and

tears" to create. Orders were flying in but "I had no kitchen, no business, no business experience, no money, nothing". One super-rich client from the Middle East flew her private jet over to pick up a huge order.

The turning point came when a friend and fellow entrepreneur, sofa.com and Deliverance founder Pat Reeves - "my diamond geezer" as Rope calls him - urged a change of tack. "He kept saying to me do chocolate bars, forget the flora ... I said I wasn't interested. Two years later Pat put in a commission for a thousand bars for sofa.com and I had six weeks' notice to find someone to help me make them, to design the packaging and sort out the recipe."

Armed with just two flavours, she hit the delis to sell bars, and in February 2010 got another big break when she sent two to the head of the food hall at Selfridges, which snapped them up.

Another big online order helped, but disaster nearly struck when the banks refused to put up the funds to fulfil the orders, saying that it wasn't a "viable business". Friends filled in the gap, but kicking up a stink with her MP Priti Patel, she campaigned her way into Cable's office to push for more help.

It clearly still rankles: "Nobody is looking after people like me. I have had no support from them, I'm giving them 20% on every bloody thing I sell and I'm incensed by it."

There's entrepreneurial blood in Rope's veins and she's willing to put the hours in: she doesn't blink at 12-hour days and did 80-hour weeks for three months to fill Christmas orders last year.

Now she's close to finalising an investment which will help grow the business further. But she won't do it at any cost. She says: "This is me, my name is on the chocolate. I won't compromise on quality or taste and investors have got to have my vision."

AMELIA ROPE

Founded: September 2007

Staff: Six people in the kitchen

Turnover: About £450,000

Business idol: Pat Reeves, Deliverance and sofa.com founder

come through at the end, like the lemon, and others hug the chocolate and are intense like the pale rose and dark peppermint ... The recipes just come to me and I play around at home seeing if they will work."

An intricate crystallised rose petal with chocolate and gold leaf took "three months and a lot of hassle and

Young people can take control of their future

Dear James

I'm 22, I've just graduated from university and I'm struggling to find a job. I've got an idea that I'd like to explore how to turn into a business but I'm not quite sure how to go about this. Where can I go for advice? Scott

THERE are many graduates like you struggling to find a job. So it's great to hear you are seriously considering starting your own business. Enterprise is a viable option for young people to take control of their own future.

When you are thinking about starting up your new business you need to establish whether your business idea is a hobby, a lifestyle or a scalable business and make sure you are comfortable with the category it falls into. I don't want you to be disappointed and frustrated by

Ask James



James Caan

not becoming the next Bill Gates if your idea is actually a weekend hobby. And is it strong enough to keep driving you forward through all the challenges you will encounter?

Share your ideas. Tell as many people as you can. Ask for feedback and you'll be amazed what you can learn. Somebody will give you a piece of advice or the one angle you hadn't thought of that could make all the difference between success and failure. Don't forget about research - this is absolutely fundamental to your ability to succeed. You will also

need to ask yourself how you will fund your venture. Going to family and friends for the money is always a route worth exploring.

If this is not an option, thankfully there are a lot of organisations out there that offer support - initiatives like the StartUp Loans scheme, which I chair, provide quality mentoring and loans to young people looking to set up their business.

Your idea does not have to be "unique". You don't have to change the world. The most successful business ideas are often simple, ingenious tweaks on an existing way of doing business, but delivering it faster, better, cheaper or more easily.

■ For the full article and news of James Caan's free app, go to standard.co.uk. His new book, *Start Your Business in 7 Days*, is out now.

Real benefits are to be found in putting apprentices on payroll

WHY is it that just one in 10 small and medium-sized enterprises currently employ an apprentice when the rate for larger businesses is twice as high?

A Government-backed inquiry into apprenticeships chaired by Jason Holt, the jeweller who has championed this form of training, says SMEs should have more say in the content of courses offered by training providers.

With the Government agreeing to look into this idea while also promising more funding for SMEs that take on apprentices, David Prosser examines the issue on Business Connections, the Evening Standard's website dedicated to start-ups and small London firms.

He writes that there has been a

Business Connections

tendency to think of apprentices as a source of cheap labour, but that the benefits to businesses are much more positive than that.

As well as being able to fill skills gaps, apprentices often show high levels of motivation and loyalty, and prove more cost-effective than taking on skilled staff.

Our next members' event, featuring Theo Paphitis, chairman of stationery chain Ryman and star of *Dragons' Den*, is on September 26.

You can register on the website es-bc.co.uk to attend now.