



Baking up a career in gluten-free bread

Inside Track Q&A

Denise O'Callaghan, Denise's Delicious Gluten-Free Bakery

Taking lessons of baking for coeliac into business

Gráinne Ní Aodha

When banker Denise O'Callaghan found out that her father Michael had a **gluten** intolerance, she decided to use the baking skills she had learned from her mother to begin testing **gluten-free** recipes.

Once her father became "the best-fed coeliac in Ireland", O'Callaghan began thinking of others with the intolerance, and founded **Denise's Delicious Gluten-Free Bakery** in Cork.

What sets your business apart from the competition?

When I opened the bakery in 2008, we were the first **gluten-free** bakery in Ireland. We were the pioneers at that time. The market for **gluten-free** produce wasn't huge, so we had to take on an educational role and raise awareness, as well as build a market for ourselves. Now we are noted for our high-quality produce and recipe development. If a customer wants to make something, we can develop the recipe and bake it for them. We also take frantic calls from people who need advice such as "I've just been diagnosed, how do I make gravy?"

What has been your greatest achievement to date?

We're now exporting to the UK, France and Germany. It's just amazing to see your cakes on a shelf in a bakery in France: we never thought we'd see that happen. We also sold out of half a million gluten-free pies last year. We thought we'd never get through baking them all, never mind selling them. It's a long way from the four dozen we sold in our first year!

What is the biggest mistake you have made?

Not going with my gut. Like hiring someone you didn't feel was quite

right for the job and later on you're proved right. Not giving myself enough of a break was also something I had to learn to fix. But I don't regret anything.

What is the biggest challenge you have had to face?

Growing is a challenge for any small business. Any kind of upscaling, such as increasing our stock of mince pies, means massive funding, especially in the food business where food standards are so important. Luckily for us, our bank has been so supportive.

Are the banks open for business?

Most definitely. AIB has been phenomenal. The bank manager knows our business so well, but I am also very honest with them in showing them where the business stands and what our figures are. They also give excellent advice.

What's the best piece of advice you have received?

I was at a presentation a few years ago where a gentleman who owned a huge, well-established international business was giving a talk. I said to him afterwards, "I'd love to have the problems you're having, I'm struggling with the minor stuff." He replied: "It's all about the journey, Denise. You're business is like dealing with a difficult toddler, but mine is dealing with a horrendous teenager! Take it as it is." I found that very sage advice.

Whom do you admire in business and why?

My dad is a great inspiration; if he hadn't taken his initial entrepreneurial leap, I never would have taken mine. He manages a heating engineering business and he also runs a beekeeping business, which he gives talks on. He and my husband Derek are very clever

people and are always giving me advice on different opportunities and solutions to problems.

What advice would you give to the Government to help stimulate the economy?

Whatever they can do to help small businesses would be welcome because we are the grassroots. It's especially expensive to hire new staff, between taxes, USC and the rest. At busy times, like the Willy-Wonka-mince-pie-packing frenzy we were in at the end of last year, we have 13 people working with us, and that goes down to nine when it quietens down.

What does the future hold for your business?

We're going to work on establishing ourselves internationally, as well as build our business here in Cork and support people locally. When business grows for us, it grows for our Irish suppliers as well, so it spreads around. We're also talking to Enterprise Ireland about different companies exporting their goods together.

How much is your business worth and would you sell it?

We tried evaluating it before when we invited investors to help us grow internationally and it's very difficult to put a price on. Of course the real worth is in the eye of the buyer. We can see how this business can develop and grow, so we think it's worth a fortune!



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