

Spotlight On:

Afke Zonderland | Owner

Okanagan Rawsome, Est. 2008

Born and raised on a large dairy farm in the Netherlands, Afke grew up with business decisions being made at the dinner table. For her being an entrepreneur wasn't an afterthought, it was genetic and after being self-employed for 30 years as an interior designer, Afke at 60 years of age decided to follow her second passion – healthy food. She bought a recipe book and started experimenting to create nutrient-rich, delicious raw snacks. But it wasn't until her daughter piped up and said how great the crisps were that she had even considered selling them.

Afke decided to fill a gap in the market and as luck would have it a wonderful food grant came through from the Small Business Association of BC which allowed her to purchase a commercial grade dehydrator that she had her eyes on for a long time – it would be her ticket to scale up and support the production demand for Okanagan Rawsome.

Okanagan Rawsome is a proud family business created by Afke Zonderland and her daughter Anna. They are a family “Farm to Fork” business in the small rural area of Grindrod.

- What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

I saw the crisps were filling a personal need for so many with allergies, food challenges and also for children. People have become so educated about the quality of their food, a real shift in thinking for people to be preventative in our approach to health. You just need to listen to people's needs then find innovative ways to fill them.

- How has mentorship or networking played a role in where you are today?

Networking gets bigger for us all the time. We source from farms down the road that we drive by every day. We build relationships with the farmers and they grow specifically for us. It's a tight community, you can ask one person a question and they will talk and pass along that question to 10 other people. It's nice to know that there is a community around us that supports us and wants us to succeed and will help us out when we need it.

- What do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

I've always been really pleased to offer some employment in a rural area. I've never felt that minimum wage was enough, so we pay fair, livable wages. I was also lucky to have Anna come home when she did. I was just a little sprout with an idea, but we became a team and there is a lot of accomplishment in that as well.

- What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

The food business around it, the distribution, the stores, how that all works – that was a big learning curve for me and of course food safety. This food is so specific in the way we treat it, we had to be extra cautious and go beyond the regular food safe requirements and work to develop new procedures to make sure it was safe when it went to market.

- What has been your greatest reward to date as a small business in the healthy lifestyle sector/industry?

These humble little crisps are still so innovative and unique. Even 10 years later we still go to shows and people say wow, there is nothing quite like it, no one is making something with this much quality and fresh local produce. We are really proud of our delicious recipes and the response from our clients saying that they need these! It's not just a luxury item, it has become a staple item in people's cupboards, it has become their bread and that's really cool.

The public recognition is always in feather in someone's cap, I won't deny that. But in my heart we provide a service that is just immeasurably good, it's filled with integrity and we stick to it. When in doubt we do the right thing and we don't mess around with inferior ingredients. We do our very best to provide top quality.

- What unique challenges have you faced as an entrepreneur running a family owned business and how have you overcome them?

I grew up with the sentiment that sometimes things go wrong, but life goes on and you recover and you build again. I've always looked at challenges in that there has to be a solution; we have to think outside of the box here. Even when things go wrong and someone drops a bucket of beet juice we try to find the humour in it.

With the dynamics of a family business you have to make sure the personalities mesh, open communication is the bottom line. You need to set good boundaries, and plan ahead for different scenarios – and we always have chocolate in the fridge to get through the tough days.

- What is it like operating a small business in a rural part of the Province?

Receiving shipments is a challenge, we live on a dirt road with a hairpin corner and the trucks never want to come up our road, especially in the winter – so we drive down and meet them half way. It's a little bit inconvenient, but at the same time being where we are is what makes our company work. We can grow our produce and have access to the farms. I don't think this business would function nearly as well if we were in the city or a rented out space. We are a farm based business; we see everything grow from a little seed.

- What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs looking to start a family owned business from your experience?

Firstly you must all get along, Anna and I feel like our characters and work ethics mesh. You all must be prepared to work extra time when needed and be versatile. A flexible business plan is crucial, we were so fortunate to work out the kinks when we were small. Look at your families talents and build a team that has the experience and the ability to make adjustments quickly. Stress kills creativity, if you can start a business without all of that heaviness you will be ahead of the game.

- Your motto is?

We often say “Head’s down, let’s get it done.” Even if we don’t feel like peeling beets or carrots for five hours it’s just got to get done.

- Tell us a little known fact about you.

We are both certified interior designers. That’s far removed from food but it’s helped us, we are both creative and both really comfortable being faced with challenges every day – that’s what business design is, there is a problem and you need to find a solution. Anna does all of the package design, so we can tweak it in house and the packaging gets printed in Vancouver.

- Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

The Okanagan is amazing; we love to ski and mountain bike.

The Bottom Line:

- In 2018 Anna has taken on a larger role with the business as Afke starts to enjoy her retirement years ahead
- 2018 Top 5 SBBC People’s Choice Award nominee
- Afke would love to see her product on shelves right across Canada one day and continue on a forward path as a family owned business with sustainable growth, so long as they stay on the farm