

Food for THOUGHT

When it comes to facing our childhood obesity problem, it's about education and convenience – for kids as well as parents

BY EMMA CLIFTON



It might seem like a hard ask to create your own business which helps tackle New Zealand's childhood obesity problem – let alone a job that also has flexible, family-friendly working hours, where you have no previous experience in the industry. But that hasn't stopped these three Kiwi mums from giving it a go.

Bex Woolfall and Suzi Tait-Bradly have turned their friendship into Auckland business Little Cooks, which teaches primary school-aged children how to cook. And mother-of-three Sandra Finlay has given the humble tuck-shop lunch a nutritious make-over with her online endeavour EZ Lunch. They each started with a passion for children and healthy food, and wanted to create their own jobs that would fit around family commitments.

LITTLE COOKS

Running a business with your best friend may sound like a dream team, or a worst-case scenario, depending on your temperament, but for Bex Woolfall and Suzi Tait-Bradly it's been a creative and slightly chaotic version of both.

The pair met four years ago, when they were both living on the same street in Devonport – an upmarket seaside suburb in Auckland – and became fast friends. The idea behind Little Cooks first started when Tait-Bradly, planning to go back to work after taking time out to have her two children, was looking to start a new career that combined her two passions: children and cooking.

Diagnosed with coeliac disease in 2007, she was at this stage well-versed in cooking healthy, preservative-free food and wanted to start educating children about the importance of eating well. Tait-Bradly mentioned her idea to Woolfall, also looking to return to work after having two children, and the pair started doing some research.

"I wasn't sure at first, because I was never a kindergarden mum and I don't like mess," laughs Woolfall, as the pair chat to NEXT in her sunlit Devonport villa.

"But we did some research on it and found there was a need for it. Devonport was a good environment to do it in because people have



'We have enough stress in our lives. Cooking should be one of those activities where you can take time out and enjoy it'

got money and if anyone's going to be precious about teaching their children, it's probably going to be Devonport mums!"

Creating a survey, which they forwarded to 90 locals, they got their first focus group and started getting a good idea of what parents wanted and what they would be willing to pay. And so Little Cooks was born – the pair moving from soccer clubs, to cricket halls, to school staff rooms, teaching kids to cook after school.

"If you involve kids in the process of cooking, that's how you get their attention," Tait-Bradly says. "They're taking part in something they don't get to typically do at home. A lot of the time mums and dads are working and that skill has been lost."

One or two generations ago, cooking was a skill that was passed down from mother to child, but now with both parents having to work, getting dinner on the table is viewed as another source of stress, rather than a creative outlet. It's a battle both mothers are very familiar with, but they say it's slowly killing our enjoyment of cooking and of eating.

"We have enough stress in our lives. Cooking should be one of those activities where you can take time out and enjoy it," Tait-Bradly says. "Because you're going to put that food in your body, and if you create a bowl of stress, you're going to eat a bowl of stress and then how are you going to feel?"

There are two key aspects to Little Cooks that they believe set it apart from other businesses in their market. One: the food is easy and relies on only basic kitchen appliances – which appeals to parents, who don't have to go out and buy the latest gadget. And two: the food is fun to make, and creatively named.

In August, they released their first cookbook through Scholastic, *Piggy Pasta and More Food With Attitude*, which Tait-Bradly describes as "creative and fun and silly and ridiculous".

"We didn't start off wanting to own that 'play with your food' territory but it's where we've ended up," Woolfall adds. "There are a lot of kids out there with big, big problems and this is the way to do it." >>



Left: The Hot Diggity Dog hotdog. Below: Piggy Pasta. Right: Tait-Bradly and Woolfall put their friendship first.



'Kids are often victims; they're eating what their parents give them. But when you teach the child how to cook and eat, they can take those lessons home'

In good company

The team behind Little Cooks share their tips for running a business with your best friend

DO: Make your friendship a priority

"We try to make a point of having friend time. When you run your own business, all you ever talk or think about is work!" Tait-Bradly says.

DON'T: Be afraid to have awkward conversations

"You have to be able to talk about the difficult things," Woolfall says. "We have to both make sure we're bringing the same amount to the table."

DO: A lot of research

"We used Survey Monkey [free survey tool] for our test market," Woolfall says. "Use social media – put an idea out into a forum. Gather information on what people want once you've got your idea."

DON'T: Spend a lot of money

"Don't invest too much money, because you don't know what will happen," Tait-Bradly says. "A lot of it can be done very cheaply."

DO: Have a plan

"Once you've done your research, create a plan. Work out your strengths, weaknesses, vision, top line," Woolfall advises. "Remind yourself: 'What were we here for?'" But also, be nimble and open to change – go with wherever it takes you."

Woolfall – whose brother is single sculls Olympic champion and Team New Zealand star Rob Waddell – grew up on a farm and had plenty of experience cooking for the shearers from a young age. For Tait-Bradly, however, who grew up in America just as the pre-packaged food craze hit in the early 1980s, it was a totally different mindset.

"All the stuff in the freezer was the pre-made dinners, and boxes of cookies, all low fat but high sugar. There was this movement to decrease the fat in products but at the same time, all the other junk was increasing. Now I think maybe it was a gift that I had coeliac disease, because I realised what you put into your mouth actually affects how you feel, how you think."

The rise of childhood obesity is a global problem and New Zealand children are faring badly, with 29% currently either obese or overweight, according to a study published in *The Lancet* in May.

Associate professor Tony Merriman, of Otago's Department of Biochemistry, says lack of food education and a rise in "nutrient-poor processed food", are some of the major reasons behind rising obesity rates.

"It has to begin with public health approaches to reduce the total calorific intake of New Zealanders, alongside approaches to physical activity," Merriman says.

However, Woolfall says even with one of the main driving factors behind Little Cooks being to educate children about nutrition and healthy food choices, it's still hard to convince their parents that cooking lessons

have their place alongside more common extra-curricular activities such as sports.

"Our biggest threat to people's perception in the after-school market is that cooking is not as important as hockey or rugby. That's why it's key we get into schools."

The feedback so far has been excellent – Tait-Bradly says the pair are routinely stopped on the street by happy parents who have finally found an after-school activity that suits their children – and the friends believe cooking is an easily achievable way for children to work on their creative sides.

"Cooking gives these kids an opportunity to be proud of themselves in a way that nothing else can. It's a different way to use their brains. They can do sport, they can do school-work, but cooking is one more way to build their self-confidence because they're doing it themselves."

The pair believe knowledge is power when it comes to tackling obesity from the ground up, and getting children to have a healthy relationship with their food is the way to do it.

It's that mission that has kept Little Cooks going, even though they say it has been a hard journey to get this far.

"Kids are often victims; they're eating what their parents give them. They don't have a choice. But when you teach the child how to cook and eat, they can take those lessons home. You've got to start somewhere. And if parents, for whatever reason, are making bad choices, it's not fair to put that on the kids."

EZ LUNCH

'Convenience without compromise' is how Sandra Finlay describes her simple but brilliant tuckshop makeover for the 21st century. Frustrated by the unhealthy, traditional stodge being sold at her children's school, Finlay made up her mind – with no online background – that she was going to streamline the entire process by putting it on the internet and making it healthy.

And so her company EZ Lunch was born. Schools sign up for the programme, which sees local cafés and caterers make school lunches from a set menu. If parents want their children to get lunch from the service, they organise it all online. No fuss, no mess, and no having to root around for spare change to put in an envelope.

And the best part? The menu was approved by the Heart Foundation, based on Finlay's ideals of additive-free and colour-free food.

"When my son first started school, their tuck shop wasn't anything that was particularly useful to me, as a parent who wanted to make sure the food that was going to my children was good food. We might use it once a term as a treat, but it wasn't useful for those emergency days when the bread's gone mouldy and you've run out of fruit."

Finlay, a mum of three, with one daughter who has intolerances to certain foods, decided parents needed a bit more assistance when it came to what they were getting from existing school systems, and started doing some research.

"We looked at exactly how many schools were in New Zealand, what sort of sales we could get through tuckshops, the use of technology in Kiwi households... All that kind of stuff that could try and give us an idea of what sort of sales we could expect, and therefore what kind of prices we could charge."

She admits a lot of the initial calculations were 'wrong when we got in there', but that was the start of EZ Lunch, which launched in 2011, two years after she came up with the initial idea.

"It was based around all the learning I had for my own children," Finlay recalls. "I still clearly remember standing in the middle of the supermarket, when I found out my daughter had food intolerances and just feeling overwhelmed by everything I picked up. It's an awful feeling to think you've been feeding these things to your children and you had no idea."

Taking NEXT behind the scenes in Dellow's Kitchen, in Auckland's Herne Bay, we get to see EZ Lunch in action.

The cooks at Dellow's have created fresh, individually packaged meals for local schools – lunchboxes filled with butter chicken, macaroni and

cheese and sushi are piled up, each labelled with a child's name and room number. The system is now available at 75-80 schools around New Zealand in Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga and Christchurch.

"We have just reached the point where we're having schools ring us, which is fabulous," Finlay enthuses. "They see it happening in their neighbouring schools and think that it could work well for them. The convenience thing is huge now, and we need it without it being a compromise."

Her enterprise saw her win the Best Food & Beverage award at the Fly Buys Mumtrepreneur awards, which Finlay says made her family extremely proud – her daughter Kate picked her when asked to do a school project on an inspirational person, even though Finlay tried to sway her towards Sir Edmund Hillary or Helen Keller.

But she maintains that growing her own business came, at first, out of needing a job that would work around – rather than against – her role as a mother.

"Working full-time for another company wasn't ever an option; there are just too many school holidays. It makes it really difficult for working mothers. I liked the idea of doing something for myself, so if I do have to drop everything and go pick my daughter up from school, I can."

"And that's been the same with everyone I've contracted – they're parents who would love to earn a bit of extra money and have maybe 15 hours of spare time a week. There's a lot of talent out there – you don't have to write off an entire sector of the population just because they have another role in life as well." □

Should cooking be taught from a young age?

email us at: next@bauermedia.co.nz or facebook Next Magazine NZ

'The convenience thing is huge now, and we need it without it being a compromise'



PHOTOGRAPHS: JESSIE CASSON AND SUPPLIED MAKEUP AND HAIR: SHARON LAURENCE-ANDERSON USING MAC