How to turn your creative outlet into an actual car

An interview with Ovenly’s Agatha Kulaga

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 5851 words.

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Transitioning from passionate side hustle to full-time job

What was the genesis of Ovenly? As I recall, your original career path wasn’t to have your own bakery, was it?

No, both Erin and I had completely different careers and we were both cooking and baking on the side. Baking was a passion of mine for years and it was really more a creative outlet to start, and it was also a way to create a connection with people. That’s what I really loved about it. I think Erin would say the same thing. Erin and I actually met at a food-focused book club while we were still working at other jobs, but we were reading books about food and cooking food for these meetings.

When we met it was really more just an aspirational moment where we wanted to start businesses in food but we didn’t know exactly what that business idea would be. It really evolved into several different ideas, but at one point, we just decided that we wanted to build a business that was scalable—something that could start out very small and slowly grow. Initially we thought, where is there a need in the market? Where is that gap? We were having lots of meetings in bars, just having drinks and talking about business ideas. At a certain point we realized that the bars where we were meeting had no good bar snacks. It was just generally something like a bag of potato chips or some peanuts. So we had this a-ha moment where we thought, “What if we created the ultimate high-end bar snack?” And that really was what got us thinking about starting a food business in a real way.

After that we started recipe testing and playing around with different types of bar snacks. What would be the most appealing? Definitely something salty and something that you would want to keep eating as you were drinking, but also something that would be shelf stable and that could be easily packaged, obviously. We ended up with a few different types of bar snacks and then Brooklyn Brewery said that they would sell them.

photo credit: Dustin Cohen

And then our friend Heather, who had just opened a bar in Greenpoint and knew that I loved to bake, asked to sell our bar snacks, but only if we also did the pastries to sell at her coffee window in the morning. She also wanted gluten-free items, which we could do. That was really the start of Ovenly but in a very non-strategic way. At the time, we still thought that bar snacks were the way that we were going to go.

Most business owners will often say that when you start a business you end up saying “yes” to everything just because you don’t want to miss any opportunity that comes your way. That was certainly true for us. We started doing pastries for a few different places and pretty quickly the pastries took off… and the bar snacks didn’t. After that it was mostly just word of mouth. At that point, we were still baking from our homes.

That seems to be true for a lot of people who turn their food passion into a career. It starts out at home and then at some point it becomes unmanageable.

That is what generally always happens. You're doing shit illegally until at some point you have to do it the right way. Eventually you have to find a commercial kitchen space. That part of the process—going from working at home and moving into a commercial space—is actually super tricky. Obviously, space is an issue in New York City. And when it comes to sharing space within kitchens, there are a lot of legal restrictions related to that. And so our first idea was, "What if we rented a kitchen space from someone who didn't use their kitchen during the day?" We got creative. I happen to live in Greenpoint and Pauly G's, the pizza shop, had just opened that year. I knew that they weren't using their space during the day, so Erin and I rented space from Pauly during the day to make our pastries. Unfortunately, just due to the science of baking, it didn't work out very well. Trying to make pastries that require cold air and cold dairy products in the same room with hot pizza ovens… it just wasn't a match.

So we worked in the pizza kitchen for a few months and just kept looking, inquiring with friends about available spaces. Basically the restriction with kitchen spaces is that you cannot be producing in the same space as someone else if the kitchen space isn't completely divided. That's the general gist of it. So we ended up subletting a kitchen space in Red Hook from another food manufacturer. We ended up being there for a year, but it was not easy to find that space. These days there are actually more co-working spaces within food manufacturing facilities available for people that are interested in doing that. Back then there weren't as many options. It makes sense though, especially at the beginning, because initially you aren't producing food 24 hours a day.

So, to invest a lot of money into a space when you haven't necessarily launched your business yet, when you're just testing things out, is a huge financial commitment. And it's easier, I think, to have these sort of in-between options when you're first starting, which is what we did before we invested in our first real space of our own in Greenpoint.

Don't quit your day job too soon... and don't hold onto it too long

In the early days, you both still had day jobs while trying to get Ovenly off the ground. At what point did that become too much? At what point did you decide to give up your day job?

It was at the point of total burnout. As things started to take off, we were both basically waking up at three in the morning, starting to bake at four in the morning, baking, doing deliveries, and then going to our respective jobs at 9:00 a.m. Then, after a full day of work, I was coming home late and doing the same thing all over again, usually on about three hours of sleep. And it just got to the point where it was completely unsustainable. It was almost this forced decision of like, "We need to do this *now* or this is not going to work for us any longer."

For Erin it was I think it was a bit of easier to dive into it because she was not really happy at her day job and was looking to get out of it and start something immediately. I, on the other hand, had been at my job for 10 years and it was just harder for me to leave it. My boss was also my mentor and he's like my second dad, and so it was hard for me to let go of that. I think it was also harder for me to walk away from the stability of having a regular job. I worked at the NYU School of Medicine in the psychiatry department overseeing mental health and addictions research. It was a completely different career than doing something with food, but I really liked it. I'm a big science nerd and so I liked what I did, but at the same time I had kind of plateaued in my job there. There was nowhere else for me to go, but that was also what made it feel secure. That job allowed me to do all of the creative pursuits that I wanted to on the side, which was great for me, but when the creative pursuit actually turned into a business, it was just this moment of, "Well, shit. Now what?"

Going Pro

When you decide to make the leap to, "We need our own kitchen space," does it then also make sense to be like, "Well, if we're gonna get our own kitchen, we should just have our own store"?

We opened the bakery in Greenpoint in 2012. Before that we had been working out of a kitchen space in Red Hook and it was an insane nightmare. So insane in fact that at one point a friend said to me, "What are you doing? I'm afraid for your life." We were basically subletting a kitchen space from someone that, we found out later, was using the space illegally. It was truly the most insane nightmare year of my life. We had to jump through so many hurdles and challenges related to that space while also routinely working 18 hour days. We were doing everything from washing dishes to doing the accounting to doing the prep work to making the deliveries. And so there was no time for anything in our lives except that. And then there are all the crazy things getting in our way that you can't ever predict, like finding out there is a massive termite infestation or having people from the mob come in at night and trying to smash up all of your equipment with sledgehammers because the space, unbeknownst to you, is being rented illegally. That really happened to us. It was crazy.

Soooo… yes. We ended up finally coming across this space in Greenpoint and we were desperate to get out of Red Hook, so we decided, "Let's move our kitchen into here. And then, since we're already here, let's have a face for the company centered around this space. A little shop."

At that point, we were only a wholesale business and we didn't necessarily have a set retail strategy in place. We knew that we would have to do tastings with wholesale clients and have people come to our space occasionally, so to understand what type of business we were and what our aesthetic was and what our values were, we decided to have this little storefront spot. The space that you're in really does articulate those messages. And so we decided, "Well, we might as well just put a small bakery in the front." At that time, we were on this little dead end block. The park wasn't there yet. There was no one around. It was really just to have a face of the company, a place where we could have meetings and for wholesale clients to come in and taste things. We weren't expecting it to become what it is now.

So eventually the store took off and the retail aspect of your business overtook the wholesale stuff?

Yeah. It's funny, a lot of times investors and other people that we speak with when we talk about our business and our trajectory will say, "Wow. You guys were so strategic in starting the wholesale business first and then moving into retail, because you built this huge clientele and following and a brand awareness first." And that's true, we did, but it wasn't necessarily our intention. That was not part of our business plan, and it was not an intentional strategy. But it really did become that. We had a lot of wholesale clients in NYC carrying our products, so when we opened the retail space we suddenly had customers coming to us looking for the products that our wholesale clients had been carrying.

photo credit: Mark Weinberg

That experience really did help us to rethink what our business strategy was. The retail component is really meaningful in the sense that you have a direct connection with your customers. You're able to tell the story of your business, of who your staff is, of the product itself, directly to the person that's enjoying what you make. You can control the entire experience. And I think that that piece of it was really important to us, and it is what we were missing before. I think sometimes within wholesale business, that message gets lost. Our own staff were trained to talk about the business in the way that we wanted to convey to others. That was really when we realized that, "Wow, this is a whole other opportunity that we have now, to build a community in a different way."

So now we've really pivoted to having a pretty robust retail strategy. We want to be the neighborhood bakery in every neighborhood. And again, I think it's about fostering this community and fostering these relationships with people. With a retail bakery, we're really able to do that. It's not the same as selling your products to somebody and then having no control over how they are displayed or sold. The pleasure that we get out of walking into the bakery and seeing so many people enjoying the experience that we've created for them is really incredible.

Not everything is gonna feel creative and fun all the time

For a lot of people, the idea of turning your creative project into a business sounds fun, but when you're suddenly working 18 hour days and doing a million different jobs—or when you have to hire people to help you bake and it's no longer just a hobby—it can suddenly feel very different. When the business side starts to get very real, how do you stay connected to the part of all this that feels creative and fun and good?

It was definitely a creative project to start. I think the difference for me, as opposed to some other people that might go into business and turn their creative projects into businesses, is that we really went into starting and growing Ovenly with the intention of turning this into a business that's scalable. You start small and move in baby steps as you grow. And that doesn't mean that the creative component has to come out of it. Also, you kind of have to view all of it as a creative challenge. I see creativity as being constantly challenged and feeling uncomfortable and facing new tasks and new problems. I find creativity within the puzzle of problem solving and growing a business.

Baking was always a passion because it was an outlet for me. It was something for me to do that was creative, but also the tactile component was really huge. It was really meditative and relaxing. It was something that was unrelated to the work I was doing at that time. So when we started the business, and after being entrenched in it for the first few years during which we were totally working our asses off, your feelings do change about things and you just have to adjust. After a couple of years had passed and we were finally able to have help and take a tiny step back from the day to day, I found that I didn't even want to be in a kitchen. I stopped cooking completely. I stopped baking. I felt so overwhelmed. I was very conflicted about that, but this thing you love has somehow turned into something really arduous.

photo credit: Winona Barten-Ballentine

I think the thing that kept me going was that, yes, maybe my hands aren't in butter 24 hours a day anymore, but there is still so much creativity that's required in growing a business. You're figuring out what your brand identity is, your aesthetic, all the outward facing pieces of your company and how you want to convey your message to people. That's all creative work. Building a team is also a creative process in itself, and really understanding the psychology of building a team. Figuring out what types of people you need. The entire experience of creating company culture is a creative process.

So the physical act of baking was a creative process that maybe I'm not involved with on a day-to-day basis anymore, but I've regained that in my personal life. Now I'm back to feeling really passionate about cooking and baking. There is a certain creative spirit that still exists and that you kind of have to maintain as you grow your business and refine what it is that you're doing.

Branching out (but only when it makes sense)

You published the first Ovenly cookbook, *Ovenly: Sweet and Salty Recipes from New York's Most Creative Bakery*, in 2014. I know that writing cookbooks is complicated, but was that also a way to sort of reconnect to your roots with the business?

I have so many thoughts and emotions related to that experience. But it was a tough process. My one big takeaway from writing that book was that, for some reason, we decided to write it ourselves. We didn't get any writer to help us. And when you're starting a business and building a business, it's incredibly hard to just decide to drop everything and also write a book. So we were still running all the day to day stuff with the business while writing the book. And it's a lot of work. I developed a huge appreciation for writers and the writing process, especially for people that work from home. I don't think I realized what kind of undertaking it would be to actually get into writing a book until we were thick in the middle of it. I was constantly like, "This is the craziest process I've ever experienced." There's just so much of being inside your head when you're doing this type of work, and it's such a solitary process.

You're so tied to all of the work that you're doing in this way that it's going to be written on paper and never going to go away, creating this thing for the public to see that will always be there. It's such a crazy feeling. Businesses evolve. Things change. It's a little bit easier to adapt and revise and improvise as you go. Whereas, writing a book, once it's on a piece of paper and it gets published, it's permanent. And I think that that was really intimidating.

But yes, in writing the stories behind the recipes and doing the recipe testing, it did bring us back to all of the reasons why we started baking in the first place and how we got to where we were. There were all of these moments and memories that we had really forgotten about until that point, where we started really reflecting upon things and thinking about the stories that we were going to tell. That was the fun part for us. Starting a business, you don't really have time to pause and reflect. You're in it. The cookbook was the first time, I think, after a few years of having the business where we were like, "Damn, we've done so much." And that felt really good, too. But it was a painstaking process.

Steering the ship

So now you have a business, a brand, and a book… what next?

Our retail strategy right now is to open up more stores in more neighborhoods. And that's a complicated process all its own, because one of the things that we really want to ensure is that our brand is represented really well and that we're doing it in a way where you can walk into any one of our stores and know that it's an Ovenly store. But at the same time we want each store to have its own feeling and its own sense of space. We don't want every single store to looks and feel exactly the same though. Right now we have four bake shops that are also retail spaces, and then we have one kitchen that basically creates all of the baked goods that we deliver to ourselves, to each of the locations.

As Ovenly expands and you depend more and more on a growing staff, how do you maintain quality control? Do you ever walk into one of the locations and say, "Oh my god, that's not how that cake is supposed to look!"

(*laughs*) Yes, actually! We're obsessed with quality control. I think that's where it gets really challenging, because everything that we do is handmade. With things being handmade, there is this human component to it, and with that comes with it's own challenges. We like to say, "handmade but perfect." Everything looks and feels like it's made in a kitchen by a person, but at the same time we want it to look perfect. I think we've done a really incredible job with that, but it's also because we're obsessed with quality control. We train our team to also make sure that that's happening, but at the same time you can't be so rigid that you make yourself and everyone else insane.

I think that if every single product looked exactly the same each time, it would take away that human component to it. We don't want that to happen. But at the same time, one of the benefits of working in a food business is that you get to eat everything around you. There's a lot of taste testing that happens. It really is training your team to understand what is important, and it may not be that yes, this has to look exactly like the one before it, but what are the components and qualities that make it so that it is presentable and consistent with what we're trying to create for our customers.

Friendly advice

For anyone out there who has some kind of food passion that they are considering turning into a business, what advice do you have? What are the most important questions to ask yourself before jumping into this world?

There's a long list of them. One of the things that I can say for certain is that I had a dream to open up a bakery. For many years, long before I met Erin, I had several close friends that shared that same passion for baking that I talked to about potentially starting a business. But somehow I knew that they would not be the right partners for it. As much as you can have a passion for cooking, or baking, or food, that isn't necessarily enough. Passion is important, but being able to execute is what really matters. You have to be a really hard worker.

photo credit: Winona Barton-Ballentine

If you look at the way kitchens operate, it's all really just manual labor. So in terms of work ethic, I think it's a big one for food—especially if you're building a business that requires a kitchen—that you cannot be afraid to roll up your sleeves and wash the dishes or be able to do any single job in the kitchen just the same way as anyone that you hire. A lot of people I know might have quit within the first year of the business because it's not easy… and it's not easy for several years. You have to do it for a long time before it eventually gets easier.

When it comes to building a team and figuring out a workflow, you need to be humble enough to admit your own shortcomings and identify the areas where you might just not be as good as someone as at performing a certain task. I think that's actually a huge thing to come to grips with, because as a business owner, it's really easy to want to do everything and want to have control over everything. If you're a control freak, that's probably not going to work. You'll exhaust yourself and burn out if you aren't willing to delegate things to the right people. Unless you're starting a company where you're going to be the only employee, being a real control freak is really counterproductive.

A lot of growth really is about admitting your weaknesses and being able to say, "This person is better than I am at this. They should be the ones doing it." Sometimes it's not easy, especially when it's the company that you're building. I think that there's an element of vulnerability that's really needed to be able to grow a business in a way that is going to be effective and successful.

Time and time again you see chefs that start restaurants after having worked in kitchens for a long time, sometimes with mixed results. Knowing how to work in a kitchen is very different than running a business. I think it is really important to go into this kind of work asking, "Do I want this to be just a passion project or do I want this to be a viable business that's also financially successful?" You need to either have business skills or the willingness to develop some business skills because simply being a good cook or a hard worker in the kitchen is not going to grow a business for you. You need to put together the right team to help you do this, but you can't do that if you're always stuck in a kitchen.

Get the facts before you start and be prepared to still learn the hard way

Ok, so say I make amazing brownies and everyone tells me, "You should sell these!" What do I need to know?

You must have a certified kitchen, a food processing facility, and in order to become certified there are very strict guidelines you need to follow in order to do that, which may vary depending on where you live. You can certify your home kitchen to be a certified food processing facility but it needs to meet these minimum requirements. You can easily find all of that information online. However, most people don't do that because it's very hard and you'll have to install certain equipment to be compliant, which takes time and money and a certain amount of investment. Considering that most people—particularly in NYC—rent their apartments, it's just not gonna work. Even if you own your own home, making your kitchen food sale certified is not an easy task.

So my advice is to just start by Googling everything. But more important than that is doing real world research. When we were first starting, the thing that we spent a lot of time doing was emailing every single person we knew that might somehow have relevant information to what we were doing. When it was possible, we met with them and asked them every possible question we could think of. Something that I felt really grateful for is that there were so many people that shared their knowledge and their resources with us during that growth process. In my experience, the food community is generally incredibly supportive and there's so many people in the business that are willing to help each other out. I was so grateful for that.

We met with a lot of other food producers and asked, "How did you do this? Where did you go for this? Who are the vendors that you worked with? How did you negotiate pricing? How did you find your space?" Depending on where you live, the most most helpful answers to these questions will come from other people who are actually doing it. Find out who makes the pastries at your local coffee shop, where do they get their coffee, where do they get their supplies. You just have to ask. In our experience, people were really open with that kind of information, which was awesome.

Following your passion, even if it's not the passion you planned for

So many people leave college and are disillusioned to find that their real passion might have nothing to do with that they went to school for. Chasing your dream can be a scary leap.

Absolutely. I still have thousands of dollars of student debt that I racked up from getting my undergrad degree at BU and my Master's Degree at NYU. Now I'm doing something completely unrelated. Still, I would not change anything because all of those things led me here. Every single thing that I did leading up to Ovenly has somehow shaped what I do now and so many of the skills that I've learned along the way I now apply to this job. I worked specifically with people that had varying needs of treatment related to mental health and addiction. I worked a lot in community treatment programs in New York and I also oversaw all of the staff that treated those people. I feel like a lot of the management skills that I learned over those years and the people skills and everything I learned about the psychology of people all relates to what I do on a day-to-day basis.

The beauty of starting your own business is that everything that you're passionate about and all the values that you have, you can essentially imprint onto the business. For Erin and I, all the things we cared about before doing Ovenly are now infused in what we do there—our backgrounds in social justice and social work we can now apply in different ways, including our hiring practices and our environmental impact and the kind of culture we are striving to create around what we do. The part that is really exciting to me—and the work that still feels very vital and creative—is about trying to build a company that feels like a place we'd always wanted to work ourselves. It's also about creating a place where people can have this little moment of joy, this little break from the daily grind where they can experience some small form of indulgence.

Just because you *can* it doesn't always mean that you should

When you create something successful, there is often a symphony of voices that springs up out of nowhere to tell you what else you should be doing. There is always this tendency to want to immediate do more, add more, sell more, expand. Have you experienced that?

We get that all the time. People have definitely approached us over and over again about, "Well, why don't you guys do bread? Why don't you offer sandwiches? Why don't you offer salads? Why not create a larger menu?"

The thing is, we're not a sandwich place. We're not a bread bakery. We are sticking to our core strengths and that's what we know how to do and we know how to do well. We know how to make fucking delicious, amazing, consistent products and I think that we really have an incredible sense of customer service. And that piece is so important, especially in a place like New York where you can walk into places and feel like you're spending money, you're there trying to take a break from whatever you're doing, and it sometimes can feel even more stressful.

It's not as if we never talk about trying new things—in fact, we try new things all the time—but it's so easy in business to get distracted by all of these other side things, all the things people are telling you that you *should* be doing. Instead of that, I think it's a better use of your time to constantly ask yourself, "What are our core strengths? What are we good at? Where do we excel?" and build on that. All the other things, trying things without actually thinking them through, can lead you down a path that will eventually put you out of business.

Also, I know it's less fun to talk about, but you can't underestimate the financial aspects of running a business, no matter what level you are operating on. If you don't have an understanding of the financial aspects of maintaining a business or growing a business, you will probably fail. It's really important from the very beginning to make sure that piece of the puzzle is being attended to. You can't really go backwards. You can't put a product out into the world at a certain price and then realize six months later that you need to be charging twice as much for it in order to break even. People will not respond well to that.

Aside from the practicalities of running a business, what are the emotional struggles? As things grow and expand and become more complicated, how do you not lose your mind?

The thing that I struggled with personally as we've grown the business mostly just had to do with losing sight of who I was as a person. You become the business if you're not careful. There was a point a couple of years ago where I'd run into people and they'd ask, "How are you doing?" and without thinking I'd say "Ovenly's great!" Ok cool, but how are you? I just sort of forgot what I wanted out of my own life because I was so consumed with trying to grow this business. Now I make sure to periodically take the time to step back and really look at things. You have to make a distinction: This is what I want personally. This is what I want professionally. If those two things can be tied together, that's great. If not, you need to be able to look at other ways to do that. You can't forget to keep tabs on what it is you actually want for yourself, your business, and your life.

photo credit: Mark Weinberg

Ovenly's Agatha Kulaga recommends:

Get comfortable with taking risks, and with failure. There are so many great ideas out there. The differentiator is execution.

All things Zingerman's, including their organizational trainings

How I Built This (Podcast)

Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking* (Book)

Burlap and Barrel for the most beautiful, fragrant, ethically sourced single origin spices

Name
Agatha Kulaga

Vocation

Baker, Entrepeneur

Photo by Winona Barton-Ballentine