

Entrepreneur found out the hard way that food, rather than music, is the spice of life

HOW I MADE IT

Arun Kapil Founder of Green Saffron Spices



ARUN KAPIL left a successful music business in London in order to "find himself". Where he found himself was in a caravan in rural Co Cork, cooking up his next business venture, spice company Green Saffron.

Now 45, Kapil grew up in Scunthorpe in Lincolnshire, the son of an Indian father and an English mother. He spent a year studying business at college before a nascent music career, "in the New Order vein", got in the way.

"I got a deal for a single, which I wanted to go ahead with. But my manager was holding out for an album deal, which never happened."

Determined to never again give someone else such control of his destiny, he set up his own record company, Funky Peace Productions, at the age of 19. He also began organising acid raves.

"Basically it was parties in fields, driving up and down the M25 looking for locations and then paging people in directions. We'd have between 10,000 and 20,000 people turn up and the police couldn't control it. I was making money and having fun but it was totally illegal."

His record label began putting out DJ compilation albums, including an early Ibiza compilation in 1994. Kapil subsequently opened a string of recording studios across London, but his lifestyle took its toll.

"I was working all day and acting as an A&R [artists & repertoire] man at night or going to clubs. I began to get

tired." He also began questioning what he was doing with his life. "My father had come from India with a very strong sense that, as an emigrant, your role is to give something back to your host country. He is a doctor, a property developer and the owner of a number of care homes for the elderly."

Past the age of 30 and knowing he was mixing in the wrong circles, he decided to "get out", a process that took about four years.

"What all that that experience taught me was that I could achieve anything. I came out of it not scared of failure. When it comes to setting up a business that really helps."

He decided to go back to his roots and rekindle a love of cooking he had as a child. In September 2004, Kapil signed up for a 12-week course at Darina Allen's Ballymaloe Cookery School in Cork.

He paid himself an allowance of €100 a week and set himself the task of learning as much as he could, with classes by day and kitchen work at night. When the course finished, he stayed on as an employee, spending his first six months preparing vegetables.

After London, rural Cork was a culture shock. "I fell in love with the place and the people," he said. In 2007, he married Ballymaloe staff member Olive O'Connell Motherway.

While still working at Ballymaloe he started selling spices at a stall at Mahon Point farmers' market in Cork. "I was like Del Boy on the market, but wearing a printed sarong. People seemed to respond to it, they were probably just humouring me but the spices began really selling," he said.

Spices had always been central to his family's cooking when he was growing up, reinforced by frequent trips to his father's family in India.

The Ballymaloe emphasis on procuring the best possible ingredients had also made an impact on Kapil.

He contacted his father and asked to be put in touch with the farmers who

from plain spices to developing his own blends with suggested recipes for their use.

"It began spreading by word of mouth, people would tell their friends and family and more would come. I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but we've never once had to pick up the phone to make a sale in a shop."

By 2008, Kapil was selling in four markets and had moved his business, Green Saffron Spices, into a business unit in Midleton, Co Cork. In the first three years, he doubled revenues year-on-year. With only himself in the business, his costs were low and profit margin was high.

That Christmas, he decided to make a pudding, on the basis that puddings are heavily spice-based. He sold 829 of them at €30 a pop, bringing in almost €25,000, and it gave him the idea for a mulled wine spice packet, which also sold well.

Chefs such as Ross Lewis at Chapter One restaurant, Heston Blumenthal and Alain Ducasse began using his products. Yet it wasn't until 2011 that Kapil sat down and drew up a business plan. Employment grants from his local county enterprise board helped him take on his first staff.

From there Kapil was introduced to Cork Business Innovation Centre and on to Enterprise Ireland, which helped him hone a development strategy.

Last year, Marc Amand of La Rousse Foods became an investor in Green Saffron. Kapil's company now supplies more than 140 independent stores across Ireland, plus supermarkets such as Tesco, SuperValu and Dunnes Stores.

The company employs 10 people and will take on two more this year. There are plans to enter Britain, and the Benelux and US markets in order.

"What I want is for Green Saffron to be a global Irish spice brand selling around the world," said Kapil. "It's my way of giving something back."

SANORA O'CONNELL



Kapil prepared spices in his caravan

supplied spices to merchants used by his family in India. Where others were buying a commodity, he was seeking out quality.

He would work a double shift in the kitchens at Ballymaloe and then spend nights in his caravan preparing spices by hand with a coffee grinder and pouring them into little packages. To focus his mind on the business, he stopped paying himself his weekly allowance.

As it happened, he began making money pretty quickly, moving rapidly