

Forget a desk job



Young foodies are betting that their bright ideas — gourmet croutons, bespoke s'mores — are their ticket out of the rat race

By [Kathleen Pierce](#)

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Leigh Foster catches tubes of penne as they shoot from a pasta maker. At her side, Rachel Marshall readies a gift package of pasta with pesto made of kale and spiced pumpkin seeds. The fresh-faced, ponytail-wearing duo may look like college students in a culinary class, but this is no dry run. Foster, 25, and Marshall, 27, are deep into their second year as owners of Nella Pasta, a food company operating out of CropCircle Kitchen in Jamaica Plain.

As former co-workers at a Boston design firm, their days were spent “sitting in a chair in front of a computer,” says Marshall with a moan. “We never had to think,” Foster says. Now their weeks are as diverse as their penne — wheat and ground flaxseed, beet, roasted red pepper, and squid ink. They may not be rolling in the dough just yet, but even in the middle of a harried work week, they radiate life. “If you have a job that makes you happy, it’s not like going to work,” says Foster, who fell for fresh pasta during a college semester in Florence.

In the past few years Greater Boston has become a hub for young food entrepreneurs attracted to places like CropCircle Kitchen, which rents out ovens and counter space. With job security bleak and personal fulfillment a high priority for this generation of Millennials (born between 1980-95), more and more of them are stepping away from traditional jobs and into the kitchen. Besides Nella Pasta, about a half-dozen energetic new businesses have sprung up in this region. They include Emmiez Croutons, Sweet Lydia's, Grillo's Pickles, and Chive Sustainable Event Design and Catering.

CropCircle (formerly Nuestra Culinary Ventures), is a shared kitchen space where companies pay from \$15 to \$30 an hour for access to commercial ovens, counter space, and industrial mixers. Of the 22 food companies that rent here, seven are run by entrepreneurs in their 20s.

"I can't imagine a better time to start a new food business," says Jonathan Kemp, executive director of the culinary incubator. "The generation of folks in their early 20s that have been constrained with traditional jobs and unsatisfied with the suburban home model haven't been told that they must keep doing it," says Kemp. "They have an urge to do something different."

Lawrence Hester sure did. The Brown University graduate left a six-figure salary on Wall Street after three years because he "wasn't excited to go into work anymore." At a potluck dinner one night, he turned the one thing he knew how to make — banana bread — into croutons. An exit strategy was born. "People have salads every day, but there's no effort put into croutons," says Hester, 27, an athletic blond with a runaway beard. "The flavors of most croutons are so bland. This could be a whole new market."

He dipped into his 401(k) and \$15,000 savings to launch Emmiez Croutons last summer (the company is named for his mother, Emmie). Now instead of trading equities on a hectic sales floor, Hester turns Monterey Jack jalapeno corn bread and cranberry pecan bread into tasty croutons with his girlfriend Dawn Leanness, 26, while most people are sleeping. Emmiez Croutons have been on the market since August. A 4 1/2-ounce package costs \$4.99.

While leaving the nonstop pulse of New York was difficult, Hester couldn't have launched his crouton company there. "In New York you have to be on a career path," he says. He finds the population in Boston young and "everyone is doing their own thing."

Nella Pasta began with a few thousand dollars in the bank; the owners were able to sustain themselves after a few months. A \$10,000 prize they won from the lifestyle website DailyCandy helped. This month they upgraded their pasta machines, redesigned their packaging, and are gearing up to "go big," says Foster. Nella Pasta costs \$8-\$12 for a 10-to-14-ounce package.

A funny thing happened to Travis Grillo on the way to finding a career. The budding entrepreneur gave up searching for a job designing sneakers when he bit into a juicy pickle, made by his father, one summer day. That's when he decided to bring "garden-fresh pickles to the masses," he says. In summer 2009, he launched Grillo's Pickles using his family's Italian recipe.

Since then, he's gone from selling two spears for \$1 outside the Park Street MBTA to selling his pickles at the EMC Club at Fenway Park and in 48 Whole Foods Markets. "Boston is the kind of place where you can break the ice. The city really embraced what I was doing," Grillo, 29, says.

For the owners of Chive Sustainable Event Design and Catering, a Beverly-based company run by a trio of women in their 20s, being able to work for themselves is sweeter than any corporate gig with an unlimited expense account. Julia Frost, a Suffolk University grad, went into business with her sister Jennifer Frost and Lindsey Wishart to improve the food choices in the region.

"We have never been able to go out and have a meal made for us that is beautiful and delicious and has some food value behind it," says Jennifer Frost, 26. So they launched their own farm-to-table company. Besides weddings, they cater at Harvard University and often whiz to the other side of Cambridge to serve organic meals at tech company events.

Julia Frost, 25, relishes the freedom of having creative control over her days.

“I feel terrible for anyone who would have to work in an office. We have so much variety in our lives. One day we are planning menus, the next we are in the dirt harvesting with a farmer,” she says.

To Frost, if there’s one characteristic that defines her generation, it’s gumption. Their attitude when approaching a business decision is, “Let’s just make it happen. If we fail, who cares? We are young.”

Fears about being laid off, outsourced, or forced to deal with volatile bosses stirred this younger generation into action. They flock to food because it’s tangible and less risky than other business ventures such as tech start-ups. “There is a whole universe of truth that if food tastes good, people will buy it,” says Kemp. That’s what Lydia Blanchard discovered when she launched her s’mores company, Sweet Lydia’s, in the back of a Lowell cafe last year. At first the former after-school program director struggled to get business owners to take a chance on her chocolate-covered toasted marshmallow and graham cracker snacks. “They totally didn’t sell, not at all,” says Blanchard, 27.

After a year of marketing her treats on blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, her pumpkin-spiced s’mores were featured on Brides.com last fall and her peppermint s’mores dipped in dark chocolate and crushed candy canes were a holiday hit. Even though she pays herself the bare minimum and works a 70-hour week, she wakes up every day motivated. “I hate the feeling of dreading work . . . that’s just not good enough for our generation,” says Blanchard.

Before she knew she would be making marshmallows for a living, Blanchard saved \$24,000 for the next phase in her life. By living frugally — and working a second job part time — she has been able to keep the Web-based confectionary company in the black. Sweet Lydia’s s’mores cost \$3 each or \$16.50 for a box of six.

When you’re on your own, there’s no one to suggest you learn a new skill, and certainly no IT guy to call for help. But these emerging CEOs are taking control and feeling empowered. “If we fail it’s our fault. If we succeed it’s because we did it ourselves — 100 percent,” says Foster.

So they learn as they go. Hester considers Emmiez Croutons “my own personal business school.” Now that his former Wall Street colleagues see what he’s accomplished, his status has changed from escapee with a half-baked idea to legend. “Everybody needed to see somebody jump off the cliff. I’m an example of hope.”