

Expat entrepreneur and food revolutionary



It's not every day that you meet someone with the profile and accomplishments of Renée Elliott and find her or him so affable and easy-going. People who have revolutionised something fundamental in our lives, in her case the way we shop for food and what we eat, often run the risk of appearing more rarefied and slightly unapproachable. But not Renée who in 1995 opened the doors to the very first Planet Organic, the ground-breaking chain of supermarkets dedicated to healthy living. We easily ran over our allotted time for the interview and frequently veered away from the topic of her experience as an expat entrepreneur and innovator and into the common ground in our respective lives. This approachability and easy manner is no doubt one of the keys to her success.

Like many, Renée's expat experience started unintentionally when she was a 20-year-old student from Massachusetts travelling around Europe in the middle of university studies. In fact, it's by sheer luck that she ended up in London at all as she says it wasn't where she initially planned to be. "I came to Europe with my sister and friend, and we went to Paris. I didn't want to be in London because it didn't seem foreign enough!" she jokes. But they did come to London and it was a night bus journey from the West End to east London, where she was staying, that changed everything. "We had been in a club until late that night. It was cold and there was no Underground so we took the night bus. The door opened after one stop and in stepped a tall, dark and handsome man. I've been with him for 33 years now."

After returning to finish university in the US and realising that the relationship with the man from the bus, Brian, was more than a holiday romance, Renée headed back to London. "I got a job but needed a work permit," she explains and before long she and Brian were husband and wife. "I came over for a boy. I thought it would just be for a few years." Those years ticked by with a glamorous stint working as a journalist on a Wine & Spirit magazine, a

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job that involved a lot of travel and dinners. But Renée was aware that she wanted to do something else. “I knew I wanted to own my own business. I needed to be passionate about it and I wasn’t interested in convention.” It was back in the US at Bread & Circus, an innovative, organic supermarket in Boston that she had an epiphany. “It was something different. It was a beautiful, clean store with brilliant products and knowledgeable staff and I knew then that that’s what I wanted to do.”

Renée didn’t let the small matter of knowing nothing at all about retail get in the way of her plans but she did rely on her strong background in health and her family tradition of good food appreciation. “The health interest was always there. It’s why I studied it at university. My mother Lucille was an amazing cook and baker who always cooked from scratch. My father, Edward, was an engineer and always had a huge vegetable garden which we all helped out on as kids. I knew nothing about retail but I knew I had to do it,” she explains. After a stint working at an organic shop in London to gain necessary experience, Renée launched Planet Organic in November 1995. “I had a lot of negativity from certain places saying ‘don’t follow your dream.’ My attitude was it will either succeed or fail but I have to try.”

It’s difficult to imagine now with seven locations in London, and its imitators a feature of most high streets and towns, but at the time Renée and her business partner had a hard time getting funding for the project as “investors were not on board. They couldn’t get their heads around the concept of this new way of retail.” While much of the funding came from friends

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and families, there was one banker who was willing to take the plunge as he remembered when his institution passed on the opportunity to invest early in the Body Shop. In fact, Renée cites Body Shop founder Anita Roddick as one of her role models because of the way Anita shook up the body care industry. “Anita was doing in body care what I wanted to do in food. I felt horror at the realisation that no one is looking out for my best interest. Just because it’s for sale doesn’t mean it’s good for you. I wanted a store where everything fits that ethos.” The chain of stores bills itself as the one-stop shop for all the right choices and she’s especially proud that during various food scares over the years, Planet Organic have never had to pull any products off the shelves.

Planet Organic is now 23 years old and in the intervening years Renée and her shareholder hired a CEO. Renée stepped aside to relocate to Italy for a while with her family. “I was very tired and stressed. We went for one year and stayed for three” she explains. This was after a turbulent time when she and her business partner went their separate ways after disagreeing on how to take the company forward. A lawsuit ensued and was eventually settled, leaving the business in Renée’s hands. “I learned lots of lessons with that experience. You don’t know what you’re made of until life throws something difficult at you,” she reflects. And from this vantage point Renée confidently states that the hardest lesson she learnt from that experience was to always trust your gut. “Don’t say it’ll be fine if you suspect a red flag. All good relationships are based on trust, respect and good communication. Make sure investors respect what you’re doing and always talk things through. If you’re unsure and it’s uncomfortable, talk about it. It might not be very British, but do it! Life is about relationships.”

Now back in the UK, Renée has developed another innovative business, Beluga

Bean, a business and life skills mentoring academy. Where Planet Organic is focused on physical well-being, her new venture is all about what she calls the Seven Spheres of Wellbeing – physical, occupational, economic, social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. It grew, organically of course, from the years of experience Renée gained from business, personal development and mentoring. “Beluga Bean is a very mothering, nurturing thing to do. My mother was very loving and nurturing. I thought all mothers were like that but I saw friends who didn’t have that,” she explains. The academy is all about empowering people – it has focussed on women, but now includes men – with the know-how for things we usually don’t learn in school. “Girls are going out into the world without the skills for things like household budgeting, understanding their taxes, pensions, managing salaries. Girls asked questions about these issues so I thought ‘I could run an academy!’”

The mission of the academy is how to lead a fulfilled, joyous life. The biggest lesson Renée says she has learned over the years is that “you are the most important person in your life. You have to take care of yourself before you can show up for anyone else.” And the best lesson? That it really isn’t about the destination, getting to some idealised point on the horizon where everything will be different, but about the journey. “If you don’t enjoy what you’re doing, there’s no point. It’s a rollercoaster and you have to enjoy it. Also, being older I’ve learnt that there aren’t success and failures. You learn and move forward. The only failure is if you don’t learn anything.”

Francine Bosco is the Editor of FOCUS magazine and can be reached at focus.info.editor@gmail.com