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Turning your passion into your business

Seattle couple ditch corporate careers to start wine and food companies — leaving little free time to savor the results

By TERESA MEEK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Who hasn't dreamed of ditching the corporate suite to start a business doing something you love?

If only it weren't so risky.

After 20-plus years each in the tech business, Kevin and Holly Brown took the risk. They followed their passions for wine and food into new careers. The results show that a "passion business" can succeed — if you do your homework first.

The Browns, who met while working at Visio Corp. before its acquisition by Microsoft, used their savings accumulated over the course of two careers to transform their West Seattle house into the "Brown Lounge," which doubles as incubator for their startups — Kevin's winery and Holly's food-and-entertaining website — and home to the Browns and their kids.

Kevin, 55, has won awards for the Siren Song wine he started making in 2009 and selling in 2011. And Holly, 49, is attracting a growing clientele to the website she started a little more than a year ago, the-BrownLounge.com, which offers recipes, home entertainment tips and how-to videos for things like making paella.

Their lives can be chaotic, and they both work 60-hour weeks. But they wouldn't have it any other way.

'You only live once'

"When you believe in yourself and have skill and experience and passion for something, you have got to go for it," Holly Brown said. "You only live once."

But the Browns didn't just plunge in.

Kevin Brown, who has a tech-entrepreneur background, turned to the Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers and took advantage of online videos offered by Washington State University's Viticulture and Enology program. He also attended South Seattle Community College's Northwest Wine Academy.

"It's a very rigorous program," he said. "I enrolled like any 18-year-old. Took chemistry for the first time in 30 years."

His son Connor will enter the same program in April, and is thinking about joining the family business someday.

Kevin Brown wasn't afraid of starting a company, having done it several times



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO 1/Anthony Bolante

ACTION!: From right to left, Holly Brown, her husband Kevin Brown, chef Erin Coopey and videographer Mark Malcolm pause in between video shoots of "The Brown Lounge," being shot in the kitchen of the Browns' West Seattle home.

before. Still, wine is different. "I was a software executive for 30 years and now I'm a farmer," he said. "I'm talking about pruning, weeding, spraying grapevines."

People don't usually think about pruning and weeding when dreaming of a vineyard. Nor do they envision having to deal with large quantities of inventory.

"We see a lot of people who want to start their own business, but they really need to sit down and decide if they want to take the risk and have a tolerance for being an entrepreneur," said Larry Spelhaug, a member of Seattle's Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), a nonprofit that offers seminars and other help to people setting up shop.

To succeed, added Daniel Rossi, executive director of Northwest Entrepreneur Network, another Seattle nonprofit, you need three things: knowledge, collaborators and money.

"Cash," he said, "is more important than your mother."

And don't try to do everything your-

self, Rossi added. If taxes, legal work or marketing is not your area of expertise, find help from people who know about these things rather than trying to wing it.

"Let a plumber be a plumber," he said. "You make more money doing what you do."

But hiring people to help also adds a new wrinkle.

"It's been very challenging with help," Holly Brown said. "There'll be someone who gets your vision and others who just don't get it at all...With my first website, I finally had to cut the cord and start with someone who 'got' me."

Another hot-button issue is market research. Rossi said he sees a lot of people who have what they think is "the billion-dollar idea" but haven't done a reality check. It's important to hear from people who might actually buy your product.

That came naturally to Holly Brown, whose last job before starting the website was working as chief innovation officer for a digital marketing agency, where she

did a lot of explaining to clients how to manage their brand online.

"I was very well-versed in the whole digital media, social media phenomenon," she said. "For me, it reached the point where I was compelled to take the advice I was giving to clients and do it on my own terms with my own brand."

Regina Daigneault, coordinator of South Seattle's wine program, said many people think they can break into the business by learning how to make wine.

"But you can't just make wine; you have to sell it," she said. "If you make two barrels, now you've got 50 cases in your basement you've got to do something with. It's not as easy to sell as you'd think."

Producing and selling wine is also expensive. Investment costs for wineries range from \$500,000 for a 2,000-case winery, to more than \$2 million for a 20,000-case one, according to a WSU study. Building and land costs account

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VIDEO FEED: At left, chef Erin Coopey is a blur with her chef's knife while she chops ingredients for a Mediterranean salad to be used in a video segment of "The Brown Lounge." At right, Holly Brown (center) works on camera settings with videographer Mark Malcolm, while Coopey sets up for a video segment.

BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTOS | Anthony Bolante

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for the largest percentage of the total. The next step would be acquiring or starting a vineyard, which requires soil analysis, consideration of the direction of the slope and water rights, among other things. Even established viticulture regions like Chelan County, where the Browns have their seven-acre vineyard, can be challenging. "It's an agricultural product," Daigneault said, "and you don't get the same thing every year." Kevin Brown learned that lesson after winning a gold medal at the Washington State Wine competition for a wine called A

Night in Madrid, which he made in 2009. He couldn't repeat his success the next year because the grapes weren't available. His business isn't cash-flow-positive yet, but his bottles retail for \$25 to \$32, and he expects to make money in 2014. He delivers wine to Seattle-area restaurants himself, chatting with the owners and getting feedback. It's not only less expensive than hiring a distributor, it provides him with a key to success: making sure he finds the right customers for his products, and giving them what they want. Essential advice for anyone thinking of starting a business.

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CROWDSOURCING YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS

When Kevin Brown needed to design a wine label, he got a price quote from an agency: \$30,000. "I almost had a heart attack," he said. Instead of using the agency, he used a crowdsourcing app called Crowdspring.com. He described the basics of what he wanted in a design and offered to pay \$300. Within a week he had 25 submissions, some of them excellent. He ended up buying three for \$900 and combining elements of each to create his label. "You could never have done that 10 years ago," he said. Another crowdsourcing app useful

to people starting a business is Amazon's MechanicalTurk.com. You can ask specific market-research questions of hundreds of people in a chosen demographic, paying anywhere from 25 cents to \$2.25 or more per internet survey response or phone interview. Who would agree to do a survey or interview for 25 cents? "Folks are interested in being the person giving out that data," said Daniel Rossi of the Northwest Entrepreneur Network.

— TERESA MEEK

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2012 Washington's Best Workplaces honorees from left Dan Kearney, 110 Consulting; Christian Chabot, Tableau Software; Danielle Burd, Umpqua Bank; Aaron Blank, The Fearey Group. Photo by Marcus R. Donner.

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