

Partnerships

Andy and Claire Burnet

The husband and wife team behind fine chocolate company Chococo explain how, from the cramped confines of a Swanage alleyway, they turned a sweet idea into a growing £1m-turnover business with 30 staff

Vital stats

Founded 2002

Founders Andy and Claire Burnet (previously with United Biscuits and Procter and Gamble)

Location Swanage and Wareham, Dorset, and Winchester, Hampshire

Staff 30

Turnover £1m

International *The Chococo Chocolate Book* (published by Ryland Peters & Small in 2011, £16.99) is available in the UK, US and Denmark

Words
Behiye Hassan
Portrait
Amit Lennon

Claire Burnet We are artisan chocolatiers with an ethos of using fresh and local ingredients in our chocolates. They have no additives or preservatives, so they have just a two-week shelf life, which is very different to most commercially produced chocolates.

Andy Burnet When we met we were both living in London, working in corporate careers. My family came from Swanage in Dorset where we got married in 1999. When our first child Lily came along at the end of 2000, she was a bit of a catalyst for us changing direction with our lives.

Claire Burnet My parents lived in Brussels for many years. When I'd visit we'd go to the chocolatier for chocolates handmade on the premises with fresh ganache cream fillings designed to be eaten within days, not months. I thought: 'There's an opportunity here: a gap in the market for someone to create truly fresh chocolates on the premises, continental-style – a local chocolatier.'

Andy Burnet We were fortunate in that we had a flat in London, so we sold it to fund the business and moved to Swanage. There weren't any chocolate courses in those days, so we found a chocolate-maker in Sheffield who was prepared to train us. The rest was lots of practice in our own kitchen, testing ideas on friends and relations. We wanted to show we were real people making real chocolates, so we bought an old hairdresser's and put the kitchen on the ground floor – with a viewing window so people could watch us – and the shop upstairs.

Claire Burnet In the alleyway we were in, there were some other

units that we acquired over the years to grow the business. We were able to move the kitchen across the road and then put the shop downstairs, so we had space upstairs for packing. We also secured the space next door, which had been a little beauty parlour and turned that into our chocolate café.

Andy Burnet We then hit a massive hurdle – we couldn't grow the business because there was no more space. We'd reached that natural point where we had to decide whether to expand or to accept it, so we decided to expand.

❷ Couples working together should separate work and home or it becomes all-consuming"

Claire Burnet

We put together a business plan in 2008, looking for funding, but our plans had to go on hold until [the economy] settled down. In 2010, the confidence came back in and we got a bank loan to fit out a factory space in Wareham [Dorset].

Claire Burnet As a couple working together we've tried to share the childcare. The children see a lot more of Andy than they would have done had we stayed in London, so that's been a benefit. They probably see less of me, because more often than not I'm the one doing the press and buyer meetings. We try not to get tired at the same time – that was advice we got very early on: share the load so there's always one of us fresh.

Andy Burnet We don't take work

home and that's something that's evolved out of necessity. If you've got two young children you can't always be working at home. This was part of the decision not to have a house with the chocolate factory in it. I suppose we were guilty to start off with, when too many board meetings were being held in the bedroom at night.

Claire Burnet Don't do that, very bad idea! A top tip for couples working together is to separate work and home. Otherwise it becomes all-consuming and it's tough on the kids. If you get stuck on something, don't make decisions when you're tired, don't make them late at night. Often the world looks quite gloomy at night – go to bed and in the morning a solution often presents itself.

Andy Burnet We're now working on developing our Winchester shop, which opened in December 2013, so it's an evolving process. We are also focusing on our corporate gift service. Our fresh chocolate is a great way to reward clients or staff and say thank you, so that is also a real focus area for us.

Claire Burnet We've made so many changes last year: we put in a new Epos [electronic point-of-sale] system, opened a new shop, launched a new website. So this year it's about reaping the benefits and planning for what's going to happen next. It's an opportunity, not to catch breath, but to learn how to use the tools we've put in place to build the business. ❶

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