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Lizzie Vann

Founder of Organix brands

When Lizzie Vann first hit on the idea of making healthy organic food for babies, she decided to draw up a list of the most nutritional ingredients she could find and then mix them together to create the ultimate superfood.

Unfortunately, the three foods at the top of her list were blackberries, lean steak and peanut butter. The experiment was not a great success. She says: 'I ended up with this horrid, grey, slimy mess that looked like a squashed slug.'

Happily her subsequent attempts to create healthy food for children worked rather better. Sixteen years later her company Organix sells £36 million of baby food a year, the company has won numerous awards for food quality and campaigning and Vann has been awarded an MBE for services to children's food.

Brought up in the Midlands, Vann first became interested in nutrition as a child when she suffered badly from asthma and eczema and had to be treated with steroids. She says: 'I felt I needed to understand my illness and as I studied the



way the body's system works, I started to see there were links between food and health.'

She went on to briefly study biology and ecology at Lancaster University, where she also became actively involved in campaigning for social justice. This included volunteering for housing action trusts and helping to set up a wholefood worker co-operative.

Her campaigning took a temporary back seat as she pursued a career as an investment analyst with a firm of actuaries in the City. But after eight years she realised she wanted to get back to the issues she believed in. She says: 'I have always wanted life to feel like it has a coherent pattern to it and makes sense, instead of putting different aspects of your life in different boxes. But life in the City didn't feel like that. It felt very glamorous and exciting and I felt very important earning lots of money but it just didn't feel the right thing to be doing as I turned 30.'

She adds: 'I had always had a very strong belief that society needed to be run in a better way and that ordinary citizens could change things. I started to think there had to be more to life than this.'

Vann decided that the best way she could contribute to making the world a better place was to give infants the best possible start in life by creating baby food using organic products and natural ingredients, without additives or chemicals.

She says: 'Babies and children need good food because their bodies are developing and growing and I wanted to make food that would make a difference to their health. I wanted to be a standard setter for the industry.'

Confident that success was just around the corner she quit her job in the City and began experimenting with recipes in her kitchen with the help of a friend. She says: 'I thought "Oh I can do this, it's easy." I decided I needed half a million pounds and thought "I know people in the City so I'll just go and see them." How naive can you be?'

Unsurprisingly her lack of any experience in setting up a food company did not impress. After being turned down by dozens of venture capitalists and merchant banks she was forced to scale down her ambitions. She started up the company with a more modest £50,000, raised through loans from banks and friends. She was not even able to persuade a British manufacturer to get involved and ended up having to get the first batch of baby food made in Germany.

She says: 'I visited lots of companies that made baby food but they all said "Who are you? Have you ever done this before? What backing have you got?" So there was a bit of a credibility gap.'

Her belief in what she was doing started to pay off only when she took a stand at an exhibition for health visitors in Torquay. She says: 'Baby food had a really bad reputation

for being beige and adulterated with maltodextrin and cornflour, so none of the manufacturers would offer its food at exhibitions because people would turn up their noses at it. They gave away things like calculators instead. But we put out bowls of our baby foods for people to taste. They were bright orange and green and purple because they were made with carrots or spinach or blueberries, and people tried them and thought they were great. You could tell what they were by looking at them and tasting them rather than looking at the label.'

Orders from supermarkets quickly followed. Organix now produces around 50 varieties of food for babies and children up to 10.

Vann has meanwhile become a campaigner for better children's food and in 2003 launched a drive for a children's food bill after drawing up a code of practice for the food industry. She has also set up a Food for Life campaign to improve the quality of school meals which has generated a

Fact File

Date of birth: 23 September 1958

Marital status: married with three stepdaughters

Highest level of education achieved: university (did not complete course)

Qualifications: three A levels, qualified investment analyst

Interests: organic farming and gardening, reading, politics

Personal philosophy: 'Live life in the present. And never forget that information is power. The power of information can change the world.'

huge response among parents and schools. It is contributing to a major shift in the way the government sees the challenge of feeding children in school and the way that society more generally views children's nutrition.

In 2008 Vann sold the business to one of its suppliers, Hero Foods, for a substantial undisclosed sum. She no longer works for the company on a day-to-day basis but has stayed on as president and a trustee of the Organix Foundation charity which funds research into food quality and child health.

Now 50, she says: 'I really believe in the power of people. I believe we can change the world by putting out ideas and raising awareness, by showing different ways of doing things and by being noisy and loud.'

Vann says her outlook on life has always been driven by a combination of energy, passion and optimism. She says: 'If I have a spare hour then I think I can do ten things in it. I'm constantly looking for solutions.'