By combining their foodie passions, entrepreneurial vision and sense of purpose, one couple found the recipe for a thriving business

by Aaren Madden
Most people can tell you about at least one unforgettable meal they have had in their lives, but few can claim a meal to be as life-changing as Nicholas Baingo and Lauren Isherwood, both MBA ’10.

At a Buddhist vegan restaurant in South Korea in 2009, the couple was presented with an array of tantalizing dishes. “There was such a variety of textures and flavours, mouth feels, colours; everything was so broad and varied and new to us. It opened our minds to what vegan cuisine could be, especially in respect to flavours that were not very common in North America yet,” Baingo recalls. Says Isherwood, “It was a decade later that we started thinking back on that experience and how we could bring such delicious vegan flavour to our products.”

Enter Vumami Foods and its range of Umami Bomb shiitake chili oils.

Back in 2009, Baingo and Isherwood had no idea they would become specialty food purveyors. Both were working on their MBAs at UVic, after moving from Calgary to Victoria together to begin their studies. In fact, their very presence in South Korea was for a work-study component of the program that also included travel to China. After graduation, the pair married and embarked on their careers.

Today, Baingo is a business development strategy consultant, Isherwood consults in human resources and recruitment, and they run a thriving food business. Their plates, forgive the pun, are truly full, but they are deeply motivated by shared values.

Environmental and animal welfare concerns compelled the pair to become
vegan about three years ago. Initially, they longed for those seductive, savoury umami flavours found most easily in this part of the world in meat-or dairy-based dishes. Then they cast their minds back to South Korea. “We just thought, let’s test every ingredient that we know is delicious and drives the umami experience without including any animal products,” says Baingo. In 2020, after about four or five months of recipe development, Vumami Foods was born.

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In just a couple of months, Vumami products were selling in over 30 farm stands. Local tourism and a resurgence of home cooking brought about by the pandemic were a silver lining for early sales.

Farmstands are seasonal, however, so Baingo and Isherwood moved back to Vancouver Island (they are now based in Sidney) to focus on specialty markets and grocery stores in western Canada. Today—barely one year later—Vumami Foods’ shiitake oils are sold in upwards of 115 shops. Expansion plans are in the works, including new products, wider reach and a facility to ramp up production.

Such rapid growth wouldn’t have been possible without the security of consulting work, even if it is double-edged. “It would be too hard to draw salaries out of such an early-stage company that requires capital to grow,” Isherwood explains. Both worked full time during development, then took time off to focus on product launch. Once the ball was rolling, they went back to consulting part-time—albeit, often with gruelling seven-day work weeks. “We know it’s not sustainable and we’re not going to be able to do it for too much longer,” Baingo admits. “We think once our new facility is open we will be able to scale way back
and just focus on our venture.”

In the meantime, the pair is energized by living their values. In addition to helping facilitate a more earth-friendly diet, they have donated to Food Banks BC ever since they sold their first jar of Umami Bomb shiitake chili oil. Baingo explains, “We have a sense of pride of ownership where we get to build something and grow something that to us is quite meaningful.”

Isherwood concurs. “The thing that makes us so much more passionate about the business is that it’s purpose-driven. It’s a tough, long road to build a business from scratch and when you’re exhausted, just thinking about that positive impact you’re having can really get you through those darker times. Developing new products and having that end connection to customers who are as excited about our food as we are, that really helps to propel us,” she adds.

The couple frequently draws from their Gustavson days, and laugh about how they never expected to refer to the entrepreneurship case studies so frequently. Baingo remembers an early class where students were reluctant to share their ideas, lest they be stolen. “The professor said, ‘Ideas are the easy part. It’s the execution that makes a business successful.’ Now we hyper-focus on successful execution in everything we do. We think that has helped us grow really quickly,” he says.

Their approach seems to be working. “We have customers reach out all the time telling us about the ways they spic up their dishes with our products. Just today we had an independent retailer in Alberta reach out to us because a number of their customers had been asking them to carry our products,” Baingo says. Gratifying moments like that make the long hours worthwhile and show Baingo and Isherwood how their drive, passion and vision are paying off.