

Smart cookies



When two mothers founded their bespoke biscuit business, they were determined to help other working mums balance kids and a career. By **Jane Yettram**

It was when they were working for the same digital marketing agency in Leeds that Saskia Roskam and Lisa Shepherd bonded over a love of baking. Both women had always offered to bake a cake for team members' birthdays – but baking was also a way to connect with their homelands.

'Saskia's from the Netherlands and I'm from Germany,' says Lisa, 'and we missed the flavours of our home countries.'

Together they started baking traditional Dutch and German cakes and selling them on a market stall. 'We were busy mums, wives and employees,' continues Lisa, 'but this was a way to be the women that we used to be, outside all those other hats we wore.'

Saskia then built their first website and the duo set up social media channels. 'Because of our digital marketing background we almost couldn't help ourselves creating an online presence,' laughs Lisa. Their skills meant they began to rank high in Google searches, and just a year later book publisher Penguin emailed asking if they could make some biscuits for a crime-writing festival.

Running the market stall wasn't easy though. They would often bake an array of cakes, only for bad weather to keep customers at home. Then all that food and effort would go to waste. But the discovery of a £5 stamp tool for biscuits at the



Saskia and Lisa with their branded biscuits

TK Maxx checkout changed everything. 'It enabled us to personalise biscuits with a name or message,' explains Lisa. 'That way, we could bake less but charge more.'

Just before Covid, 80% of their business was creating logo biscuits for corporate events. The pandemic, however, put paid to that. 'Everyone felt so disconnected from friends and family, we wanted to do something to help. So we thought, let's bake!,' says Lisa. 'We launched our kindness biscuits – biscuits with encouraging messages like "stay safe" or "missing

you". People could email us to nominate someone they would like to receive a biscuit. Then we handwrote a gift note – for example, "For my sister, who works on a Covid ward – please enjoy this little biscuit and stay safe".'

After their initiative was picked up by social media and local news, they were deluged with requests. 'It was more than we could handle because we were still working from home for the marketing agency, as well as homeschooling our children,' says Lisa.

They had to limit the free biscuits they sent out, but many people bought from their website instead. Orders soared by 400%.

'Then,' says Saskia, 'I was made redundant. It was sink or swim time but we'd had the best Christmas sales so far.'



Making the personalised biscuits

They took the plunge, Lisa resigned from her job, and the biscuit business – which they later rebranded The Biskery – became their focus. 'We wanted to run the business in a way that helped working mothers,' says Saskia, 'so we decided to be open during school hours only and hired our first three employees on that basis.'

It was their own experience of juggling work and motherhood that made this a key principle. 'When I had my first child I was the only woman at work who was a mother,' says Saskia, whose children are now 12 and nine. 'Male colleagues had children but it's a different experience for them. In the mornings I'd have to drop my daughter

off at the nursery and would often be late. It hurt that people didn't try to even understand my reality.'

Saskia also found that colleagues doubted a mother's professionalism. 'After maternity leave people look at you like an alien. Can she still do her job? Is she going to be serious enough? Women lose their status when they have children, whereas men get promoted. It makes women leave the workforce.'

Providing flexible working has helped The Biskery benefit from the experience and skills of mothers forced out of the workforce in this way. 'We operate only five hours a day, but in those five hours



The successful Biskery team

these working mums move mountains because they know why they're doing it,' says Saskia. 'They want to provide for their families. But they also want to be good mums to their children. I don't think people understand how powerful that is.'

Lisa and Saskia now employ five women, and the skills and talents they bring are invaluable. 'Their resourcefulness,

organisational abilities and problem-solving skills are incredible,' says Lisa, whose children are six and nine. 'I mean, when a working mum with young kids arrives at work she's already made breakfast, made packed lunches, got everyone out of the house... Becoming a mother is a self-development exercise. You can be your biggest, strongest self after you have children.'

In fact, The Biskery was cited in a recent report as an inspiring example of how to break down the barriers that keep women out of paid work. And Lisa and Saskia were also recognised in the Yorkshire Businesswoman Awards.

Now, four years since Covid first struck, kindness remains another key principle. 'We made it a foundation of our business,' says Lisa. 'Every Tuesday we send out free thank-you biscuits to people who've been nominated. We call it GratiTuesday.'

And at the centre of everything are the award-winning biscuits that the team of seven women produce. 'We're really proud of our Great Taste Awards and Great British Food Awards,' says Saskia. 'We've won these for our Lebkuchen biscuits, a German Christmas product, and for our signature jam biscuits too.'

Their customers include both corporate clients – from the BBC to RNLI – and individuals. 'We've made biscuits for some very special occasions, such as a 70th wedding anniversary and for a 100th birthday,' smiles Saskia. 'We've even made a "Marry me" one, so someone could propose with a biscuit!'

CINNAMON SWIRL BISCUITS

Makes 40 biscuits

INGREDIENTS

- 50g cream cheese
- 60g soft butter
- 140g sugar
- 1 pack vanilla sugar
- 1 egg yolk
- 180g flour
- Pinch baking powder
- 2 tbsp melted butter
- 2 tsp cinnamon

METHOD

1. Mix the cream cheese, butter, 80g sugar, vanilla sugar and yolk.
2. Sift flour and baking powder into the wet mixture.
3. Roll dough between clingfilm into a 20x30cm rectangle.

4. Remove clingfilm. Brush with melted butter.
5. Mix 60g sugar and the cinnamon, sprinkle onto the dough, leaving a quarter of the mixture for later.
6. Roll the dough tightly (like a sausage) from long side. Sprinkle with remaining cinnamon sugar.
7. Chill for at least three hours, then slice into 0.5cm-thick pieces.
8. Bake on lined tray at 180°C for 12 minutes.
9. Cool completely before storing.



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