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MEAL DEAL

In just three years, Lisa Sohanpal has taken her idea for healthy kids' ready meals to meteoric levels. Now she's about to take an even bigger bite of the apple

REYHAAN DAY REPORTS

It's mid-morning at CUT at 45 Park Lane, and Lisa Sohanpal's laugh echoes through the room. It's infectious – her positivity radiates across the table. She's in a good mood despite her manic upcoming schedule; at the time of interview, the entrepreneur is soon to launch the first collection of premium prepared meals in Europe under her Nom Noms World Food brand, after three years of hard work. But let's go back to the beginning.

"I was working for one of the leading medical device companies, looking after 47 countries and, while travelling, I would have amazing cuisines from around the world," says Lisa. Later she endured a "never-ending pregnancy" – having three kids in three years. It was juggling her demanding work and home life that sparked the idea for what would become Nom Noms. "Trying to cook every single day and having an early flight to catch in the morning was really time-challenging. Also – though I wanted my kids to grow up with a diverse palette – I also wanted them to eat our food: Indian food," she says.

Lisa zeroed in on the need for time-pressed parents to have good quality, healthy food available – and the seed for her business was sown. "I couldn't find anything suitable for my kids – everything was high in preservatives, additives and salt – so I thought there had to be something we could do."

Lisa set about creating a series of dishes inspired by her travels. "I'm from an Indian background, so I started off with Indian flavours; then we wanted to focus on the world foods. We've got Malaysian, Moroccan, British, and now also Korean, Caribbean and Mexican."

Because of Lisa and her husband's medical backgrounds, making each dish healthy was "part of the DNA – a pre-requisite"; with no E numbers, acids, or what Lisa describes as "the nasties". Soon, she was on the way to making her vision of trustworthy prepared meals – initially designed for children – a reality.



That year, Lisa began to understand the full potential of what Nom Noms World Food could be, as she debuted her idea at a trade show. She says the event represented a make or break moment for her fledgling company. Offered the only remaining stand at the exhibition, which was as big as and opposite Coca Cola, Lisa took it.

Nom Noms was the surprise star of the show. "We ended up winning gold – the most innovative brand to enter the market, voted for by the buyers." Lisa says that the show opened up the food service sector. "I didn't realise the potential. Someone who owned 700 food courts around the UK was interested; another buyer asked us if we could serve 600,000 meals a day. I nearly fainted." The brand was picked up by EasyJet that day. "They came to



us and said, 'We want to change the food on our airlines. This is perfect.' We're now going on-board 500 flights per day," Lisa says, barely containing her excitement. One after another, leading companies approached the brand, wanting a slice of the action. "We've just got a deal with British Airways too, on the Indian leg. I just want to fly so I can have my product!"

With the massively increasing interest in the brand from buyers and investors, Lisa had to step up the game. "The brief was to find a producer that could produce half a million meals a month, because that was the kind of volume that was landing in my lap." She says that although

she is determined to make Nom Noms succeed, there is more for the brand to offer than just food. "There's a lot more to be inspired about."

Lisa is referring to her involvement with Akshaya Patra Foundation, an NGO that provides meals to schoolchildren throughout India. The partnership came about after Lisa attended a Women Empowered networking event hosted by Reena Ranger – the daughter of entrepreneur Rami Ranger, who happens to be Lisa's uncle. "I was in concept stage on Mini Nom Noms – I was focusing on the children's market, because that was my personal need and I understood it. I met the UK president of Akshaya Patra

Foundation at this event, and she told me about what they do – how they cook all this amazing food and distribute it across India, feeding 1.6 million children per day.” She says that it gave her a new vision of what Nom Noms could be. “It’s the ‘why’ behind what we do. If I can inspire a future generation and make them see the difference they can make in a child’s life, then there’s even more satisfaction to drive the brand forward.”

As well as committing to feeding 300 Indian children every day, she is introducing innovative initiatives in order to bring the work of Akshaya Patra Foundation to life. Virtual reality is the first, with customers able to learn more about the NGO’s work and the reality of life for many children in India, through the use of interactive videos made using 360 degree cameras. Those who follow the story can unlock further content – which Lisa says: “keeps customers inspired and coming back for more.” She says that her work alongside the charity has helped draw a varied demographic for Nom Noms. “I talk to more and more millennials, and making a difference seems to be top of the



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agenda. They want to feel proud of their association with brands – the brands you associate with say a lot about your own values.”

The brand isn’t just making waves in the UK, either. Nom Noms is gaining significant attention in France – something that Lisa was surprised by. During a trip to Paris, France’s biggest food retailers began lining up for exclusivity on Nom Noms, including Carrefour and Monoprix. The company is now launching in 800 stores across the country. “I thought Britain was the place to launch a ready-meal brand,” says Lisa, “but the reason for the interest in France is because this kind of food isn’t readily available on the shelf.” She says that “nobody is owning the world food space over there” – giving Nom Noms “an amazing opportunity to become leaders in that space.”

Though Europe was the first market to bite, other territories soon followed suit. The company is in the process of shipping its products to Australia, working with “one of the biggest food suppliers and distributors there”; and Lisa has even seen interest from retailers in India that perceive the domestic market’s trust in British products.

But a bigger market awaits. Lisa has been approached by a buyer for 80 boutique stores in New York – as well as, according to the entrepreneur, the biggest distributor in North America. “I showed them our product and he told me we’d got the home run.” This was soon followed by pitches to investors including Whole Foods. Although Lisa admits there is a difficulty in keeping up with the growing demand, she says that she’s determined to make it work. “I’ve got a team in place here, managing locally. The aim is for them to manage UK and Europe, and I can focus on North America, which is the bigger market.”

I ask Lisa what the future holds for Nom Noms. “World domination,” she says, with a wry smile and her staccato giggle. With her sheer ambition, perseverance, and success so far, this idea doesn’t sound that far-fetched.