



Nicola's Teas Bring Taste Back To The Cuppa

It's a huge market category dominated by mass market tea bags but **Nicola Kearns** sees a niche for her bespoke blends of tea leaves. And why not? Tea drinkers are surprised when they venture outside the convenience of the tea-bag comfort zone and discover that this ancient concoction can be delicious.

Niks Tea produces a selection of loose leaf teas, blended with fruits, herbs and spices. Nicola says that the inspiration for her startup came from her experience as a cabin crew trainer with British Midland International, a role that took her to a variety of tea rooms and shops around the globe.

"I decided to embark on a completely new career path in the middle of the recession, and after considering several options I was handed a tea menu in Spain and decided to start a tea business." She called the business Niks Tea in honour of her father, who died shortly before the business was founded. "My dad was the only person who ever called me Nik," says Nicola.



Flying high: Niks Tea founder Nicola Kearns

Distributor

The first packs of Niks Tea went to retail in 2013 in about 20 stores, and that has grown to over 300. "Brown Thomas, Fallon & Byrne, Cliffs of Moher and Wrights of Howth at Dublin Airport are among our customers," she says. After recently launching a new tea blend, Niks Tea caught the attention of distributor Pallas Foods, which has widened the retail reach for the product. "We are gaining market share in all sectors, have just started exporting to Malaysia and we are enjoying every minute of it."

To get the business going, Nicola invested €15,000 of her own funds and avoided seeking a bank loan. "You have to be very creative on a limited budget and make every cent count. Although I've made some silly mistakes along the way, I've also been very lucky." Niks Tea received some LEO funding for its website and for exhibition costs overseas.

Nicola is also a graduate of **Bord Bia's Food Academy** programme.

"That was a fantastic boost and I highly recommend it to anyone starting a food business. It's sponsored by SuperValu and the LEO network. We have been trialling in 15 SuperValu stores in Dublin and Tesco has also committed to giving the brand some shelf space."

Tea ingredients are sourced from tea merchants in Germany, which is something of a hub for the industry. Niks Tea retails for €4.95 a packet and the company also sells various tea accessories. The founder was assisted by two French interns last year and recently she made her first hire at her base in **Terenure Enterprise Centre**.

"Moving there was one of the best decisions I've made. You are part of a community with support and facilities, which eliminates the isolation of running a business alone at a very affordable cost."

KEY TAKEAWAY

Artisan tweaking of an old favourite can be the basis for building your own business.