

Drinkers, prepare for The Big O, says Dragon's Den reject

Submitted by: Yes Consultancy

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Entrepreneur Alex Hall to appear on Dragon's Den Where are they now? Sunday October 8 at 8.00 PM on BBC Two

Pucker your lips and prepare to receive a huge round Greek olive bathed in a delicious marinade. This is what Alex Hall wants you to do the next time you have a drink down the local pub or sports club.

A glamorous mother of two, Alex is the founder of The Big O (<http://www.the-big-o.co.uk>), a thrusting young company about to supply drinking establishments with plump Grade 1 delicatessen-style olives in four flavours.

Customers will love The Big O's olives for their taste, their healthiness and, dare we say it, their sophistication. On the other side of the bar, pub landlords will love The Big O's olives for their six-month shelf life (thanks to patented revolutionary packaging), their aesthetic appeal (especially the arresting display pole) and their healthy margins.

The Big O's impact on bar snacks could be huge. Which is odd, in a way, because if Alex had not separated from her husband five years ago, the company may never have happened. Shortly after the rupture and understandably at a bit of a low ebb, Alex got a job in her local pub from 11am to 3pm. It suited her because it meant she could pick up her kids from school straight afterwards.

"Of course I asked myself, 'Why am I back here as a barmaid?'" she says, "but I had to get on with it. I had no real finance to speak of, and two kids to support."

While working at the pub, Alex noticed the popularity of the fresh olives which the landlady would dish out in little ramekins for a few pounds. Indeed, customers with sharp ears soon detected a strange whirring sound whenever they ordered some olives. There was, in fact, nothing to be scared of: the whirr was just an irrepressible entrepreneur's brain awaking from dormancy.

Between pulling pints, its owner started her own informal market research, asking customers why they liked the olives so much, how much they would pay, and whether they would buy them if they were pre-packed. Three days convinced Alex she was onto something.

One of life's born entrepreneurs, and following a strong family tradition, Alex jettisoned three other ideas she had on the boil and focused solely on olives. She knew what it would take to succeed.

Alex had set up her first company offering flexible secretarial services when she was just 19, and sold it and its three offices when motherhood kicked in at 27. Now, the taste for business success was back.

Over the next nine months, Alex became a woman possessed by her unique vision. Fresh marinated olives sold well in pubs - that she knew already. What she did not yet know was whether there was a company out there which could satisfy the stringent criteria she set herself. The olives would not just taste

delicious, she decided, but they would also have a shelf-life of six months, they would be free from oil or brine (no stains for The Big O...), and they would be attractively and conveniently packaged. Vacuum-packing was ruled out, because customers would need a knife to reach the olives underneath. Instead, a neat plastic pot with a peelable lid appeared in Alex's tunnel vision.

Every spare moment, Alex spent on the phone, online and on anything else that would help her with her mission. Switchboard operators of food, plastic and olive companies Europe-wide got to know her on first-name terms, and quick trips to the shops for a pint of milk became fevered exercises in R&D.

Shelf-stackers in all supermarkets would nudge each other saying, "There's that woman again!" as they watched a willowy blonde figure in dark glasses rattle jars, peer at containers through a horn-rimmed magnifying glass, and stroke boxes with a faraway look in her eyes. Rumour had it she even listened to a jar of gherkins through a stethoscope, although this was never verified. The Big O's founder also reached areas she never imagined existed, including the rather linear world of bar-coding, the intricacies of graphic design and the finer points of plastic production.

Founding The Big O

In November 2002, Alex gave up her pub job and officially founded The Big O. Money was tight, but she still stumped up £400 to have manufactured a prototype plastic pot. That way she would be taken seriously, and anyway, packaging was an important part of the concept from the start.

This was the only pot Alex ever paid for: many improved designs were to follow, from plastic companies with pound signs in their eyes. In fact, Alex has a habit of doing things frugally. While it's true she traded in her battered Peugeot 306 for a set of wheels better suited to a high-flying business executive, it's no less true that she has been slumming it in a converted garage for the last four years.

Yet for all her ardour, stubbornness and self-sacrifice, Alex initially got precious few results. Company after company said they could meet some but not all of her stringent criteria. None, that is, until Alex met a certain senior at a food fair in Barcelona. One of a thousand-odd people Alex had talked to at food fairs around Europe, the smooth Spanish talker claimed he could satisfy Alex's search for The Big O.

That was in May 2003, two months after Alex had received the first tranche of what became a £205,000 private investment. Another backer added a further £50,000 not long afterwards.

"It was a hilarious moment," she says, recalling her Spanish adventure. "I had flown to Barcelona on my own, and speak no Spanish, so this man's daughter who was studying English for her A-level equivalent did the translating both at the food fair and at a second meeting at his factory. His parents had dealt in olives, and so did he, so there was nothing he did not know about the fruit. And he claimed he could manufacture the packaging I needed, so I naturally believed him. After many tricky negotiations on napkins, we had a deal." And his daughter did very well in her exam.

Teething problems made it clear that drastic change was necessary, and the senior convinced Alex a £120K custom-built thermo-forming gas-packing device was the answer. She gave the go-ahead. This impressive bit of kit not only made the pots, but also packed the olives, which were sourced from Spain.

For a while, it worked, and Barcelona became a staple in Alex's life. Every second Wednesday for a year meant getting up at four, flying to Spain, and returning the same day at midnight. For the kids, such Wednesdays meant a day with dad.

Life was a whirl, and Alex was in the middle. Scouting around Europe for a distributor, she also met a charismatic Dutchman called Oos who ran a large food company called Kesbeke Mediterranean. He kept phoning her up asking if they could meet. Now this happens a lot to the tall blonde Alex, and she's a dab hand at gently puncturing admirers' hopes.

Maybe it was because her Dutch was a bit rusty, but this time, our Oos did not get the message. Worn down (although secretly admiring such persistence), Alex finally succumbed but with one proviso: "OK, but only if you bring me a huge bunch of tulips". Sure enough, upon entering the arrivals hall at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, there was the biggest bunch of tulips Alex had ever seen. Somewhere behind them was the man they call Oos. They got on famously, and made a pact: he could distribute The Big O's products around the Benelux once the Big O had grown enough to supply him.

And then, problems. It turned out the Spanish olive firm had promised rather too much, and it eventually went bust. Take-over by a tobacco firm promised salvation for a while, but the company's heart was never in Alex's ambitious project, and deliveries petered out amid legal acrimony. Given that the new sales director had kept telling Alex, 'You're very pretty, you should be in my kitchen cooking us dinner,' she was almost glad when the relationship ended.

The timing was not the best, however. The Big O ground to a halt a mere two months before Alex was thrust into the limelight as a contestant on the BBC TWO TV series Dragons' Den. Alex pitched her idea in her bid to secure £150,000 for a 15 per cent stake from the elite business entrepreneurs - or 'dragons'.

Inevitably, the turbulence buffeting her business meant her confidence had taken a knock. "I had seen Dragons' Den once, when we had a consistent product and I was feeling pretty bullish," she says. "At that time our profits had hit £20K within five months of the company starting, and I flippantly thought I may as well do it, even just as a PR exercise. So in November 2004 I filled in the application form, they looked at the business plan, and after a brief interview, I was accepted."

The dent in confidence meant Alex's performance fell short of her own high standards. The dragons liked the attractive, patented pole dispenser she designed herself to package her olives, and agreed she had a good and potentially lucrative product, but they did criticise the way she came across. "I had been nervous during the screen test, and during the actual shoot, my presentational skills let me down," she says rather ironically, given her winsome mien. "I had to pretend everything was forging ahead with my business when being interrogated, but of course the reality was quite different."

The brutal truth is that the timing of Dragons' Den could not have been worse, scrutinising The Big O at the nadir of its existence. The good fortune that immediately underlines the cruelty of the timing. Tears in her eyes, Alex rang her charming Dutchman to say The Big O had hit the buffers. She was sorry, she spluttered, but their arrangement for him to act as distributor within the Benelux would have to go

on hold indefinitely. Yet instead of an expression of regret from Oos, she got a stark and beautiful question: "Well, can we do it?" The shriek of delight at the other end of the phone provided the answer. The Big O was alive once again.

Today, The Big O is not just alive, but running around shouting with joy. Oos's company, Kesbeke Mediterranean, has invested £1.5m in a new factory based in Beverlo, Belgium to produce the distinctive Big O packaging and ally it with even juicier plumper Grade 1 olives which are now sourced from Greece. Alex cannot hide her excitement. "The other operation (in Spain) worked in the way a Ford Focus does, but this factory is a Rolls-Royce in comparison," she gushes. "Everything is done with such slick professionalism, it's all so organised and clean.

The machine is made by Tramper (a brand highly esteemed in the understandably secretive world of food packaging groupies) and costs a whopping £700K. When I went to see this thing in July last year, I immediately got on the phone to the investors and said 'We've hit the big time, we've got to aim high now.' We really do have a lean mean Big O olive machine."

Unlike olives, money does not grow on trees, and Alex has traded 20 per cent of her company for the privilege of working with Oos. Yet it has been a worthwhile sacrifice. Not only does the Belgian factory boast BRC approval (the HACCP or Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point accreditation needed before food can be stocked in UK supermarkets), the machine inside can lovingly create up to 20,000 pots for the Big O each day.

It may soon need to. Because The Big O is thrusting forth, about to market itself with intent to the UK's 80,000 pubs and their 250 chains, not forgetting all the theatres, bars and sports clubs. Then there are the giant food distribution groups such as 3663 and Brake Brothers - and that's just the UK. Alex really has the feeling now that the world is her, well, olive. Finally, it seems, she is about to really pull it off with The Big O.

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