

From Corporate High-Flier to Artisan



By Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent; and Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Tips and stories from three executives who left a lucrative career to join a skilled trade.

Quitting a white-collar job to open a quaint little B&B has crossed the mind of so many professionals, it has become a bit of a cliché. Those who do get involved in “hobby businesses” tend to do it for fun, after a long career that has secured their financial future. As career coaches counselling talent of all ages, we were intrigued by the phenomenon of younger professionals making the switch. Here are the stories of three international corporate executives who transformed into local artisans.

Laila, the investment banker turned restaurateur

Hailing from the Philippines, Laila was always a foodie. But in her comfortable family environment, only maids cooked for a living. So she

became a successful banker, first at JP Morgan, then Deutsche Bank. Eventually she was offered a finance position in Dubai. She travelled often and frequently took solace in the food joints on her trips. Soon she wondered why she did not just go into the food industry.

She took a year off, reckoning that she was still young and could always go back to finance. During that time, Laila visited Europe, hatching a strategy and saving as much money as she could. Settling on the city of San Sebastián in Spain, she began knocking on doors in search of an apprenticeship.

Her lack of work permit and professional culinary experience led to many rejections, but finally, a prestigious chain of restaurants saw her potential and offered her a place as an apprentice. She started that very day - after rushing to buy her knives and other gear.

Initially, Laila struggled with her fear of making mistakes. She took a colleague's advice to practice outside of work hours, when it would not matter if she messed up a plating exercise. She was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. After a while, she felt the need to return to Asia. Using her connections, she secured a "proper job" in a top Japanese restaurant in Singapore.

An even better opportunity came along when a renowned New York gourmet food retailer opened an outlet in Singapore and recruited Laila to oversee it. This was a pivotal moment of her career, as she was able to keep her chef's toque on while using her business savvy.

But no victory is as long-lived as we wish. Laila next joined the formidable chef and restaurateur Joël Robuchon, and found herself getting her "ass kicked again". In a roundabout way, this led her to return to Spain to deepen her technical proficiency in the culinary arts and do a master's in hospitality management at EADA Business School.

During her studies, she spotted a gap in the market of pop-up restaurants, which were an emerging phenomenon at the time. Seeing a need for high-quality and good-value Asian and Latino street food, she opened "Hawker 45" as the final project of her master's. In a matter of months, the unique restaurant became the darling of the trendy crowd in Barcelona. She has now attracted an investor with whom she is building the business, including brand extensions.

Her financial experience is proving invaluable and she can see herself teaching restaurant finance in the future, as it is “badly needed”. Laila has consistently found the resources to reinvent herself. It has not been easy, and she has missed many a family Christmas. But she is hooked and still has several new concepts up her sleeve.

Jean-Frédéric, the general manager who became a vigneron

Neither his background – a comfortable French professional family – nor his education in a classical French elite engineering school predestined Jean-Frédéric to a life as a winemaker. After six years in the aerospace and defence industry, he earned an MBA at INSEAD. This was followed by an international management career that took him to Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Switzerland, among other places, working for the likes of Philips, Quantum and Seagate.

After enduring many restructurings, Jean-Frédéric started considering an entrepreneurial life. With his wife, he nearly bought a hotel and restaurant business in a ski resort. This opportunity was set aside when he was offered a key role in a healthcare company developing a breakthrough innovation.

One evening, a long work session caused him to miss his flight, forcing him to stay overnight in Paris. Dining with a close friend, Jean-Frédéric tasted a superb wine, which, he learnt, “would soon no longer exist”. Intrigued, he discovered that the winemaker was going to wind down his business, because no successors lined up. After Jean-Frédéric recounted the story to his wife, they decided to pursue a meeting with the producer.

The deal first looked promising. But the unusually complex contract took almost two years to draft. During that time, Jean-Frédéric travelled once a fortnight to the vineyard, learning the ropes of the business, from pruning to ploughing. But at the last minute, the owner accepted an unmatched offer from a Chinese company. Jean-Frédéric and his wife then retained an agent to introduce them to other vineyards. Eventually they acquired the Domaine des Maravilhas, facing the Châteauneuf-du-Pape valley.

Jean-Frédéric and his wife promptly realised that joining the conservative winemaking industry would be quite challenging. Their lack of connections made it hard for them to sell their products. They struggled to optimise their marketing as bootstrapping operations took all their time and energy.

After five years, the couple's winemaking reputation is now burgeoning. They have recruited expert help and are in for the long run. While Jean-Frédéric quips that he has yet to master tractor driving on the perilously steep slopes of their domain, his experience running profitable businesses is standing him in good stead. Expect to see his wines on your restaurant table soon.

Iona, the former equity analyst now thriving as a landscape architect

Compared with Laila and Jean-Frédéric, Iona encountered fewer obstacles on her journey. Raised in the Scottish Highlands, she frequently travelled with her family, developing an appreciation for local cultures and languages. An exchange year in France and a gap year in Australia later convinced her that she needed to make a lot of money to finance her wanderlust. So she decided on a career in investment banking in London.

She first took a junior role on the trading floor at Goldman Sachs, before joining another bank, selling European equities. She loved the constant travel, the glamorous clients and the bright people around her. However, after seven years, the finance world started shifting. As the environment became far less pleasant, she reconsidered her options.

Flowers and plants had always attracted Iona, as they reminded her of the strong artistic bent in her family. She secured a part-time job at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which she found inspiring enough to sell her house and most of her other assets in order to undertake a proper education in landscape architecture. Far more exacting than her degree in economics, her training required many "all-nighters", but Iona quickly found she had made the right choice.

Starting with some small projects for friends, Iona set up her own practice and never looked back. Of course, her new career involved a certain amount of physical work contrasting with her life in banking. Although she now has teams helping with this manual labour, landscape architecture is absolutely a hands-on field.

Iona believes that the constant learning involved in banking – with markets shifting daily and even hourly – has boosted her flexibility and ability to adapt in her new trade. While she was never a natural salesperson, the perpetual pressure to sell in her previous job prepared her to be an entrepreneur and lessened her fear of talking to "powerful people".

Overall, her advice is to follow your instincts. Do not worry about making mistakes, as they are essential to success, she says. Sometimes she does miss the money and “staying at the Georges V”, but she loves what she does so much that anything else pales in comparison. Referring to our [4 Es model of successful career transitions](#), the path to her success included intuitive exploration and experimentation, but her engagement and expansion are likely to be long-lived indeed.

Seven tips for aspiring artisans

1. If you are unclear about what you want to do, look back over your life for clues.
2. Take the time to explore and experiment as much as possible, to reduce risks and confirm your new vocation.
3. Accept that there will be intense learning involved, and that much of it may be more arduous than you could ever imagine.
4. Leverage the competencies and skills you acquired in your former career.
5. Be prepared to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.
6. A sense of humility will be your friend as you start from zero.
7. Consider your age, life stage and risk profile, but remember that mistakes will help you grow.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH.

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, offering services as a coach, adviser, speaker and writer on topics related to people, talent and culture.

Antoine and Claire are the co-authors of [Disrupt Your Career: How to Navigate Uncharted Career Transitions and Thrive](#). The original, extended version of this article can be found [here](#).

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About the author(s)

Antoine Tirard is an international Talent Management Consultant, Trainer and Coach to large global organisations.

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!

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