

A Sweet Dream Comes True

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Maureen and Jim Elitzak are known around Scottsdale, Arizona, for their exquisite bonbons, bars, brownies and caramels, which can be found at [Zak's Chocolate](https://zakschocolate.com/) (<https://zakschocolate.com/>), the shiny shop where they make everything from scratch on site — even, surprisingly, the chocolate itself.

They live in a warm and sunny climate, work together on a creative business they enjoy and have won a slew of awards for their organically farmed, ethically sourced confections. One is tempted to say they live a sweet life.

None of this was on the horizon when they met in a freshman English class at the University of Connecticut, then graduated with accounting degrees. They spent enough time in Arizona to know they liked the state.

What followed was, for Maureen, company finance jobs, then raising two children and doing volunteer work that drew on her business acumen. Meanwhile, Jim followed a well-trod corporate path: auditor, director of corporate accounting, director of financial services, CFO and ultimately CEO, all in parts of the country with cold, bleak winters.

A Hobby Becomes More

Back in 2007, Maureen had become a chocolatier through [Ecole Chocolat](https://www.ecolechocolat.com/en/) (<https://www.ecolechocolat.com/en/>), a professional school with classes in Vancouver and San Francisco; after various creative hobbies, she began making chocolates and trying them out on family and friends. In 2011, both took a wine class at Boston University just for fun.

Later that year, Jim's employer asked him to transfer to a city that the couple did not want to live in. Instead, they seized the opportunity to move back to Scottsdale.

What now? The kids were in college and grad school. Savings allowed them to explore options before rushing

into anything. Jim had plenty of connections in Arizona and nationwide, which they started to tap.

"I was reconnecting, thinking I'd find my way back to the corporate world," Jim says now. "Partway through these explorations, I decided to look for what I *wanted* to do."

That meant asking questions — of themselves and others. One "other" had trained as a chef before earning an MBA and working alongside Jim for years. "These are great," he said of Maureen's confections. "Seriously, you have got to sell these."

Acquaintances from the tech world who opened restaurants told the Elitzaks they appreciated their new business because when they awoke each morning they thought not about the problems of the day but about food and having fun with food. Hmm.

We're having fun, they thought. Maybe we should give this a try.

Jenny Blake, author of "[Pivot: The Only Move That Matters Is Your Next One](https://www.pivotmethod.com/)" (<https://www.pivotmethod.com/>), suggests trying out your vision on a small scale before going big, like "piloting" a TV show.

"Pilots can help you build backup systems and test ideas in a low-risk manner so that you are positioned to make your change when you need to," she writes. Among her questions: Are you good at it? Do you like it? Can you expand it and earn a living?

The Elitzaks had the same questions. They considered doing a pilot at a farmers market, but Maureen realized that if they were to scale up to a commercial cocoa-bean roaster from the home coffee roaster they were using, it might be better to perfect their technique and product and prepare for a full retail space.

Settling Business Questions



In 2013, Jim enrolled in the same Ecole Chocolat course that Maureen had taken six years before to become a professional chocolatier. They hired a commercial real-estate broker and, after one false start, leased 1,500 square feet at a mall — roughly a third of which was the retail space.

"Pivot" suggests that whether in planning their business or in getting it going, entrepreneurs should avoid limiting their thinking or using linear thinking. Instead, Blake writes, borrow from improv the "yes, and . . ." technique: "How can I pursue what I love *and* keep my job? Or, how can I leave *and* maintain a strong sense of financial security?"

For the Elitzaks, one such question was how they could structure a successful small business and still do the work they went into it to do.

'Ruthless Honesty' About Goals

This decision was crucial. Casey Graham, author of "[The No B.S. Small Business Book](https://houndstoothpublishing.com/books/the-no-bs-small-business-book/) (https://houndstoothpublishing.com/books/the-no-bs-small-business-book/)," emphasizes setting an overarching goal, which he calls the Owner's Intent, and being "ruthlessly honest about it."

"Never mind what all the business books and articles say it *should* be, like 'sell it and make \$1 billion' or 'go public' or 'expand endlessly,'" he writes. Maybe, instead, you want to make the best product you can to make people happy or be able to pick up your kids after school daily or create a business you can pass down through the [family](https://www.nextavenue.org/family-business-succession-successful/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/family-business-succession-successful/).

Sure, the Elitzaks could make more product by hiring people, but they like to maintain creative and quality control and Jim likes interacting with customers. So in this case, the answer was to keep the business to themselves, not hire staff. If Jim hired someone else to do it, he'd be supervising them rather than handling the retail part himself.

Growing Pains and Joys

The store opened in 2015. There were initial problems, of course. The shop's storage space was down two steps and across a back patio — inefficient and awkward. The kitchen air conditioner gave out, which meant temporarily moving a 10-foot enrobing belt into the retail space.

The biggest issue, though, may have been time management. Experience in a corporate setting, the couple found, does not necessarily translate for entrepreneurs.

Identify your strengths, Blake writes, such as childhood interests, work experience, marketable skills, results and reputation. Besides a common understanding of finance and management — both vital — Maureen counts among their strengths organization, mutual commitment, an interest in home cooking and Jim's ease with customers. Jim credits Maureen's patience, fine motor skills and attention to detail.

Assess Your Skills, Share the Work

How do they divide the labor? This has evolved. Jim roasts the beans, takes out the trash, keeps the orders straight and lets Maureen know what's coming up. Maureen makes beautiful bonbons and bars to order, often inventing new flavors and presentations. They share strategic decision making and management of the business.

So, another "yes, and . . ." question: How could they make all this chocolate, fulfill all these orders *and* keep everyone happy? For years, the answer was too many workdays extending until 2 a.m. — not a sustainable solution.

First, they tried taking over the spot next door, which provided more storage space and allowed the couple to work ahead during slow times, roasting beans and making chocolate to have available for holiday rushes. (And no more patio storage.)

Pivot to Online Sales

Then the pandemic lockdown made the matter moot, at least for a while. Upon reopening their retail space after

the COVID emergency, they made a new rule: Customers could only pick up internet orders, not browse. Jim still interacts with people but spends less time with them, and online orders are far easier to handle.

(<https://www.schulzefamilyfoundation.org/>) and [EIX](https://eiexchange.com/) (<https://eiexchange.com/>) .

"We've learned not to say yes to everything," Jim says, "and now that we do everything online, we're better able to manage the orders we take."

Zak's Chocolate continues to win critical praise. It earned a spot on [Food & Wine](https://www.foodandwine.com/lifestyle/best-chocolate-shops-america) (<https://www.foodandwine.com/lifestyle/best-chocolate-shops-america>) magazine's Top 50 list in 2021, and [Tasting Table](https://www.tastingtable.com/1123252/best-chocolatiers-in-the-us/) (<https://www.tastingtable.com/1123252/best-chocolatiers-in-the-us/>) named it one of 17 best chocolatiers in the nation earlier this year. Says Maureen, simply, "We are delighted."

Hard-Learned Lessons

The chocolate and career-change experts' advice to others:

- **Talk to people who are doing what you aim for.** "We found people we respected and got their perspective," Maureen says. Be specific with your questions. For example, she emailed a company that was using a particular roaster and inquired about its pros and cons before buying it.
- **Respect your advisers' time.** Potential competitors don't have to share suggestions, so be nice and "reach out in the least imposing way," she says and then adds an example: "'When you have time, can you tell me. . . .'"
- **Join your industry's association.** The couple got involved early on. "Building that network is important," Jim says.

As with most startups, expect to work harder than you ever have. Loving what you do certainly helps, says Jim.

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