

A photograph of a window with a view of a lush green garden and a balcony railing. The window frame is light-colored wood or metal. The balcony railing is ornate, featuring scrollwork and a central decorative element. The garden outside is filled with dense green foliage. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

THE GOLDEN BOWL

*Lucy O'Donnell has hit the big time with Lovedean granola. Killer cereal, says **Rory Ross**
Photography by **Joe McGorty***



Lucy O'Donnell shakes her glamorous blonde head dismissively. 'Some have missed the point,' she says, 'They're diluting the quality with cheap ingredients. They're calling it one thing, when in fact it is something else.' O'Donnell was talking about the stampede into granola — the fashionable breakfast cereal made from toasted cereals and nuts sweetened with honey — that she triggered when she founded Lovedean granola in 2005. So far, she has kept ahead of the Gadarene crush of rival manufacturers, but for how long?

If you've never heard of Lovedean granola, run don't walk. O'Donnell sells it to Sainsbury, Waitrose, a host of independents, hotels, restaurants, clubs, spas, gyms, villas, chalets and *Talitha G*, the Getty yacht. Competitors, however, are clambering aboard her niche in the £1 billion breakfast cereals cliff face, fired by a gold-rush mentality: Kellogg's, Jordans, Alpen, Quaker Oats and M&S have launched their own, as well as specialists Dorset and Sharpham Park. Since June 2007, the UK granola market has shot from £6 million sales to £9.5 million on consumption up from 2 million to 3 million tons.

Three years ago, few people in Britain had heard of granola. Fewer still knew what it was. Inspired during a trip to the Alps in 2005, O'Donnell decided to make her own in her Sussex kitchen. She hated feeding her three children expensive, sugared-up, additive-laden, E-riddled and mildly addictive processed effluvium otherwise known as breakfast cereals. Granola seemed like the answer. When friends went nuts about her toasted blend, a light bulb lit up in her mind. On a whim, she entered the Guild of Fine Food Retailers awards, 'the Oscars of the food industry', and won gold. That was it. She decided to go into business and wage war on E-numbers.

Previous business experience selling orchard apples at the age of 11, followed by spells in advertising, property relocation and pashminas, had taught her the need to 'have a vision, communicate it clearly, and... go for it.' She has added a light toasting of ambition, a sweetening of personal charm and a lot of gut feeling. 'Mark Birley was an early fan of Lovedean,' she says. 'He sold it in his clubs. If Mark liked it, I knew others would too. I sensed it would be the next big thing.' Lack of food industry experience served her well. 'I had no idea how tough it would be,' she says. 'So I wasn't put off. I had no negative thoughts, no prejudice, nothing. I didn't know all the answers but I knew there were people who did, so I went to find them. That took [sighing] eleven months of people hanging up on me.'

In the absence of an industry definition of granola, the bandwidth of variations is broad, and the market is growing fast enough to accommodate everyone without the need for cannibalism. Lawyers, of course, are licking their lips at the prospect of test cases, but if it comes to the crunch, Lovedean has the singular advantage of being first and best.

Planted and wrapped in Lovedean is a 'healthier' way of eating. Healthier in the sense that, of all granolas, you'd

struggle hardest to overdose on Lovedean. It has no added sugar, no genetically modified crops, no wheat or salt, and is freshly made from natural protein-rich, cholesterol-lowering ingredients. It tastes good, too. A creeping 'health' element has removed the flavour from breakfast cereals. Muesli, for example, granola's less fortunate cousin, is just dry, uncooked ingredients tossed together like bird food. 'I thought it was a crime that our children's generation were living off unhealthy breakfasts when they could be eating incredibly healthy breakfasts and enjoying them at the same time,' she says. 'Same goes for all generations.'

Lovedean has cruised through the recession, with turnover up. 'Before the present recession, "bigger equalled better";' she says. 'That doesn't apply in food. Quality and health come in small doses. People are realising that.' Elizabeth Hurley, Prince Charles, Rocco Forte and Normandie Keith are among those who have already seen the light and have become fans of Lovedean.

The breakfast cereal market is characterised by companies founded by visionary individuals who break out of the kitchen-table model. Kellogg's, for example, began when Mr Kellogg, who was a cook in a mental asylum in the USA, burnt a sludgy mix of grains and ended up with Cornflakes. Making that leap is one of the toughest things in business. 'The daily blocking and tackling can be a grind,' she says. 'Spirit, determination and fortitude come to the fore.' Earlier this year, however, with the business still growing fast, she sold a stake to two partners, Angus Cameron and Mark Cuddigan of Dormen's Nuts, in order to help expand internationally.

O'Donnell's greatest challenge, however, is juggling the business with her husband, children and extended menagerie of chickens, goats, ducks, rabbits, dogs and cats, never mind siblings. 'But there are no short cuts,' she says. 'I avoid the world "sacrifice". I prefer "choices". I make sure I remain flexible and never commit to anything social. The most important things to me are family and work.'

Technology is one essential ingredient of Lovedean. 'I use my BlackBerry to live the lifestyle that I want,' says O'Donnell. 'These devices are essential. But please don't ask my opinion of social networking internet sites. You will regret it. I don't know which gets me going more: them or E-numbers and preservatives!' We look forward to blackberry-flavoured Lovedean granola. *f*



Shot on location in the Beluga Suite, one of the Hempel's signature suites

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