

Edinburgh Reporter chats – Miriam Fogarty of Gulp Food

☒ A chat with Miriam Fogarty is like a chat with an old friend. The Irish brogue is, of course, quite beguiling and she is immediately approachable and chummy, and the conversation was peppered with laughs and chuckles.

It is a Friday morning when The Reporter speaks to her. She may be still at home, but she is already working.

We start off with the usual question of how she got to this stage in her career:- “The thing is, I could fill twenty minutes on how I got here. It is not a brief story but I shall try to put it succinctly, here goes – despite having other lives in career terms -I used to be a tax lawyer for 20 years. (I qualified in Ireland and then requalified here) the common theme running through the last 20 years of my life is that I have always loved an event, a party, entertaining, cooking. I have always liked things in that context – and I always like things that are a little bit different.

When my husband and I were Dinkies (Double income no kids yet) and had time and money to have weekends away, we were always hanging out in the kitchen shop or the design shop. I have always been interested in that kind of thing. What honed my research over the last few years is that I was always adamant that, even though I was working and had young children, I would continue to do parties even when the children came along.

I am the eldest of seven children. So, when it came to Christmas it was a massive challenge to cope with all the organisation. I used to spend hours on the internet looking for presents. I was actually never scared to buy on the net. I subconsciously gathered information about buying on the net. I

always gave the internet and websites the benefit of the doubt. Probably this was born out of desperation however!

I wear several hats now, but my biggest role depends on whatever is happening that particular week. For example, at Halloween, which I have always totally embraced! I go completely OTT. But I find most people respond to it. When I came back from mid term break with the children just before Hallowe'en, I spent an evening at the shop with one of my staff. I went to North Berwick, and we did one window completely with Halloween black and orange, and the other in green and black with a big witch. All of my products are inedible delights for eating, cooking, partying whatever. The window drew lots of people into the shop looking for witches brooms!

I took a stand at the SECC at the end of last year – There was an exhibition being held there called [The Girls' Day Out](#). It was held over three days. So I was busy mapping out the stand and the logistics of getting from A to B. I had to figure out what stock I would be bringing. Then there was the lead up to Christmas which meant people want to buy more stuff. As well as that I am busy being a mum but I enjoy wearing all the hats.

At the moment I have one permanent employee. Other than that I have a pool of four to six people who help me out. They have all fallen out of the sky for different reasons.

Back in 1997, I was a lawyer and my husband was an accountant. I suppose it all started when we bought an old TSB bank and turned it into Cafe Politic – it is now called Toast. We created it from scratch, and the manager who worked there is still one of my key helpers. Through her network I found a person to work in my new North Berwick shop. She was a lucky find! She has over twenty years of retail experience in Gap. I have the enthusiasm, but she has the retail expertise to put

it into reality!

I also have the online shop, and a 1500 square foot warehouse in Peffer Place. So another hat I had to put on was putting on the Marigolds and the old clothes and we tried to tidy it all up. We thought we might do a novel retail offering opening the warehouse to the public just before Christmas, but the snow got in the way a bit. I have thousands of products which I cannot showcase in the shop, so I thought it might appeal to people to come and have a hot port and go shopping in the warehouse.

Last year I was trying to work out whether my enthusiasm was sort of shared by anyone or was it just me who felt that so much in the High Street was the same.

It was recently my first commercial anniversary. Last year the shop was in the front room for five weeks. At that point I really did not want a shop. Then I opened the shop in North Berwick on 7th August last summer.

Although it seems a bit of a jump from a professional career to what I am doing now, I had five years in the wilderness. I had time out. I stopped working in July 2005, and when I gave it up I had no plan except to spend time with my kids. I had voices ringing in my ears telling me the time would be gone in a flash. I wanted to spend time with the children but I did not want to stop earning!

I went straight to college from school, and straight to work after that. People would not believe me when I said I had no plan except to let my mind rest for a while. Two to three years into my time out, I realised what it would be like to retire, and that my identity was wrapped up in what I did. Socially, people would ask what I did and my answer became 'I am taking a break at the moment.' And so then I could talk about what I used to do. But really I was socially fed up with making excuses for doing nothing other than being a Mum who

baked! So in those circumstances you have to develop new skills and have your one-liner ready. It is a need that people have to pigeon hole you. I wasn't really trying to hang onto my identity. It was just socially easier to chat with people if I said that. I was not sure that I wanted to go back. The further away I got from office life the harder it would have been to go back.

In November 2009 I was reading some glossy magazines at the hairdressers – an article telling the story of businesswomen who have a ping moment. I used to get down about this and was always looking for The Idea. But then I realised I would rather think about the attributes of what it was I wanted to do. It was a sifting process rather than an actual positive idea. I decided that I don't want to be in an office again, I want to be there for my kids if they need me, and if I have to stay up till 3 o'clock in the morning to compensate, then I could do that. I thought about writing and that led into the blog.

Although I had children, I could still find time to bake at home etc. I just did it in 10 minutes however! People beat themselves up about inviting their friends round and being scared by the whole process. So I wanted to take the 'gulp' factor out of entertaining. I have always been a bit of a relaxed entertainer. If you're coming for food at our house and its going to be an hour late – well too bad! I always have something substantial to eat ready for guests immediately they get here. Then it doesn't really matter so much.

As for a mentor – that is another bizarre story! I recently signed up for extra membership on LinkedIn so that I can link up with Natalie Massenet of [Net-a-Porter](#). She doesn't do that many interviews, but I have read them all. I have never met her, but I have always taken something from the interviews she has done. I relate to her – I wish I had her figure and her wardrobe however! I actually sent her a message on LinkedIn! She was suggested to me as a person I might like to connect

with. I know she is quite private, but I sent her a message and hope she might get back in touch as I would really like to meet her. She has two daughters about the same age as mine. In one interview she admitted that she has turned up at school things with the bought cakes, so I would like to show her how to get round all that! I could show her the foolproof five minute recipe! She wasn't trying to misrepresent herself, but just because you work does not mean you can't do these kinds of things.

I wanted a really nice website. I had the blog idea in my head for a long time. I wanted to put these various desires to show people how to do these cookery type things into the context of real life. So while I was in the process of trying to clarify that and produce something definitive that I fell into the commercial side of things. I still have not posted any recipes on my blog!

Last summer my parents who had invested in a property in Spain asked us to spend the holiday time with them. I came across a flexible silicone liner for a baking tray when I was in Spain. So rather than sun-bathing I was cooking breakfast bars with sugar substitute etc. All the kids round about came to our house. When I came back from Spain I had the recipes but my site is not really about recipes It is about fitting making your flapjacks into your daily hectic life. I came up with the expression which is Minta Maxa – minimum tasks and maximum taste. Minimum anxiety and cleaning up time!

There is a way round all this stuff that we have to do. The cookery programmes are not real life. They have loads of people helping them to do the cooking and the cleaning up. It is totally false and people are striving for that perfection. It is unrealistic. Gulp is not about recipes. It is about how to do it in a friendly way with one saucepan one baking tray with the magic liner. So when I had the magic silicone liner I would be able to show people that they could do this easily too. So I went to Birmingham on the trail of the silicone

liner so that I could then sell it online. I signed up for a trade show and tried to find it at the show. The first day was devoted to volume sales – for the likes of Argos! I had blagged my way into a furniture show in Milan years ago. In Birmingham I did not know what to say and realised that I should have been there the next day. I picked up the phrase – ‘How much would that retail for?’ So I went back the next day and that was my line. I realised that the company who sell the liner were not actually at the show. I became a private detective and went to visit any stand that sold silicone products. I had the liner in my handbag! In the process I met people who have since become my top suppliers. I realised I had to find other products which might meet my needs. I saw a ceramic double walled mug which was the same as one I had at home. It was really attractive. I had got it for the Christmas before from Ali who was the manager in Cafe Politic. This was much smarter looking.

The guy on the stand claimed that this was the only one available but I soon put him right! His colleague said to me that I knew a lot about the product and I got offered a job! The retailer thought they would be good for men working in offices. But I thought the better use was for women with small children who never get the chance to sit down. I had thought I would redirect people from my blog to places that they could buy something. I had heard about affiliate marketing for example. I just wanted to help people find nice things easily by telling them about nice things that I had found. But nobody at the trade show had heard of affiliate marketing! The bottom line was that they were incredulous at this housewife with no chequebook and no reputation. I had various conversations about my blog and I had a moment where I had ten minutes left to get my taxi to the airport. I hated the fact that there were so many things that I wanted but found it difficult to get anywhere. I asked for a brochure. He asked me where my shop was. When he found out that I did not have one he took the brochure back and took out the price list in case

it upset me. When I got to the airport I looked at another brochure which had a price list and realised there was enough of a mark up on it for me to sell them easily. Nobody wanted to supply me with anything as I had no actual outlet for it. So I just decided to go ahead anyway.

There was an element of sexism and non-pc behaviour among some of the guys on the stands. It made me a little mad. I bought loads of stuff even before I had the website up and running. I moved the furniture out of our front room and into storage to allow me to set up a pop-up shop there and invited people round and my sales were great.

I had zero experience in relation to the website. I spent a year with an agency who were fabulous about the creation of the name but the manual tools for building a website were not quite as good as they might have been. I wasted some time on that. I put a lot of time into my mental creative list and what I wanted it to look like and my new company have made it what I wanted it to be. I am very proud of my website. But this is phase one. I have mental wish list of where I want it to go now. I am not a computer website but I have gone up a huge learning curve. I have done so much shopping online when I had little time and so I had a good idea as to where to start. I also got some ideas from museum websites!

January 2010 – no sales and then I had a pop-up in North Berwick in February & March. I had great sales and a good response to all the products for sale. I had sporadic sales and the only way to even it all out was to have a shop. People can come into the shop every day and touch and feel everything. I encourage everyone to lift feel touch everything. My rule is that if it breaks it breaks. My best day was still the opening day, but the beauty is that cashflow is much better. I am moving forward with new suppliers. I have a wishlist of new suppliers.

I am right at the beginning of the process. I reckon it will take me three years to make this into a really good business. I have to go to North Berwick today to deliver stuff that I have in the warehouse. And also I will sell stuff out of the window in time for Halloween! I have done all these kind of parties for Halloween etc and I know how to do this – so I love helping my customers. I took a stand at Taste and Foodies but because people see different things there on our stand, they talk to me about things they have seen somewhere else that they were interested in. So I am going around finding these things for them! I love all of this – and I have a huge list of it all! If it is out there I will find it. I love being a private detective.

My children are budding businesswomen too. They seem to have a good grasp on commerce already. They understand that they have to wait for the remodelling of their bedrooms till we can afford it! They interview me every day and ask how much money I have made each day. The older one already knows the concept of profit and overheads. For children it is a simple concept. You buy things. You pay people to help you and you rent a warehouse to store it. And then you sell it – hopefully at a profit!

I can talk for Ireland I know. I love what I do and I am better off now in the job I am doing. I am out in the fresh air most days, not stuck in an office and I adore what I do.

One of the sayings that means a lot to me is one of the comments that my Dad made. in a n interview for a publication. He has 7 children, who were born in 9 years and so my mother was a housewife and did not work outside the home. One of his lines was this:- “I was 42, and had to figure out what to do next!”

There is a lot in that. I love that comment.

We finish off our chat promising to have coffee soon. We ask for a photograph and she asks how long she's got to get the facelift organised.. but truly this is someone who has made the right job for herself and who is very comfortable in her own skin!

☒ Gulpfood has its own [website](#) and a shop in North Berwick, with pop-up shops from time to time in Miriam's living room or elsewhere! You can also follow Miriam Fogarty on [Twitter](#)