



SOYA ALCHEMY

Jenny Coupland tells Lauren Fitchett about her vegan café Tofurei, which makes all its tofu from soya beans grown down the road



JENNY COUPLAND

“We said, ‘Let’s take a chance and do it - that’s where it all started’.” Jenny Coupland is the first to admit that launching Tofurei, her vegan café in Norwich, was something of a risk. “I had no business experience prior to Tofurei,” she says. “I used to work various jobs, accounting, working with animals - no particular career. But I had been vegan for 10 years and out of the blue my step-father phoned me up and asked if I would want to open my own vegan business.”

With experience of plant-based cooking and an eye on the burgeoning vegan market, work on a business plan began and, in 2016, Jenny opened the doors to Tofurei. Six years on, it is a bustling café, which has set itself apart through its home-made tofu - everything the team uses is made at its soya micro-factory on the edge of Norwich, from beans grown just down the road, a rarity in the UK.

Its team (Jenny dubs them ‘soya alchemists’) whip up plant-based café

staples, including tofu egg and bacon breakfast sandwiches, chocolate Biscoff brownies and ‘soysauge’ rolls. They also test innovative alternatives - points of pride include its vegan whippy ice cream, cheesecake and even a deli-style counter.

While the momentum of the vegan movement has surged since, in 2016 it was already gaining pace (animal charity People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals dubbed it the ‘year of the vegan’) and, to Jenny’s surprise, Tofurei gained a following almost immediately. “It was hugely popular - so much so that we used to make all the tofu at the café, but we had to take the machine out and set it up elsewhere because we couldn’t keep up with demand,” she says.

“To start with, it was a really sharp increase, so much better than we thought it was going to be. We thought we would be able to bobble along, we would have a few customers, especially because then veganism was not mainstream.”

The decision to make its own tofu was made early, thanks in part to a lack of inspiring options available on the market, and Jenny believes they are the only food producer making tofu from UK soya beans. “We were making recipes and using an awful lot of tofu, but we kept thinking it was not that nice, so we thought, ‘Why don’t we make our own?’,” she enthuses.

“We found out nobody else in the UK had that concept, making it on-site and using it in the cooking. It was unique in the UK. We initially started using Chinese soya beans, but we wanted to use UK ones. We would phone up soya companies and they’d just laugh at us.”

A large chunk of the UK’s soy is fed to animals, and Jenny had a difficult time convincing suppliers to give them the

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relatively small quantities they needed. It wasn’t until they had been open two years that they agreed a deal with a Norfolk farmer, based just

miles away from the café, who agreed to supply them with 10 tonnes initially. Today, all the tofu used in the café is produced at its micro-factory, staffed by just two people, which also supplies local restaurants.

Tofurei’s success, she believes, has been in large part dictated by its location. Norwich, a two-university city, is home to several long-running vegan businesses and often tops lists of places best-suited to those with plant-based diets.

Another factor, Jenny says, is its menu. From the outset, she was keen to avoid options deemed typically vegan, including lentils and salads - in essence, health foods. Instead, she zoomed in on vegan treats, keen to prove that plant-based eating doesn’t mean missing out.

While café classics line the counter (its best-seller is its creamy tofu, leek and mushroom pasty), Tofurei, which weathered the pandemic with collections and online orders, has gained traction for its creativity. After hearing about the tofu, the Hairy Bikers visited last year to film an episode of an upcoming TV show, due to air this year, and were said to be blown away by the cheesecake.

Shortly after opening, they also turned their attention to vegan whippy ice cream, first through a powder imported from America and later via a link-up with a local ice cream producer. The motivation behind it was simple. “We thought ‘isn’t it a shame that we

“ They bring in friends and say ‘this is real vegan food’ ”

can't have vegan whippy - or can we? I think we can do it',” Jenny explains.

While a large part of their trade is, of

course, those with plant-based diets, Jenny says vegan operators often have a wider appeal. “I see it every day,” she says, “vegan friends bringing in non-vegan friends and saying, ‘This is real vegan food, it isn't just lentils. It's really delicious and you are not missing out on anything’.

“People's expectations of vegan food can be quite low, but we really pride ourselves on putting in that extra love and detail. We are passionate about cooking and food; we want it to be the best for customers and for them to experience what we like about food.

“We see a huge range of ages and cultures and all sorts of different people. There's not one particular sector. People come in and say they'd just like a plant-based coffee or that they're having a dairy-free day - there are all sorts of reasons.”

As is now well-established, the vegan market is growing fast. The Vegan Society says the number of vegans in Britain quadrupled from 2014 to 2019, while Veganuary sign-ups have broken records every year.

While Jenny says, personally, it's brilliant news, it's hard to deny the challenges it presents for Tofurei. While its potential market has soared, so too has its number of competitors. “All the big boys and supermarkets get involved,” she says, “but we are steadily growing and have a good customer base. Our tofu is a premium product, you are going to spend more on our tofu than that from a supermarket, but you do get what you pay for.”

It is a drive accelerated by social media and the availability of information online, she says, adding that diet is just one part of the picture, with a true plant-based lifestyle extending to what we buy and wear.

So, in an evolving market that is likely to balloon in coming years, what is it that will set Tofurei apart? “We like to be our authentic selves and we think that's what shines through when you visit Tofurei,” she says. “We are a team of original thinkers and we want our customers to have a truly genuine taste of what a planet-friendly palate can be.”



THE ETHOS IS TO AVOID FOODS THAT ARE OBVIOUSLY VEGAN



TOFUREI OPENED IN 2016