

COMPANY PROFILE

Small business of the month

By Amy Leonard

Tony and Jen's, Lisburn Road, Belfast

Public interest in health and fitness has never been higher, and there's one Belfast business in particular that is taking it seriously and making it personal.

Tony & Jen's on the Lisburn Road is all about great food with even better nutritional value. Owned and run by Tony O'Neill, a personal trainer, and Jenny Curran, a writer, it is their first venture into the world of business together.

The couple met five years ago in a gym, rather poignantly, when Tony was Jen's trainer and the concept was quickly born. Jenny had always been interested in opening her own food venue and Tony inspired the healthy aspect of it.

Spending a year in Australia from 2013-2014 and experiencing the health conscious lifestyle there only spurred their enthusiasm. A line of cookies they created was nearly taken on by a cafe in Melbourne, but with their temporary residential status the red tape unfortunately proved too much.

The Belfast cafe produces food that people like, but in a healthier way, with twists on pancakes, potato bread and waffles to name but a few. "It's stuff that people want to eat, but that's going to help them live longer" says Jen. Nearly everything is made from scratch in their own kitchen and everything on the menu is free from gluten, dairy and wheat.

"We want to kill the perception that healthy food is dry and boring" says Tony. "We are proof that it can be tasty."

It was preceded by a pop-up only a few doors from their current unit, or rather the pop-up was in the interim whilst they patiently awaited planning permission. It ran for four months and Jenny says she was pleasantly surprised by its reception.

"It was startling. We never imagined people would take it as well as they did. We were just two people who love food and eating well. We thought it might end up just a handful of friends popping in and out but suddenly we were producing enough food to keep a busy pop-up running, and for much longer than intended. We really learnt from the ground up."

The permanent cafe opened its doors in October 2015 and is continuously growing in popularity. Tony says that every single month they are getting busier. "We started out with 10 staff and now employ 19."



Tony O'Neill and Jenny Curran, the people behind the name.

"Our online presence has increased substantially. We've gone from 3,000 Likes on Facebook to 8,000 without paying for any advertising; it's just an organic growth, people spreading the word. It's a great measure of how well people are receiving our product."

They recently held a huge charity event, a 26.2 hour 'marathon' shift completed by Jenny and manager Jane Sally, who is running the Amsterdam Marathon in October in aid of Marie Curie. The event was an incredible success, with over £3,000 raised for the charity and a large amount of publicity for the business.

Both Tony and Jen believe it's all down to quality and source their produce locally; Massey's of Saintfield provide the turkey sausages, Marfield Farm in Co Down the free-range chicken and Get Fresh in Dunmurray for fruit and vegetables.

There are plans for expansion in the future but both Tony and Jen are realistic. "Yes that would be a dream but we won't be getting carried away," says Tony. "We want to get everything working completely efficiently and smoothly first" finishes Jen. "We have projections for the future of course but at the minute we are very much in the here and now."

There are however imminent plans to open evenings, which seems like a step in the expansion direction. ■