

Crispy Startup

Despite his relative youth, 22 year-old Charlie Fermor has created a product that has got the big supermarket chains sitting up and taking notice. His steady, seemingly effortless progress is enviable, but then enterprise is just something that comes naturally to him.

There is something about Charlie Fermor that is reminiscent of Prince Harry. The shock of auburn hair and the infectious grin, perhaps, although Charlie's use of the royal 'we' is more of an acquired habit that he is trying constantly to break than a royal affectation.

"When we – I – was at university in Reading, I realized it would make total sense to own a house and rent out rooms to other students rather than pay rent to someone else," Charlie says. "I borrowed from my Mum and Dad to top up my savings and put it all down as a deposit. When I left uni in 2008, I sold the house for a very nice profit, just one month before the market crashed. It's now worth the same as what I paid for it!"

Charlie was studying agriculture and business management at

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Reading. His parents own a 1,000 acre farm in Kent, 300 acres of which is fruit trees, and he wanted to do something that would help him help them run it, including ways to add value to the produce.

"I had become aware that young people in schools were being told that to avoid obesity they should eat more healthily but in reality they were being offered a choice between what they were told was good for them or snacks that were full of fat and salt. There was no middle ground, nothing that was both healthy and a snack at the same time."

Charlie had experienced the pleasure of eating apple crisps on a visit to the US and decided to experiment. He had a spare room in his student house, so he bought a small drying machine from a company in Oregon and set up a test lab in the spare room. Things kicked up a gear when, as part of his course, he and fellow students had to come up with an entrepreneurial idea, develop it and present the end product at a mock Dragon's Den event. While other students had to develop new ideas, Charlie was already using his dehydrator to experiment with different varieties

of apple and different ways of perfecting the product.

"I tried pears as well, and apple leather, which is puree that is dried in strips. It wasn't a big success on that machine but with the equipment I have now, it's going well. Back then, it was apples that worked best, so that's what I launched."

Charlie won the competition, unsurprisingly, and decided to make a go of it full-time after leaving university.

"The only competition out there was coming mainly from China," he says. "They and others who were marketing similar products in the UK were using chemicals and microwaves to produce them on a mass scale. They spray the fruit then stick it a giant microwave vacuum dehydrator. I didn't want to do that. I went to Oregon and bought a bigger machine that dries the apples completely naturally with zero impact on the environment."

He reluctantly had to go back to the Bank of Mum and Dad to generate all the working capital he needed to get going because trying to get money out of the banks was proving totally tedious and time-consuming. Soon bags of Apple Crisps were popping off the production line and he was on the road looking for buyers. His parents use a network of 40 farmers markets in London to sell their farm produce and this provided a brilliant means of both selling and doing market research for nothing.

"The family and staff all run stalls at these markets, selling fruit and other produce – my Mum and Dad and Uncle are up there every week, while I do Saturdays and Sundays. We offer Apple Crisps at every stall and they have been a big hit."

While it is all very family-oriented, business is business. Charlie leases the use of the farm's name, Perry Court Farm, as his brand, pays rent on the buildings he uses, and even sub-contracts his own labour to his parent's business when he is helping them out. He employs three staff full-time and uses another nine or so part-time, usually from among the farm's workforce.

After the nail-biting early days of waiting for orders, his product is now being bought by wholesalers, which means he is already producing 10,000 packs per week. This compares with a maximum capacity for his machine of 20,000 a day flat out. The next step is developing the product further by working with his parents to plant trees that are more appropriate for his crisps.

"We're putting in five acres of Maori Red," he says. "We lose 20% of every apple in production because we cut the core out, so it makes sense to start with the biggest apple possible that tastes right and has a nice red skin, which the Maori Red does."

As for expansion, Charlie doesn't appear too concerned about world domination. He loves the farming life and sees the Apple Crisps business as an adjunct to it, not a tail that will one day wag the dog.

"If one day it all goes pear-shaped," he says, grinning at the unintentional pun, "we – I – would be very happy to just go back to farming."

Source: Perry Court Farm
www.perrycourt.com/apple_crisps.html

