

Bags of Bites founders turn family recipes into flourishing business

 By Lauren Hartzenberg

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Mother and son, Karen and Ryan Jossel, make up the formidable team behind local baked treats business [Bags of Bites](#). By harnessing treasured family recipes and tapping into evolving consumer preferences, the pair has turned a modest home kitchen business into a growing company that supplies over 500 retail outlets from its factory in Cape Town which employs 26 people.



Karen and Ryan Jossel, Bags of Bites

A self-described "bored housewife", Karen opted to turn her passion for baking into a business venture in 2002, using biscuit recipes handed down to her from her mother as a springboard. As orders picked up, Karen was soon partnered by her son Ryan, a former web and graphic designer.

The Bags of Bites range comprises more than 40 different artisanal, handmade products, including biscuits, rusks, biscotti and more. The company has carved a niche for itself catering to the various health and allergy concerns of its customers, and creates food products across nine different dietary categories.

The most recent Naturally Loaded range includes cookies, crackers and crunchies that are 100% vegan and banting-friendly, and all products in the range are also wheat-, nut- and gluten-free with no added sugar.



We caught up with Ryan Jossel to reflect on the growth journey of the Bags of Bites business so far.

■ ***To kick things off, what led you to launch Bags of Bites?***

Bags of Bites was born in 2002 in our kitchen. It started out with nothing but great ideas, a huge amount of passion, an electric mixer and our granny's old bread slicer. We saw that there was a demand for homemade artisanal biscuits.

■ ***When did you realise that you could make a solid living from your creations?***

As our products were new to market, we decided to take up a small stand at the Good Food & Wine exhibition. We felt that this was the best way to showcase our new range of biscuits and speak directly to our customers. The feedback was outstanding as well as we were approached by one of South Africa's large retailers to have our products listed. This was our realisation that we could turn this into a scalable business.



■ ***Bags of Bites has over 40 different products; that's quite the catalogue for a small business. Can you take us through your process when developing new recipes?***

My mom heads up innovation at Bags of Bites. Most recipes we use are our own personal family favourites. Each one has

been tried and tested until she felt they are perfect.

We spend a lot of time in the trade looking at trends, understanding consumers' needs and wants as well as dietary requirements, etc. Once we have decided on a new line/range my mom, who lives out in the country in a place called Greyton, starts to formulate the recipe.

This can be a time-consuming process as she needs to perfect the taste profile, understand the size and shape as well as test for shelf life. From the very first batch of testing until the product is available on shelf can take up to 6 months. It also needs to be sent away for testing if allergen claims are made.

■ ***From your humble beginnings in a home kitchen, how has Bags of Bites grown since then?***

In 2002, we moved from our home kitchen in Sea Point, employing two staff members and supplying roughly 15 outlets, to our first 120m² factory in Observatory. In 2019 we moved to a 700m² factory to be able to increase production. We currently employ 26 staff members and supply over 500 outlets nationwide.



■ ***How did you go about getting buy-in from retailers and getting your products onto the shelf?***

I'm often travelling arranging meetings with the retail buyers and handling key accounts with all major retailers. Retailers always want to keep trustworthy products in their shops, so when they add a new product they want to see a record of accomplishments behind them. If you can provide a solution for a buyer, you can get the buy-in. As we say... the proof is in the tasting!

■ ***Do you have any advice for entrepreneurs trying to do the same?***

Take the risk and believe in yourself. It takes time to build and for people to trust a brand, but if you operate with integrity, you will make a success.

■ ***How has your business model or strategy shifted over the years, and is there a lesson in that?***

Our strategy at Bags of Bites is driven by being the frontrunners in innovation and product development especially following the latest health trends i.e wheat and sugar-free options. We continually revisit and discuss our strategy.

When our business first started, our strategy was to develop a range of biscuits to take to market in South Africa. In 2021 we have developed a range of biscuits with natural ingredients which we are now looking to export opportunities.



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■ ***In the 'About Us' section on your website, you mention a focus on empowering others who have had no previous training or skills. Can you expand on this, and speak to the importance of this to you as a business owner?***

As Bags of Bites has continued to expand over the years so has the need to increase our workforce. Our products are handmade, hand-rolled as well as cut by hand, therefore no two are alike.

We opt to empower others who have had no previous training or skills as we can train them from the outset as to our specific planned processes. It is critical in a food production facility as well as when working with various allergens that staff are trained and upskilled by our managers.

■ ***To close off, what's next for Bags of Bites?***

It has always been our belief to provide our existing customers as well as all potential new global customers with the best selection of high-quality handmade biscuits. We believe that our recently developed 'Naturally Loaded Range' is perfectly aligned with our customers' demands and is specifically targeted to the growing community of conscious consumers who are looking at healthier and more natural alternatives.

There are a couple of new exciting projects in the pipeline as well as our focus is on building an export arm to our business.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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