

# TRANSCRIPT

## On Your Terms



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Episode 155:

FOOD PRODUCT FOUNDER, SYDNEY KARMES-WAINER, ON CREATING A HIGH QUALITY BRAND, TENACITY, AND BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

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Sam Vander Wielen:

Hey. And welcome back to On Your Terms. I'm your host, Sam Vander Wielen. And today, I bring you such a cool conversation with Sydney, the owner and founder of French Squirrel. I'm so excited to talk with Sydney today about all things like creating a consumer-packaged good product, like going from creating a product just for fun to getting a commercial kitchen space to getting it to a co-manufacturer and packer. Talking to Sydney was just so eye opening and so cool.

Like, I know we talk a lot in this space about coaching and consulting and digital products, but I want you to listen to this episode even if you would never create a product like this in your life. It is so epically valuable to listen to other business owners in other spaces who do business completely different than you to get ideas. I just find it so inspirational to talk to someone like Sydney and I couldn't do something any more different, right? Like I sell digital products. I'm not trying to get into Whole Foods or Erewhon. I'm never going to be on Target shelf, as far as I know.

So I just can't tell you like if you could just trust me in this to listen to this, even if you don't want to create a product. I feel like everybody always says this with guest episodes, but I truly loved this conversation with Sydney. I really want to bring you different kinds of businesses on this podcast moving forward. Like I want to bring a variety, right? I want to bring you lots of people in our space who are doing things that you can learn from, but I also want to give you some North Stars.

I've really gotten into this idea lately from like I listen to a Mel Robbins podcast. It was all about North Stars and thinking about people maybe who you know or don't know or even fictional characters who there's like a little part of that you want to be more like, that's somebody like

Sydney represents to me, right? And Sydney is like 11 years younger than me. I find her so inspirational. I love watching what she's doing online. I love watching her build a food product brand. I love like her spirit and her passion for it.

And I think I learn a lot from it, from watching it, even though I don't have that kind of business. So I think you will, too. And you never know when an idea will come up. Like maybe this will spark something related to a product or not, right? I just think it's really, really different. So Sydney is just like fun and carefree. She's obviously very smart and driven and she's also a foodie like me, so it's just very easy to relate to her. So I'm really excited to bring you this conversation.

Keep in mind, if you haven't listened to a guest episode of mine lately, at the end of the episode when I conclude with Sydney, hang in there because I now share my top takeaways from my interview at the end of every single episode. So you're going to want to listen in for what my four takeaways were on this one, and it was hard to narrow them down to four. So definitely listen all the way through.

All right. Let's get into Sydney's episode. Sydney lives in Los Angeles and she's a huge foodie. She owns her own food brand French Squirrel, which makes 100 percent dark chocolate coated snacks like stuffed dates, berets, bateaux and hopefully even more in the future. She was talking about she might be creating a new product. Sydney loves to dance, cook, try new coffee shops and restaurants and spend lots of time with her family and friends. So let's all welcome Sydney Karmes-Wainer. And I can't wait for you to hear this conversation. Hey, Sydney. Welcome to the podcast.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Hello. Thanks for having me.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Thank you so much for being here. I'm so excited to chat with you today. I would love for you to start off by just telling everyone what your company is and what you do.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. I'm Sydney. I am 24. I live in Los Angeles, and I've lived here my whole life. I've always been into food. And then in the recent years, it's been more health and wellness focused. And my company is called French Squirrel. We make 100 percent chocolate coated snacks that are blood sugar balancing, hormone friendly and also taste delicious.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I can confirm the bisous is delicious. They are so good. Yeah, it's so good. I love like recently on Instagram you shared the story, like your background, your history of why you love food so much and how you came to love food. And it just resonated with me so much because I was like a little wannabe chef as well when I was a kid, and I didn't get to go to France and go to cooking school until I was older. But that was like I saw your pictures were adorable. I was dying. But tell me a little bit like I know you've had a passion for food and cooking your whole life, but like, how did it go from being a passion about food to deciding like, okay, I want to start a packaged goods company?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. Yes, there's a lot of evolution between the two ideas. When I was younger, I actually thought I wanted to become a chef. Like that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to culinary school. And I've shared this before and I think that's where the photos are from that maybe you're referencing. During summer as a kid, I didn't go to traditional summer camp. I went to a summer camp that my parents sent me to like, bless them, it's so amazing that they even lean like they knew that my passion was cooking. And they leaned into it instead of sending me to just another regular summer camp, they sent me to a cooking school.

And it was 10 to 1 every day in the summer. So you start in the morning and everyone that was around, like my age, I don't know, maybe I was eight, nine, ten, something like that, maybe even younger, I'm not sure. And we would start in the morning and prep lunch. And then it wasn't long. It was only three hours. I think my parents wished it was longer, but that's what I thought I wanted to do. And then I think you just hear from people as you choose a career path and you hear from professionals.

And I remember even for one minute I wanted to be a veterinarian. And then you hear from a vet I remember at career day in high school, and they didn't like it essentially. They're like, I don't know if I would choose this again. And I'm like, okay, well, that's interesting that they even chose to come speak about this at career day if they don't like it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, right.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Besides the point that I hear. But to the same matter, a lot of chefs say that it's very difficult, that it's all they do. It's a 24/7 gig. You barely have time for family and friends. You're always in the kitchen. It's intense. I don't want to lie. It kind of swayed me the other way. But honestly, I got more into just the health and wellness space in college I would say. So while I was a sophomore in college, I guess this is a very long answer.

Sam Vander Wielen:

No, we want to hear it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. I've always been into food. I would watch my French grandmother, Sarah, cook food. Every Wednesday, she came over for Salmon Night, which is still a tradition we have today. And I actually have a side account on Instagram called Salmon Wednesday. And it's just --

Sam Vander Wielen:

I love that.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Half a joke but every Wednesday is salmon night. And all my friends know it's like you don't ask Sydney for plans Wednesday night because she has Salmon Night with her family. And she didn't cook with anything spectacular, very French in that it was pretty bland, but in the most beautiful way. The salmon has nothing on it. The green beans were just steamed. The vegetables were just cooked regularly. The potato was just a baked potato in the oven. No fancy herbs, sauces, oils, fancy ingredients.

It was just the real stuff. I got a lot of inspiration from her and my mom as well. And I would always cook as a kid, bake, and it was really just a love for food and anything and restaurants.

But then in college, as you can imagine, I know a lot of women go through this and I'm open on my platform about it, going through a lot of disordered eating and over exercise, and it led me down a bad path. But I'm still thankful for that path because it led me here and I fell into some body comparison and under-eating and then not fueling my body enough and to the point where I lost my period for three years. And that was a huge wake up call for me.

And so now, when you ask about how the food shifted, my idea of food shifted, it's now very -- it's health focused, but also happiness focused to go hand in hand. And my relationship with food is not the same as it was before all of this, but it's definitely stronger. And I allow everything now. Before, I was like vegan-ish and I allow everything there. Nothing is off limits, just everything in moderation. As my French grandmother said when I was younger, and it slipped my mind many years ago. So now to that and how it shifted into a product was an accident.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Really? How?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yes. So that's why it was not my intention, but I used to make -- so when I was trying to gain weight in a healthy way and incorporate nourishing snacks that made me feel good and held me over to the next meal because I wanted to make sure I was eating snacks, fueling my body. All of those things are important for getting your cycle back. And I used to make these protein bites so that I would bring to the office. I was working at Erewhon's corporate offices at the time. I'm sure you're familiar with Erewhon.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay.

Sam Vander Wielen:

It's a fancy grocery store for anyone who doesn't know. It's a very beautiful and fancy grocery store.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I hope it makes it to New York soon, but I was working for them. I still do work for them, but I'm not a full-time employee anymore. I would go to their offices downtown every day, Monday through Friday for the last three years, and I would eat these protein bites. And my boss said to me, why do you keep eating the same thing every afternoon at like 3:00, 4:00 p.m.? It's like kind of like my French in pause moment, which translates to a pause in French.

And I learned that when I was studying in Bordeaux and everyone would be outside in the middle of the afternoon, even on a workday, eating a snack and having a little bit of like an espresso. And it was that time to just like eat a snack. They already had lunch. They haven't had dinner yet, but it was like a nice treat in the day. And I kind of liked that. And so it was my way to break up the day. Sorry, almost done. The story --

Sam Vander Wielen:

No, I want to hear it. I love this. I love hearing.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I would bring these protein bites and they were coated in 100 percent chocolate. I made them myself, made them for my family, made them for my friends. It was just my thing. Kind of tasted like a Reese's peanut butter cup, but healthier and not too sweet because sometimes I didn't want apples and nuts or like celery and hummus and carrots and like, sometimes I just wanted something chocolatey and peanut buttery. And that was my way of honoring that.

So anyways, I give some to my boss because he asks for them to try and he goes, these are incredible. Why aren't you packaging these? Like you need to start your own company. I already had my French Squirrel Instagram because I was posting recipes. Why don't you start making these? I thought

he was absolutely insane. And this is where when people ask me, why did you start the business? Or how did you start? Or what got you to start? I have no answer because I didn't know it was happening. I just went with where he was going. He goes, start in a commercial kitchen, start making them.

And I was like, okay, got an L -- I mean, sorry, LLC, incorporation, all the paperwork, legal filings, hired a graphic designer. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I ordered ingredients at full price, not even sale price, like retail price. I was just trying. And after I launched, I sold so many that I couldn't keep my full-time job and work in the kitchen. So I found a manufacturer and the rest is history.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. And how long has it been since you did that? Since you launched.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

This end of August will be three years now.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Wow, 20 what? Yeah. That's crazy.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Part of Covid.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Oh, yeah. Perfect time. Yeah. Well, yeah, that's amazing, Sydney. So I'm so glad that you shared the full journey because I think that so many of our listeners too, can resonate with different parts of your story. So thank you for sharing. I love seeing -- like one of the things that I'm always advocating is that every experience is a valuable one.

So a lot of times when we go through something, we might not understand why, like, why did this happen to me or why did I have to experience this hardship? But it's really cool to see, like you shared your background with restricted eating and stuff, like how that -- I can even see, and I'm obsessed with like packaging and marketing and all of these things. So I can even see in it how you've blended like pleasure and health because you

kind of mentioned health benefits, but you're not doing it with the like, very strongly. I think you just strike a really nice balance.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Right. Yeah, I heard the phrase gentle nutrition.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's a nice thing.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I really like that because I still will eat things that are not "healthy", whatever that means, even I don't know what that means anymore because it's so individual. What I do is not going to work for somebody else. A lot of people, even when I was at my thinnest weight, didn't even know that I had an issue because maybe I wasn't -- and this is where I talk about on my page is like, there's no such thing as thin enough. Like I had an issue, no people didn't even realize because maybe to them I wasn't that thin. I mean, for me, but for my body, I was because I wasn't getting my period. And that's like the main marker of any woman's health.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, scary.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yeah. And so that's why I think looks are so not everything. You don't know what anyone is going through. And even someone who's in a, let's just say a larger body by societal terms, you don't know mentally what they're going through, you know?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, for sure. And I really love hearing too like how -- well, not only your experience with your grandmother, obviously, but then your personal experience with being in France. I had the same thing. I lived in Lyon for a little while and so like, yeah, I loved it. I just loved it there, but I had a very similar experience.

And then I've traveled everywhere around Europe. And I noticed the same thing. Like every single country you go to in Europe has its own like break



of sorts or some sort of like what I call savor moment. Like I noticed in France, one of the things I loved when we were living in France was, first of all, all of the drinks were served full fat, which just made me absolutely love them and as well as the pastries, but also everything came with a little tiny treat. And it was just like such a moment to savor instead of like scarfing something down. And I just remember it felt very slow and lovely, right?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That's my worst.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I know.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It disconnects you from your body when you do that and it's like you can't appreciate the food when you're eating it so fast. And I'm not saying that, you know, I understand people have busy schedules today, especially America, this hustle culture. I get it. But if there's some -- if you can change it in some moments, that's all that matters. Like I think that this health space feels sometimes so extreme. But let's say you have five, sorry, five lunches out of the week at work and you're able to sit down and be present for at least three of the five, that's a win, you know?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I want to talk to you later about hustle culture, but I want to go back for a moment because like for the people who are super overwhelmed by the process and like maybe don't understand the terms, so can you explain to them what a commercial kitchen is and then what that process looked like. Let's just stick to the commercial kitchen for now. So like, what did that look like? How long were you there? That kind of stuff.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Sure. Sure.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. So, yes, I get questions about this too.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, sure.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I like what you said to go back to what you said in the beginning about how everything is a valuable experience. And so in college, I worked. It was my first job. I worked at Press Juicery.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Oh, fun. That's fun.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I worked there for a couple months, and no one really understood why I was even working there. But in all honesty too, I wanted to put myself in the food scene because a lot of those things scared me actually, which sounds so ridiculous, but the toppings and stuff I wanted to put it there. Like, kind of like exposure therapy. And I really liked Press Freeze. Now, I don't know, I eat other things too. That was kind of --

Sam Vander Wielen:

It was a phase.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's a phase. Like I eat real froyo now. I don't eat like, you know, but I still like it from time to time. Anyways, I started working there and I remember doing the -- why I'm blanking on the name? The food handler's license.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Oh, yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I remember doing that course and I'm like, this is so annoying. I don't want to do this. When am I ever going to use this again? And lo and behold,

I ended up using that food handler's license that was still active because I was only a few months prior to actually help me in the commercial kitchen. And I had no -- I was like, when am I ever going to use this food handler's license? And then I ended up needing it.

So a commercial kitchen is a space. It can be co-working or it can be your own kitchen and you can rent it out and you can be making the product or you can have somebody else make the product for you. It is more direct to the business like you are in control of it as opposed to a co-manufacture or a co-packer who you give your recipe to them and they produce it how they produce it.

So in the commercial kitchen, that's how most small brands start off because they're doing the work. But I remember my dad said to me, he's like, are you the manufacturer of the product or are you the CEO? And I was like, okay, I don't want to be making this for the rest of my life. I mean, major, major props to anyone who is doing work like that. I commend them immensely. It is hard. I have never been more tired in my life than those two months that I was in the commercial kitchen. My feet, I can't even tell you how --

Sam Vander Wielen:

I can't imagine, making that all by hand. That's so much.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

All by hand, hundreds of them, scooping and dipping and everything. And the manual labor of it was exhausting.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. Not sustainable for a business.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And you could say, okay, which one is -- you have to still pay a manufacturer to make it for you or you can do it yourself, but it's still your time. Your time is money. So that's the commercial kitchen is, you are doing it, or you hire someone to actually manufacture it and package it. And a co-packer or a co-manufacturer is someone who you give the recipe to.

You teach them the standard operating procedure and then they do it for you.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Okay. So between your dad's sage advice and probably your tired feet, you were like, okay, let's get out of this commercial kitchen and let's go to a manufacturer who's going to do this for you. So how did you go about finding somebody? And then like, what was that relationship to start? Because I imagine there's some startup awkwardness, right? Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

This is the golden question I think of the entire food industry. If you ask anyone in CPG, finding a co-manufacturer is the hardest part of this whole thing.

Sam Vander Wielen:

And CPG is consumer packaged goods, right?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And it -- sometimes people, my friends still are like what is that, and I say it's anything from food to beauty wellness, anything packaged, okay. It's hard to find someone, a partner who, to your point, is able to recognize that you have the potential to grow this thing. But it may not be at the stage yet where it's huge but someone to hold your hand to make it through to the time where you grow and are growing. And that's the hardest part. It's like, I have this business, I need help. It's not at the stage where I'm doing pallets and pallets and pallets worth of product. And for anyone, pallets in the food industry is like a wooden thing, how do you call? A wooden --

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, like a box of sorts. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Sure, a box of sorts that you stack product and it's wrapped in plastic, and it's shipped all over the country.

Sam Vander Wielen:

And so do they want some sort of commitment that like you're going to produce a certain number of pallets?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Right. And produce a certain quantity. And sometimes you don't know that quantity yet.

Sam Vander Wielen:

And you have a perishable product, too. So you can't just, like overproduce. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So no one wants to hear this but cold calling, I cold called so many manufacturers, I kept an Excel spreadsheet. I remember I sat outside Erehwon Beverly Boulevard. I like have the image in my head. I went and I got a smoothie, and I sat down. I put my phone like on -- do not disturb wasn't a thing then, but just I ignored all messages I mean. And for I think three or four hours straight, I sat there, and I just called. And I kept calling and kept calling and kept calling. And you start in your region, you want to be near. If you're in California, you try to call -- you keep your search to co-manufacturers California or whatever you're doing, but it's not something that's highly publicized.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Right? I would imagine it's hard to find these people.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's very difficult to find. And you have to be dedicated and committed to saying, okay, hey, well, do you know someone else who does this? Or, hey, actually we love this. I've gotten to many stages with someone about to, like, do the deal. And then they say, wait, does your product have peanuts in it? We're a peanut free facility.

Sam Vander Wielen:

And now, you know, the next time you got a lead with like, I have a peanut product.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yes, exactly. And not just nuts, but peanuts because that's a specific allergen and you learn as you go. But everyone wants to hear that it's easy to like you just cold call and that's it. It took me months. And finally, I have someone. And I've actually changed.

Sam Vander Wielen:  
Since you got them?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:  
To add. Yes.

Sam Vander Wielen:  
But you only have one? You use one soul like.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:  
Right now, I have two manufacturers.

Sam Vander Wielen:  
Okay. Why do you have two?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:  
So one does one product.

Sam Vander Wielen:  
Okay.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:  
And the other one does, the one that is local is the one that I've been with for many years. They're my long-term partners and they are very, very nice people. And they see where I'm going, which I think is really amazing. And they're local. They're 45 minutes away from me. If I need anything, I drive right there and the bisous, the serial is such a niche product. It's done in Vancouver.

Sam Vander Wielen:  
Oh, that's cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

In Canada this time last year, developing it. And that was my dream product to make a healthy, muddy buddies. I don't know if you used to eat that as a kid.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yes. And you guys have to get this bisous. It is so good. And you're right. It literally tastes like a Reese's Cup. It is so good. I was just thinking about, like, all the things I want to put it on. So.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yogurt, smoothies.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Ice cream. I was like put this on ice cream. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So, yeah, that's in Canada, but everything else is local.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Okay. And like, how do you control -- I know my first fear would be like, how do I control the quality of all this? How do you know because you don't see things when they're going out, right?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

A hundred percent. Yeah. Well, first there is, I have insane quality control. I am always on it. I am very involved because I am really a one-woman show. I have a business coach and business advisor who helps me out and I have amazing interns, but in general, it's just me. They know that I'm a stickler for quality. And the thing is, is that sometimes I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I want to say, well, why am I doing all this? Like I could just be doing non-organic ingredients and just making regular product.

Like French Squirrel would be making probably much more money if I wasn't using the quality of ingredients that I'm using. So people ask me, why is your product so expensive? It's expensive to produce. I'm using all organic ingredients. Organic almond butter is double the price of regular almond butter. I'm using real organic, dark chocolate that has no fillers, no

preservatives, and everything is still done by hand in Orange County. And that's manual labor. And everything is really -- I know it sounds cheesy, but like everyone is like made with Love because it's by hand and it's not by machine.

But in terms of quality control, they know that I am a stickler for ingredients. I don't compromise on anything, and my customers know that. And when I get messages that say, thank you so much for making this product that has real ingredients and not weird stuff in it, that makes me like feel seen as a company, as the entrepreneur that I am, that I know I'm doing the right thing because those messages are a reminder, okay, people appreciate that I'm using organic almond butter, organic oat flour, organic pea protein. They appreciate it. And even if it's few people, I know I'm doing the right thing.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely. Yeah. And see, also like to our earlier conversation, see how little eight-year-old and nine-year-old Sydney that was off cooking at camp like how is she -- I mean you wouldn't be able to do quality control if you didn't understand the gloss and the shine of a chocolate and these kinds of things. Yeah, yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And also, I think communication is everything. And I have realized the other day I just don't want to do business with anyone who doesn't have good energy and anyone who isn't a kind human. And I know that's inevitable to run into people who aren't. Let's say I know that happens often, but with my manufacturers in Orange County, I'm on a texting relationship with her. She sends me photos and I see everything being made. We FaceTime.

And that's the quality control. I'm there, I'm watching it, I'm seeing. And I am going there next week. Next Friday, I'm just going to Orange County and checking up, saying hello, looking at everything, taking content, because a lot of customers like to see the product being made. But of course, a lot of things are proprietary, so I can't share everything but yeah.

Sam Vander Wielen:



Yeah. Were you nervous at all about when you went to co-manufacturing? Like, were you nervous at all about the proprietary side of things like these people are going to have -- like you didn't know in the beginning you would be friendly with them now, but like now you're handing it over, right?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Well, I mean, of course, yes, they sign an NDA. All co-manufacturers do or should. They -- no, I'm not nervous because the thing is, you have to be comfortable and confident in your brand. And I know that, for example, our bateaux, our dates, bateau, boats in French for anyone who's listening because their little date boats, I get messages from people that are like, oh my God, like love your stuff dates. I make those all the time at home. And I go, great, so did I. I'm not saying I was the inventor of stuffed dates. It's a three-ingredient simple snack, but nobody was packaging it. So, yes, you can make it at home. And yes, somebody could knock me off, but nobody is -- no one has my chocolate, number one.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's important.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Number two, the quality of my ingredients, I'm very particular about the medjool dates we use. They're from Coachella Valley and they're delicious. The nut butter is like, I'm very particular about all that. But number three is it's my brand and be comfortable and confident that you're building a brand and other people could take ideas from you. Inspiration. But if you're solid in what you're doing, you don't need to worry about anything else.

And I think that's the most common question I get from other founders, like, oh, but or like the wannabe founders, but someone already is doing that, or someone might steal my idea, or someone might do that or that's a competitor. Okay. Like there's so much out there. It's so saturated. You have to be comfortable in what you're doing and confident and keep going.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. Personally, I like to put my head down. I talk about this on the podcast a lot. Like, I just put my head down and I go, I don't even know what else is going out there because I'm not looking. Like just that's kind of like the attitude I've always taken.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

A hundred percent.

Sam Vander Wielen:

People say the same thing to me and I'm like, well, I wouldn't know about it because I don't look. So that makes my life a lot easier, and I just go forth and prosper. Like I'm doing fine.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That's great. And it's a great way to navigate social media, too. Instead of scrolling, it's like I'm doing my own thing. I don't need to look at what anyone else is doing. But yeah, I just tell those customers, great, I'm so glad you make it at home. It's for convenience that we have, like health on the go.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, yeah, first of all, yeah, you don't always have those on hand together, but also, like, your combos are unique. They taste more delicious. Like so many things. But I also think like something that's so interesting about you and watching you on social, if you guys don't follow Sydney already, I'll link both to her business account and her personal account.

But yeah, I love your stuff and everything you cook. I'm always like, oh my God. I remember one time, I forget where you went, but you were away and you made that crushed graham cracker or the crushed chocolate cookie thing with like, the raspberry jam. Do you remember this? And, like, the coolest thing?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Palm Springs. Thank you, Sam. So sweet.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I love it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I was in Springs with my friends and we all rented an Airbnb. I'm in charge of the food, always.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Of course. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And they wanted a dessert, but then I didn't want them to just buy Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Like, there's nothing wrong with that. But, like, I just wanted to make something and create something. And so we went to the store. I didn't follow any recipe. All I did was I kind of just -- this is something, again, it kind of sounds woo woo. But as you develop a really good relationship with food in your body, as I did, I'm able to kind of like, listen to what I want now and I know what I'm craving, and then I kind of just create it. So we were all craving something like yogurty, cold, but like also kind of like a pie, ice cream pie.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, it was like an icebox cake.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yes. So I found simple Mills Brownie thins, added coconut oil, made a cracker crusted yogurt and then raspberries and topped it with a -- and peanut butter and a chocolate shell and froze it for a few hours. And it was like one of the best things I've ever made.

Sam Vander Wielen:

It looked so good. I remember, it was like during the magic show craze of the yogurt cups dudes, everybody was like, how else can we use magic shells? Yeah, this was so funny. I loved it. But well, I'm bringing that up too, because I think, I remember when I was watching that and I watched your other stuff, I'm like, I want her to do well, right? I'm cheering for you. I want you to do well. And so I think it's so interesting because coming from the coaching consulting space, people think, oh, it's a personal brand.

But I also want people to hear from a product entrepreneur, like how you're still sharing parts of your day to day, your little like food tour, your impromptu food and coffee shop tours that you're doing. And so yeah, how are you integrating that? How do you think it's helping, if at all?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yeah. I think I went through a time where I was putting so much pressure on the business content. I run both Instagrams and part of me should maybe let some of it go and maybe have some help. And I know that But it's hard because, like, I'm the voice behind the company, but I know I have to at some point give up some control. But for right now, I run all four plus accounts because it's TikTok, Instagram, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Never ends.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I'm big on LinkedIn for anyone who wants to follow me on.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's cool. Why LinkedIn By the way? Why did you go big on LinkedIn?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's really funny. Sometimes, I'll go out in LA and people will be like, I've seen you on LinkedIn.

Sam Vander Wielen:

What? You're asleep or LinkedIn hit. I never knew.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Why LinkedIn? It's my way. What I like about it is that I can share business things, but also, it's kind of fun and it's not like Instagram. It's just a different platform and you can -- it's almost formal in a funny way. Like people are connecting with you and I don't know, I like it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So yeah, if anyone wants to follow me on LinkedIn, I'm pretty active, but.

Sam Vander Wielen:

We'll share it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

But in general, I think when I was putting so much pressure on myself to develop this curated content for French Squirrel of recipe videos for the actual tangible product and everyone is saying content, content, content, and that's what drive sales. And I so see the benefit of planning content, I do. And maybe one day I'll get there. But I tried that for a little bit, and it felt so restrictive. And I was like put in a box and I stopped having fun with it. I was like, I'm just posting this because I created this schedule and it's very businessy and formal and in a box and I didn't like it. And now I wake up in the morning and I'm like thinking about what I want to post today. And yes, maybe it makes me a little bit crazy all over the place because I'm like, what am I going to post today? But it's authentic. It's what I'm feeling sharing today.

And I think the second that I put more time into my personal Instagram, as you asked, like Sydney, my Instagram, where I'm posting my recipe videos of me making chicken stir fry and salmon bowls and banana bread and posting stuff with friends and cooking videos, restaurants, that's actually when everything in the business became easier because I was able to -- I actually that was my more creative outlet and I was able to do things that were fun and not so like, okay, well, what am I going to talk about with my protein bites today? Like instead posting stuff about my journey, posting stuff about food. And I don't know, this is a whole another conversation, but masculine and feminine and the CEO position really makes me in my masculine. That's why I do things like my personal Instagram where I can create whatever I want, and it feels more flowy.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Sorry. That was a long answer. I hope that answered it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

No, it's a really, really good answer. I think it's really helpful because I always see it as like a log jam. Like if you try to force it too much, like stuff just gets backed up. And I think like what you're hitting on is that allowing yourself to be more flexible and creative and go in the moment and be more authentically you, which is then causing people like me to watch and say, I just want to support her because you're being you, right? And that makes me connected to you.

So like, I just think that's a good lesson for people to learn who maybe are sitting there staring at their content calendar, being like, I have to do three educational posts this week and two of this. And it's a lot.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And people are always saying, oh, this is how you grow it. I'm like, okay, well that maybe works for you, but I don't do any of that.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. Well, one, growth is not everything. And two is that I also believe that if you do good in the world and create a good product that you will grow. So like, I don't know that that's everything. And I think people can -- I wish people in our space sometimes focused more on doing good work than building like huge accounts and then thinking that that's what gives them validity. And like, I would rather rely on a good product, good service, a good education, whatever. And so, yeah, that's where I'm coming from.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I resonate with your content as well, as I mentioned, all your business content. And I always like what you have to share. So thank you and thanks for supporting me. It means a lot.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, of course. Yeah. I'm curious then. So if this kind of more like personal side of social then is helping the business on social media

marketing side, how else are you marketing the product and getting it out there?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So social media is my biggest driver, 100 percent. I would definitely say that. I think because everything has been organic, influencers will post the product or organically because they love it. I don't pay, really, I don't have a small marketing budget. So like the product, they'll post it and it's organic. It's not because French Squirrel paid them to post it. So that's one. Two, I have great distribution partners who for anyone that's not in the food space, most food brands have a distributor who's a third man, third party, man or woman, but I meant like third party.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, I know what you mean.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Third party who helps sell and distribute your product. And sometimes they're just a distributor. Like they just deliver it, but sometimes they're actually, they also have a sales arm as well where they really are trying to get you into more stores. And that's the case with me. I have great distributor partners who help me get into other stores. Of course, I still have to do the work and the intros and there's that, email marketing with my newsletters. And of course, being in different stores in general and having that retail space is what drives online sales as well, because people see it at the store and then they want to go buy it online after, for example.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Right.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I don't know if that --

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, it's really helpful. I've seen you do like influencer, like somebody hosted like an in-person event and then you provided for the gift bag. So I guess getting out that way kind of thing. And then also -- yeah, go ahead.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Ask events all the time. Like if you are a CPG brand, you know it's crazy how many events are put on and they ask for product all the time.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Really? How do you decide then which ones to do?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's a problem too, because I want to do all of them. But because of budget, I can't.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And you still also want it to be exclusive in the sense that like in a good way that it's not just free for everybody also. So I think that's hard to navigate because you want -- the product is valuable and so when you just give it free all the time, it's like, oh, I can just get this for free. I'm not going to buy it, you know? So sorry I cut you off, though.

Sam Vander Wielen:

No, no. I was thinking about --

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

[Inaudible] something else as well.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, I was thinking about too, like how DTC, like direct to consumer or DTC is like, so common nowadays that. But how did you decide do I want to go direct to consumer, or do I want to be in grocery stores? Like I feel like that would be so tricky.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. Retail is a beast.

Sam Vander Wielen:



Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I always say this to anyone that wants to start a food business. Okay. How do I -- okay. It's hard to phrase because you need the retail business to help grow your brand. But in terms of it being lucrative, it's not really, because by the time your manufacturer takes a cut, the distributor takes the cut, the store takes a cut, French Squirrel and a lot of CPG brands that you see, a lot of food brands on shelf don't make much. That's why the retail business is a volume game and selling so many because it's a very small margin in the food space.

And I'm so grateful for the retail presence that I have. I remember getting on a call with my business coach one time and she asked me, before we started working together, are you a B2B business? Like, are you a retail company? Or are you a DTC company? And I answer something like both. And she's like, that's not a thing.

Sam Vander Wielen:

We can't do that. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

She goes, which one, what's your primary business model? And the second she said that, no thought, it's a retail product. People pick up our protein bites and our stuffed dates and our cereal when they see it at the store. So that is a no brainer. Of course, French squirrel would be profiting more by eCOM orders. People know that it's kind of industry standard because you're eliminating the middle people. You need the retail business to help give your brand value.

Sam Vander Wielen:

The demand. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So it's hard. It's hard. I do both. I have a website. People order online. Thank you for ordering.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yes, you're welcome.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

But if you were to ask me what's my primary business model, it is retail. And it's unfortunate because that's where, not unfortunate, but that's where it's harder to make money at retail than it is to do a DTC company.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. I think it's helpful for people to hear that breakdown, let alone the reality of that breakdown. So then if you decide to go more of the retail model, then it seems like volume is king. Like you just have to start selling enough that you're making and then you get into bigger stores. Like I feel like everyone's goal is to get to Target or something, you know what I mean?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Right. And the thing is you can get into a retail store, but how about the sell through when you get there? It's a big win that we just got into the Fresh Market. I'm so excited. That's 84 stores that are nowhere near Los Angeles.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's incredible.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I now have to sell at those stores. Okay. I got in, but like French Squirrels are now sold there, but let's make sure that people are buying it. And I think the number one thing for that is social media. But another marketing thing that I did, which was definitely a large cost, but it was extremely worth it, I did a partnership with the Coconut Cult, and we included our stuffed dates in every subscription box. And the Coconut Cult for those of you who don't know, is like the most amazing coconut yogurt. And they have insane ingredients. Real, like, real ingredients. And I'm friendly with the owners, really love them, love their mission.

And what we did was for the Fresh Market launch, we put a stuffed date bag in every subscription box because a lot of their subscribers are on the Midwest, East Coast area. And so because of that, in the Midwest, on the

East Coast areas, because we wanted them to get familiar with the product. So that's another marketing thing we did to drive sales at the Fresh Market.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Some collaboration. Yeah. And that makes so much sense because like the people who love Coconut Cult are going to love what you're doing. So it makes -- it's a very complimentary --

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Nobody understood what I was doing when I did it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I get it. You should just call me next time. Like this makes perfect sense.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

But that's the problem. Like a good thing and a bad thing, but I operate intuitively. Sometimes people hit me over the head that I should operate more logically. But the reason why the business is what it is today isn't because of what I've like thought about really in my head. It's kind of like my intuition and my body telling me I should -- this feels aligned, I'm going to go do it. I'm not making stupid decisions, but that's how I make decisions is it's with my heart. Actually, I know that sounds corny.

Sam Vander Wielen:

No, it doesn't. Because at the end of the day, your name is on it. And like, I believe, people have to do whatever you have to do. Like it's all on you. I teach people the legal side, right? So I'm always talking about how the reason you need to do the legal side of your business because at the end of the day, it's on you. And so if following your intuition is what makes you feel like you can sleep at night knowing you followed your heart, that's what's most important.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

You know what, class, I think you would love to take if you went back to school. My brother is in law school.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Really?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

At UCLA. And he told me that they are offering a food in law class.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I took that in law school.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Oh, you did?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, I took that and animal law. That's the kind of kid I was. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And I really wish, like I think I want to go sit in that class.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's so cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Incredible.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's actually -- not this is anything to do with me right now, but that is why I went to law school. I wanted to do food policy work. So I was like fascinated by food labeling, food regulation, food advocacy, consumer awareness, laws like that. I was really into it. That's like a completely random thing.

And I fell in love with Marion Nestle, who is a professor at NYU in food policy space when I was a teenager and she's a brilliant, brilliant woman, has written Food Politics, it's a great book. If anybody's interested in like food policy that we're talking about. But there's so much to learn about in this country when it comes to commodities and food culture. It's fascinating. So I'm sure they're talking about it in your brother's class.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

And my brother is probably sick of me talking about all this stuff, but there are things with the FDA and the food labeling guidelines. And I remember when I first started, even when I was putting, creating the packaging, of course it has to be FDA approved. And the language, it's so interesting, the intricacies in the language and what you can and can't say.

And here's an example I used to -- I eat medjool dates because of a multitude of reasons, but one of them besides being delicious and super good for your brain and your digestion, it's very high in fiber. Okay. And it's great. Most Americans are deficient. And I remember wanting to put on the package high in fiber. Okay. Because of the serving size of one stuffed date, I could not write high in fiber unless the serving size was three of those stuffed dates, which people can eat three of the stuffed dates if you want. And that's you do you.

Sam Vander Wielen:

You do you but you're going to run out fast.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's one or two or whatever. One, two, whatever you want. And you can't say high in fiber. You can say a good source of fiber. And those intricacies is the difference between something that's FDA approved and not.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, this right here, everyone was literally my dream to go to law school. I was like, sign me up, I want to do this. So like, I don't know. Yeah, I don't know what was wrong with me, but that is what I wanted to do. And then I found out there's like one job in DC at some food commission policy group. And I was like, oh, shoot, what am I going to do now? It's not a high --

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Pivoted.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, pivoted. And, well, I graduated from law school when things were bad. Like the economy had just tanked. It was like people were scrambling. It

was like, you'll just take whatever. And so it's actually really weird because I'm writing my book right now and I'm writing about a lot of this process of graduating from law school and being terrified, having taken out hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans and then going out into this world and everything had closed up. Like they were firing lawyers, laying off lawyers. And I took like the first thing I could grab. And I had my own experience with that, just taking stuff, taking the experience, not really feeling like it was what I wanted to do, you know?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

When was this?

Sam Vander Wielen:

This was in -- I graduated law school in 2012.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. So the year I started law school is 2009. Like we had had the epic crash, like everything was really, really bad. Yeah. So it was bad. But to our earlier conversation, like everything was so helpful. Like, thank God I did all of that because it's just all been so helpful. But yeah, I'm excited to hear if your brother ends up liking this class in the long run. I would really love to hear something that's going really well in the business right now.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That's a great question. Thank you. Thanks for making it positive as well because there are a lot of negatives.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, we can get to the challenges after if you want.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

No, no, no. It's so important to focus on the positives. My brother just made a joke because that's what I do all the time. Sorry. Side note, I got my car towed last week, and it's never happened to me. And he made a joke

like in the family chat saying, like quoting me something I would say. I didn't say it, though. "You know, it's really important to see the positives in life because even though my car got towed, I found this really great coffee shop on the way to the tow site."

Sam Vander Wielen:

That is good. That's a glimmer, right? Isn't that what they tell us? Like we have to find the glimmers.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That didn't even happen. He was just making fun of me because, like I do that.

Sam Vander Wielen:

You would do it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Something that's going really well right now, I would say, is me getting my message across to people. I think my customers are the most loyal. They get what I'm doing. And I think the community building around French Squirrel has been going really well. And again, all organic and it has been that since the beginning. So I think in that aspect, having this community of customers that are so loyal to me and my brand is really amazing.

And second, I would say I am dialing down on the finances and really working hard to track things, be consistent. And it was hard in the beginning and now I'm like, it's necessary. And I've been working really hard on that the last couple of months, so it's been going well.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's really cool. Congrats, because that's an area that's easy to stick your head in the sand and be like, we'll figure this out later.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yeah, yeah.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's really cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I'm on it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely. And I love that community is so important, given that you have a food product brand. Like I just think that's not something that, you know, typically people would be like sales so it's cool that that is community. I also want to know how your business fits into your life, not the other way around.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. Well, it is in the food space. So naturally, I'm attracted to people that are already in the space. And I mean that in terms of I have met some of my best friends through starting this business. It's unbelievable. One of my best friends I met through Instagram actually, and she's like a sister for life. She actually has her own company as well. She's the co-founder of Akasha Superfoods and she has CMOs gel and she is like my rock.

She does this business alongside me, and we both have each other because it can feel really lonely to do this alone when you don't have anyone in it with you. So she's like, next best thing to having someone in it with me. And so because of this LA Food Space, I've met so many amazing people that are doing ice baths on the weekend and like cold plunge events and wellness parties and yoga and things.

And I'm not on the extreme side. I'm not doing this every single day. I think there's something to be said about like, not being so rigid with the ice baths every single day. But if that's your thing, great. And all these events that come up in LA that have to do with food or doing like a cooking event, I would say it's how my business fits into my life, the people because I've met so many great people through it.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's amazing. Yeah. Yeah. How do you protect your personal time or maintaining personal Sydney and not always being like CEO Sydney?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:



Yeah, I think we talked about this on DMs before, you and I.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, it's hard.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I'm still working on it. It's a work in progress to be able to shut off because you can't really fully shut off. I make an effort sometimes to just not talk about the business. I don't want to talk about it. People ask me because they are curious, they're wanting to know. And it's really nice that they're trying to connect with me in that way. But sometimes, I don't want to talk about it because then again, it puts me again in the masculine like boss mode, which I don't always want to be in.

One thing I do is I do not answer anything business related in the morning when it's my like gym time. So my sacred -- everyone knows that my morning, like if you're friends with me, my morning is very sacred. Like nobody bothers me. I take -- like my boss used to joke with me because when I was working at Erewhon, because sometimes I would be a couple minutes late. And he's like, what, did you take an hour to make your breakfast? Yes.

I was never that late. I was on time mostly. When I was a couple minutes late, it's because I take an hour to do, like, my whole spread. And I romanticize my morning with my coffee and my yogurt and everything. And I have the phone on do not disturb and I do not answer anything business related from 7:30-ish to 9:00 about and 9:00-ish. And that's my boundary that I've set. Now, working from home, it's very difficult to set that boundary. And so around 5:00-ish, shut it off, I'm done. And I don't think about it. I mean, I think about it, but I'm not --

Sam Vander Wielen:

But you're not going to work on it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It can wait. And I think something that I've learned is when I first -- this is one of the most valuable lessons I've learned since starting the business. I used to be very reactive. Someone would say, hey, can we get on

a call to discuss this right now? Hey, I want to talk to you about this. And I would -- or there was an issue.

And let's just say it wasn't an urgent issue, I would still make it urgent. Everything is as huge problem as if it's like a heart attack. And I would be like, ting, like typing and freaking out. And that is not the way to operate when you're in this fight or flight mode craziness. So now learning after the last three years of running this now, if it's not urgent, I write, hey, let me think about this and I'll get back to you. Then I process it and then I come back with a clearer head and maybe you can resonate with that but --

Sam Vander Wielen:

I like that.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yeah.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah. I think that is a lesson to learn over time in business of like everything is not an emergency, but also I think that mindset and that you talked earlier about the confidence in your business, now I have more confidence in my business that everything will be okay or something can wait. Like, I don't need to jump in, you don't need to go in every grab bag that for every single event. Like you have the confidence to be like, I'm going to be okay. So that urgency of being like, I have to do this or I'm going to miss out, this opportunity is the one opportunity. Like, no, no. There are many.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

What do you do?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, there's so many. So I wanted to know too, like what's your idea of where the business is one year from now?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Okay. Very, very out there. But I would love to get French Squirrel on the plane for plane snacks. That's a dream of mine.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

French Squirrel in the air. I would love --

Sam Vander Wielen:

Let's do it, people.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yeah, one day. Maybe I'm not at a price where it's there yet but it's a dream. So I would like to shoot for that. Wider distribution for people who can't get French Squirrel right now in stores, Whole Foods, Sprouts, Wegmans, Fresh Thyme, all these amazing stores. And also, I hope to develop a new line of products in the next year and have some ideas working through it. And then also to your point, making sure that I separate the business from Sydney personal. So being in a place where I can also have my own life outside of that too. So that's where I see everything in a year.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Do you have like a dream upon dreams that you feel comfortable sharing, that there's like something that you're like, if this thing, one day, no matter how many years in the future it was, do you feel comfortable saying any of those?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Oh my God.

Sam Vander Wielen:

You don't have to name stores. That way, it's no pressure.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

No, no, no. Not even stores. I mean, I would one day hope to be in Target in all those places. And two, I would love to do different collaborations with different influencers and different products, like doing collab

flavors with brands. That is super cool. And I don't know, sometimes my best friend Anna and I joke about starting an airlines company called Squirrel Air.

Sam Vander Wielen:

I like this idea. You should get on Air France. You should get on Air France. What are they doing?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's absolutely insane. I know. But my mom says, anything is possible.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Anything is possible. One of my neighbors, like high up at American Airlines, I'm going to be like, you got to come listen to this and go make this happen.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Squirrel Airlines. Yeah. On the domain name, [squirrelairlines.com](http://squirrelairlines.com).

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's hilarious. I'm like the queen of domain names so it's like an internal joke that I own. Like, I think any domain that's left, I own it because I just keep buying them like.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Really?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, anything I think about, I'm like, I'm buying all the domains for that.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That's how I started French Squirrel. My mom --

Sam Vander Wielen:

No.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

The name Frenchsquirrel.com when I was ten years old. Yes.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Why did she buy it?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

She asked me. She said, I'm buying domain names. Do you want one? And I thought I was like little. I didn't know anything. And I go I want FrenchSquirrel.com because my late French grandmother used to pronounce the word squirrel really weird.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Really? Oh.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Because French people can't pronounce the word squirrel.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, that's amazing. I love that. That's so cool that your mom did that. Oh, that's amazing. Okay, wait. I had a few questions here from the two I picked out from Instagram that people had asked. So well, someone asked you. I'm not sure if -- you can answer whatever you're comfortable, but she said, what are her margins looking like for producing a product? I'm a co-owner of a Filipino food business, and I've always considered how we can do more than run a brick-and-mortar restaurant.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

So wanting to package?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, I guess package a product that they probably offer there.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

That's funny because sometimes I want, I think about like having a -- oh in terms of a drink too like maybe, like a French Squirrel Cafe.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That would be cool.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Or some store. But then that's another business and it goes back to like the chef and the 24 hours and the --

Sam Vander Wielen:

It's hard. Yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

The margins are tough for sure, for packaged goods because you can't just put it at any price. People -- there is price resistance to a food product once it gets to a certain range. But as you were talking about, there are companies who are doing a \$22 granola. Yeah. And but that's maybe at Erewhon or in the Hamptons or places where there are these like extremely niche health food stores that some a lot of people can't afford those --

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It's deciding if you want to be a product for the masses or you want to keep it smaller. So if that -- whoever sent that question and they want to package something, are you doing this for the masses? If so, try to get your costs down to the best possible way and make it so it's accessible at a price for everyone. Or are you trying to make this curated artisanal product that's only exclusive to certain people who can afford your product? And once you decide that, then you can know which direction to go because you can make money from charging \$22 for the granola. Just what audience are you going for?

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, exactly. And the other question we got is kind of on that topic and something we slightly covered earlier, but this person asked, how can you tell that your product is niche enough in order to attract your audience? Although we talked about the fact that your product is something that people associate with like, oh, I make these at home kind of thing, but then you've changed that.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I think it's even though right now, it's very health food focused and even like the stores that I'm launching into are very niche too. Like even the Fresh Market is still like a health food store. It's kind of like a Whole Foods, Bristol Farms, if you will. It's not necessarily Walmart, obviously, yet. Do I hope to get there one day? Yes, I do. I want to bring good quality ingredients to the masses.

How I get there, it might be a long journey to get there, to make it at a price that's affordable. That's something I'm trying to do. I get comments about that, DMs, and I say that's what I do every day is trying to get the price down but not compromise on quality. So I think starting off in these niche places and Foxtrot is one of my best accounts. If you're familiar with Foxtrot, they're in Chicago.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yup, I've heard of it.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yes. And Erewhon and Bristol Farms and Mother's and Jimbo's and they're all sort of health food focused. And once I get more customer acquisition there, I hopefully will expand into Target and Walmart and Costco one day.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Costco would be perfect.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

It may look different. That's what happens to a lot of food brands is they end up changing the serving size or changing the packaging to fit the Costco market or the Walmart market. But I know that when I do that, I still won't compromise on the quality. It's just some other things might have to change.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Absolutely. Yeah. Well, this was so fun. This is like one of my favorite interviews I've ever done. This was so, so fun.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I can talk about this forever.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Me, too. And I just so appreciate you doing this. Will you tell everyone where they can now go buy French Squirrel? I'll also say, make sure you go in Sydney's website or on FrenchSquirrel.com so you can use the store locator but tell them also where they can buy it and then also how they can get in touch and follow you.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Thank you. That's also a reminder I got to update my store locator for the --

Sam Vander Wielen:

Oh yeah, yeah.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

You can find us at the Fresh Market in the fridge. Everything is in the fridge besides our bisous, which is our cereal clusters. And they're typically merchandised with the trail mix and granola. We sell the bisous to a couple retailers. Still expanding on that in a large sense. But we sell to Erewhon, Mothers in California and Dom's Kitchen and Market in Chicago for the bisous. And in terms of all of our products, Jimbo's in San Diego, Berkeley Bowl in San Francisco, Berkeley area, Bristol Farms, Mother's I said. And in New York, we sell to the Goods Mart, Bonne Berry, Lifetime Market, then Foxtrot in Chicago, Texas area, mid-Atlantic area. And I'm probably forgetting a lot of the independent stores but --

Sam Vander Wielen:

But they can go on your website and use the store locator, right?

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Yes. And you can store locator. Yeah.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Okay, cool. I always find that helpful. I'm like, where did they sell this stuff? All right, cool. And then how can they get in touch with you on social?



Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

You can find me at @Sydney\_KW. That's my personal Instagram. And if it's a business related question, @Frenchsquirrel.co. You can also email me. My email is on my Instagram and on LinkedIn as I said.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Yeah, go find Sydney, queen of LinkedIn. She will be there.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

I wouldn't have met you if we didn't connect on Instagram.

Sam Vander Wielen:

That's true. Thank you, Instagram, for that one. We owe you that one. Thank you so much, Sydney. And everybody, hang in there because I'm going to share my top takeaways from my conversation with Sydney in a sec. But thank you so much for doing this.

Sydney Karmes-Wainer:

Thank you. That was so fun. I could do that for hours.

Sam Vander Wielen:

Me too. Oh, how good of a conversation was that? I learned so much during that conversation. I was just like the whole time, I could have talked to her for so much longer because I genuinely had so many more questions about like, how do you do this and how do you do that? I just find it so inspiring and so helpful to hear from other people in other kinds of spaces.

So, okay, what are my top takeaways from my conversation with Sydney? There were many. I would say, number one, my top takeaway from our conversation was that, like, I found her take, I don't know about you, but I found her take on competition and not being like the most unique, mind-bending product in the world, very refreshing. I loved how she just talked about being confident in her product and in her business and like everything else, will kind of fall away. And you heard me talk about how I do something kind of similar, just like keeping my head down. I'm not really paying attention. Like that all seems like such a waste of time to be

worried about what everybody else is doing. Like just do your own thing. So I found that very inspiring.

The second thing that I'm taking away, and I really would encourage you too as well, I talk about this a lot when it comes to building an online business is can you see how Sydney focusing on quality is like really what's setting her apart, right? Like she knows her stuff. She knows where her dates come from. She's getting the best dates. She's making this incredible chocolate from her own, like, proprietary formula. She is getting, like, the best almond butter. She's really focusing on high quality. And she knows that she charges the prices for that as well, but she is focusing on quality. And I love like how confident she was about that, too.

My third takeaway is that she really seemed to be able to draw on like a lot of experiences that she had, relationships she's built, like things she's gone through in her life and her education, and she allowed things to unfold. And it seemed like she kind of just, I don't know, experimented and tried things. And I can tell you from like talking to a lot of people who have been successful in business, one of the things that I find often is that their businesses start because of some sort of like I mean, what people will often refer to as an accident, but it's more that you're not doing it with the intention to necessarily create the biggest business in the world. And I think that that was really true in her story with like bringing her products for herself, for her own nourishment and benefit to work. And then it took like maybe a little nudge from somebody else, her coworker at Erewhon to push her into being like, oh yeah, this could be a product.

The fourth thing that I took away from this conversation was I was just like really impressed with Sydney's hustle. And I don't mean like hustle culture, like go, go, go kind of hustle, but just like I liked her gogetterness. Like she was talking about how if she wants to be in stores, she's got to get on the phone, she's got to develop those relationships. She pitched the idea to the Coconut Cult to be included in the boxes. She was on the phone trying to find a manufacturer when, you know, people wouldn't believe in her.

And I just think that tenacity and that drive is so admirable, so impressive, and it's something that really needs to be deeply heard and felt in this industry that it is not about being an overnight success. It's not easy. It's usually not easy. It's usually not straight and narrow either. And so like, I think it's just so refreshing to hear from somebody. It's like, yeah, you're going to have to pick up the darn phone and like you're going to get a lot of no's because people aren't going to believe in you. And then she got smarter and smarter with asking, like, do you know anybody else who will do this? Like, oh, by the way, this thing has peanuts in it. So she could stop getting denied, you know?

So I just loved hearing her very tenacious story. I think she's so impressive and I can't wait to see where French Squirrel goes. I hope if you're able to get your hands on it, you get some French Squirrel products. I will tell you, this is hashtag very not sponsored. I love this stuff. It is so good. So, so delicious. Very much worth it. And to support Sydney, that would be a great thing you could do for another small business owner.

So I'll make sure I drop the link to her website below. You can use like the store locator or they did just get into Fresh Market all over the East Coast. So if you live anywhere where there's a Fresh Market, hopefully they're carrying it. And if they don't carry it, go in and ask them too, because mine here in New York didn't carry it for some reason, and I asked them to. So you can always do that for any other small business.

Thank you so much for listening. I can't wait to hear from you. If you liked this episode, do you want to hear more founders that are from different kinds of businesses? Did you find it helpful to hear from somebody who wasn't in like your exact kind of business? I mean, maybe it's just me. I find it really, really helpful. Every conference I've ever gone to that's like a little bit outside the coaching bubble is so helpful to me. I learned way more and think of way more ideas there than I do when I attend something that's from somebody in our space.

So let me know. Let me know if you like it. Let me know if there's anyone specific you want to hear from. But just in general, if you want to hear from different kinds of brands, different kinds of founders, I am happy to

bring them to you. This was so much fun. Thanks so much for listening. I'll see you in a few days.

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