

“From Avocation To Vocation: How I Turned My Hobby Into A Career” With Chef Lucia E. Robles

An interview with Phil La Duke



Phil La Duke

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Get comfortable being uncomfortable — Having a business is high-risk and you will be riddled with uncertainty. You're not guaranteed a paycheck and you might even run through all your savings. I've had many friends put it all on the line. Just embrace

it, continue to commit and choose to see it as part of the adventure!

AS a part of our series about entrepreneurs who transformed something they did for fun into a full-time career, I had the pleasure of interviewing Chef Lucia E. Robles. After a lifelong love affair with food, eating, and feeding others, Chef Lucia decided to make her fantasy a reality and enrolled in the California School of Culinary Arts Le Cordon Bleu Program in Pasadena, California. Chef Lucia is president and co-founder of Lucia & Co., a high-end luxury gourmet business gift company. Her firm provides automated, done-for-you custom gift services along with concierge gift services to help business owners with consistent client retention, team appreciation and consistent prospect outreach. “Creating unique gourmet gift boxes and helping our clients nurture their client relationships is an extraordinarily gratifying endeavor,” she says. “I love hearing about the successes and growth our clients experience, the visibility they receive and how happy their clients are really feeling so deeply appreciated. All this because of our little black gift boxes and the lasting impression of thoughtfulness they leave behind.”

Thank you so much for doing this with us Lucia! Can you tell us a bit about your “childhood backstory”?

I have been cooking since I was a kid. I can only guess that maybe my parents saw something in me early on and just encouraged that creativity. My mom wanted me to feel included in the kitchen and not left out. So we would cook and bake together. My dad and I also did cooking together, but it was more formal, bigger meals. I noticed early on how food just seemed to connect people and I liked that. I got this idea to host these big family holiday dinners. I cooked everything and then watched everyone enjoy themselves. It really fascinated me that people who normally wouldn't be interested in talking to each other would see something different on the other person's plate and feel compelled to start talking to them. If I made sure that the plates were a little different,

people would talk. Now I look back on that and realize we are all still kids inside so when someone has something different we can't help but look. However with food, the cool thing is that it generates conversations and gets people connecting on a level where they wouldn't normally. I really, really like that.

What was the catalyst from transforming your hobby or something you love into a business? Can you share the story of your “ah ha” moment with us?

I had graduated from culinary school with dreams of being this rock star pastry chef. I had been working in hotels, restaurants and even opened up a couple of restaurants. I loved what I was doing and it was exciting to be writing menus, coming up with dessert specials etc, however the experience wasn't all it was cracked up to be for me. I wanted more and I wanted something different. I really did start my business as a hobby, totally thinking I would do this on the side until I got a real job. I really wasn't putting a lot of thought into it. It was something fun to do, a way of engaging with people. I started at the local farmer's market selling pastries along with our gourmet roasted coffees and hand blended teas. Because I was coming from a merchandising background as well, I decided to make gift baskets and sell those at the market too. People started to figure out I was a chef and started asking me to cater their parties. I was also picking up gigs as a private chef. Even though this still wasn't my big dream, I thought this was going to be my next move so I started to market myself as a chef. However, my clients started to ask me for gift baskets. I just kept saying yes without putting a lot of thought into it. At the end of one year, I looked at the sales reports and saw that these gift baskets I wasn't telling anyone about were 60% of my revenue. We evolved from gift baskets to gift boxes, phased out catering and private chef services. It was super exciting for me because I was doing something I loved. I was baking, playing with food, creating great fun unique gifts (I LOVE presents by the way), I got to make pretty packages and talk to people. So I guess if we were going to call it a catalyst, I would say it was the numbers. Once I started to see the numbers (sales) for my hobby, I started to toy with the idea of making it a business. I still wasn't really ready to pull the trigger though. It wasn't until I made the realization that I could really help people, help people connect with each other and that what was really easy and fun for me was a hassle for them, making what I was doing much needed. I still had no idea how this would evolve and if you'd asked me at the time, I would have told you that I was prepared to only make money during the

holiday season. I still didn't see the big vision or possibilities; I just knew that I wanted to keep moving forward.

There are no shortage of good ideas out there, but people seem to struggle in taking a good idea and translating it into an actual business. How did you overcome this challenge?

Honestly, I don't think I put any thought into this. You have to keep in mind that my thinking at the time was 'I'll do this for fun until I find a real job later.' I loved what I was doing so it's not like I couldn't wait to do something else. Looking back on it now, what allowed me to transition was the fact that I listened to my intuition and allowed myself to be led to my next steps. I listened a lot to what people would tell me about their experiences with other companies, what they liked and didn't like. Since I was still in my job, I also took away from that what I wanted to do differently as well. If I was going to start a company I wanted it to be a place where people enjoy coming to work and thrive. The real moment of transition, or kicking me out of the nest, really came from my mentor when he very simply said to me, 'It's time.' And I asked him, 'time for what?' "Time for you to quit your job!" I thought he was off his rocker. I thought I wasn't ready, I thought it was too early, I even tried to negotiate that with him as well and he wouldn't budge. When it really sank in I needed to leave, I felt sick to my stomach. Ironically enough, I was also well aware at the time that every day that I went in to work, it felt like that job was slowly killing my soul. When I woke up the next morning, I realized he was totally right and I was excited about the possibilities. I was nervous, but in an excited way. He told me later, 'Look, if I thought you would go into some depression, lay in bed eating Cheetos all day long, I'd never suggest it. But there is no doubt in my mind you'll turn this around really quickly.' He was so sure of himself and his belief in me that it really made me think. I couldn't help but wonder what did he see that I didn't? It wasn't a smooth ride, it was really bumpy at times, but I survived and have been on an upward trajectory ever since. I also learned to embrace the idea of being comfortable being uncomfortable, sometimes easier said than done.

What advice would you give someone who has a hobby or pastime that they absolutely love but is reluctant to do it for a living?

I'd say if you're going to do something for a living, it needs to really be something you love and something you would also do for free. I say that not because I don't think you

should make money, but because it's something that really needs to be a part of you, a part of who you are. It's got to be something you are really passionate about. Besides that, what it really takes to have a successful business is grit and drive. If you don't have that, don't bother. Not everyone is cut out to be an entrepreneur. I heard someone once say that owning a business is the best lesson in personal development. They are right because if you're going to be successful you need to be honest with yourself about the good and the bad, be willing to hire people to support you, letting them thrive in their talent and be willing to listen, really listen.

It's said that the quickest way to take the fun out of doing something is to do it for a living. How do you keep from changing something you love into something you dread? How do you keep it fresh and enjoyable?

Gratitude is a great tool to stay focused. If I'm dreading something, something is wrong. Either I need to hire someone to do it for me or my mind is not focused. It's really the only time where I've really started to feel that way. When I do, I take a minute to figure out where that's coming from. More often than not, for me it means, it's time to pass this on to someone else (delegate) so I can focus on what I really need to be doing. It's funny you should ask that, though. I remember thinking that early on ('what if I hate this?') before I started anything, and *that* being my excuse to not go to culinary school. That statement is a horrible lie and I have never found that to be true at all.

What is it that you enjoy most about running your own business? What are the downsides of running your own business? Can you share what you did to overcome these drawbacks?

Wow, it's the funniest things that I enjoy about having my own business. All in all it's about freedom. However, there is a price to pay for this freedom. It's the discomfort of not knowing, and learning to embrace it. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. So yeah, I do what I want when I want. I wear what I want, I keep the hours I want but I also have to hustle harder than anyone. I have a team working for me, and they all want to get paid! So I'm not just putting money in my pocket, I'm responsible to put money in others' pockets too. People never think about that and think having a business is easy, maybe even glamorous. I always tell people, if you can live with the idea that you might not be able to turn your lights on next month, then go for it! If you're wondering, no that

hasn't happened to me, but it's that level of not knowing, risk taking if you will, that you really need to be okay with, your new normal.





Can you share what was the most striking difference between your actual job and how you thought the job would be?

I used to get frustrated because I felt like I was never done. There was always something. I quickly realized it really is never done. Once I got over that, it was fine. There's always more and if, which I do, want the company to continue to grow there will always be more. That's actually a good thing and I look forward to it every day.

Has there ever been a moment when you thought to yourself "I can't take it anymore, I'm going to get a "real" job? If so how did you overcome it?

It's funny you should ask that. So I actually kept my building credentials from my corporate job and a couple of other little mementos. Any time I've ever had a shred of an idea that would even come close to that, (honestly, if I was even just having a 'bad' day) I'd take a quick minute to look at one of those mementos or better yet, I would picture myself back in my old job. Just that alone would mentally send me screaming back to work, it would get me to refocus, have deep gratitude for where I am in the moment and inspire me to keep on keepin' on. It's really never been an option. I got out of my job because I needed to leave. So there's really no point in entertaining it. Who would I work for anyway? I don't think I'm hire-able at this point!

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I don't have funny mistakes but I do have fun times and funny times when I was first starting. There is a FedEx hub not too far away. Although, I would order pick ups for our packages there were many times where I underestimated time and was running late, so

not all of them were ready in time for the scheduled pick up. There would be a few more boxes to get out that wouldn't make the pickup deadline, which meant I had to drive them down to the hub...before the office closed and before they stopped taking in packages for the day! Needless to say, I didn't make it and I remember having to literally chase down the FedEx trucks as they were trying to re-enter their gated yard, one arm full of packages, the other flailing like a crazy person because I *had* to get my client's packages on that truck and out that night. And yes, I chased down more than one truck. I chased trucks in the sunshine and in the rain. It was becoming a bad habit if you will because it meant I wasn't being organized. While everyone else was getting fat during the holidays, I was trimming down, partly due to not taking the time to eat regular meals and because I was busy running with my packages, chasing trucks! Talk about having great friends, at one point I had even roped in my friend Danielle to help and by the time we'd unloaded my SUV we were both soaking wet from the rain and somehow she'd stepped in a hole or some crazy puddle so her shoes got drenched all the way up to her ankles! I felt badly, but she was really cool about it and took it in stride. I remember her then thinking out loud that, *that* would make a great story. I had no idea I would tell you this!

Who has inspired or continues to inspire you to be a great leader? Why?

That's a tough question because it's not just one person it's many that inspire me. I've surrounded myself with great people who inspire me to be better and do better. For me it's important to be around people who are positive or where I want to be and who have the ability to be supportive. I have amazing special friends who inspire me to be a better businessperson always upping my game. However, at the moment, if I had to pick one, I'd say that there is a certain individual who inspires me every day to be more, do more and have more personally and professionally. They inspire me to really live in the moment, appreciate that moment and what's right in front of me. I am very grateful to have people in my life who inspire me to be a better version of myself.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I can't totally change the world, but I can make a dent one person at a time and that's how I take it. I happily offer in my two cents to people getting started, sharing things that I wished had been shared with me. I give insights all the time on different things letting people know they have choices. It doesn't have to be done one way necessarily. I

do also ask first before I dispense. If you don't ask, its not really advice, it's telling someone what to do and that's not kind.

What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. **Its never done** — You're never going to close the doors at 5 o'clock and not have to touch anything, redo anything until whenever. There will always be something.
2. **Get comfortable being uncomfortable** — Having a business is high-risk and you will be riddled with uncertainty. You're not guaranteed a paycheck and you might even run through all your savings. I've had many friends put it all on the line. Just embrace it, continue to commit and choose to see it as part of the adventure!
3. **Enjoy the journey** — Having a business is the adventure of a lifetime. Seriously enjoy the ups and the downs, one day they will make a great story.
4. **Not everything is as it appears** — Don't think that just because for the moment, everyone has said no to your product or service or times are tough and lean, that the solution or what you want most isn't just around the corner. Listen to your intuition and those doors will open.
5. **Keep your eye on the eight ball** — Always stay focused on what you want most because when things get scary, and they will, your faith in your vision will get you through.

What person wouldn't want to work doing something they absolutely love. You are an incredible inspiration to a great many people. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

There are so many directions I could go with this and I don't want to be cliché, but the first thing that pops to mind is something that my dad would always say to me, “ Just be happy.” So simple and profound at the same time because when you think about it, we think about being happy, but are we really feeling joy? I mean, how much joy do people feel throughout the day? If people were to really take the time to allow themselves to feel joy and happiness throughout the day, what a difference that would make!

Whenever we feel joy, people and opportunities are naturally drawn to us. Who doesn't want to be around someone who's happy and basking in his or her element? Everyone does. It also makes the lenses in which we view our lives much clearer I think. When you're feeling really good about yourself, and I mean really good, nothing gets you down. You don't really care that the bank teller was grumpy with you and things in general don't really bother you the same way when you're feeling really good. The more I think about it the more I think that gratitude is also very intertwined with being happy.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

Wisdom directly from a fortune cookie: “The greatest pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do.” For many years I had it taped up to my bedroom door at my parents' house. At the time, and for many years, that was about rebellion, just gratuitous rebellion. Now, it really speaks to following my intuition about things, seeing opportunities and pouncing, regardless of what people think or how things appear. So many people are stuck in following the rules and doing it the way it's always been done. Many people, especially in management make changes just to make changes so they can say they changed something. Sadly many get promoted this way even though those changes didn't better anything. The change was literally moving something from left to right and then right to left again. I have always appreciated when someone takes the time to see an opportunity to change something that can make it better for not just themselves but those around them as well. Leaving a mark isn't easy and it's not something that's really intellectual. Really affecting people, maybe creating a movement if you will is about seeing an opportunity, following your heart and intuition. It's not an ego thing.

Some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I would love to meet with Gene Simmons, even if it was just for a quick coffee — I love his story, how he got started and why. I really appreciate him as a businessperson. There is so much more to him than meets the eye — how he's marketed himself and made

himself relevant. I also really admire his relationship and attitude towards money and success. He's truly unique. I think we could all learn something from him.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.

About the Author:

Phil La Duke is a popular speaker & writer with more than 400 works in print. He has contributed to Entrepreneur, Monster, Thrust Global and is published on all inhabited continents. His most recent book is Lone Gunman: Rewriting the Handbook On Workplace Violence Prevention listed as #16 on Pretty Progressive magazine's list of 49 books that powerful women study in detail. Follow Phil on Twitter @philladuke or read his weekly blog www.philladuke.wordpress.com