

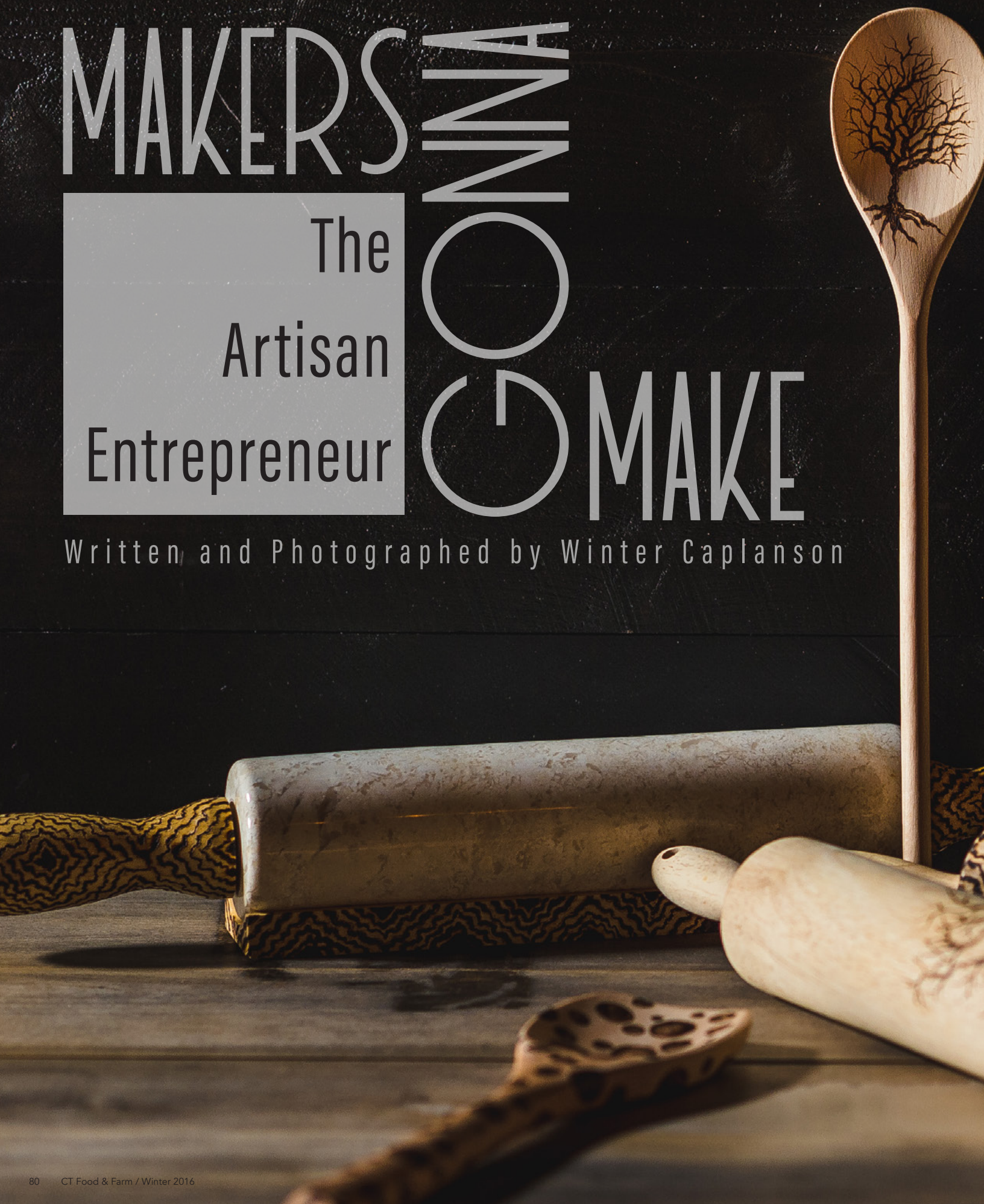
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The
Artisan
Entrepreneur

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Is your idea of the perfect commute to work wearing your slippers and carrying a cup of coffee downstairs to your home craft studio where the fireplace crackles and your favorite music plays? It's not only *possible* to thrive on your own terms in your own craft business, but you may be further along in preparing for it than you think!

I write to you as someone who started, ran for more than a decade, and then sold a profitable soapmaking company. I also worked with countless artisan entrepreneurs as a founder and executive director of the Coventry Regional Farmers' Market. Here, I explore the elements of success with Denise O'Reilly, owner of The Burnt Shop. In two years, her woodburning artisan business has grown sufficiently enough to allow her to do it full-time, replacing her corporate salary.

Here's one indicator you might be well suited to entrepreneurship: you've already been one. Were you the lemonade stand kid? I sold tomatoes grown in my grandfather's garden from a table by the road and my handmade paper-bead jewelry in his five and dime store. In fifth grade, during classes, I crafted little daisies made of yarn on a vintage brass form, left long a long yarn "stem," and sold them as bookmarks to peers until I was shut down by school authorities. Through high school, a wild-crafted wreath business kept spending money in my pocket. Entrepreneurs can't help it; we keep migrating toward selling things.

Denise's previous businesses include catering, in-home daycare, residential cleaning, two restaurants, and decorative painting. Through them, she learned skills that would serve her well with The Burnt Shop, including time management, understanding codes and regulations, documentation, communication with clients, financial record keeping, and how to delight customers.

Where do craft business ideas come from? Often, it's from the reception you've already received to something you've made. Before the handmade soap craze had blossomed, I learned to make it for myself so that I could enjoy great soap with culinary-leaning essential oil blends. (Coriander! Bergamot! Rosemary! Dill!) After giving to friends collections of my homemade soap for Christmas, they wanted to buy it for









Valentine's Day gifts. "I'm not in business," I repeated, but the more I said it, the more I wondered if I could be, and soon, I was!

Denise wanted to make holiday gifts for family and friends that would be useful and lasting. She bought a woodburning pen from Joanne Fabric and created her own patterns on inexpensive wooden spoons. Customers loved them, and she loved the process. "It was so peaceful and so different than any creative thing I had ever done. Nothing had to dry, nothing smelled bad, nothing was sticky, and it required very little space, actually. I could do it on my living room couch with just my pen and that piece of wood. I put a couple of pictures up on Facebook and the reaction was incredible compared to what I was used to as a grandmother posting pictures of her dog or grandchildren. With hundreds of likes on a post and people asking to place orders, I said 'Oh my God; this could be something.'"

Starting your own business gives you the opportunity to craft a product that speaks deeply to you. Denise feels called to make things that are expedient, creative, and original. When the product matches your DNA, you'll believe in it, and you can sell it. "I would hope that I go into someone's house who had bought one of my pieces 10 years down the line, and it would be all careworn and you could tell that he or she used it every day. That's important to me."

The Burnt Shop now produces cutting boards, spoons, wooden spreaders, stainless steel and leather-wrapped flasks, apothecary bottles, growlers, spray bottles for essential oils, olive oil bottles, marble pastry boards, wooden salad bowls, and slate cheese boards and coasters. "I don't want to leave my home to go to work. I want to walk downstairs at any hour of the day or night. My kids can drop in any time and they know that if I'm busy, they can sit down in my studio and discuss the problems of the world. They couldn't do that when I was working outside the home. I can be at home for my family, and still be producing. I feel like I won the lottery."

Business is like math: there is a *right* answer. If you are enjoying what you are doing and your sales are meeting or exceeding your goals, then you are doing it right. It is not important that you are doing it like anyone else. It does not matter that while you are better at your craft than you were yesterday, you are not as good as you will be tomorrow. There is a satisfyingly -clear and -quick connection between doing a good job and being rewarded for it that does not often come in working for someone else. "I looked at a book in one of the woodcraft stores, and it had an image of a very dark design with a big 'x'



through it: "this is wrong; you're scorching the wood". But all of my designs are very dark and bold, it was an 'ah-ha' moment that I don't have to do anything that anybody tells me to. I can do whatever is visually appealing to me.

"I like the idea that if you looked into a big, beautiful kitchen, maybe a white kitchen, and you saw one of my spoons in a crock with other spoons, it would stand out – you can see it, like kitchen jewelry. You need a bold design to achieve that." Denise loves to make (and her customers most love to buy) cutting boards and cheese boards. "I was a cheese monger at Whole Foods. They are a fantastic \$25 gift, a wonderful little gem. Each is a little bit different. Each one that I touch, I love."

You alone will define the structure of your business. Working from home can allow you to work non-traditional hours or care for children. You control your growth. Your business goals are your own. Your idea of success is up to you.

So, let's get to some nitty-gritty advice. Where do you start?

Really look at your desired product category and see if it's saturated. "You may have the best product ever, but if you are trying to get into a market or event and they already have their soapmaker, candlemaker, or jewelry person, you aren't getting in. If you're going to go into a flooded niche, you're going to need a *categorical* differentiator to stand out." An example: there are many candlemakers making fine products. Our friend Lynz Morahn at Bright Edge pours great candles into vintage glass canning jars. Boom. That's the ticket.

In this early phase, you might sell at small farmers' markets, church craft shows, and to friends and family. But very quickly, you need to take steps to make yourself look like a viable business to market organizers, shop owners, or anyone with whom you'd like to work. "You do have to decide whether you are, in fact, a true business, and you have to make the jump," advises Denise.

Structuring your business properly should include:

- **Insurance.** It's essential to protect yourself if you are selling **anything**, it is required to sell at most reputable events, and is probably not as expensive as you fear.
- Setting up a **legal business structure** provide protections to personal assets – a sole proprietorship and LLC is a common example.
- **Register as a business entity with local, State, and Federal government.** This is required to open a **business checking account**; you will realize you need one the first

time someone writes your business a check and you can't cash it. **Register to collect Sales and Use Tax** which is required by law if you sell taxable items.

- Get your **financial recordkeeping** in order. You may want to hire an accountant. Doing it yourself? I love Wave's free software for small business accounting, invoicing, and credit card processing.

- **A solid logo, some quality photography, and a polished web presence.** These investments make you look professional.

- **Time management.** Making product will take, on average, about 50% of your work time. The rest will be spent on marketing, selling, record keeping, paying taxes, completing event applications, and the like.

Once you're underway, here are some ways to step up sales:

- **Make the best product.** Happy customers evangelizing via positive word-of-mouth is the best advertising.

- **Keep improving your product.** Out- of-area recon can inspire you with new ideas as can online learning from education websites like CreativeLive.

- **Find your people.** What shows and venues are frequented by the customers who would appreciate your product? Denise looks for juried shows with all handmade products and considers how long the event has been running, how the organizers are advertising, and whether or not the event has a sizable social media following and a respected reputation.

- **Align yourselves with other artisans** who are serious. Denise relies on fellow members of The Nutmeg Collective to recommend qualified resources, help her vet prospective shows, co-market, and cheer for one another!

- **Use social media** to share photos of new designs you are making and use it as test marketing. "I can tell it's a hit if I get 50 likes on Facebook or Instagram. Also, it's a good sign if the image receives several comments. If I immediately get people inquiring where they can buy it, I start making that stuff like crazy and add it to my wholesale offerings," explains Denise.

- **Evolue all-important display and packaging** by looking at other maker's booths. Taking a field trip to progressive metropolitan areas like New York can be especially enlightening.

- **Make your sales language leaner.** No one likes to be sold to; a wonderful product with a name that resonates may be enough, but if not, say as little as you can that's exactly what customers need to hear. "My 32-oz. Amber Apothecary Bottles are cool and retro, but on their own, they don't sell





well. I tell people they are the perfect size to be filled with oils, flavored water, cold brew coffee, liquors, and herbal vinegars. Then, they buy."

Invest in upgrades as soon as you can. Professional grade equipment is easier and faster to use, and delivers a more consistent product. Buying raw materials in bulk saves money, but will require more storage. Many makers prefer to rearrange, reorganize, and pare down family possessions to allow for more space for the business, rather than renting a studio. This keeps overhead down, allows for more permissive regulations as a "home-based business," and means that improvements like lighting and electrical upgrades are also investments in your home.

Work does not feel so much like work when it's your own business. Enjoy the freedom of taking a nap between 3:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., opting to pop back into the studio to work from midnight until 2:00 a.m. Have your dogs with you. Make a cup of tea or use the bathroom whenever you'd like! You're the boss! Never forget, though, that artisan entrepreneurs who succeed are self-motivated and really enjoy being productive.

Perhaps this is not the moment for you to go into business. Instead, create for gifts, barter, swaps, and donate to charitable events. Keep making, keep evolving, and your skills will be all the better when it is time to launch your artisan entrepreneur adventure!

The Burnt Shop can be found at quality farmers' markets and events throughout Connecticut and at West Elm in West Hartford and Westport; Rings and Things in Colchester; Whole Harmony Apothecary in Haddam; Soulbury in Woodbury; the New Britain Museum of American Art; Joy and Wit Interiors in Granby; Pious Bird in Black Rock, Local Soul in Wilton, and Rootz in Huntersville, North Carolina. 🐦



