



# From Corporate High-Flier to Artisan

**Tips and stories from four executives who left a lucrative career to join a skilled trade.**

*By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour*

**R**etiring to make wine or open a restaurant by the sea crosses the mind of many professionals over the course of their careers and has become a bit of a cliché. Yet, this sort of move is more commonplace among those who are finishing their traditional career and want to get involved in such hobby businesses for fun, without high financial or lifestyle stakes. As career coaches counselling talent from all stages of lives, we became more intrigued by the phenomenon of much younger professionals deciding to abandon their corporate offices to try new ways of working which

involve getting their hands dirty.

To better understand how to manage this courageous transition, we picked four highly contrasting characters and examined their transformation journey from international corporate white collars to local artisans. They openly shared with us what signs were on the cards early on, what motivated or triggered the change, what adjustments they had to make to become proficient and legitimate in their new occupation, and how they envision their future. Here they are, in the hope that their stories inspire many of you to follow your heart and your instincts.

Name  
Jean-Frédéric

Nationality  
France

Education  
MSc Engineering,  
MBA

Old Career  
Commercial and general management  
roles in electronics, IT and  
healthcare industries

New Career  
Wine maker (vigneron), Domaine des  
Maravilhas



Neither his background – a comfortable French provincial professional family – nor his education in a classical French elite engineering school would have predestined Jean-Frédéric to a life as a winemaker. And yet, this is just what he has ended up doing. How come?

During and after university in the French Alps, Jean-Frédéric went with the flow, getting a long-term offer to stay in THALES, the aerospace and defense multinational, after doing a final year internship there. Up till this point, Jean-Frédéric's work life had been slightly tinged with frustration and disappointment, feeling more of a smaller fish in a bigger pond than he might have liked. After six years of work experience, he decided to take up an MBA at INSEAD. There, he found that the shift from engineering to business was not as simple as he had hoped. While he had dreamed of a job in consulting or tech, what he actually got was a substantial role at Philips, where his hire was more a result of his previous project management experience than of his MBA. However, this started him in another league with a role of greater size and impact on an organization.

After a successful stint at the Dutch conglomerate, and precipitated by an internal reorganization, Jean-Frédéric entered an enjoyable few years, first in Paris, then Geneva, in the data storage business. One significant and constructive factor for him was that, through a series of mergers, his work involved the products' brand and reputation. But on the

other hand, the various restructurings eventually got the better of him, and he soon found himself searching again for the next career move.

## Red Red Wine

At this stage, he took a well-earned “pause” and considered his options. This was the first time Jean-Frédéric seriously considered anything entrepreneurial. With his wife, they looked hard at the opportunity of buying a flourishing hotel and restaurant business in a nearby ski resort, and setting up a promising young chef there. This might have been a success, but he was diverted from this plan by a call to tackle a project in the healthcare industry working with a rather idiosyncratic CEO, and taking on some equity in the business.

Working in the medical company to develop a breakthrough innovation in heart valve industry was exciting and the relationship with the CEO was filled with sparks and pressure. But it turned to Jean-Frédéric's advantage the day that a long work session caused him to miss his flight, and get stuck overnight in Paris. Dining with a close friend in one of his favorite restaurants that evening, Jean-Frédéric experienced the serendipity of learning that a superb wine he tasted “needed to be enjoyed right now, as it would soon no longer exist”. Intrigued, he discovered that the winemaker planned on closing down his business, having no successors lined up. This seemed too much of a tragedy to Jean-Frédéric, and when he recounted the sad story to his wife, they agreed to pursue a meeting with the owner.

From the beginning, the deal looked as though it would work out. The stars seemed to align. However, the contract was unusually complex, and took almost two years to define and complete. While this was going on, Jean-Frédéric was travelling once a fortnight to the vineyard, to learn the ropes of the business, from pruning to ploughing, oak barrels and overseas orders. This was juggled with raising the couple's young children, and in lieu of undertaking the usual studies available to young people taking over a farm in France.

Things took a different turn, however, and the deal fell through at the last minute: the owner accepted a substantially larger and unmatched

offer from a Chinese company, and proceeded with them. Silver linings soon appeared, as Jean-Frédéric and his wife retained an agent to introduce them to other vineyards. Following an effective search, they eventually found themselves owners of the Domaine des Maravilhas in the Gard department, facing the Châteauneuf-du-Pape valley.

As they got into their new life, Jean-Frédéric and his wife realized how little they had understood that penetrating this conservative environment would be as challenging as it was. Having no connections or reputation as a winemaker meant very few or small sales at the outset, and bootstrapping a lot of the operation meant little time to market or sell optimally.

In practice, the winemaker spends some time in the fields and the winery, but has recruited expert help too. He easily manages planting, pruning and the production cycle, but says that driving the tractor on the perilously steep slopes is something he will take years to master. His plan was always to be technically competent in order to lead the process, but his past experience of running profitable businesses gives him a better long-term edge. In the meantime however, the daily grind is real, and our interview was put off two or three times because of rain, or a late delivery.

Some of the more tiresome aspects of his work include small, long-cycle sales to cynical buyers, despite a gratifyingly burgeoning reputation, lack of time to attend to clients as he should, endless admin, not helped by the heavy French system, unpaid bills that he needs to chase, engendering cash flow problems, and “waiting his turn” to be accepted by the elite of the industry.

Nevertheless, Jean-Frédéric is in this for the long run. He is determined to fight his way toward success. He is particularly keen to be known as a vigneron (winemaker) and not just a more typical amateur investor. Expect to see his wines on your restaurant table soon, because he is not giving up. But, as you sip, please do remember the blood, sweat and tears involved.

Seven thousand miles to the East of France,

Laila, our second subject, was a foodie from the outset. But her family environment was one in which the very thought of cooking for a living would have equated her with the maids who served her comfortable household in the Philippines.

She did break with the traditions of medicine and engineering, and became a successful banker at JP Morgan and then Deutsche Bank in Manila. Those early years in banking were profitable, enjoyable, and a great grounding for Laila. Then the opportunity came along to take a finance position for a new metro network in Dubai. Much travel ensued and she frequently took solace in the varied food joints she encountered on her trips. Soon she was wondering why she did not just go into the food industry, be involved daily instead, and live happier.

## Gettin' Hungry

She found a way to make the jump towards a new existence by giving herself a year, reckoning that she was still young, and could always go back. Over the ensuing twelve months, Laila visited Paris and Spain, saving as much money as she could, and hatching a strategy. She defined that San Sebastian would be her destination and began knocking on doors in quest of an apprenticeship.

Many rejections ensued, because of her lack of work permit, but also due to her status as a mere talented amateur. Few restaurants wanted to take on the risk. However, finally, things took a turn for the better: a very prestigious chain of restaurants was wise enough to see her potential, and added her to the large group of apprentices they ran with. And so she started that evening – going off to buy her knives and other gear in the afternoon.

Amidst a less than friendly reception from her chef de partie, Laila threw herself into things, but encountered certain blocks that came from her fear of making mistakes. The chef had made it clear that errors were not tolerated. Laila took a kind colleague's advice to practice out of hours, when it would not matter if she messed up a plating exercise, and she would not be seen by her boss. From there on in, it became easier.

Name  
Laila

Nationality  
Philippines

Education  
BA Economics, Master Hospitality  
Management, Culinary arts courses

Old Career  
Finance positions in investment banks  
and transportation operator

New Career  
Co-Founder, Guerrilla Dining Concepts



She was always the first to arrive, and the last to leave, partly because of her conscientious character and partly as she knew her experience would benefit from full attention at all times. Soon, the inevitable question of “what next?” came up. Laila wanted a return to Asia and used her connections to obtain a role as a trainee in a top restaurant in Singapore. She then obtained a “proper job” in a Japanese restaurant, having finally “arrived”.

The next opportunity came along and allowed Laila to bring all her different experience and expertise together. A renowned New York gourmet food retailer and outlet set up in Singapore, and Laila was asked to oversee the process. This meant she could keep her chef's toque on while using all her business savvy at the same time. This was a key, pivotal moment of her career, as she had now been exposed to every aspect of running a food operation, and knew the underbelly intimately, as well as having the perspective of an international, global businesswoman.

But no victory is as long-lived as we wish: on her next job, with the formidable chef and restaurateur Joël Robuchon, Laila “got her ass kicked again”. This led her to make a return to school in San Sebastian, where she dug in to the nitty gritty of more demanding techniques, giving her the opportunity to follow up with a job in a top Singapore hotel, finally as a sous-chef. But corporate politics were a nightmare, and Laila decided that this sort of environment was not for her.

At this point, she started pondering the idea of becoming an F&B Director in another, possibly less political hotel. She decided to undertake a Master's in Hospitality Management at EADA in Barcelona. While there, she was torn, as she still loved the adrenaline of the kitchen, but also felt the pull to get out of cooking and start a career in consulting.

Serendipity played its game here. Pop-up restaurants were an emerging phenomenon and this allowed her to spot a gap in the market. She had identified the local appetite for Asian and Latino street food, and the need for high quality, good value eateries. “Hawker 45” was her final project in the master's but more significantly it became a grand vision. In a matter of months, the unique restaurant became the darling of the trendy crowd in the city. Laila worked hard to craft not just exquisite food, but also a finely honed operation, with great marketing and outstanding commercial management. It is so successful that she has attracted an investor, with whom she is building the business, with some brand extensions, and getting ready to exit within the next few years.

Would she go back to finance? Definitely not, “but I use it!” says Laila. It is a valuable part of what she does, and she can imagine herself in the future teaching restaurant finance, as it is “badly needed”. Does she fit in to her new “artisan world”? Well, she left a family who thought she was crazy to join a group who could not understand why she would have left a stable, high level professional job. So she has perhaps always been the outsider, but she made a virtue of it. Laila has consistently found the resources to shift, reinvent, and write her own curriculum. It was not easy, and she missed seven of the past eight Christmases with family. But she is hooked. The move to the US, post exit from Hawker, will not be just to retire and sail with her partner. She has several new concepts up her sleeve, and is not tired yet of, literally, rolling up her sleeves and starting over. Americans, get ready!

In contrast to Jean-Frédéric and Laila, Iona's journey to independent artisan was paved with fewer obstacles. Her seven-year career in investment banking in London, before becoming



Name  
**Iona**

Nationality  
**United Kingdom**

Education  
**BA French and Russian, Gardening school, diploma in Landscape Architecture**

Old Career  
**European equity analyst in investment banks**

New Career  
**Landscape Architect**



a landscape architect, was not necessarily what would have been predicted from her childhood, but there were elements present, which are visible with 20/20 hindsight. Languages and shoestring family travel meant that she often visited other places than the stunning countryside of the Scottish Highlands where she was raised. She was fascinated by local cultures wherever she went, choosing finally to study languages at university, experiencing an exchange year in France, where she “just happened” to pick up Russian too. A gap year in Australia prior to university had exposed her to the world of land-scape architecture, as she had found herself working as a receptionist in a practice there, and was bewitched by the scent of the sepia prints drying.

A further trip down under on finishing her studies maintained the eclectic approach to life, but finally pushed Iona to consider what she really “needed” to do. She soon realized that what was needed was to earn a lot of money, to catch up with all the spending her travels had incurred. So, investment banking seemed to fit the bill, but she had missed the all-important fresh graduate recruitment season, and so had to find a different way in. This came in the form of a junior role on the trading floor at Goldman Sachs. After this “fantastic introduction”, Iona found a job at another bank, where she could use her linguistic skills, selling European equities. She loved the constant travel, the glamorous clients, offices and bright people around her. A series of progressive moves took

her to other eminent institutions, where she thrived. However, once her world became more dominated by US banks, through mergers and general market shift in London, she found the tougher environment far less pleasant, and reconsidered her options.

## In the Garden

Flowers and plants had attracted Iona instinctively, and reminded her of the strong artistic bent in her family. So she looked into various ways of working with them, including obtaining a part-time job at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which she found inspiring enough to decide to sell her house and most other assets in order to undertake a proper education in landscape architecture. The training was far more exacting than her degree, as she braved many “all-nighters” finishing projects. Despite this, Iona became quickly convinced her choice had been the right one, and that she had found her long-term interest, with no chance she would ever get bored.

With some small projects from friends to set her up, Iona created her own practice, and has never looked back. She reflects on the wide range of skills she uses now, comparing them to the past, highlighting, curiously, her love of math, and her technical obsession with levels and angles in landscaping, and then recalls that she chose to do Maths A Level at high school, because she loved numbers, and despite teachers predicting she would not pull it off. They clearly did not know her determination. Her desire for balance in everything also definitely comes in useful in a profession where the competencies required are so diverse; so the “maths plus the arts” or “banking plus languages” and so on all take on a sense that was not perhaps apparent as a trend hitherto, but is now crystal clear.

Of course, the beginnings of her landscape career involved a certain amount of manual or contrasting work to her life in banking. She recounts her mornings of running to get bacon sandwiches for her teams, and unloading tons and tons of plants, or the experience of watching thousands of pounds’ worth of plants being lifted by crane over Sloane Square, so that

she could help her property developer client set up a launch on time. While she was not on her hands and knees planting everything, this was constantly a hands-on field.

What has been valuable from her old life, then? Iona believes that the constant learning involved in banking, the daily and hourly challenge of shifting markets was instrumental in giving her the flexibility to learn and stretch in her new trade. What is more, while she was never a natural sales person, the perpetual pressure to be selling in her previous professional life prepared her for this stage, and lessened her “fear of talking to powerful people”. And, it turns out, Iona has been a lifelong entrepreneur, having started out by knitting fingerless gloves for her schoolmates at 14, sold dresses to her peers while still in school, and sold her creations while in Australia.

Overall, her advice is to “follow your instincts, and not to worry about making mistakes, as they are essential to success”. Would she ever go back? She is clear that, while she misses the money and “staying at the Georges V”, she loves what she does so much that anything else would pale by significance. The path to her success included intuitive exploration and experimentation, but her engagement and expansion are likely to be long-lived indeed.

During 2011-2012, on the INSEAD campus nestled in the forest of Fontainebleau, Lee went through a most intense and challenging year. Her time spent as an MBA student there was fraught with the realities of running two successful hostels in Barcelona at the same time as studying a demanding program. And yet, prior to that, she had walked the “good girl” path of going to Wharton to do a degree in Finance and International Business, and interned and worked at Goldman Sachs for several years. What induced her to make that drastic change? And to do it so young? Some clues lie way back.

As a child living in the US, Lee had admired her businessman father, and watched her mother emerge from “just teaching” into becoming an educational entrepreneur. So she

had simply and quietly assumed she would “go into business” even though she was not truly sure what that meant. She spent hours with her younger sister Lauren creating “make-believe” companies, fashioning collections of jewelry, building marketing plans, and selling the pieces to friends, family and various imaginary clients.

After Wharton, Goldman attracted Lee because the Private Wealth Management business she joined was “remarkably entrepreneurial” and she recognized that instinct in herself. She also enjoyed the chance to put into action what she had studied in her degree, and found that her new position gave her a legitimacy that was both useful and pleasurable.

## There's a Small Hotel

Studying abroad in Spain while still in school, Lee had noticed that there might be a market for a better kind of travel hostel. She had even written a business plan in her last year at university. When she mentioned the plan to her roommate while at Goldman Sachs, she was egged on to develop it further, and the two of them focused: “We’d come home, exhausted, from work, open a bottle of wine, and find new energy to build our ideas”. They entered a few business competitions, and even won prizes, but somehow the project just stayed on the back burner.

When Lee found herself in a messy political conflict at work, and realized there was absolutely nothing that she could do to affect the outcome, she knew that she had to find a new job. At the same time, she came to understand that her “heart was not in it anymore”. She did not want to work anywhere else in finance, nor did she want to risk encountering another “bad boss”. Suddenly, the business plan was coming into its own.

In just a short time, Lee and her sister decided to move to Barcelona, taking their savings and a huge dollop of optimism with them. “It seemed crazy, but it was calculated. And we were both young, unfettered by any other responsibilities, and it would not always be that easy.” It was a case of now or never.

During the initial stages of the project, the girls worked like crazy, setting up meetings with every expert they could persuade, from tourism councils

Name  
**Lee**

Nationality  
**United States**

Education  
**BS Economics, MBA**

Old Career  
**Financial analyst in private wealth management bank**

New Career  
**Principal at L&L Hospitality**



to town halls, architects and construction companies. They networked at every event they could and were perceived as being a bit crazy. They profited from their background in a professional, slick business to get appointments and approached each encounter with the seriousness of a banker's meeting, which gave the young things some credibility in an environment where no other 24 year-olds would have dared.

The lifestyle change was enormous. Whereas in banking, they would be "buckled in" before the markets even opened and work long, structured days, here in Barcelona, they had to decide, plan and motivate themselves without a taskmaster, or schedule dictated by others. Lee also needed to get used to being in a city and culture that functioned far less efficiently than her previous environment.

After endless rejections, false starts and disappointments, "the" property was finally found and secured. Lee recalls the multiple trips to IKEA, nights spent assembling furniture, painting walls, and giving attention to minute details. They launched their business with no team, but had invested much time and thought into how to make a supremely great hostel. Lee says "we were so naïve that we would not even have known what to ask of staff!"

The small hostel opened, with the help of friends, and the girls managed for some time by running the place themselves. They handled a 24-hour reception, cleaned, and stumbled home to shower occasionally, bringing each other meals. Lee reflects that this gave her tremen-

dous respect for housekeeping staff, as she knows first hand how painful and exhausting their work really is. After a few weeks of being fully booked and totally drained, the girls made their first hire – a night receptionist – so that they could restore sleep to their agendas.

Things went from strength to strength, and they opened a second hostel, not far away, and expanded the business. When Lee decided to do her MBA, they got in a manager, who was amazing, but, through no fault of his own, his arrival heralded the beginning of the end. A tourism tax was introduced in Barcelona, which impact was excruciating at the bottom of the market where they were. Regulations also tightened up, with a huge increase in "inspections" leading to fines. Altogether, it was time to diversify, so the sisters planned a new venture in New York.

As they built their business on the other side of the Atlantic, they sold up in Spain. Even in New York, with a much bigger venture, they remained hands on, "though this time we got a team to build the beds!" Unwittingly, as they gently coerced their team into doing the finishings while the construction added delay upon delay, they created an unusually intimate and committed culture, in which each individual identified strongly with the whole, and could spot details for which he or she had taken total responsibility. Comments like "that is the room that I painted" were frequently heard. This nurturing style led to engagement and "shockingly low staff turnover".

L&L Hospitality continues to thrive, with a new hostel being developed in Portland, Oregon, and there is a sense that growth will continue, with this magic mix of vision and detail. Lee is positive that there is no turning back and yet also clear about how her background helped her towards the success she enjoys today: "the corporate veneer of investment banking, with the professional polish and attention to detail, which counterbalanced our youth. A hard work ethic was also key, because we did everything for ourselves, and we certainly developed our humility!" She concluded our discussion on an emotional note, saying that she had not truly known "the meaning of happiness before going

## Seven Tips for Aspiring Artisans

1. If you are unclear about what you want to do, look back for clues.
2. Take the time to explore and experiment as much as possible, to reduce risks and confirm your new vocation.
3. Accept that there will be intense learning involved, and that much of it may be more arduous than you could ever imagine.
4. Leverage the competencies and skills you acquired in your former career.
5. Be prepared to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.
6. A good sense of humility will be your friend as you start from zero.
7. Consider your age, life stage and risk profile, but remember that mistakes will help you grow.

to Spain, where she discovered joy, optimism and constant learning”. We believe she will not stop, whatever the geography of the company’s growth.

So, what is it that makes these changes happen? There are definitely many common points, including a sense of frustration and fatigue about the “old job”, and of course there is passion, even though sometimes it was harder to tease out than others. This all goes to show that we can rein-vent ourselves at any stage we choose, if we find the focus and the energy. While it is clearly valuable to be driven by a fiery focus, some aspects of these stories show that there are many other factors involved, and

that they are pretty diverse.

What will you do? And when? We both made many changes, and grapple every day with the hands-on minutiae of businesses without structure or secretaries, learning new techniques and technologies, but loving the freedom we have created. What is next for us? We have more ideas of what we can do with our energy, for sure. How about you?

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