

# Isatou Njai: Innovating Internationally

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“ *Hippo & Hedgehog as a company represents our multicultural backgrounds as I founded the business with my partner Paul after we had spent 10 years working on community development projects in The Gambia. We aim to help bring purpose and wellbeing into people’s lives by tackling many of the dietary health issues seen around the world and working with ethical supply chains supporting female co-operatives in Africa to develop innovative healthy food and drink products for global markets. As well as an innovative pipeline of products we have launched Baotic prebiotic drinks made from African Baobab superfruits.* ”

## INSPIRED

My inspiration comes from growing up in rural Gambia, West Africa, where there is a 7 month long dry season and around 70% live below the poverty line. Understanding the many challenges within the community villages where there are high levels of poverty and a lack of opportunity, I saw the female co-operatives as a strong mechanism to eliminate many of these challenges especially in hunger and malnutrition. However, it also supports a purpose for empowering wom

elevate the family unit and facilitates collaboration across diverse tribes with community empowerment. I have been blessed with a number of opportunities for growth myself and I have a real hunger to build something with a community spirit that will help bring and inspire others on that journey.

## **NEW CANS & MACRO FACTORS**

The world feels very turbulent right now and there are a number of shifting macroeconomic and global factors effecting many businesses. With increasing environmental awareness, we have been accelerating plans to move away from plastic and are close to launching an exciting new drink range as part of a mini pivot building on all of our lessons learnt. However, the biggest challenge is uncertainty, which first was coming from Brexit and more lately with the Covid-19 outbreak having slowed down our launch.

As with many others we are looking at all the ways we can pivot out of the pandemic and come out stronger in the long term. We have a multi-distributor opportunity in the USA which we are working really hard towards as it offers the large volume required to really make a retail product successful in the long term. We were having advanced investment discussions to fund this before Covid-19 struck, and we are revisiting and revising that approach now, confident we have a strong innovative health product that can contribute to customers seeking healthy options and immune boosting properties.

We will soon be launching online through our website and through Ocado and are in discussion with buyers we have worked with in UAE as well as other UK national retailers. With UK and international goals, future trade agreements coming out of Brexit, inflation, and currency rates between the pound and the dollar will all be important elements for us to stay close to. A potential future US trade agreement and the regulations around that could bring opportunities. However, there's a strong debate and the chlorinated chicken discussion shows us some of the other food regulatory standard complexities involved. Covid-19 also clearly shook the bricks and mortar retail and logistics industries so we have continued some of our pipeline innovations that would be more suited to digital channels to help capitalise on this growing market.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



## **COMPANY INSPIRATION**

There are many inspiring companies in the food and drink space that I really admire such as Proper (snacks) with their engaging marketing and brand building. I also really admire some of the work being done by BrewDog in their continually creative and purpose-led approach, and Virgin Galactic's bold mission to space. Looking across to the United States there are great purposeful lead businesses I am learning from such as HEB retail chain which has a real community focus.

## **INDUSTRY VISION**

Its noteworthy the food and drink retail industry was one of the first to be highlighted as critical during the covid-19 crisis. It's not going anywhere, but clearly elements are also shifting. Short-term emphasis has been on commodities and falling back on trusted brands but trends from around the world show consumers appetite for interesting, novel, and luxurious goods accelerating after coming out of lockdown. It's also interesting to see a significant number of investors moving into food and drink as a safer and more ambitious haven during this recent period.

Digital innovation, technology and agile ways of working have drastically shaped many industries, and it could be argued food retail hasn't yet seen that big change. There's an exciting place for novel ways of getting food and drink to consumers but perhaps the biggest change will come from science and its link with agriculture. Having had the vision for a prebiotic gut friendly drink range for over 10 years, it's fascinating to see the developments and our understanding in gut science as an example.

I am sure the environment and sustainable supply chains will continue to play an important role. Climate resilience, crop varieties, and nutrient dense and immune boosting properties are bound to increase in demand. Covid-19 has increased the focus on transparency, food systems, supply chains and the farm to fork ideology.

It has also shown what can be achieved when we work together towards purposeful outcomes and I think we have an opportunity in time to do this, but it will take a swell of great leadership and business must play its role. There's a tension between eating local and global demand, and as our pallets grow fonder for more tropical tastes and ingredients, we also seek out more of the 99% of the worlds healthy botanicals that currently do not reach our shelves. I would love to see more equity going to the mainly underdeveloped countries that supply them. I hope we find new and creative ways to build mutually beneficial communities that help uplift the poorest and reduce the gap in standards of living and wealth. That's the part that excites me.

## **SKILLS**

When I look out to the employment and skills market it is also a nervous and uncertain time for many, but with hard times also comes great opportunity, and perhaps whilst job markets are low it offers the space to be more adventurous to starting a new business, building on passions and cultivating new skills.

There are sacrifices beyond all of the hard work that goes into setting up a business, knowing that you could be working and supporting friends and family in different ways, but I try hard to hold onto that bigger vision of impact in the long term. The breadth and depth of things that you learn is unimaginable. One thing I have always tried to do is invest in myself knowing that I will always carry that with me. I recommend investing in skills, real experience, learning through failure and continuous improvement.

There has been a huge shift across many industries away from traditional project management to agile ways of working, and I have been applying that more in my business. I had the opportunity with Unlocking Ambition, Entrepreneurial Scotland & Future X to visit Silicon Valley earlier in the year. Through this visiting LinkedIn, Facebook, Cyber Cube and Pivotal whose focus on lean, agile methodology and mind-sets are inspirational. As a business we have also invested time in supporting students in the Gambia and at Glasgow Caledonian University, and always recommend even if you do not want to be a graduate entrepreneur there is a huge value in becoming an entrepreneurial graduate. An important skill I often see across industries, for selling our own individual or business brand, and with increased virtual working, is the power of communication and the ability for us to continuously communicate the value that we bring through storytelling.

The world is clearly changing at a faster rate than ever and I believe those with the right entrepreneurial and growth mind-sets will be the ones that thrive in the long term.

**– Isatou Njai, Hippo & Hedgehog**