

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/an-unconventional-co-ceo-journey/>

Splendid Spoon co-CEO Elise Densborn tells the story of how she started as a customer with an interest in the intersection of food and technology, then rose through the company, becoming co-CEO in 2021.



Transcript

- The funniest part of my journey with Splendid Spoon is 00:00:05,160 that it actually started at a birthday party, so I met one of Nicole's co-founders, and we were just kind of chit-chatting and at the time I lived in the Midwest and I was working full-time and going to school full-time and was interested in a plant-based diet for my own personal, like, research and reasons.. And kind of quickly shifted from sort of like what do you do to how do I sign up.. Like, it was a very immediate sale on the customer front.. I mean, so that was sort like my initial experience.. I started as a customer, then I was really excited about the concept and idea as an investor.. And then this co-founder of Nicole's at the time had reached out to me actually when I was in transition.. So I was stepping away from my world in the industrials in middle market manufacturing and knew I wanted to go after the intersection of food and health and food and tech, but I didn't quite know how I was gonna do that.. And he called with an operating problem.. At the time, we had just launched smoothies and which feels like forever ago, but we had just launched smoothies and they are a different product line.. They have a shorter shelf life than everything else..

And so there were some bumps in the road as there are in early stage business building.. And I came in to sort of like parachute in and solve the smoothie purchasing problem.. So that was sort of like part one.. As you said, I was a consultant first, so I actually was a little like, okay, let me, I had just quit my job.. I'm in the Midwest, I don't know which way is up, like, let me do this part-time.. And that was my consulting project.. So it was cool because it was a really nice way to sort of like just get introduced to a completely different size, stage, industry, all of the things just by getting my hands dirty and sort of like proving myself, so to speak.. But at the time I wasn't actually like seeking to join Splendid Spoon.. It was sort of just the next step and an interesting learning opportunity right where I was thinking of going.. So after we solved the smoothie problem, we actually were hiring a VP of operations..

I came out to New York to train and transition to him and Nicole was like, "How about you stay? How about you move to New York and join the team?" And so that was sort of like, I came in as this like finance and strategy role.. Splendid Spoon had just raised its Series A at the time and was just kind of in need, I mean, it was like a seven person team, so in need of really some additional sophistication and structures and systems and just tighter strategic thinking and things of that nature.. And that's what I came in to do initially.. And I think the shift, let's see, the shift from finance and strategy and sort of like basics there to COO was actually pretty quick.. There was a couple of just like between the smoothies and needing to build

out a team for marketing and tech, there was just a quick understanding that like the team reporting to me made sense just from like an operator standpoint.. I had a little more operating experience.. Nicole's a super talented chef, super talented communicator and brand builder, but I had, you know, just graduated business school and had some of those more like operating skill sets.. And so we shifted pretty quickly into the COO and CEO dynamic in early 2019.. And that worked really well for us.. It gave us a chance to sort of like find our ways in these new roles and to build trust and to sort of like understand our respective strengths and weaknesses..

But over time it pretty organically evolved candidly into sort of more of a partnership.. And I think it was the beginning of 2021, we decided to like formalize this into a co-CEO relationship.. And it has been very effective for us.. So there's lots of different bumps and bruises along the way, but it's a really effective model for us...