

THE SLOW PATH TO SUCCESS: NOMIKU RE-INVENTS SOUS VIDE

CUSTOMER PROFILE



With thousands of years of accumulated human knowledge about cooking and preparing food, you might think that there is nothing new under the sun in the culinary world. Not true. Nomiku, a San Francisco-based startup, set out to demonstrate that technology can refine and improve a cooking technique previously reserved for exclusive restaurants and top chefs, and make it available to anyone who wants to enjoy food slowly cooked to perfection at precise temperatures. Developed in the mid-1970s, sous vide (pronounced soo-veed) involves sealing food in a vacuum bag, immersing the bag in a pot full of water, and heating it for several hours at a controlled temperature. Nomiku saw the opportunity to take the basic idea, design a simple yet sophisticated hardware device to circulate the water at a set temperature, and introduce its product to home kitchens and appreciative foodies everywhere.

THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA

Abe and Lisa Fetterman, the husband-and-wife cofounders of Nomiku, share a love for fine food. During a discussion about sous vide, Abe set a plan in motion when he said, “Let’s just make one. Now is the time.” A plasma physicist by education, Abe deviated from his intended career path as he and Lisa spent the next several months creating a working prototype—with parts purchased on the Internet—of the sous vide machine they envisioned. Abe has now assumed the title of CTO—Chief Tasting Officer, in his own words—at Nomiku. Lisa excels as both the outspoken evangelist and CEO of Nomiku, a role in which her natural enthusiasm for food, community, and applied technology can be openly expressed.

“[Being an entrepreneur is] such an emotional ride that if you don’t have a support system and a community, it’s very, very easy to just want to give up.”

— Lisa Fetterman, Cofounder

KICKING OFF THE FUNDING

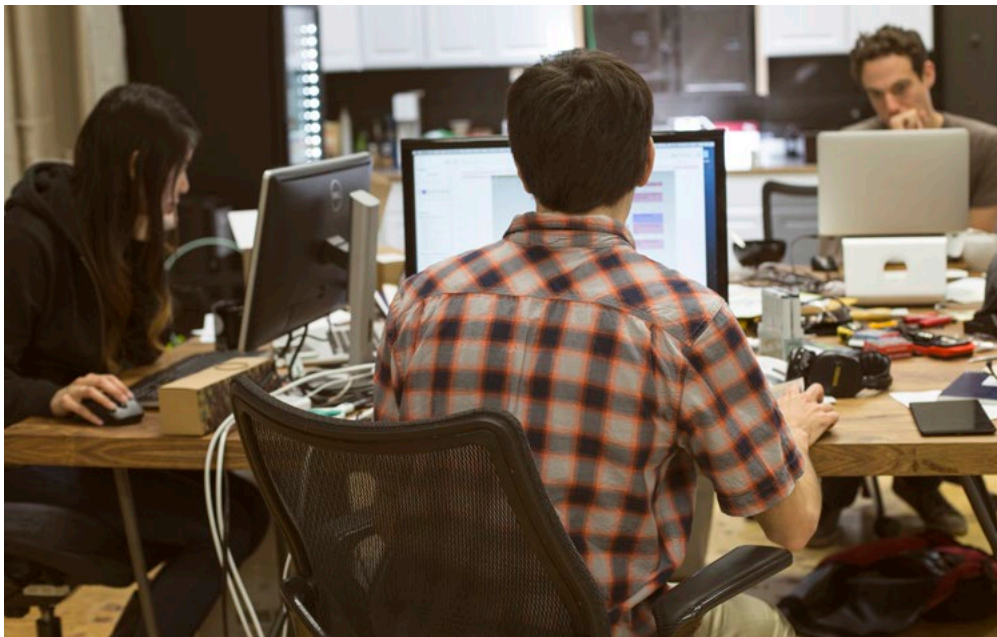
After approaching several potential investors, none of whom saw any real promise in their idea, Nomiku launched a Kickstarter Campaign that eventually received the highest funding in the food category, generating \$750,192 of backing (over three times their original target). Surprised but gratified by the response, Nomiku initiated the design phase of the project, turning to SOLIDWORKS to test concepts and develop the foundation for creating the prototypes.

Having proven through Kickstarter that there was widespread interest in a hardware device to commoditize sous vide cooking, Nomiku turned to hardware accelerators to sharpen the development process. They first moved to Shenzhen, China, to continue the prototype design, initially participating in HAX Accelerator. Next, they gained knowledge and enhanced their approach by working with Y Combinator, the preeminent startup accelerator in the world.



Lisa notes that the camaraderie within the accelerators was a boost to spirits during difficult stages of the journey. “The biggest benefit that I got out of each of the accelerators,” Lisa says, “is a network of entrepreneurs. Being an entrepreneur, even though I had my husband with me, is an extremely lonely ordeal. You hit walls all the time. It’s such an emotional ride that if you don’t have a support system and a community, it’s very, very easy to just want to give up.”

Design changes and refinements took place over many more months; new ideas helped reshape the prototypes, spurred by field-testing with people who had an interest in the cooking technique. Testing finally led to a unibody design—created using SOLIDWORKS—that eliminated power supply issues noted earlier by participants. Safety and usability remained an important focus throughout the evolution of the product. The Nomiku device issues alerts if the cooking temperature drops into the danger zone, where the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) notes that dangerous bacteria and toxins can be produced. An alert is also generated if there is a power loss during cooking.



LOOKING AHEAD

The iterative process of design, prototyping, and testing—part of an accelerating product evolution quickened by Nomiku's in-shoring of the prototyping steps—has led to the introduction of a second-generation version of the Nomiku sous vide immersion circulator that is controlled through a Wi-Fi connection. Once again, SOLIDWORKS helped streamline the design effort. With Wi-Fi access, the device can be monitored and temperatures adjusted from anywhere that the Internet can be accessed. The company is sourcing tools from US factories and planning to perform final assembly in San Francisco's Mission District. The trend toward US-based prototyping and building of products is driven by changing economics for hardware startups, as noted by TechCrunch Daily, fulfilling a requirement to tighten design-and-testing cycles by using local resources.¹

The Nomiku staff has been increased, and product shipments have already tallied millions of dollars in revenues. The future looks bright for the company as more cooks discover the convenience and taste benefits of sous vide and realize that smart technology has dramatically brought down the price of adopting this cooking technique.

Nomiku has built a thriving web community around sous vide cooking. "People come to us when they want recipes," Lisa says, "and when they have a question about sous vide. When that happens, we're basically agnostic to what sous vide machine you have. We just want you to have a good time cooking!"

¹ Cutler, Kim-Mai. 2014. "Lean Hardware Strategy Lets Kickstarter Breakout Nomiku 'In-Shore' Manufacturing Back to the U.S." TechCrunch Daily. <http://techcrunch.com/2014/08/18/nomiku-2/>.



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