



Swede success

When Sofia Bune imported a Swedish kitchen for her own use, she decided that there was a market for Lidhults Kök bespoke products in the UK and started her own kitchen retail business selling them exclusively. David Harris finds out more



If you want evidence that a gifted novice can successfully sell kitchens then look no further than Sofia Bune. This Swedish ex-solicitor whose only previous experience of kitchens was the one in her own home, has succeeded with her company Sola Kitchens in the teeth of some of the worst economic conditions the sector has ever known.

Disconcertingly, Bune says that before setting up business in London in 2006, she “hadn’t spent much time looking at what others are doing” either. Even now, several years on, she still relies more on her own judgement than looking too much at other retailers.

But the fact that she turned sales of £130,000 in her first year, 2006/7, into nearly £1 million of business last year, demonstrates that experience is not everything.

At heart, this woman’s story is a personal one. The prospect of a kitchen business first struck her forcibly after she imported and installed her own Swedish kitchen for her home in Marylebone, London. She did so because she did not feel she could get the quality of kitchen she wanted in the UK without paying too much.



She says: “At the time, I knew nothing about kitchens whatsoever, but I knew what I liked, partly because I do a lot of cooking.”

And what Bune likes, and what her company now sells, is Swedish kitchens. They are solid wood, bespoke and rather expensive – the starting price for a Sola kitchen is around £25,000 all in and her biggest installation so far cost £150,000.

The bespoke element is an important distinction. Standard kitchens, says Bune, can restrict designers “by limited sizes, finishes and colours and appliance choices”.

The extra expense of a bespoke service is one reason why Sola suits its base in Fulham, where property prices are high and where residents are prepared to spend as much on a new kitchen as entire homes cost elsewhere.

In this environment, design also matters. Sola does not charge for design and does not release drawings until a deposit has been paid.

Sola moved to Fulham in 2011, having originally set up in Wimbledon in south-west London – another of the capital’s wealthier areas. The Wimbledon operation was particularly unusual because it was run from a Swedish chalet in the garden of her business partner. She has now left the UK with her family to live in Hong Kong, leaving Bune in sole charge of Sola. The chalet was a “big shed, basically”, she says. The company name is a combination of the first two letters of Sofia and her former business partner’s first name, Lara.

Sola did receive customers in its ‘shed’, but by appointment only as passing trade was impossible in a private garden. The modest beginning helped limit costs.

She says: “We started at a time when a lot of kitchen showrooms were going bankrupt, so a garden in Wimbledon was actually quite a good move.”

Even before the chalet operation, Bune had

been operating from her home, then in Marylebone, while she still worked two days a week at her law firm.

Apart from her own desire to get the kind of kitchen that she felt she could not get in the UK, there were other personal factors that drove her to set up her own business.

One was that visitors who saw her kitchen said they wanted one and asked her to help. The first two kitchens she sold were to friends who had seen hers in Marylebone and wanted one like it.

Another reason was what you might call the “seize the day” factor. Bune was getting fed up with the demands of the legal profession. “Being a solicitor was a slog of long hours and hard work,” she says.

And there was also the influence of her mother, who died aged 63 with her dreams of retirement cut short.

“ There are good kitchens sold here, but too many retailers concentrate on getting people to ‘sign here’ rather than really listening to what they need. It’s too much about the sale and not about the consumer ”

Bune says: “She had all sorts of things planned, but then she never got there. It made me think.” That reflection resulted in a business plan for Sola that was distinctly upmarket and that has so far been extremely successful.

Sola is the sole UK importer for Lidhults Kök. Lidhults is a town in Sweden and kök is Swedish for kitchen. Because all the Lidhults kitchens are bespoke, there is no challenge from the internet. No other retailer in the UK sells the kitchens, so the only way a customer could source this particular make would be to go to a supplier in Sweden, Norway or Finland – the other countries where Lidhults sells. If you live in the UK and like Lidhults kitchens, then it is Bune you will almost certainly be dealing with.

She is clearly immensely proud of the product. Big selling points include that they are solid wood, which is not only easy on the eye but makes for a much longer-lasting kitchen, she says. This is very much the Swedish style and Sola’s sales literature makes a point of saying that the average lifespan of a Swedish kitchen is 18 to 20 years, compared with five to seven years in the UK. Clearly this makes the high price tag more palatable to some customers, although Bune admits that most are simply prepared to spend whatever it takes to get the kitchen they want. Many UK retailers, I’m sure, would love to have such a customer base.

None of this means that Bune has had an easy time establishing the business, but she did have some advantages, including her legal training, which she supplemented with robust common sense.

She hasn’t borrowed money for the business



Top: Storage options include this plate drawer
 Left: The oak shelving system from Lidhults Kök
 Above: Oak drawers and integrated trays
 Below: The Newport painted kitchen in white





at any point. The set-up costs for the Munster Road showroom, which has been taken on a 15-year lease with an initial rent-free period and a couple of lease breaks, were funded entirely from money made during the Wimbledon phase of the enterprise.

Bune has also made sure that she did not expand until she was ready to do so.

“Until a year ago, I did all the design myself,” she explains.

Not anymore, however. After a couple of false starts - she took on and then parted company with several designers - she has taken on two in the past year. Both have the right sort of experience with one previously having worked for Smallbone of Devizes and the other for John Lewis of Hungerford.

The fact that Bune went through several designers before she eventually finding the two that she wanted - Rhiannon Phenis and Pia Rosling - indicates one of the reasons for her success: she is clearly somebody who knows what she wants.

She is reserved about why the other designers did not work out, merely observing that “some kitchen designers are great designers, but can’t sell their designs”, while others are “too focused on the sale, not caring enough about the client’s needs”.

Bune also seems good at garnering press coverage. A pile of magazines with Sola kitchens featured on their pages sits in the Fulham showroom. Many of those pieces have been secured by making sure there was good photography, which Bune had the foresight to organise herself.

“We use a good photographer and if you send people good pictures, they are more likely to feature our kitchens,” she says.

And although she may not have examined the UK kitchen retailing business in microscopic detail, she has picked up one or two views on it, not all of them flattering.

She says: “Of course, there are good kitchens sold here, but to my mind too many retailers

Top left: The contemporary Sletten painted kitchen in grey with Corian worktop

Top right Larder unit with solid oak interior

Below: Butcher’s block in oak



TIMELINE: Sola Kitchens

■ **Summer 2006**

Started selling Swedish kitchens from home, still working part-time in a law firm

■ **September 2008**

Started Sola Kitchens full time, working with a partner from a Wimbledon garden

■ **January 2011**

Moved to a purpose-built showroom at 121 Munster Road, SW6

concentrate on getting people to “sign here” rather than really listening to what they need. It’s too much about the sale and not about the consumer. And so many kitchens I have seen are badly planned spaces - sometimes I just can’t believe it.”

As an example of this bad planning, Bune recalls one particular case where a dishwasher and a cutlery drawer were put at opposite ends of a large kitchen.

“They spent half their lives walking between the dishwasher and the drawer,” she says.

Despite these criticisms, Bune does not dismiss all of the competition, acknowledging that “there are some very good kitchen companies in London”.

Not to mention those that Sola is up against in the forthcoming kbbreview Awards, such as Kitchens International, Podesta and Hart-Woods, all of which Bune acknowledges “have made some really stunning designs”.

Sola has two employed installers, which matters, she says, because they have a thorough knowledge of what they are installing, “which ensures a perfect finish”.

She adds: “Small details can make a huge difference.”

But Bune is no kitchen snob. Among other firms she admires is Ikea “for its creativity and affordability”. Bune should know - she was born just a few miles from where Ingvar Kamprad started the Swedish furniture giant. And the bottom line is that the likes of Ikea are never going to be a problem for bespoke specialists like Sola - an assessment that she says applies equally to other big names now muscling in on the kitchen market, such as Next, M&S, John Lewis and Laura Ashley.

So what is the next step for Sola? A second showroom back in Marylebone, where it all began for her? A base in W1, perhaps? They are difficult to secure, but you sense that this is where Bune would really like Sola Kitchens to be. Wigmore Street, here she comes. [kbb](#)