

# ALVAR



STYLE. CULTURE. THOUGHTS.

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# POKER, PORRIDGE AND GUERRILLA KNITTING

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Fleur Emery is a woman of many titles: entrepreneur, design enthusiast, mentor - but perhaps first and foremost she is a relentless advocate for small creative businesses. Through her own beer brand she supports young artists and knows the challenges creatives face when trying to earn a living from their - sometimes obscure - craft.

We took Fleur for lunch (or she might have taken us, not sure) and talked about the successful marriage of art and commerciality, the creative business scene in London, crowdfunding and how to make it as a creative entrepreneur.

Can you really make a living out of knitting covers for ping pong balls? Apparently it's not that difficult.

**Hi Fleur. Thanks for taking the time to chat with us. We thought it would be interesting to talk about the challenges small creative businesses face today, as you have first hand experience about this, don't you?**

I started my first business just before the recession and when it hit I took a beating so I feel like I learned my lessons the hard way. Talking to novice entrepreneurs is like 'back to the future', it feels like I'm talking to my younger self, giving the advice and re-assurance that I wish I'd had. The world is different now of course, there's the mass dissemination of information on the internet, crowdfunding etc. The hurdles are different from when I first started; today a startup's biggest challenges are differentiation in a crowded marketplace and the sophistication of consumers.

**Let's talk more about that a bit later. Tell us a little bit about your background first. We've heard rumours about a certain 90s club kid...**

I arrived in London in 1992 to study Spanish Literature at UCL. House music had just arrived from Chicago and the scene was

incredible. My halls of residence was ten minutes walk from The Milk Bar and Love Ranch. A friend of ours ran Madame Jojo's at the time and would appear in a five-litre Mustang convertible with a drag queen in the back on the way to Trade or the YMCA in Great Russell Street. It was hard to go to engage with Medieval Spanish poetry in those circumstances. I could have done better in my degree but I don't regret it. Funnily enough I come across fellow entrepreneurs a lot who were part of the 90s club scene, my business partner in the beer, Jamie Anley used to run a night at The Gardening Club. I have a vague memory of staggering home after a 24 hour clubbing session to be told that my flatmate's Dad was shooting a film with Brad Pitt and that he was coming to RAW at the YMCA with us and did I have any money? I'm fairly sure I didn't finish my homework that weekend.

**...who then turned into a professional underground poker player...**

Yes, that's recently though, years after like all clubkids I'd had hung up my pink Adidas Gazelles and got serious. I'd had ten painful years post-uni of trying to find a job I suited. I was a nanny for a rock band on tour, an analyst in a German investment bank (I got sacked) and I worked at a hostel for homeless people. Eventually I ended up playing poker for a living. That was actually quite a productive time for me, I learned a lot about myself and about psychology sitting around in unlicensed games ten hours a night, seven days a week.



**...and finally into a proper business woman.**

I started my own business because I was sick of myself and couldn't seem to find a job that would suit me. I set up a porridge company with my sister in our back kitchen. We did all the design, packaging and concept for Waitrose in 18 months. It was all grind and no money for a long time with that business. And at a time when all your peers are starting to make money living on £200 a week is quite hardcore. That separates the men from the boys.

**And after that, you started Green&Pleasant, your craft beer business?**

Yes, although, it's evolved into more of an art project really.

**But you do sell beer though? How is it an art project?**

Business often takes the personality of the founders. Things

that have meaning for you, your project can become that. My business partner Jamie and I are enthusiastic and excitable people. We both love craft and creativity in all its forms. If we are interested in what someone is doing, we find a way to get involved and support them. This could be publicising their event, sponsoring their launch with the beer, matchmaking them with people (our contacts are great), buying stuff that people make and showing it in our homes and so on.

We also support creative people by hiring them and paying them properly. I hate the way artists, photographers and designers are expected to work for free. You wouldn't ask lawyers or accountants to do the same. Big companies just give credit but no fee and that shames them, it's so old fashioned and people higher up the food chain in the creative industries need to start calling that out and not just seeing it as a right



of passage. I also sometimes represent artists with my creative agency Emery Barnard and again, I'm drawn to very new talent where there is no obvious commercial application.

**What is the most exciting current project you guys are supporting?**

The New Craftsmen. I love that project. Britishness is important to us and we stick to supporting emerging creative talent in the UK. It's easy to support someone who is already cool and famous. We want to support people who need us and not the other way around.

**Other interesting projects on your radar at the moment?**

Guerrilla knitting. My friend Rachel runs her own knitting company. What's interesting to me is that she took a totally non-commercially viable craft and made a career out of it. And promotes knitting at the same time.

**Why are you doing all this?**

Are you kidding? It's the best gig in town! My working life is spent talking to people who are crazy about what they are doing and we are able to support them. It feels marvellous. The beer

business is at the heart of it, it's the engine room driving the rest and an extraordinary creative project in itself, the brewing that is.

**What's the best thing about helping young creatives? We can imagine it's quite rewarding?**

As an entrepreneur I'm a natural problem solver. I get my energy from finding creative solutions to different challenges. And any artist that hasn't starved to death or taken another job is a hero to me. To be able to live on your art is extraordinary and by that they have demonstrated that same problem solving skills. That's not always easy for artistic people. And they definitely don't tell you in school that you can live on knitting.

**No, they certainly don't. But should they even tell you that? Would we have any accountants, policemen, nurses and shopkeepers if everyone could just do the thing they like doing the most and get paid for it? I believe that used to be called 'a hobby'.**

People in infrastructure jobs keep us alive. But artists give us the reason to be alive. On a personal level, I love that my friend makes a living out of knitting and I love that British society supports that. It's a sign of how civilized we are.

**And also probably how privileged we are.**

Yes. When you're knitting ping pong ball covers for a living that puts you sat right on top of Maslow's Pyramid of Needs swinging your boots. I don't watch the news but I talk to novice entrepreneurs every day and it's them who are digging this country out of the hole the bankers made, digging us one knitted hand-grenade at a time.

**What about the huge bunch of artists whose work nobody buys?**

As an entrepreneur, if I make beer and no one buys it, I need to think about that. I have investors I am responsible to, I take that extremely seriously, but supporting artists is not the same as being an artist. Yes, life is tough and creatives need to find a way to create without starving and that is harder for some than others. Sometimes it's just about recognising that we need help and partnering up with someone who can make a dollar.

**Should they change the work to please the crowds though, or just change their marketing tactics?**

It's different for everyone. Sometimes it's about marketing your work differently or finding others to collaborate with, and listening to the public's feedback on your work. But sometimes the reality is cold and you have to accept that your art is just a hobby, not a job.

**What's the creative sector at the moment like in London? Is it a good time to set up an experimental string quartet or a retro stamp business?**

The atmosphere and opportunities are brilliant. The recession

has been great for artists: banks and investors stopped lending which was tough at first but it was like ripping a plaster off and we needed it. Banks and venture capitalists were slavemasters for creative people. Crowdfunding has provided an amazingly democratic way of working together. Access to money is much easier today. If you put your work on a funding website, the amount of people that will look at it is huge and you'll get the confirmation: whether the concept is viable or needs revision. If you have the courage to listen and adapt to people's suggestions and opinions, they will give you invaluable information.

**Has crowdfunding changed the relationship between money and art? These two used to be in the opposite corners of the ring, didn't they?**

It's about the amount of money that is involved: if you have 50 shareholders who have each invested £500 in your project, it's a very different feeling for you as an artist than having one person who has given you that much money. And the chances are if a single person has given you all that money they are not creatively clued up themselves, they would work in a bank or something and they are going to be nervous about your progress and asking you questions you don't understand in a way you don't like. You become Princess Leia on a chain; it's hard to be creative in those circumstances. If you have 50 investors you won't have the same pressure. Getting the money from a diverse crowd of people gives you more artistic freedom.

**Some of the greatest artists were frowned upon in their own time and only found to be great and truly innovative after their death. Is this democratisation necessarily a good thing? Or does it mean that provocative or difficult art won't get the attention because it doesn't appeal to the masses straight away?**

The great artists in history you are referring to were mainly frowned upon by the elite. No one else saw their work. Based on prevailing attitudes and preferences, the work wasn't widely available for scrutiny. If you had shown for example Goya's work to a broader audience, maybe people would have identified with it and seen something in it that the elite discarded as rubbish. Geniuses are distinguishable by anyone.

**You obviously support a lot of young creative talents through Green&Pleasant and personally as well. Do you think people in general do enough of that? Is our responsibility to keep the creative scene alive by buying emerging artists' works for example? Or at least take an interest in those knitted ping pong ball covers?**

People do care more about the products they buy for their home these days, they want them to be beautiful and last. This culture has had a resurgence on the back of the recession. Conspicuous consumerism is uncool now, which is great. Craftmanship, authenticity and stories are in fashion again and people do support that. It's re-defining luxury which is a relief.



**Do you think this will last, or is this a fad that will fade away when these stories about bearded craftsmen start to get too mainstream and boring?**

I'm an optimist and hope it will last. I think people will keep wearing their grannies' clothes and fixing them. This attitude is here to stay. Internet and crowdfunder have enabled people to share views and connect in a way that can't be reversed, the genie is out of the bottle in that sense.

**We probably have a few fresh creative entrepreneurs amongst our readers. Any advice on how to turn your craft into a successful business?**

If I had to mention one thing, it would be the School for Creative Startups at Somerset house. I mentor there for free. It's the course I wish existed when I started in business. It's specifically designed to help creative businesses to become commercially savvy and make money from their art forms. They support artists, jewellery makers, food makers, photographers, knitters... you name it. They have a very practical approach and there's a bunch of industry heavyweights backing the course.

**What's the main insight one gets taught at these kinds of courses?**

With creative people it's often a question about confidence.

When I teach a workshop on how to manage money for your business, the first thing I teach is that if you live in a flat, have gas and electricity, your mobile phone is working, then you can manage a domestic budget and if you can do that, you can manage a business budget. The skills are the same, you know more than you think. Young creatives often just need the reassurance that they can do it.

**What would you say to all these hopeful creative talents residing in bunkers around Hackney Wick and questioning their choice of career?**

It's funny how what they tell you in the mainstream news is so wrong and pessimistic. For example, they keep telling us that print is dead, that print media is collapsing. And when I go to my local newsagent in Soho, the shelves are full of amazing creative magazines. They are managing to exist and succeeding by finding their niche. The kind of work that they produce surprises me every day and simply couldn't be created by a corporate news corporation, it's raw, it's fresh and it's not going away any time soon.

I love this country. If we listened to what is being said in mainstream media, no one would have the courage to do these amazing things. Thinking purely of profits and market shares is so old school. People are starting creative businesses for different reasons. And when they make it work, it is the most brilliant and delightful thing to be witnessing.



## ON HER RADAR

### SHADE 7

The founder, Hajera Memon is a devout young British Muslim and has a passionate love of the stories of the Quran and along with her business partner has made an extremely lairy 1970's style pop-up book, illustrated them, complete with kneeling elephants and collapsing temples.

[www.facebook.com/Shade7](http://www.facebook.com/Shade7)

### MISO TASTY

The best thing about this project is the sheer bloody-mindedness and self-belief of its foodie-founder Bonnie Chung: they have been in the development stage for far longer than most people could tolerate. I'm known for my gunslinger approach, so the idea of holding off for perfection is anathema to me, but the result is they are entering the market with a product that is second to none.

[www.misotasty.com](http://www.misotasty.com)

### PRICK YOUR FINGER

As knitters go this lot are beyond radical. When I first went to the shop they were sat in a circle drinking tea and knitting planks as part of a project to re-construct the Golden Hinde

(life size). Since then they have knitted ping pong ball covers, the Great Barrier Reef, numerous boulders and building rubble to name a few.

[www.prickyourfinger.com](http://www.prickyourfinger.com)

### THE NEW CRAFTSMEN

This business appeals to my grown-up side. I'm a firm believer in the post-bling concept of craftsmanship as the new luxury. Particular favourites are black dinner plates which are hand carved, oiled and scorched by a maker/expert on medieval design and block-prints by the Dorset artist Cameron Short who weaves aders, folklore and dead rabbits into a print called Ode to The Ash.

[www.thenewcraftsmen.com](http://www.thenewcraftsmen.com)

### HERMAN ZE GERMAN

Burgers are over, make way for the best German wurst you've ever tasted. This business has delicious, all-natural hotdogs, great locations, enviably cool industrial interiors and more drive and personality than you know what to do with.

[www.herman-ze-german.co.uk](http://www.herman-ze-german.co.uk)