

Introduction/From Scratch

First everyone laughs at the title *Elbow Grease + Chicken Fat*, then they ask, “What’s the book about?” Or, they say, “Why did you combine a business book with a cookbook?” The short answer is there are tons of people with brilliant ideas who never go anywhere. It takes muscle power, persistence, and a never-give-up attitude to reach often-perceived-unattainable goals. Grease and fat are forms of lubricants without which few things move into action. A book full of business advice can become a boring read, and a cookbook by itself is simply a tool to produce a meal. The two combined play off of each other to help cement business concepts and illuminate the broader aspects of developing recipes.

The next questions are, “Why did you write a book?” and “Who is your audience?” I wrote this book for one person—the person who, after reading this story, says, “I can do that, too.”

Entrepreneurship and cooking came to me all at once.

Suddenly, after 10 years, I was alone. Faced with bankruptcy, less than \$200 in child support each month, and foreclosure on my house: surprise, anger, and fear raced through my mind. Three small boys to feed and take care of by myself. No money coming in and only \$1,000 in the bank. I couldn’t balance a checkbook. Hadn’t really ever worked as more than a waitress, and I had little more than a high school education. A huge house with an impossible mortgage, and a silver Jaguar in the driveway about to disappear. Suzuki violin lessons, private school, and so the list went. What to cut and how to survive?

It was a summer night. I sat at the kitchen table with the children upstairs sound asleep. I was in deep trouble. With a gallon of Gallo wine to keep me company, I made a pros-and-cons list of possible new careers. What talents did I have that I could sell? A counselor at Catholic Charities had told me to do an assessment and see what would come to the surface before I went further. The first of many, many plans began to take shape. On the left was the negative and on the right the positive. I could garden (on the right). Not in the winter in Buffalo, New York (to the left). I could knit (to the right), but not enough to feed the boys, and I would get arthritis (on the left). I could cook (on the right). Who was I kidding? I couldn’t cook (to the left). I could shop with other people’s money. Right. I could feed the children the leftovers. Right again. I could learn to cook. Didn’t I come from a long line of great cooks? Right again. And hadn’t I at one time eaten in some of the best restaurants in the world? Right. Cooking things looked like a good idea. But, what could I cook? I had a tad too much wine by then and thought I should sleep on it.

I woke up the next day with a feeling of destiny. Probably for the first time in my life I had a feeling of purpose. A direction. What could I cook? Through the night the decision had been made. I literally could not cook. I even had to call my mother, Wanda, and ask, “How do I make French toast?” Somehow, overnight, a new passion replaced fear. The plan moved my perception from negative to a possible positive. There was one recipe I knew I could make. The sponge cake recipe from the back of a Manischewitz Potato Starch box. When I dropped the boys off at school, I went shopping. Don’t most women do that when things get tough? I bought eggs, pans, potato starch, lemons, and sugar. I flew back to the house with more energy than I had had

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in weeks. I'm really not sure how I came up with the next idea. I decided to make twelve cakes, take them to dress shops and gift stores, and offer a free cake of some kind every week. In exchange, the store owners would tell their customers who made the dessert, give them my business card (I was making them by hand as the cakes were in the oven), and keep the cakes wrapped up and fresh. Within a week I had my first order for an apple pie. The business was called "Painted Pies and Such,"* and it began as many sole-proprietorships do—in my home. It wasn't until I opened the commercial kitchen that the name changed to "Marilynn Tunkey, Caterer."

So began the start of my new career: Entrepreneur and business owner of the largest and best off-premise catering business in Western New York. As I began, I lost the cars and the house. Friends lent us places to stay and gave me an old, used, yellow car. Countless obstacles ensued, ranging from personal custody battles to the constant new business practices I had to learn. How to: Do accounting, use a computer, write a contract, build a commercial kitchen, price a menu, hire and pay hundreds of employees, deal with government entities, cook for five thousand, strategically plan, pay off howling creditors, and build a line of credit. The list seemed endless.

Eventually, through hard work, a positive attitude, and a guardian angel, I raised my sons, built a fabulous catering business, and graduated with honors from the University at Buffalo. I went on to build other businesses, own my home, cars, and have savings. Somewhere in there another marriage came and went and I found myself, having closed the catering business, in the position of starting all over again, but this time armed with much more confidence and knowledge. It takes a natural ability to self-generate positive emotions and access creative thinking in the worst of times to completely undergo metamorphosis. With nothing to lose and everything to gain I moved from Buffalo, New York to Washington, DC and created WinSpin CIC Inc., a change management, public relations, marketing and public relations firm. Along with that business I became a published author, a nationally recognized speaker, and eventually an adjunct professor at Georgetown and George Mason Universities.

The Cookbook that Wants to be a Business Book or Vice Versa?

One of the biggest lessons I learned was that stories sell anything. It's because they're the glue that make concepts stick. I mostly use stories from my catering business to help my clients understand or remember a point I am trying to convey—hence the recipes. I've told the brownie story a million times—now people can enjoy the recipe.

This book depicts a story of how anything can happen in this country. It's a never-give-up tale. It's an adventure thriller. There's even romance. It's a case study on how to balance life, raise your children, oh, and how to start a business and win. And, how to transition from one type of business or lifestyle to another. It's a book about transformation and change.

Life can have happy endings.

**To paint the top of a pie crust: mix food coloring with egg yolks and with a paintbrush create a design on an unbaked crust.*