

PISTAKIO

# LOVE & PISTACHIOS



# THE JOURNEY

**IDEATION & PLANNING**

**EDUCATION & FORMULATION**

**MARKETING & RETAIL**

**PISTACHIOS EVERYWHERE**

**CONTINUED GROWTH**

**NICO & FRAN'S  
TIPS & RESOURCES**



# IDEATION & PLANNING



**NICOLA BUFFO & FRANCINE VOIT**  
Co-Founders

The Pistakio spark ignited between two energetic, competitive-tennis-playing art students in Savannah, GA.

Francine Voit (Fran) and Nicola Buffo (Nico) from Southern Florida and Northern Italy respectively, met on the tennis team at SCAD (Savannah College of Art & Design). Fran was enrolled in the building arts program and Nico in advertising. They had a shared desire to create a capstone project that they were genuinely passionate about and could continue working on after a rigorous semester—with Nico building the brand messaging and advertising, and Fran designing her own brand from scratch while also getting to share her love of food and creating a recipe the world could try.

In their dormitory kitchen they experimented with several products, including a sweet pistachio spread (made with white chocolate), a savory pistachio mayo, and a cheesy pistachio mayo

(made with pecorino cheese), all focused on the versatile pistachio. They shared samples of their creations at Forysth Saturday Farmers Market under a banner that read: Pistachios Reimagined. They got rave reviews at the market and knew they were onto something. They were also aware there was a lot they didn't know when it came to creating a food product, "We knew nothing about food production, food science, safety, or packaging," says Nico.

As graduation neared, they were faced with a decision: begin applying for design and advertising jobs or take a risk and build a pistachio business.

After a few more markets in Savannah, and some soul searching about their future, the duo decided to launch Pistakio as soon as they graduated.

They knew that their target audience wasn't in Savannah and went looking for a place that was both affordable and food friendly. After some research they decided on Portland, Oregon. Says Fran, "Portland is open minded and full of foodies. A food centric city with small town feels."





# EDUCATION & FORMULATION

They moved to Portland in the Summer of 2023 and enrolled in the Getting Your Recipe to Market (GYRM) program at Portland Community College's Small Business Development Center. To support themselves during launch, Nico taught tennis and Fran worked at a coffee shop and an after school program.

"In GYRM we learned that our original product—the pistachio mayo—wasn't food safe or shelf stable due to its high water activity," says Nico. Towards the end of the three month program, they decided to pivot to a sweet recipe that met all food safety guidelines and was more easily made shelf-stable.

**"WE WANTED TO LIST  
PISTACHIOS AS OUR  
FIRST INGREDIENT."**



Nicola says "We wanted to create a sweet pistachio product that listed pistachios as the first ingredient while also keeping our costs down." They were originally importing pistachio paste from Italy, but after working out their cost of goods, determined it would be more practical and economical to source pistachio paste from California.



Fran & Nico started working with the Hacienda Empresarios program, an incubator for food businesses in Portland who also run Portland Mercado, a shared commercial kitchen. The Empresarios Program Coordinator helped them get started in the kitchen where they were able to reformulate and begin to scale their production.

By December of 2023 they were licensed in the Portland Mercado kitchen to self produce their spread. All of this was accomplished with unprecedented speed with Pistakio officially launching to the market in December 2023, just six months after Fran & Nico graduated from college.



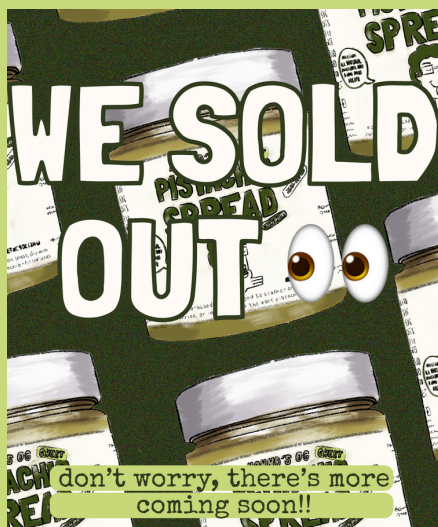
# MARKETING & RETAIL

Retail buyers were attracted to Pistakio's quality product the infectious creative energy of Fran and Nico. After completing their first grocery pitch in December, a part of the GYRM course, they landed on the shelves of a medium sized local retailer in March of 2024. They also secured shelf space at a second regional grocer later that Spring. "Retailers saw us pushing our product and we were working hard to promote our brand. We had been promoting our brand, through social media and our website, for a year and already had a loyal audience," says Fran.



Fran and Nico designed & sold Pistakio merchandise in order to raise money for their first production run. Then after just a few production runs at The Portland Mercado, a fire damaged the commercial kitchen that Pistakio and many small food producers used. With no place to produce and the pressure of online and wholesale orders to fill, Pistakio turned to social media for help. They quickly got a referral to a newly vacant production space and were back on their feet in no time. Although feeling some initial panic about the sudden move, Pistakio has easily adapted.

In their first year, Pistachio has vastly improved their production capacity. Initially a production batch yielded 20 jars. Slowly they expanded to 100 jars per batch, they are now producing in 1,000 jar batches 2 times a week. "We quickly learned that our 20 jars per batch was not feasible and we needed to find ways to increase our overall productivity and batch size." Their goal is to carry an average inventory of 2000-3000 jars so that their day-to-day focus can be on sales, marketing and demos rather than production



# PISTACHIOS EVERYWHERE

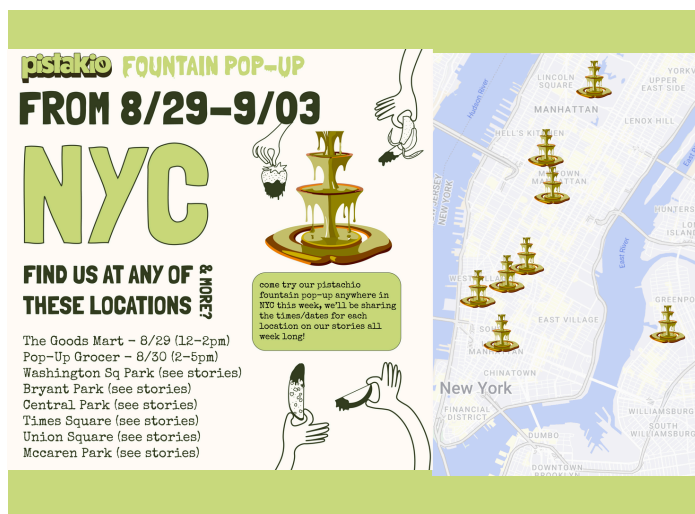
While it took a bit of time for Francine and Nico to fine-tune their production, they hit the ground running with marketing and sales strategies. Nico says “we looked at using glass and plastic. While we started with glass we wanted to know what our customers wanted. We also wanted to know what would be best for our business. Glass was more expensive to purchase, ship, and handle. We realized that could lower our price several dollars if we switched to plastic, so we did.”



Pistakio was successful at getting into local retail chains and small specialty stores early on which helped them to test out the market and identify their target customer. They noticed that sales velocity was different store by store due to different shoppers, in store demos, shoppers’ income, as well as awareness of the brand. “Pistakio is the most expensive product in the category at most retailers,” so it was great news when we switched to plastic and were able to be even more competitive with our wholesale and retail pricing,” says Voit.

Fran and Nico launched with a start local, grow global strategy. Their goal is to make Pistakio a pantry staple in every American household. While they initially launched at the Savannah Farmers Market, they discovered that they weren’t allowed to sell at Oregon farmers markets because their ingredients are not sourced locally. They quickly pivoted to small specialty stores who loved Pistakio’s branding. Fran and Nico would walk into stores where they found many of the same customers. Fran & Nico hit the pavement and started dropping into stores, connecting with buyers on a personal level and sharing product samples.

Pistakio has built a good fan base in Portland where they’ve sold well at small independent stores and cafes. Once they saw that sales were strong locally, they set their sights on expanding their reach in states like New York, California, Arizona & Washington. In this early stage, they are careful only sell to retailers that are small enough to not charge slotting fees. “We know that getting accounts at retailers like Whole Foods or Erewhon will be very expensive,” says Nico.



After launching with Pop-Up Grocer this summer, they went on a New York City tour, popping up all over NYC with their Pistakio fountain.



# CONTINUED GROWTH

Design students at heart, Fran and Nico invested time in surveying the marketplace and evaluating what other brands are doing. “Graza is a brand that consumers are seeing everywhere, we want to also be a brand that consumers and retailers are seeing everywhere. We looked to similar brands and where they were selling, then we targeted those retailers,” says Nico.

The mental toughness Fran and Nico developed as competitive tennis players has served them well as they execute their email and marketing strategy. “Our goal is to give the impression that we are everywhere even if we are not quite there yet. We want buyers to see the brand over and over, through emails and social media.” Pistakio’s email strategy includes hard work and a thick skin. A typical morning involves emailing up to 200 shops and then following up a few days later. “If we end up with 30 replies from those 200 emails, we consider that a huge success,” says the duo.



In the end, it’s a numbers game and you can’t take it too personally. For those retailers who respond, Pistakio shares sales information and anticipated velocity for the new retailer. Pistakio always asks buyers who respond to their emails for a mailing address and promptly send samples. They focus on easy to digest emails with catchy imaging. This strategy is an area where these two art school graduates excel.

In addition to building their brand, they are working on expanding their product line. They recently launched a large format version of their original spread for foodservice (and loyal fans) and have plans to introduce a new flavor soon.

Pistakio is energized by creative partnerships with complimentary brands like their recent Pistakio ice cream and baked goods collaborations. Reflecting on their rapid growth, Fran and Nico are proud of what they have accomplished in such a short timeframe, but recognized there is still a lot of work to do: Pistachio lovers await!



# NICO & FRAN'S TIPS & RESOURCES



## TALK TO YOUR PEERS

### Ask Questions & Connect

Don't be afraid to ask other food entrepreneurs about their journey. "We wish we had asked more questions early on." The food community is kind and welcoming and no one wants you to make the same mistakes they did: be curious, connect, ask questions, share information.

### Follow Brands you Admire

Take the time to really look at your category and the shelves you want to occupy. Think about the brands that you admire and those that inspire you. Look at where they are selling, think about their marketing strategies; follow them on Instagram, sign up for their newsletters—then develop a strategy that will make you stand out among them.

### Listen

There are so many great podcasts out there with so much valuable information. Make a list of ones that you love, do searches for start-up podcasts, create playlists for yourself. There are many parts of starting a business that involved driving around, doing production and packaging up orders. Spend that time learning and listening and set yourself up ahead of time.

### Local Programs & Advisors

Look for courses and business advisors in your area. There are lots of great resources out there and many of them are free. Check out the Small Business Development Center at your local community college. Look for advising programs like Empresarios through Hacienda CDC. There are dozens and dozens of resources out there, you just have to search. There are lots of ways to generate support within your community including selling branded merchandise, inviting fans to participate in a crowdfunding campaign, or simply sharing the journey to inspire others. .

## RESOURCE CORNER

Some of the key organizations and resources that led to our success!

GYRM  
PNW F&B  
EMPRESARIOS  
HACIENDA CDC





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## AUTHORS

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## PHOTO CREDITS

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