

Breakfast of Champions: Interview with Alexandre Sagakian

Pastries, pancakes and Coco Pops are delicious, but are they nutritious? No, says Alexandre Sagakian, who's determined to re-crown breakfast as the best meal of the day with his plant-based food subscription service Blend My Day.

Maddyne spoke to Alexandre about [Blend My Day](#), which delivers superfood-fuelled healthy breakfasts – ranging from 'tropical coconut sorbet' and 'cinnamon-spiced pear pie' smoothies to banana bread and strawberry cheesecake inspired oat bowls – to your home.

We discussed his journey from out-of-shape and overworked to marathon runner, innovating in a saturated food and drinks market and how founders can avoid getting 'trapped in their own reality'.

[Maddyne] Tell me about your background leading up to the genesis of Blend My Day

[Alexandre] It all started with a wake up call in 2011 after I sold my first startup. My poor lifestyle had taken its toll on my body and my health. I had put

on 20 lbs and was out of shape. So I decided to do something about it and set myself the crazy challenge to run a marathon.

Whilst preparing for it, I realised just how crucial nutrition is, not only for sport performance but also for overall health and wellbeing. I quickly lost my extra 20 lbs, ran my first marathon in 3:15 and – a few years later – the iconic NYC marathon in 2:57.

When I turned 40, I was in the best shape of my life but I soon realised a lot of people around me were struggling. Our busy and active lifestyles lead us to pick convenience over nutrition. So I started to look for a way I could everyone to enjoy the benefits of a whole food nutrient-dense and balanced diet on a daily basis.

Why breakfast? Is it **really** the most important meal of the day?

I'm a self-confessed breakfast addict. During the five years I lived in London, I became a bit obsessed with healthy breakfasts such as superfood smoothies and porridge.

I believe breakfast IS the most important meal of the day for a number of reasons:

- your body has fasted overnight so your first meal of the day has a particular importance

- it's probably when we are the most motivated to eat healthy and have more control over what we eat

- this is the moment you need a boost, to wake you up or boost your brain

But I'm not saying everyone needs to have breakfast everyday. If you're not hungry for example, you should listen to your body.

The problem is most of the breakfasts we eat – cereals, bars, pastries, even porridge – are either unbalanced, over processed and/or not really nutritious. So you end up feeling tired or hungry by

mid-morning.

That's why I decided to start by 'fixing' breakfast.

Food and drink strikes me as a pretty saturated market. Where are we seeing innovation within this; who is gaining traction and who's getting left behind?

It is saturated and that certainly contributes to creating a lot of confusion in consumer's minds.

I believe the ones gaining traction are creating cleaner or healthier versions of existing popular products (more whole foods, no added sugar/low sugar, high-protein) or catering to specific diets (plant-based, keto, gluten-free, dairy-free...). This is what we are trying to do with our healthier smoothies (vs. sugar-loaded bottled ones) and healthier porridge (vs. flavoured instant sachets).

But at the end of the day, no matter how innovative the product is, it has to taste good as consumers are not willing to prioritise health over pleasure.

All your products are plant-based. Was this an ethical, environmental and/or business decision? I'd love to hear your thoughts on the vegan innovation landscape.

I have to admit that they are originally plant-based by accident. When I started blend my day, I was not vegan and so it was more a business decision. First it was very easy to make our smoothie range plant-based (mostly fruit, veg, grains, nuts and seeds) and we knew it was a strong trend, especially within our target market (active women aged 25-45). Now I have switched to a mostly vegetarian and vegan diet, primarily for health reasons but also for the environment.

There is a lot of innovation in the vegan space: almost a quarter of all new UK food products launched last year were labelled 'vegan', while nearly two-thirds of Britons tried meat substitutes.

But you really have two types of innovations going in opposite directions:

The engineered 'substitutes' that are trying to replicate meat or dairy products (burger, sausages, bacon, cheese..): these are often overly processed with few whole-food ingredients but loads of additives or fillers. To me this is nothing more than junk food – and vegan junk food is no better than non-vegan junk food.

The convenient plant-based products: these are mainly based on whole foods such as legumes, nuts and seeds, tofu/tempeh and vegetables.

The bottom line is that anything labelled 'vegan' or 'plant-based' does not mean healthy. You should always check the label to know exactly what you buy.

How has COVID affected business for you? What have been the main challenges and have there been any unexpected silver linings?

As for many other direct-to-consumer or e-commerce food businesses, the lockdown has been very positive for sales as consumers were stocking up as much food as possible and wanted to avoid going out grocery shopping. The fact that we are selling healthy and frozen meals with long shelf life gave us an additional boost.

The major challenge was on the logistics side: it was much harder to source our ingredients and get delivered but also to deliver our clients as warehouses and delivery networks were saturated by the explosion of e-commerce.

All in all, I think consumers will come out of COVID with healthier new habits and that might be the unexpected silver lining.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Here is what I would say to first-time founders:

Do your homework: what are the real trends (as opposed to fads)? are there any gaps in the market? are consumers ready to pay for your product?

Don't underestimate the timing: a lot of startups fail because they are either too early or too late, no matter how good the team or the product is. So you have to be able to answer the question: why now?

Get ready for a marathon: make sure you are ready to embark on this journey: can you afford it financially? do you have the support of your family? Are you ready for years of emotional and physical rollercoaster? It will be tougher and longer than you think.

Don't get trapped in your own reality: it's easy to fall in love with your product or your mission but you need to regularly do a reality check or have someone to bring you down to earth. As we say, the consumer is always right!

And finally, a more personal question! We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

I'm not a big fan of strict routines as I feel I'm living the same day over and over again and I do get easily bored. I hate when I feel my day is written in advance.

First, I'm not a morning person so no 4am yoga for me! But as you can imagine I almost never skip breakfast. Overnight oats and smoothies are my go-to

options. I exercise almost daily alternating between strength (crossfit) and cardio (running/cycling). This being said, I'm far from being perfect: I work too much, my stress level is high and I don't get enough sleep. I just try to find the balance!

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