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A taste of success

Andrew Stone

When cousins Fiona Hamilton, 43, and Alison Fielding, 40, were little girls they played at being shopkeepers. Two years ago they turned this fancy into reality by opening a shop in Princes Square, Glasgow. Their concept, combining fashion and home furnishings with a bar and cafe-restaurant, was an attempt to break the high-street mould.

Finding the funding for, essentially, four businesses in one was not easy. Since neither of them had run a bar, restaurant or shop, it is perhaps not surprising many of the banks didn't want to touch them. "A lot of them just saw a risky retail proposition and said no," says Hamilton, above. Her experience as a chartered surveyor specialising in large retail developments helped them find the backing they needed.

Fifi and Ally opened its second store this summer in Wellington Street, Glasgow, and has plans to expand, starting with a third store in London. The company employs 50 full- and part-time staff, and sales could reach £3m this year. It was ranked among Retail Week's top 100 stores in the world in 2007 and last year won a Glasgow business award for most entrepreneurial company.

Its success, according to Hamilton, is down to spotting a gap in the market. The "modern bazaar" is a kick against the homogeneity that the cousins were experiencing as shoppers and aims to provide all-day browsing in welcoming surroundings. "We were finding our needs as consumers not really being met. We search the world for stylish, hard-to-find and rare products for the shop - and we want it to be a great place to go for a coffee, a drink or a meal."

Scotland was a good place to test the concept and use as a springboard for expansion, says Hamilton. "It's a much more consistent market here: you don't get the same highs and lows you might find elsewhere - and the costs can be lower. There has been a real buzz in Glasgow and there's a good pool of talented people. Our staff consists of a lot of graduates, art students and funky people who are often quite dedicated foodies. It makes a real difference to what we are trying to do in terms of service and quality.

"The networks here are another reason why it's such a great place to have a growing business. The Entrepreneurial Exchange [a Scottish entrepreneurs' members association] is an excellent network, and Scotland is the kind of place where you can pretty much phone anybody up and they will usually be happy to share their experience or offer advice."

It's not just all about business, however, says Hamilton. "The lifestyle is great. You can leave work and be home or out in the countryside in half an hour."

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