

Can You Really Turn a Hobby Into a Career?

As the pandemic has upended the American job market, the dream of turning a pastime into a moneymaker is no longer a fantasy for these entrepreneurs.

A FedEx driver hand-crafting soaps. A hairstylist hawking porkless bao buns. A restaurant manager repurposing denim jackets.

The dream of turning a hobby in to a Plan B career is almost a cliché of the gig economy, with countless tips published on selling vintage comic books, brewing beer, playing video games and even telling jokes.

After a year scarred by the coronavirus pandemic, however, in which millions of Americans lost their jobs, it's starting to look more like a necessity than a fantasy, particularly for people who have been laid off or forced to step away from jobs to tend remote-schooled children.

Yelp recorded nearly 100,000 business closures during the first eight months of 2020, but also a 10 percent rise in new businesses selling cupcakes, doughnuts, cakes, macarons and other desserts. Etsy saw a 42 percent spike in new sellers in the third quarter of 2020, when compared to the year before.

"It could be that some just wanted to answer their creative calling," said Dayna Isom Johnson, Etsy's trend expert. "But for many during this unprecedented time, it's about people who have faced unexpected financial challenges, whether they are unemployed or furloughed by their jobs."

Here are five who made the leap during the pandemic.

Livestreaming Red Sauce

"I grew up in an Italian-Portuguese family," [Dan Pelosi](#), a creative director for Ann Taylor who oversees in-store design and marketing, said. "Food is what we did."

And as a self-described homebody, Mr. Pelosi, who shares a three-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with two roommates, found his own way to cope with the stifling existence of quarantine.

"Everyone else went out and got a sex buddy," he said. "I stocked my pantry."

At the peak of lockdowns last spring, Mr. Pelosi, an avid home cook and quippy fashionista with a 10,000-watt personality, began posting sumptuous close-ups showing his spin on old family dishes, like rigatoni with vodka "sawce" and meaty lasagna, under his Instagram handle [@grossypelosi](#).

He had no formal food training, but his recipes radiated a homey, tonight-I'll-treat-myself vibe. "I started getting messages from essential workers like, 'I come home from work and watch your stories, and it's a source of comfort to me,'" Mr. Pelosi said.

As his following swelled, brands as disparate as Chobani, Ikea and Grindr reached out for collaborations. Pinterest asked him to be a paid creator, which he particularly liked. "I refer to myself as a gay Pinterest mom," he said. "I have an annual holiday cookie party. I do a pumpkin carving party."

By summer, cooking had become more of a second job than a sideline. Now with 52,000 followers on Instagram, a website, [GrossyPelosi](#) that draws 37,000 visitors a month, as well as a book agent and

merch line called “This Too Shall Pasta” (all proceeds benefit [Sage](#), a charity for L.G.B.T.Q. seniors), he sees his future in food, not fashion.

It’s an accidental career that gives him a chance to emulate one of his idols, the cooking guru Ina Garten.

“Barefoot Contessa is my queen,” he said. And as burly man who identifies as a bear in gay culture, he added: “I always joke that I want her to hand her empire over to me. I would switch it to B-E-A-R-foot Contessa.”

Pressing Vinyl in the Basement

“A lot of people are looking to get into I.T. work,” said Eric Warner, a web programmer in Chippewa Falls, Wis. “I am looking to get out.”

Quarantine may have given him just the nudge he needed.

While isolated at home with his wife and two children, Mr. Warner, 46, started a second career he hopes to make his primary source of income: cutting custom vinyl records in his basement, often as gifts for anniversaries and birthdays.

Two years ago, he bought a \$10,000 record lathe, which looks like an overgrown D.J. turntable aboard the Death Star. It is a highly specialized machine that feeds an analog signal to a diamond stylus that carves grooves into a blank disk.

“There is really no reason that anyone would want to buy one,” he said.

As a former rave producer, Mr. Warner dreamed of starting an ambient-music indie label, Abstrakt Xpressions, but the machine mostly sat in the basement. Until the pandemic.

His wife, Izabella, 43, who designs online courses for universities, was unable to look for work, and he had to cut back on web design clients to help raise their children, aged 5 and 11. Days were hard and long.

Seeking a more commercial application for his lathe, the couple opened an Etsy shop called [Vinylus](#), selling bespoke albums — basically, vinyl mix tapes — with custom artwork for \$95 to \$110.

A woman from Connecticut ordered one as an anniversary gift for her daughter, with her spoken vows on one side and songs from her wedding reception on the other. A woman from California commissioned an LP for her husband with lullaby songs and an ultrasound on the cover as a gender-reveal gift.

Mr. Warner hopes to make Vinylus his main gig, and web design his side hustle. That may be a way off, since he has sold only 250 records to date. But sales have picked up in recent months, even after the holidays.

“Hey,” he said, “I just want to make records.”

[Vocabulary list \(A\)](#)
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Fancy Haircuts to Bao Buns

As a private hairstylist to Nike designers, Amazon executives and other well-off clients, Thuy Pham was living the life.

"I was able to make good money working only three to four days a week, which was a great schedule for a single mom," said Ms. Pham, 40, who lives in Portland, Ore., with her 7-year-old daughter, Kinsley. "I was traveling, going to music festivals. When you have a career like that, why would you consider leaving?"

Then Portland went into lockdown last March, shuttering her business. To pass the time, she began scouring YouTube for Vietnamese meat-free recipes (Ms. Pham is vegan), including mock-pork belly made with coconut milk, tapioca and rice starches, in the traditional style of Vietnamese Buddhist monks.

"Cooking for me was always a way to share love and affection with my family," said Ms. Pham, who came from Vietnam to the United States in the 1980s.

She was pretty happy with her results, so last April she livestreamed the recipe on Instagram as a way of keeping in touch with her hair clients. "Within minutes of going live, I had customers asking to buy my pork belly slabs," she said. "I immediately thought that this could be a way for me to make ends meet until I could go back to work as a hairstylist."

By week's end, Ms. Pham had filled 100 orders. Within two, she was shipping nationwide.

Last November, she opened a Vietnamese delicatessen called Mama Dut (which means "mama, feed") in the city's Buckman neighborhood, selling porkless bao buns, mushroom banh mi and other signature creations for takeout and bicycle delivery.

Business has been brisk. Ms. Pham hopes to make \$350,000 in revenue this year, and wants to expand Mama Dut to Los Angeles. She's also donating to charities like Growing Gardens, which builds gardens in schools, low-income neighborhoods and correctional facilities.

She has no plans to return to hair styling, except maybe as a customer. "I hope that I can afford myself as a hairstylist someday," she said.

Sudsy Side Hustle

When schools closed last March because of the pandemic, Tiffany Dangerfield, 31, of Huntsville, Ala., had a difficult choice: continue working long days as a delivery driver for FedEx, or stay at home with her three children.

"There was no way my four-year old was going to put himself on the live class meeting every morning," Ms. Dangerfield said.

She took over teacher duties at home, while her husband, James Dangerfield, 31, worked as an assembly operator for a local defense contractor. Money was tight, but she soon found another income stream.

About a decade ago, her husband was a corporal in the Army stationed in Vicenza, Italy, and her young son and daughter were suffering from eczema and chronic dry skin. Nothing that doctors on the base prescribed proved helpful, so she started making chemical-free soaps.

Early batches were "a mess," Ms. Dangerfield said, "oil was floating on the top, it never really hardened." With practice, she mastered the craft. Not only did it seem to help alleviate her children's dry skin, she said, but, back home in Alabama, it became her escape and a way to decompress after completing her delivery routes.

"It was so relaxing to go into my soap room at night," she said.

She made soaps for family and friends, and when the pandemic hit, they persuaded her to sell them online. Before long, Ms. Dangerfield had converted her dining room into a studio cluttered with jugs of oils, mixing bowls and packing materials. And she began selling confection-like blackberry and vanilla

soap, cedar-scented body butter and coconut oil sugar scrubs on her Etsy shop, [We Made It Soap Co.](#)

It took months to gain traction. She now fills more than 30 orders a month for whimsical products like pheromones-activated charcoal soap (\$7), coffee-whipped sugar scrub (\$8) and black raspberry vanilla whipped body butter (\$9). A sorority at the University of Illinois recently ordered 70 self-care gift sets featuring soap and bubble bath. She recently shipped a ten-unit order.

Only problem? Ms. Dangerfield needs a new creative outlet to unwind after a busy day. Lately, she's been crocheting. "Maybe that will be my next career," she said.

Bedazzling Denim

Last August, Sonia Murga, 38, a manager at Mr. Chow, a buzzy restaurant in TriBeCa, was on her way to Rite Aid near her apartment in Ridgewood, Queens, when she heard a loud pop.

Her ears began to ring. Blood trickled down her back. A 9-millimeter bullet from a gang shooting had grazed her skull. While recovering at a hospital in Queens, Ms. Murga had a realization.

"Life is short," she said, "and there is nothing to lose or be afraid of."

The pandemic proved to be an opportune time to change course. After being furloughed from work last March, Ms. Murga had started a fashion line, Xcept Sunday: festooning repurposed denim jackets with Swarovski crystals, antique brooches and vinyl prints. The items sell for \$295 to \$1,500.

This was not her first foray into fashion. Ms. Murga, who has a marketing degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology, had been playing with denim since her 20s. "I was always ripping up denim, doing these crazy, funky things," she said.

She wore her creations to work at Mr. Chow, which sometimes drew the attention of its glittery patrons. She made a jacket embroidered with patches that spelled "Hood" for La La Anthony, and one embroidered with the phrase, "The King of Bachata" for the Latin pop singer Romeo Santos.

Adopting the sneaker-drop model, Mrs. Murga plans to release 10 to 15 new jackets every season, on top of custom orders. Her revenues are about \$2,000 to \$4,000 a month, giving her hope that she will soon seat her last four-top.

"Lying in the hospital," Ms. Murga said, "made me realize I didn't want to be remembered for chicken satay."

[Vocabulary list \(B\)](#)
[Click here](#)

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