

Globe Life

Self-published cookbook *Bite Me* gets book giant Indigo's attention

After being turned down by a large Toronto publisher, sisters Julie Albert and Lisa Gnat go DIY and get a nod from Indigo honcho Heather Reisman

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A seasoned bookie might have determined better odds on getting an eight-year-old to eat broccoli than getting *Bite Me*, a self-published cookbook created by two unknowns, off the ground.

But where there's a will to share recipes like Merrymaking Mushroom-crusting Sole and Dyn-o-mite! Asian Meatballs with the world, there's a way. And word of mouth doesn't come much better than an endorsement from Indigo Books & Music president and CEO Heather Reisman, who held an event for the book at the Toronto Bloor Street store last week. "This cookbook is like no other I have seen," writes Ms. Reisman in an e-mail. "It has an edge, an energy, a sense of today."

Indeed, *Bite Me* is more spicy chocolate than vanilla wafer. While authors Julie Albert, 39, and Lisa Gnat, 37, are the daughters of prominent businessman and philanthropist Larry Tanenbaum, they say the buzz surrounding their foodie tome is largely due to a combination of accessibility and good taste, with a bit of raunchy humour thrown in for good measure. The Toronto-based sisters shared their recipe for DIY cookbook success.

Combine two sisters

"We had a mother who loved to cook and a father who loved to eat," says Ms. Albert, who credits their parents for instilling in them an early love of food, particularly international fare. The "sisterhood thing" helped them through tougher moments. "If I felt like dragging my feet one day, I had Lisa calling me cracking up about something she just made."

Mix in family and friends (well-connected ones, if possible)

After being turned down by a large Toronto publisher, the sisters reached out to people they knew. "We were tenacious," says Ms. Albert. "One connection led to the next."

Food stylist Ian Muggridge suggested photographer Michael Alberstat. *Bite Me* was printed in Toronto by Commerce Press, whose co-owners are two of Ms. Albert's closest gal pals. They got in touch with Bruce Mau, whose firm designed the book, via Ms. Reisman.

Spend on quality

Self-publish does not necessarily mean self-finance. "We went to the bank. We got a loan," says Ms. Gnat. Although the sisters admit that they exceeded their original budget, they watched their expenses. "When it was a choice of 70-lb paper or 100-lb paper, we were going to go with 100-lb paper because it was worth it to us," says Ms. Albert. But she found most of the props at a party supplies outlet and a dollar store. "The idea was value," she says of the book's \$29.95 price.

Peel away the pretension and precision

"A lot of it is us saying, 'You can goof around – you don't have to be worrying about mushroom foam, you don't have to be a perfectionist,'" says Ms. Albert. They made a conscious decision to exclude prep times. "We really don't want anyone to feel intimidated. What I find intimidating are photos of shellacked chickens, those far too perfect images."

Remove the quinoa and goji berries

Instead, think Heinz chili sauce, plenty of grated Parmesan cheese, shitake mushrooms, apricot jam and chocolate sundae syrup (not together, of course). "The parameters were that I could buy the ingredients within a reasonable distance," says Ms. Gnat. "I like fresh ingredients but I like readily available ingredients."

Filter out the diet gimmicks

The Skinny Bitch books are so 2007. Plus, as Ms. Albert says, "It's not how we live. We both eat dessert. ... Do desserts with mashed prunes in them taste good? Not really to us." Says Ms. Gnat, "Really, we're all about just eating a little and [enjoying] what you eat. Desserts that are made low fat don't taste good."

Stir in a healthy dose of humour

"The idea of Lisa whisking and me standing there felt so unnatural to us," says Ms. Albert, explaining the wacky photo of one old lady vacuuming another's hair in place of the sisters at work. Chapter headings include "Meet Me: A Bloody Good Time for Meat Lovers" and "Join Me: The Morning After" (for brunch recipes).

Bring to Heather Reisman

"We wanted her feedback. We wanted to see if she thought this could be something doable. And she got so excited – you could not keep her on her chair," says Ms. Albert. Now the book is one of Indigo's featured Heather's Picks. "She's Canada's Oprah," Ms. Albert adds. "... It's the golden Willy Wonka ticket."

Serve with mouth-watering cover art

The original plan involved a fine art image that showed a woman at a dining table with a cheetah. No food. And no dice. "We realized the cookbook-buying public needs to see food on the cover," says Ms. Albert. Enter the berry-stuffed-and-sauced French toast soufflé. But the interior retains its edge. "I think there's a lot more you can do on the inside of the book versus the outside of the book," says Ms. Albert.