

DEAN BRETTSCHEIDER



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PASSION IS MY MAIN INGREDIENT

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After a humble childhood in a small Kiwi town, Dean Brettschneider found his calling as a baker in his teenage years. In 2003, on the back of a successful baking career in New Zealand, Dean left for Asia. It was a move which accelerated his development from baker to businessman and led to the founding of his hugely successful bakery chain, Baker & Cook.

In this blistering memoir, Dean describes his journey from a small town baker's apprentice to the Global Baker and internationally successful entrepreneur he is today.

Make no mistake; this is not a book about baking.

As we follow the interwoven arcs of Dean's career and personal life, his experience teaches us how to harness our passion to strategically improve ourselves and advance our careers. His revelations on entrepreneurship — most notably how he founded and developed Baker & Cook — give us a first-row view of what goes into building a business from the ground up, including all of the pain and sacrifice that come with it.

Told in a refreshingly frank manner, Dean's story is sometimes shockingly direct, often hilarious, and always enlightening, leaving us with valuable astute insights into how to navigate the trials and tribulations of life in business.

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BIOGRAPHY

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“From the humblest start as an apprentice baker in rural New Zealand, Dean has become one of the forces to be reckoned with on the international baking scene. His skill, enthusiasm and ambition have no boundaries.”

*Lauraine Jacobs, MNZM
Food columnist, NZ Listener; former president of NZGFW & IACP*

“Baking is a science and Dean is a brilliant scientist. His understanding of how and why ingredients work together is truly remarkable. When you combine his baking genius and his business acumen, you get a formidable force in the world of food. But behind that steely determination is also a truly great person whom I am proud to call my friend.”

Dame Julie Christie, DNZM

“I’ve witnessed at close quarters Dean going from strength to strength as a businessman and entrepreneur. Dean’s ability to conceive and manage multiple businesses in numerous countries, while still managing to co-create with his team, is well worth celebrating.”

*Peter Gordon, ONZM
Chef, restaurateur, writer & fusion food pioneer*

“In my 28 years as an entrepreneur, I would be hard-pressed to name another founder of an F&B concept with the uncanny ability to repeatedly create, execute and operationalise a winning concept. Dean demands an attitude of excellence from those around him, fostering in his businesses a culture where attention to detail matters. Save every penny you can; spend every pound that you must. Not a cent more and not a dollar less where it counts.”

*Andrew Kwan
CEO, Commonwealth Capital Group, Asia*

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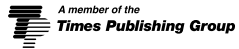
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Contents

- One** The Basic Ingredients: The Beginnings 7
- Two** Mixing: Developing One's Self 37
- Three** Maturing: The Student Becomes The Teacher 57
- Four** First Rising: Putting Into Practice + Fatherhood 73
- Five** Knocking Back: Corporate Development
+ Publishing 101
- Six** Shaping: Global Baking 125
- Seven** Final Rising: Being My Own Boss + Working In TV 155
- Eight** Baking: Building a Global Brand 179
- Nine** Reflections 237
- About the Author 248

For Review only

One

The Basic Ingredients: The Beginnings

“Brettschneider”? What kind of name is that?”

I’ve heard that a few too many times. I’ll give you the short answer. The name has its origins from Gdansk, Poland, a city that sits right on the border with Germany. Our family tree is patchy, but we can trace it back to five generations ago, where we find a guy called Johannes Petrus Brettschneider, my great-great-grandfather. He was in the merchant navy in Gdansk and one day, for reasons known only to himself, he jumped on a boat and sailed to Amsterdam, where he promptly met and married a Dutch lady by the name of Willimeep (who, coincidentally, happened to make her living as a baker). So that’s how the Brettschneider name arrived in Holland, which makes me Dutch, not German, as most people assume when they first hear my name.

Skip forward to World War II, when my father, Rudi, was a young boy being brought up in Amsterdam by his parents, Johannes and Elizabeth. Young Rudi survived to tell the tale of the war but my grandfather, unfortunately, did not. He died at only age 37. He didn’t die fighting, but it was still the war that killed him. When fighting broke out, my grandfather escaped

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from a forced labour factory and went into hiding. He paid a sympathetic neighbour whatever little he could afford to let him stay in their attic. And that's where he remained, for years, as he waited out the war.

Little Rudi was only five years old at the time and desperately missed his father, too young to understand why he had to leave. When his crying became too much, Elizabeth would take the little boy to a park in front of the building where Johannes was hiding. From his perch in the attic, my opa would peer out at his wife and son from a narrow window, blowing kisses and hoping his tears weren't visible from such a distance.

The war ended and Johannes could finally come out of hiding, but when he did, he was frail and sick. He had developed cancer while in hiding and by the time the diagnosis came, it was much too late. The end came quickly. Naturally, Rudi blamed the war for his father's death and he grew to despise anything to do with the military. National military service was compulsory in Holland for all 18-year-old males at the time, and my father became determined to avoid it when his call-up came. He managed to dodge the draft for several years — using a variety of means that escalated in creativity and desperation — before he eventually ran out of excuses. Feeling like he had been backed into a corner, the then 20-year-old Rudi felt he had no choice but to leave. And so, he kissed his mum goodbye, sold the few possessions he had and hopped on a boat bound for New Zealand.

New Zealand wasn't a totally random destination for a young Dutchman. There has long been a connection and mutual fascination between the two places, stemming from the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman. He was the guy who first discovered Tasmania and New Zealand in the 1640s — the latter being

named after the Dutch province of Zeeland. Strangely though, he rather absent-mindedly failed to claim New Zealand, allowing the old rogue Captain Cook to nip in and steal it for Great Britain.

My father was far from the only one treading the same path. Swathes of Europeans were emigrating to Australia and New Zealand in the 1960s. Many parts of Europe were still suffering the aftermath of the war, so these faraway islands held the promise of a new start. Still, it was a ballsy thing for a young guy to do. He barely spoke a word of English and he was practically penniless. I don't think he had much of a clue of what to expect on the other side.

After bouncing around a series of odd jobs for a while — from peeling potatoes to building bridges — my father ended up working at a sheep farm in Loburn, a small farming community in North Canterbury, about 30 minutes from Christchurch. Here he met the daughter of the Scottish family who owned the farm, his future wife of 48 years, Colleen Smith.

They married in 1966. My older brother, Hans, was born in 1968, followed by me a year after that. True to my future character, I arrived in a hurry. A few days premature and without much warning, I entered the world on the floor of my parents' living room, a frantic midwife having only made it with minutes to spare. When I tell people this, they often remark that it is no surprise I turned out the way I did, always pushing things forward and ensuring things get done, right this minute, no time for talking. The infant Dean couldn't even wait 30 minutes for his poor mother to get to the hospital.

By the time I was born, our family was living a stone's throw from Waikuku Beach on New Zealand's eastern coast, a few miles east of Loburn where my parents had first met. When I think of

For Review only

childhood memories, everything revolves around the outdoors. Waves, the beach, green fields, forests. I cycled everywhere — even the nearest town of Rangiora, where my nana lived, was three miles away — so I was always outside in the fresh air. And this being New Zealand, sport was part of the fabric of the place. I played rugby and cricket, of course, but also soccer, because of our Dutch roots. We had only one car so this invariably meant that whatever sports team one of us two brothers were part of, the other brother would be carted along too. After spending two hours on a car ride somewhere, I figured I might as well pull on a jersey and play too, rather than sullenly sit and watch my brother all afternoon.

There wasn't a lot of money in our house, but then there wasn't a lot of money in any of the houses of our working class community. My father switched between manual labour jobs — in forestry or the local abattoirs, or as a farmhand. Mum was a machinist, stitching shoes and leather goods. It was a simple but hard life, full of graft (work) and resourcefulness. Nothing was thrown out, and my mum went to great lengths to come up with things we needed by using the few materials she had on hand. Need a shirt for school? Your brother's from last year will do fine. Shin pads for soccer? Roll up a couple of those Reader's Digests and stuff them in your socks. Soccer shoes? These second-hand rugby boots will do the job. Goalie gloves? Hand me those mittens and I'll stitch some rubber on to the palms. There was no end to her inventiveness.

It didn't take long to figure out that items like comic books, Coke or candy were not to be expected. Such luxuries would need to be procured myself, funded by whatever means necessary — collecting pine cones for 60 cents a kilogramme, selling

lemonade, cutting the neighbour's lawn. I didn't actually mind these chores. I always liked having jobs to do and projects to work on. The first sparks of my entrepreneurial spirit, perhaps.

Growing up, I was aware of our Dutch heritage — with a surname like ours, how could I not be? But there were no fireside tales about the old country, that's for sure. My father was unsentimental in that regard. Dutch was never spoken at home, so I never learnt the language. My parents later told me they did try but I recall only the most cursory of efforts — a sticky label on the TV saying 'televisie', for example. That didn't get us very far.

I suppose it was a different time and he had more pressing everyday concerns to worry about than the nature of his national and personal identity, but my father's apparent rush to shake off his Dutchness confuses me. And to be honest, it annoys me that he unilaterally made that decision for me too. I was never really given the chance to connect with our roots in a meaningful way. My father had become naturalised as a New Zealand citizen in between the births of Hans and me, which meant my brother was entitled to a Dutch passport whereas I got a New Zealand one. Don't get me wrong, I'm a proud Kiwi, but that decision ended up hurting me both ideologically and practically.

A big part of me still felt Dutch, especially at times like Christmas, when my father would bite the bullet and make the eye-wateringly expensive long-distance phone call back to Holland. The phone would be passed around a seemingly endless line of Dutch grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. I loved hearing their accents and their tales of everyday life in Amsterdam, their promises to take me cycling along the canals when I visited. I couldn't understand why Holland only

For Review only

came into my life during these Christmas or birthday phone calls. My relatives were clearly desperate to remind me of and connect me to my heritage, so why did my father seem to want to close the door on that? I didn't understand it when I was young and I came to resent it as I got older.

I never did have my Dutchness formalised with a Dutch passport, which has always seemed wrong to me on an emotional level. It was a real balls up from a practical point of view too. In later years, when I wanted to study or work in Europe, I had to apply for positions as a New Zealander and painfully traipse through the visa applications. On one such occasion, when I was 20 or so, I asked my father if he was sure there was no way I could get a Dutch passport. Yes, he was a naturalised New Zealand citizen, but surely they couldn't erase the fact that he was born in Holland?

"I've already told you, Dean, I've tried calling and writing. They told me there's simply no way."

I later found out — when I was 33 — that I could have applied for the passport and been given one as a formality had I simply filled out a few forms and applied before I turned 28. I was seething when I found that out.

The passport issue is just one example of a conflict in personalities between my father and I. We didn't have a close bond when I was young and we are not that close today. His parenting style was what can only be described as old school — hard work, discipline and obedience above all. This wasn't all bad: I grew up knowing the value of a dollar, had good table manners and showed courtesy and respect to everyone, our mother above all. But things could get ugly at times, with a very 'firm heavy

hand' employed for perceived infractions outside of his narrow boundaries of acceptable behaviour. I was lucky, or at least canny enough to not get on his wrong side too often, so I got off relatively lightly in comparison to my brother, Hans.

Today, my relationship with my father isn't broken — there's no animosity — but there is a cultural chasm between us. We are simply very different people. My father, like many men of his generation, is a Labour man, a socialist. Salt-of-the-earth, nothing-beats-a-hard-day's-graft type of fella. I can empathise with this view and will always appreciate his fearsome work ethic, but that is where we start to diverge.

It is as if my father used up his entire well of ambition on that first sailing from Holland to New Zealand. Today, we live in markedly different worlds with lifestyles that bear practically no relation to each other. Men of my father's generation and background are like that. They're gnarled, tough, and stubborn. Even now my father won't let me pay for a flight for him to come see me in Singapore, or for other small things. He'd sooner starve than take a free meal from someone else, least of all his youngest son. I find this attitude pretty sad, but I understand where it comes from. That's just the way it is.

So, yeah, our father-son relationship won't inspire any Hallmark cards anytime soon but I don't lie in bed crying about it.

At least I still speak to my father, which is more than I can say for my brother. Hans and I have never been close. We might have been only one year apart in age and, growing up, we spent a lot of time together. We went to the same school, played in the same sports teams and slept in the same bedroom. We shared the same surname and the same bright blond hair. In spite of all this,

For Review only

we couldn't be more different in personality. Hans and I rarely talked, and when we did, it was only because we were furiously arguing. Some fights got nasty and blood was spilt from time to time. I recall a garden hoe smacked into the back of my head on one occasion, a rock to the side of my face on another.

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what went wrong in our relationship, but there was jealousy at play. I was a better natural sportsman than Hans, and I did better academically too. It must have been embarrassing for him to have his kid brother run rings around him with all of his friends watching. Even when he found something he did like and was good at — cycling — I soon hopped on a bike and started clocking better times than him. This dynamic made him resentful, I think, and created the seed for a fractured relationship between us from an early age.

Things only worsened when we got into our teenage years and beyond, when his growing rap sheet for petty crime and misdemeanours contrasted pretty starkly with my lengthening list of sporting and baking achievements. A tangible distance emerged between us, and it has only grown wider over time. This isn't something I am happy about, but I have to be honest and say that, equally, it is hard to dredge up any genuine regret about it. We went in wildly different directions early in life and ended up becoming totally different people. That's all there is to it.

Baking didn't really enter my life in a significant way until my teens, a time when teachers at school started to probe about your thoughts on potential career options beyond the school walls. Good question. I had always been a determined and focused student but I didn't pull up any trees academically. I was better in the subjects that required handiwork, the likes of animal

husbandry, woodwork and home economics. At 15, when it was time to select between courses to focus on for my leaving year, I chose home economics. That earned me a call to the woodwork teacher Mr Beardsley's office. He was furious that I was ditching his class in favour of home economics. As to be expected in the macho world of New Zealand, Mr Beardsley saw this as a strange decision. Home economics, after all, was for girls and "poofers". Already a stubborn so-and-so at that age, I didn't listen to a word he said. I stuck with home economics and became the only boy in the class. This suited me fine.

I can't say baking was some kind of mystical passion I was born with. Not many kids grow up dreaming of becoming a baker. I did have plenty of exposure to home baking though — every Sunday my grandmother and mum would spend hours baking scones, pies, tarts and cakes for distribution around the community or to sell at local charity fairs for a few bucks. But baking always seemed like just a domestic thing. I never thought of it as something you could make money from. It wasn't a job. In truth, when I first started doing well in home economics class, becoming a chef was the career I had in mind. It was a job I at least understood — cooks, chefs and dishwashers were at least visible in the restaurants, cafés and fast food joints around town. I rarely saw any bakers.

This impression changed dramatically, and quickly, when a man called Mr John van Til came to my high school in search of a baking apprentice. John ran an esteemed bakery in town, Rangiora Bakery, which was renowned all around New Zealand for the quality of its products. Each year John came to the school to size up the latest batch of apprentice candidates and find his latest lamb to the slaughter. His last few picks had been girls

For Review only

so, this time round, John rolled up knowing that he wanted a guy. Baking was heavy, hard work and he needed some height and muscle. As it turned out, he didn't have much choice. Dean Brettschneider, the only boy in class, was selected by default.

After the 'selection' had been made, John took me aside and asked, "You're not related to Jean Smith by any chance are you?"

"Actually, yes sir, I am. She's my nana, my mum's mother."

"Good, good. If you're half as hard-working and tough as Jean Smith, you won't be a complete waste of my time."

And just like that, I became an apprentice baker.

Apprenticeships might seem quaint today — maybe even unheard of for some — but back then they were highly sought after. Remember, this was a tiny rural community in New Zealand in the 1980s. Teenage kids didn't have a lot of opportunities as they looked beyond the horizons of school life. Not everyone went to college or university, as seems to be the case today, and certainly not kids like me who had a patchy-at-best academic record. Career-wise this left, well, not much — manual labour, farming, cashiers or clerks. Learning a trade, then, was a respected and valued career path.

To be clear, these apprenticeships were not a simple jaunt where you popped in a couple of times a week for a few hours, learnt a handful of techniques, baked some gingerbread men and came out a year later with a nice shiny certificate and your own little baker's hat. Apprenticeships were hard bloody work. Some might laugh, but I liken it to going to the army. You needed serious commitment and discipline to make it through.

Baking apprenticeships were run by the New Zealand Trades Certification Board, and they didn't hand out professional

certification for free. Each apprenticeship lasted about five years on average, although some were completed faster, some slower — whatever it took to complete the mandated 10,000 hours of training. And once you entered this world, you were in for the long haul. Apprenticeships were not like college; there was no changing your major from sociology to psychology halfway through your degree. Decide two years into your five-year apprenticeship that this 16-hours-a-day slog of a career might not be for you after all? Tough luck, that's two years of your life lost.

Point being, you had to go into apprenticeships steeled for work and prepared to commit. This wasn't easy for many 16-year-olds. Luckily for me, I had my nana Jean Smith, whom I stayed with in Rangiora for the first eight months of my apprenticeship, to keep me right. I couldn't drive yet, so I needed to be within walking distance of the bakery. Nana Jean, the archetypal old-school rural grandmother, taught me a lot about discipline, respect and the value of an honest day's labour. She, more than anyone, was going to make sure I didn't screw up this opportunity, especially with her own good name and reputation on the line. Every morning, to the minute, I'd be woken by her banging on the door to get me up in time for the 5 a.m. shift.

Within a few weeks of hands-on work at the bakery, it became clear to me that baking was going to be my life. I still played sport and had the usual teenage distractions, but baking was number one. It helped that Rangiora Bakery had serious pedigree. In spite of its humble surroundings, this bakery was the Cambridge University, the Harvard, the Hogwarts of the baking world in New Zealand. The guys I worked with at the bakery had been working there their whole lives, some of them for more than 30 years. And they were good — very good.

For Review only

It was quite a sight to see a busy bakery operating at full pelt. Everyone knew their jobs. Arms pumped like pistons kneading dough while burly bakers moved with a perverse ballet-like grace as they lifted trays in and out of the huge ovens. During intense moments, there would be no talking. These guys communicated with the merest of glances or minutest change in body language.

Trite, maybe, but I was genuinely inspired by their professionalism and quiet mastery of their craft. I was going to make sure I became that good, but I wasn't going to wait 30 years. I pestered these gnarled old veterans with questions: "How do you know when the dough is properly mixed? What do you mean by bulk fermentation? How can I slow down the staling process?" Needless to say, they found me a pain in the ass.

On first arrival, of course the shit jobs went to the rookie apprentice. Scraping trays, sweeping floors, lugging bags of flour, the usual kind of 'character-building' stuff. But after a couple of weeks — when I'd proven I wasn't a snivelling, knuckle-dragging idiot — I was expected to start contributing properly. The work was tough but rarely boring. Part of this was due to the shift rotation method instilled by John. You would do a month on pastries, a month on pies, a month on bread, and so on. Not only did this stave off suicide-inducing monotony, it exposed you to all the different types of baking early, developing your skills and expertise. It also prevented cliques forming — there were no bullshit rivalries between the cake guys and the bread guys, for example. This is one of many working practices of John's I still follow in all of my businesses today.

I threw myself into every part of the bakery I was allowed to. I wasn't satisfied with the baking side of things alone, I also tried to absorb as much as I could about the bakery as a business

— ingredients cost, shifts scheduling, delivery schedules, P&L (profit and loss) sheets. I stuck my nose into everything, sometimes to my detriment. John nearly took my head off one morning when he looked upon my trays of freshly baked vanilla slices. Ordinarily, these were bog-standard items, plain, totally unadorned. I, in my wisdom, had decided to correct this and spent a morning intricately decorating the things with delicate patterns and swirls of icing.

"Brettschneider! What the hell are these? If I ever find you wasting my icing for these poncy bollocks again, you'll be out on your arse!"

What John didn't know at that point was that we'd already sold two trays of them first thing that morning, having added 10 cents to the selling price. Those "poncy" swirls had helped move the product. Even I knew better than to raise this point in the midst of his fury with the whole staff looking on. Later that day though, when everyone else had gone home, I delicately mentioned to John that I was only trying to be proactive and help. I wasn't just pissing around; I had done my homework. I had figured out that the icing cost per vanilla slice equated to less than one cent, yet we could charge 10 cents extra from the customer. John didn't say a word, he simply nodded and sent me on my way with an eyebrow pointed to the door.

The following morning, John was already at the bakery when a co-worker and I arrived at our stations. "Brettschneider," he barked, "you're the artist. See if you can teach that reprobate mate of yours to pipe those bloody swirls on the slices. I want five trays in the shop in an hour."

That was a good early lesson in a couple of ways. It showed me that proactivity could be rewarded after all, so long as what it

About the Author

Dean Brettschneider is one part professional baker and one part entrepreneur. Arguably one of the world's best bakers with an international following, Dean is truly a global baker. He resides in Singapore, where he heads up his global baking empire. He travels regularly to all corners of the world as a consultant to the global F&B and baking industry. He is the founder and co-owner of the global artisan bakery and food store chain Baker & Cook, Plank Sourdough Pizza, Mo & Jo Sourdough Burgers, and Brettschneider's Baking & Cooking School, and also co-owner of the London-based Crosstown Doughnuts. An author of 16 award-winning books on baking, Dean is also a judge on successful reality TV series such as *New Zealand's Hottest Home Baker* and *The Great Kiwi Bake Off*. He also hosts the *Kiwi Baker* series in Shanghai, France, Singapore and California, as well as many other TV programmes that promote baking excellence, travel, food and culture. For more information, see www.globalbaker.com