

How coming to work in Hello Kitty pajamas made Arianne Bennett the queen of falafel



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Falafel can be a powerful source of inspiration. At least it was for the Falafel Queen.

[Arianne Bennett](#), 45, was a coder. She owned a web design company and had enough clients — including one women-run company in the adult entertainment industry — to make her a success.

Then she took a bite of deep-fried chickpeas, and her whole world changed.

It all started a little more than a decade ago, when Bennett was living in Washington, D.C., but spending a lot of time in Amsterdam visiting friends. While she and her husband were on these trips, they enjoyed the plethora of falafel stands throughout the city.

That sparked an idea: Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a falafel shop in D.C.?

Once the seed was planted, Bennett worked her tail off to turn that idea into a business. Over time, what was meant to be a “hole in the wall” falafel shop [turned into a national franchise](#), [Amsterdam Falafelshop](#).

Before they opened, Bennett spent “days and nights on end” standing on the side of the street outside of the prospective location for the shop — clicker in hand — to track the number of people walking down each side of the street.

“What was the walking traffic like? We were paranoidly trying to figure it out so we wouldn't screw it up,” she explained.

It took Bennett 13 months to write the business plan, and she refused to take no for an answer after two banks turned her down for a loan. (The key, she says, is finding a banker who identifies with you and your product.)

She tested falafel flavors herself and interviewed numerous chefs to make sure she had the very best people cooking up the Middle Eastern street food.

Once she was satisfied, [Amsterdam Falafelshop](#) opened its doors in 2004, proceeding with caution to make sure the business survived.



Photo courtesy of Amsterdam Falafel

Amsterdam Falafel opened its doors in D.C. in 2004 and the company has since sold 17 franchises around the country.

“For the first three years, we had a box for rent and one for taxes,” she said. “Every day, we would put money into two envelopes in safes, and we didn’t touch that money until the end of the month.”

That assured her they would never miss a payment — the downfall of too many small businesses. She also said they were intentional with every dollar they spent.

“We didn’t make T-shirts when we first opened,” Bennett said. “T-shirts cost \$2,000, and if people don’t buy them, you are left with \$2,000 and you’re giving [the shirts] away. You have to decide in the early years what are you going to spend on to make your business grow.”

But perhaps the main reason her business flourished was because she wasn’t afraid to show up at the shop — in her Hello Kitty pajamas.

“Someone would call in the middle of the night and say, ‘There are drunk girls on the floor,’ or ‘The register is stuck,’ so they’re used to me showing up in my pajamas and a big Hello Kitty shirt, which is strange for a CEO, but that’s what you do to make sure everything is going right,” Bennett said. “Thank goodness I don’t get as many of those calls anymore.”

Ten years after the Amsterdam Falafelshop opened its doors, the company has sold a total of 17 franchises around the country. Each costs anywhere from \$385,000 to \$485,000, including fees, tools and equipment to fully open the store. And the self-proclaimed “Mama Bear” of Amsterdam Falafelshop said her goal is to have a couple shops in and around every major city in the country.

“We are like the little engine that could,” Bennett said.

Bennett explained that the shop has become an important part of many regular customers’ lives. In fact, one couple loved it so much they got engaged in the shop. And every franchisee they have is a former customer.

“It speaks to our brand and people’s passions for it,” she said. “You have life experiences here in the middle of the night with friends or loved ones.”

And the Falafel Queen is pretty happy about that.

“I turned 45 last month, and I spent two weeks in Mexico staring at ocean and taking stock of my life and this is what I came to: I like where I’m at,” she said.