



Pioneering a future-proof food system

Carole Ackermann interviews Christina Senn-Jakobsen, Managing Director of Swiss Food and Nutrition Valley

Christina Senn-Jakobsen is a passionate food innovator with heart, striving for a sustainable planet and meaningful connections with people. Christina graduated with a Masters in European Food Studies from the University of Wageningen, then worked internationally in the branded consumer goods industry for over 12 years at Mondelez. Her scientific R&D background informs her knowledge of the end-to-end supply chain, and she loves to facilitate intersectional collaboration. Before joining the Valley, she headed up Kickstart Innovation's Food & Retail Tech vertical. Today, Christina is Managing Director of Swiss Food & Nutrition Valley (SFNV).

Swiss Food & Nutrition Valley (SFNV) is a purpose-driven, nationwide, not-for-profit association that strengthens and promotes food system innovation, with international engagement. The diverse Valley partners – of which there are now over 120 – collaborate to address the most pressing challenges in food, agriculture, and nutrition, and co-create innovative solutions that drive better planetary and human health.

PHOTO: YUSEF EVANS

Ladies Drive: Do you remember your first experience with entrepreneurship?

Christina Senn-Jakobsen: As a child in Denmark I watched my brother dabbling in all sorts of small businesses. He sold heat-treated chicken manure to our neighbors with vegetable gardens, bought wood in bulk and sold it on for a profit... But I only really became confident with the term “entrepreneurship” about 10 years ago, when I suddenly found myself surrounded by startups and supporting them on a daily basis at Kickstart Innovation.

You initially worked in really varied roles in a consumer goods company. What attracted you to this industry, and is this knowledge still helping you today?

At first – when I was at Mondelez – it was the idea of making a new product that would make people happy – a healthy but delicious chocolate. Later, it became about the people in the industry; they're incredibly knowledgeable, passionate and share my love for food.

I am comfortable talking with academics and researchers, startups, farmers, scientists and more. Even though they all speak quite differently from each other.

Alternative: After studying you worked in 14 different countries. Does this experience still help you today?

It absolutely taught me to be sensitive to my surroundings and understand people and situations before jumping into action. I also became fearless. Starting afresh in another new country, sometimes knowing nobody, or not speaking the language, is like jumping off a cliff. After doing it several times I learned what I needed to have in place to make it a safe landing!

As Managing Director of SFNV, you collaborate with many stakeholders. What motivated you to join the Valley?

About three years before I got offered the job, I co-wrote an article about uniting the Swiss food ecosystem's innovation forces under one roof. It read like a manifesto; a vision for the future. And then, three years later, I was offered my dream job doing just that! Two years in I am still pinching myself.

The vision sounds great, but I assume to implement it is not as easy?

I have always believed in the power of diversity and the power of people. I get easily bored in a homogenous environment. The food system, as reflected in the diverse collection of Valley partners, is incredibly diverse, but we're united in our aim of pioneering a future-proof food system – together.

Do the current food challenges match what startups pick as a business idea and what universities teach?

I believe the days of startups reacting to industry trends are over. Startups are much better at dreaming big and doing what some “experienced” people say can't be done. And industry is now also fostering this innovative free spirit in internal incubators. Innovation today can spring up from almost anywhere: industry, spin-offs from academia, startups, venture studios... but to fly it takes an ecosystem!

Tell us about one of the startups in the Valley. What attracted them to becoming a partner?

We always ask partners who are applying to join the Valley about what they want to get from the ecosystem and what they have to give. Planted, one of the Valley's 81 startups, plays a very active role in strengthening Switzerland's position as a Food Nation. And, at the same time, the whole team really seizes the opportunities for networking and increased visibility that the Valley offers.

The theme of this issue is post-traumatic growth – how to not only be resilient after hardship, but to grow from it. To what extent does this play a role for you, SFNV and its partners?

We are still very much in the thick of it, whether it's geopolitical instability, the energy crisis, climate emergency, food insecurity... And of course, Covid hasn't entirely gone away either. The issues are still present and very real to very many people. So it doesn't always feel post-traumatic, exactly.

It might be kitschy, but I really like the phrase “Never waste a good crisis.” This is an era when the world and its inhabitants are making great developmental leaps. That's not to romanticize the cruelty and chaos in the world, not at all. But when the price of fertilizers went up due to the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine, and stayed up, Swiss farmers looked to regenerative farming as a possible way out. This is just one of several examples of how reactions to the crises can end up having an unexpected positive impact on people and the planet.

The food industry is very male. And it's still rare to see women in top management positions in the consumer goods industry.

There are lots of talented women in the food industry. But we do need to do a better job of highlighting some of these superwomen and letting their stories inspire us. The future of food is female – it is going to take a lot of female skills to transform the food system into a truly sustainable and nutritious one. Maybe a woman's place used to be in the kitchen, but today it is very definitely within the food ecosystem!

The Valley has 81 startup members. What advice do you have, especially for female founders who have a great idea but are not well connected in the industry?

1) Drink 50 cups of coffee (or tea)! Start a list of people in the ecosystem you would like to have a coffee with, share your idea, ask for their advice and ask for an introduction to someone else you should have a coffee with. By the 50th cup you will probably find yourself pretty well connected. People are generous, and on the whole love supporting and sharing their knowledge.

2) Join an early-stage accelerator like Founder Institute or MassChallenge. This will let you become part of a cohort and connect with great mentors.

3) Seek out events relevant to your startup idea – you can find them on LinkedIn and Eventbrite. Make sure you arrive early and stay late for the best networking opportunities. Always attend with the goal of leaving having made at least two new connections. The more the merrier!

What do you do to recharge?

I retreat to the mountains with my husband and our 9-year-old daughter. My husband is great at reminding me to balance my dream job with spending time with my family. Time alone is also essential to my wellbeing. I love pottering around in our urban rooftop garden in the middle of Zurich talking to the plants!

DR. CAROLE ACKERMANN

is CEO and co-founder of the company Diamondscull AG, which invests in startup companies. She is President of EHL Group (founded as Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne), the global leader in hospitality education, a member of the Board of Directors of Allianz Switzerland, BKW, BNP Paribas Suisse, and BVZ Holding, and is involved in the Board of the Bernese innovation agency be-advanced. She is also a Senior Lecturer at the HSG and other universities.

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