



The force of flavour

Laura Santtini braved break-ups, financial crisis and even earthquakes to pursue her dream of packaging umami and selling 'happiness in a tube'

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I'm a flavourist. From the age of six, I thought of everything in terms of flavour. When I first met people I would assign them a flavour: they might be a KitKat or a tuna sandwich or, if I didn't like them, Angel Delight. I used to walk around with a notebook called *Laura's Flavours and Feelings*. Everyone was in there, logged with their flavour. As a child, it was a full-time job.

Today I still see the world and its people in a similar light. And for me the concept of umami (what I call deliciousness, the fifth basic taste after salty, sweet, sour and bitter) is the ultimate expression of flavour. But while many have talked of it, few have successfully defined it. So that was my ambition, to capture it and put it in a tube.

Of course, people said I was mad. "How can you put umami in a tube?", they

would ask. "It's like saying you're going to bottle love." Well, yes, I'd say. That's exactly what I'm going to do.

I wanted to put together a flavour that enhances people's cooking experience. With kids in the bath, jobs and partners to think about, it's naïve to think people will obsess about flavour when they just want to get food on the table.

But I can help them. My passion is to create quick, tasty, nutritious and interesting meals in moments. And my umami in a tube would help do that – it would be creating something magical. Plus I would put it in a tube that made it look like an indulgent beauty product.

I remember a day when I felt completely broke. I went out, bought some lipstick in a little black and shiny tube, put it on and felt happy. That's what I wanted to achieve in those moments of kitchen drudgery. My umami tube would create little moments of happiness, optimism and sparkle.

So I started to blend and create potions, pastes and sprinkles. I mixed olives, garlic, porcini mushrooms and more. I got into alchemy, the idea of transformation, at home in my kitchen.

I worked in the British Library – one of the most fantastic places in the world – studying 14th-century manuscripts, then discovering a 17th-century German academic called Athanasius Kircher who wrote *The Key to Alchemy According to the Egyptians*, about the wonder of the dung beetle who eats nothing but dung, but processes and transforms it into something far greater than the sum of its parts.

I returned to my kitchen and mixed in tomato and anchovy and parmesan. My endgame would be like putting the sexiest person I could think of into a tube. And then squirting it onto spaghetti bolognese. It would be the thing that makes you say "Mmmm". I finished my mixing; now I just needed to launch it.

No banks were lending to businesses at the time, so I sold my house (my marriage had also collapsed – it was a burnt-toast phase). I used the finance I had released to find a factory that would develop my recipe, pack it and help me launch it.

I did it in 2010 and it went viral. It was featured in newspapers all over the



'I wanted my tubes of umami to create little moments of happiness, optimism and sparkle'

world. But it was getting too big. It was like rolling an ever-increasing piece of pastry that becomes too thin and then rips.

But then Nobu Matsuhisa, the legendary Japanese chef, got in touch. I thought he just wanted a table at our family restaurant in London's Belgravia, but it turned out he wanted to meet me. Over lunch we agreed to collaborate on a vegetarian version using Asian flavours. "I have two business partners now," he said after we shook hands. I gulped, remembering his other was Robert De Niro.

I travelled to Japan, navigating a country where I couldn't even read a road sign, bought ingredients in supermarkets and mixed them together in a pot in my room.

Nobu loved it. Then, just before the Japanese launch in 2011, the country was devastated by the earthquake and tsunami. Our small project was just a fragment of the collateral damage.

A year later we managed to launch it, just at the time the business was set to expand across Europe. I had invested more money in the business, and a factory in Emilia-Romagna had just finished a new production. Then another disaster: an earthquake devastated the region. I travelled to the village of Cento to see our operation. But nothing was left.

I had lost my entire stock: ingredients, packaging, everything.

It was one of those clear and cold spring mornings, blue sky, no wind. I contained my emotion; relieved that no one had died in my factory, as they had next door. I wasn't insured against acts of God – but then who is?

I retired to my hotel and sat in the lobby opposite a group of German businessmen, I suddenly thought I'd lost my balance. Then I saw the faces of the men: concern and fear. Of course, this was another earthquake.

Coolly, I went out and stood in the middle of a field, reckoning I'd rather be in a crevice than have a two-star hotel on my head. The earth shook and shook. The hotel was OK, but many died that day. I went home, but returned a week later having found a new investor in an old friend. I located a new factory and started again.

My life often seems like a long game of snakes and ladders. The snakes are too long, and the ladders too steep and high. But so far I've sold a million tubes of Taste #5 Umami Paste around the world.

Find #5 Umami Pastes, Umami Rush and Bomba! Tomato Purée XXX at Waitrose. Visit laurasanttini.com



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1 Add 1-2 tbsps to your bolognese, chilli, cottage pie, lasagne or macaroni cheese during the cooking process.

2 Mix with ketchup and mayonnaise for a delicious dip.

3 Rub into meat or fish before cooking, or squeeze into burger and meatball mixes.

4 Add a squeeze to your gravy when deglazing the pan with wine or stock.

5 Spread underneath cheese for the best cheese on toast ever.