

The Gator

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA ALUMNI ENTREPRENEURS

INSPIRE A NEW GENERATION

100

In this issue, we profile a selection of five Gator100 businesses with inspirational stories. For a list of all Gator100 companies, visit gator100.ufl.edu.

By Mike Boslet

The inaugural class of the Gator100 represents the power of the entrepreneurial spirit, an attitude that breeds optimism and success. Members of this year's group lead companies large and small, with some following well-established business paths while others flourished with original concepts.

Presented by the University of Florida Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation, the Gator100 recognizes the 100 fastest-growing businesses led or owned by UF alumni. About 600 nominations touting alumni-led and -owned businesses from across the country came pouring into UF.

To be considered for the list, a business must be at least five years old and have annual revenues of at least \$100,000. The Gator100 is ranked by compounded annual growth rate, which is used to determine year-over-year growth in the past three years. The accounting firm Ernst & Young vetted the nominees. Almost all business leaders named to the first Gator100 list visited their alma mater in early February to



attend events in their honor. The two-day celebration brought entrepreneurs (like the ones on these pages) together with UF students who seek to be like them.

Alter Eco Farmers, Fair Trade and Food

When **Edouard Rollet**, (MA '01) co-founder of Alter Eco Americas, stands in line behind a customer who buys his company's quinoa, he doesn't see dollar signs. Instead, he sees the farmer in Bolivia who first introduced him to the grain. He sees a new village school, built with the money earned by farmers who sold their goods to his company.

How Rollet, who received his master's in mass communication at the University of Florida, came to be co-founder and co-CEO of Alter Eco Americas, a fair-trade, organic and artisan food brand, is a story in itself.

Photography by Eric Zamora

Rollet graduated from a European business school with friend Mathieu Senard and then received a scholarship via a France and state of Florida program; he selected UF. But before he left for the U.S. to study, he and his friends had already planted the seed of the San Francisco-based company that he now operates with Senard.

"We often talked about how we wanted to do something more meaningful with our lives," Rollet recalls. As a result, Rollet's friend Tristan Lecomte established Alter Eco in 1998 as a storefront in Paris, selling fair-trade products sourced from Africa.

After Rollet graduated from UF, he set off to make his mark in New York, becoming a senior trade attaché at the French Embassy. But something was always tugging at his heartstrings. As a student, Rollet worked for UNICEF in Senegal and traveled to impoverished countries. These experiences convinced him that he needed to serve the underprivileged around the world.

Meanwhile, Lecomte, Rollet, Senard and Ilse Keijzer changed Alter Eco's business model, and in 2003, Lecomte entered the fair-trade food market in Europe. In 2005, Rollet and Senard launched Alter Eco Americas, which now supports 25,000 farmers: 12 small-scale farmer cooperatives in nine countries.

"By working directly with the small-scale farmers who grow our quinoa, rice, sugar and cacao, helping them institute fair-trade and organic practices and assisting them in improving both quality of food and quality of life, we're creating a system that benefits everyone involved," says Rollet, whose company not only buys crops at a fair wage from small farms but also builds long-term relationships with the farmers.

"We want to change the lives of the communities we buy from — to make an impact," he says. "It's about the connections; connections with the team — and connections with the farmers. Each product has its own story."

Edouard Rollet

(MA '01)

Co-founder and co-CEO Alter Eco Americas

"We want to change the lives of the communities we buy from — to make an impact."

preserve the local agricultural biodiversity and also ensure good health for the farmers and the land they work on.

"To be an entrepreneur, you need a combination of many things to happen in your life — travel, people, cultural education and schooling," says Rollet.

"My education at the University of Florida was really an essential part of that equation," he says.

— Renee Houston Zemanski

Alter Eco is a Certified B Corporation (companies wishing to benefit society as well as their shareholders). Each product it sells is cultivated using sustainable farming methods that

Audience Inc. A Partnership that Projects Success

"Everything happens for a reason."

That's the maxim **Carlina (Terrana)**

Womeldorph (BSAC '94, MBC '96) lives by — and for good reason.



Take, for example, the time she traveled from Buffalo, her hometown, to check out Florida colleges in 1989. Her father

hoped she would go to his alma mater, the University of South Florida, but an uncle took her to see University of Florida's campus. One look at The Swamp and her mind was made up.

While there, she jumped into campus life with both feet, becoming a homecoming director and chapter president of Alpha Omicron Pi sorority. She also joined

Carlina (Terrana) Womeldorph
(BSAC '94, MBC '96)
Audience Inc.

"UF totally prepared me for this career."

Student Government and Florida Blue Key, among other groups. Currently, she remains connected to her school as an at-large member on the UF Alumni Association's board of directors.

How about the summer she interned for a homebuilder in Orlando while studying for her master's in building construction at UF? While there she met Jim Womeldorph, a recording arts graduate from Full Sail University in neighboring Winter Park. They fell in love and later moved to Texas to start careers in their fields of study. They married, launched a custom audio/video installation business and began to raise a large family.

Carlina would later realize that her involvement at UF prepared her to run a business. Based in Plano, a suburb north of Dallas, Audience Inc. melds Jim's expertise in audio/video design, technology and installation with Carlina's experience in writing contracts and handling the operational side of a business. They launched Audience in 2002 and landed some big jobs designing and installing high-end HD video, audio and automation systems, along with fully customized theater systems in custom homes and commercial projects.

"I give him all the credit for being an entrepreneur," Carlina says about Jim. "I could write contracts and run a business, but he had the vision."

As Audience grew, so did the Womeldorph family. Six children would come along, but the couple suffered the heartbreak of losing an infant son to cancer in 2008. Carlina and Jim founded the Lincoln J. Womeldorph Foundation, supporting children with rhabdomyosarcoma, in his memory.

Meanwhile, Jim continued to work as an audio/video specialist at Texas Stadium, where the Dallas Cowboys played. In 2006, Audience got the call to upgrade and remodel the sound, video and automation systems in team owner Jerry Jones' suite. When the Cowboys moved to a new stadium in 2009, Audience Inc. went with them.

Audience has since installed sound, video and automation technology throughout the \$1.15 billion AT&T Stadium, including in Jones' personal suites and in more than 230 stadium suites. The company is the venue's official provider of AMX, an audio/video control system. Audience also has installed audio/video systems used in such big-time music festivals as Lollapalooza and Electric Daisy Carnival as well as in the X Games.

"UF totally prepared me for this career," says Carlina. — Mike Boslet

Kitchen Resource Direct Custom Cabinet E-Commerce Idea Goes Viral

Here's a novel idea for the home-improvement market: Start an online business that sells semi-custom kitchen cabinets and accessories at prices far below brick-and-mortar competitors.

That was the idea that brought **Chris Larsen** (BDES '04) and **Benjamin Gordon** (BSBA '04) together to work on starting Tampa-based Kitchen Resource Direct as a dot-com business. The e-retail concept was borne out of Larsen's experience in kitchen cabinet design, manufacturing and importing and Gordon's expertise as a web designer. In 2009, they launched KitchenResourceDirect.com with only six cabinet styles to choose from.

"I spent a lot of time begging companies to allow us to sell their cabinets on the Internet," says Larsen, recalling that some manufacturers were initially wary of online retail.

"Today we offer close to 125 [cabinet-door styles]," adds Gordon.

Renamed Cabinets.com, Kitchen Resource Direct's website is a virtual showroom of cabinets, trim products and accessories, offering product information,



(L) **Benjamin Gordon**
(BSBA '04)
(R) **Chris Larsen**
(BDES '04)
Kitchen Resource Direct

*"We were never
scared to take risks."*

customer support, photo galleries of kitchen designs and free design assistance. The company ships assembled and unassembled

cabinets throughout the continental United States. With every cabinet purchase, the company gives back to the environment through the Ocala (Fla.) National Forest Plant-A-Tree program.

Kitchen Resource Direct's success has been nothing less than meteoric, forcing Larsen, 34, and Gordon, 32, to move into larger office space three times. Inc. magazine's 2014 Inc. 5000 list of the fastest-growing private companies in America ranked Kitchen Resource Direct at No. 568 (No. 8 among Tampa Bay companies on the list), based on a revenue growth of 840 percent — \$469,000 to \$4.4 million — from 2010 to 2013. Larsen, company CEO, says revenues doubled last year.

Reporting a 162 percent annual compounded growth rate in revenues, Kitchen Resource Direct landed at No. 4 in the inaugural Gator100.

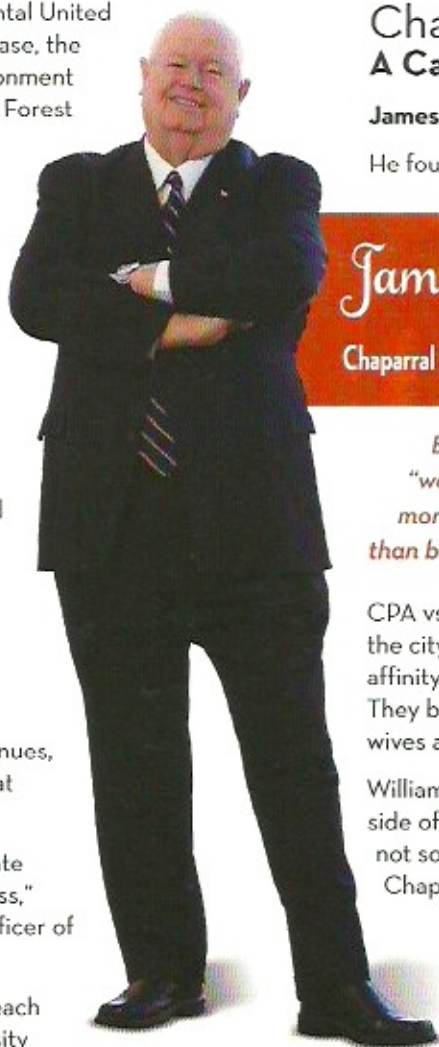
"We really focus on trying to create something great here as a business," says Gordon, chief technology officer of Kitchen Resource Direct.

Larsen and Gordon didn't know each other while attending the University of Florida. They met in Tampa while Larsen worked for a cabinet-import business and Gordon ran a website development company. They came to realize that their paths had crossed long before going to UF. Both were born in the same Allentown, Pennsylvania, hospital, but two years apart.

At UF, Larsen majored in interior design and served as vice president of the American Society of Interior Designers' UF student chapter. Meanwhile, Gordon who majored in finance and minored in entrepreneurship and mass communications, won the "most innovative idea" award in the 2003 UF Entrepreneurship Club's Business Plan Competition for his and another student's e-lottery tickets idea.

Larsen recalls the early days of Kitchen Resource Direct as being precarious, with the company down to its last dollar some months. Still, he says failure was not an option.

"We built it on the lean, mean mentality," he says. "But we were never scared to take risks." — MB



James Lane
(BSBA '64)
Chaparral Boats Inc.

Chaparral Boats Inc. A Captain of Industry

James Lane (BSBA '64) is a numbers guy.

He found that out while studying business at the University of Florida when a professor suggested that Lane's math skills were better suited for accounting. Lane took the advice, which brought him into contact with another professor who got Lane an accounting job on campus. Naturally, a certified public accountant career followed.

*Boat building
"was inherently
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Lane is also a winner.

The founder of Chaparral Boats saw that in Lane when the two met on a paddleball court in the early 1970s in Hollywood, Florida. They played against each other — CPA vs. boat builder — then teamed up for doubles and won the city championship. Besides paddleball, they shared an affinity for boating and succeeding in their respective careers. They became lifelong and inseparable friends, as did their wives and children.

William Pegg loved the design, engineering and manufacturing side of making pleasure and sport boats. The business side — not so much. He needed a numbers guy in Nashville, Georgia, Chaparral's new headquarters. Lane agreed to come on board as an equal partner and company president in 1977.

Since then, the company, which acquired the Robalo brand of fishing boats in 2001, enjoyed steady sales growth that peaked at about \$280 million before the economic downturn. Combined sales were \$171 million in 2014.

"I ... moved into a business venture that I could be entrepreneurial in," Lane says of his decision to change careers. Boat building "was inherently more interesting than being a CPA."

Lane wasted no time making the company run as smoothly as the fiberglass boats Chaparral built. First orders of business were implementing automated record-keeping systems and eliminating debt.

"We've grown the company with no debt," says Lane, who describes his business-management style as conservative.

"James is definitely more conservative than I am," affirms Pegg. "We grew steady, one step at a time, and we eventually got to the top."

Chaparral claims the largest market share in the country for stern-drive boats in the 18- to 33-foot range. It produces 33 models under seven product lines that range from luxury

pleasure boats to sport boats used for skiing and wakeboarding to jet boats and other types of powerboats.

"This past year, we decided to get into jet boats," Lane says. "We won the innovation award at the [2015] Miami International Boat Show." Chaparral came out with a jet boat that creates a wake for surfboard riding. Wakesurfing is the latest craze in watersports, Lane says.

Speaking of the future, Lane and Pegg, both 72, have no plans to retire. They go to lunch together every day, travel together and have family lake houses near each other. It's a perfect partnership except for one problem, Lane points out.

"He did have a major fault," Lane says of Pegg. "He went to FSU." — MB



Amazing Taste Foods

A Man for all Seasonings

The foot-long, frozen hard-boiled egg. Never knew such a thing existed, did you? It didn't until **Ghazi Taki** (PhD '65) invented it in 1966.

Taki looks back on that innovation and laughs about it now, but its implications were serious business to the food service industry. A kitchen worker could slice one long hard-boiled egg faster than slicing ordinary hard-boiled eggs one at a time, saving time on salad making.

Ghazi Taki (PhD '65)
Amazing Taste Foods

"Innovation is the key to survival in business."

Florida with a doctorate in meat science-food science. The Iraqi-born Taki would go on to influence cooking habits in kitchens all over the world.

Taki's career includes stints with Seymour Foods, Adolph's Food Products, ConAgra Foods and General Foods.

At Adolph's, he invented the brand's first meat and chicken tenderizing marinades. But his breakout product belonged to him alone — a seasoning product for microwave cooking. Introduced in 1977, Micro Shake helped Taki's Microwave Foods Inc. establish a foothold in the seasoning and spice space. Taki and his son, Adam, later

changed Microwave Foods' name to Amazing Taste Foods to reflect their company's diverse offerings of mixes and protein-specific seasonings for beef, poultry and seafood. Their product line is sold in grocery stores nationwide as well as used in foods prepared in grocers' meat departments.

Nearly 50 years later, Taki is as motivated to discover new food preparation products as the founder and chairman of Malibu, California-based Amazing Taste Foods as he was the day he left the University of

"He's a visionary," says Adam, 31, who recently assumed the role of president in the privately held company. "He's a man who doesn't know what the word 'no' means. He will do all the things other people don't want to do to be successful."

Innovation, says Taki, is the key to survival in business. "You change or you die," he says, putting it bluntly.

He knows something about adapting. A University of Baghdad undergrad alumnus, Taki traveled to the United States in 1959, landing in New York on his birthday en route to Oklahoma State University. "My English was horrible," he recalls. Still, he managed to come out of OSU with a master's degree in meat technology-biochemistry and three scholarship offers from doctorate programs — one of them from UF.

"I looked at who was heading the meat departments [of the universities], and I knew [UF's] **Dr. [Zane] Palmer** was a phenomenal meat scientist," says Taki, describing his decision to accept UF's offer. "I was so lucky I was his student."

Taki and Palmer, now 94 and retired from the faculty, sat together with Adam at a Gator100 event in early February. The reunion brought back memories of Taki's life at UF, of parties and watching **Steve Spurrier** (BSPE '81) play quarterback.

"There is nothing better than the University of Florida," he boasts. "I am extremely blessed."

Reminded that he also went to Oklahoma State, Taki doesn't hesitate to confirm where his loyalties lie: "I'm a Gator." — MB