

Partners - Kim Malek & Tyler Malek

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Tyler: It was not an important part of my finger. *(Kim laughs)* Don't worry.

("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Tyler: I'm Tyler Malek. I am the Head Ice Cream Maker at Salt & Straw.

Kim: I'm Kim Malek, and I'm the CEO.

Hrishikesh: Kim Malek and Tyler Malek co-founded their ice cream company, Salt & Straw, in 2011. They started with a push cart in Portland, Oregon. And now, they've got stores in 25 different locations, in multiple states across the U.S.. In 2019, they put out the *Salt & Straw Ice Cream Cookbook*, detailing some of the creative and unusual flavors their store has become famous for. Flavors like Black Olive Brittle and Goat Cheese or Avocado and Oaxacan Chocolate Fudge or Buttered Mashed Potatoes and Gravy. But, Kim and Tyler have actually known each other for a lot longer than just the time they've been scooping ice cream because they're also cousins.

Kim: Our family's very close. I think there's 15 cousins and we spent a lot of time together as an extended family. So we would always get together for holidays and every single event you can think of. Our family is one of those families that just all shows up en masse whenever there's something going on.

Tyler: Kim was like a superhero to me.

Kim: The thing is, I'm a lot older than Tyler *(Kim laughs)* so, but we definitely had a connection there.

Tyler: Whenever we met back up for the holidays, the first thing I would do is I'd try and ask her, what was she doing next? We'd even go to a different room so you could secretly tell me 'cause you didn't want, you weren't, hadn't told your parents yet. I think there was so much excitement from my perspective.

I remember when I was in high school, I was running the school coffee shop and we were calling back and forth because you were trying to build this whole program in Starbucks.

Kim: I started at Starbucks when there were 30 stores, so it was a tiny company. I started as a barista and went into the operations department and then spent most of my career there in marketing. I was working on new store openings, but what really got me excited was the community gathering that happened around coffee houses. I really loved getting to know local neighborhoods and community groups. That part was so fun to me. And Starbucks coined this idea around a "third place." So it's not your home, it's not your work, it's this "third place." And I love that. I could clearly, clearly see that an ice cream shop could, kind of, interpret that idea of a third place in a new way, but in a way that's just all good. Like, you need caffeine to power yourself, you need food to get through the day, but there's no reason to eat ice cream other than to make your day better, to celebrate. You know, it's all pure happiness.

Tyler: Yeah.

Kim: So I had the idea the very first time in 1996. And I was living in Portland in the mid-nineties. And I literally met people walking down the street who became some of my best friends. I mean, it's just a really welcoming environment, very collaborative. And I could see an ice cream shop being just reflective of that. And I started looking for real estate and working on a business plan. And then I stopped because, you know, when I was in high school, my dad went bankrupt, actually, owning his own small company. And so the idea of starting a company was just really scary to me. So I shelved that and, kind of, just carried the business plan around with me until 2009.

Tyler: I remember, specifically, I was in culinary school and I had to start looking at places to extern. I called up Kim, I was like, "Hey, I think I want to extern in Portland. Is there any good place to live?"

And she was like, "Oh, I'm living here! You can just come to my basement." And we started talking about what was happening and literally within seconds, I fell in love with this idea. I don't think I even paused. I was just like, "Oh, I'll come down and maybe I can, I'll make all of the ice cream for you."

And she's like, "Oh no. That's a good joke."

Kim: I thought to myself, *first of all, I'm not going to bring my family into this crazy idea with me. Like, you are on this great trajectory with your life and I don't want to be responsible for (Kim laughs) ruining it. And secondly, I need someone who knows how to make ice cream.*

Tyler: I had made really bad ice cream before. Actually, in school I made one and my teacher said it was one of the worst flavors she's ever tried. It was a Cheetos-based ice cream (*Tyler laughs*). It was really, really bad. Other worldly bad. And that was my only experience. That was the one time I got to make ice cream in school. And then we were in savory for the rest of the course.

So, I took it upon myself for the next two weeks to make ice cream, to learn everything about ice cream. I learned really quickly the mechanics, the science of the, of how things freeze and, kind of, the rules. From a creative perspective, it is a blank canvas, but it also has very specific constraints. And once you know these basic rules, you can do whatever you want with the flavors. That in and of itself with ice cream completely just stole my soul.

Kim: He kept sending recipes, and things he was trying, and ideas. And after a while of hearing, "No," he said, "Okay, I'm just going to run errands. I'll just run errands for you and help get the company going. I won't make any ice cream, I promise." (*Kim laughs*)

So he showed up and, you know, he'd go to school in the morning from 5:00 to 9:00 and, you know, he's still making ice cream in the kitchen. And we immediately could see, like, he's really good at this. And it didn't take long to make that official.

Tyler: I remember the first time we served ice cream. We did a "pop-up," quote-unquote. It was literally the first two tubs of ice cream. And we loaded them up in your red Datsun and we served it at Earth Day in 2011 to all the volunteers that were cleaning up on Alberta Street in Northeast Portland.

Kim: And I remember the first customers, they were there shooting *Portlandia*, were Fred and Carrie!

Hrishikesh: That's Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein. The creators and co-stars of the show *Portlandia*.

Kim: They were standing there and said, "What are you guys doing? This looks really fishy." (*Kim & Tyler laugh*)

Tyler: It was really fishy. (*Tyler laughs*)

Kim: And then they came back later and said, "You guys, really good ice cream! You should keep going!" And they were very encouraging. (*Kim laughs*) It's so nice because, "You can do it! Maybe not from the red Datsun, but."

Tyler: Yeah. "You should really make something of this." *(Kim & Tyler laugh)*

Kim: I think it's one thing to have this idea and carry it around with you from 1996 to 2011, but it's another thing when it's the first time you're sharing it with people. People love it! We served every cup. People came back for seconds. They were really encouraging. And I think it really fueled us. And for me personally, I'm very fear-driven in general in life, but felt like I was on top of the world. It was really, really exciting.

We started the company as a push cart. Tyler would make the ice cream and we would store it in this freezer that his mom gave us. You know, one of those white freezers in the basement. You know, we're just both working the cart and making ice cream. And we had planned to open a store later that summer, a real brick and mortar store, but we were just there at the cart.

Tyler: I remember the first flavors we had at our cart. We made Pear and Blue Cheese Ice Cream, Sea Salt with Caramel Ribbons, Chocolate Goopy Brownie, Cinnamon Snickerdoodle, Brown Ale with Bacon Ice Cream. And, oh! A Lemon Basil Sorbet.

Kim: I couldn't imagine opening an ice cream shop without Vanilla.

Tyler: And I remember adamantly, like, fist slamming on the table saying, we weren't going to do Vanilla. And we almost got in a fight over it, but I think that was like the 13th flavor we made.

Kim: The cool thing about Tyler is whenever we have disagreements about flavors, you know, he'll come with a really strong point of view, obviously, and then he'll think about it and he'll figure out a way to adapt the idea to his way of thinking, so it's like a win-win.

Tyler: After we'd been running Salt & Straw for about six months, I sat down with my counselor at culinary school and I said, "Hey I need to drop out."

And he's like, "You're going to regret this for forever." I haven't. *(Tyler laughs)* But I never, I never finished. I technically didn't graduate from culinary school.

Kim: I don't know, we've never talked about this publicly. I don't know if I'm allowed to talk about it. But he, at one point, before we started, he kind of, lost the tip of his finger making ice cream. And was the biggest point of pressure, I guess you could call it, because I was horrified. I was in tears. It all got fixed up at the hospital. And he looked at me and he said, "I'm going to feel a lot better about this if we actually make this ice cream company work." *(Kim laughs)* I'll never forget that moment. I was like, "Okay! We'll do it! We'll make this work for sure!

'Cause, you know, you don't lose part of your body part for nothing. We're gonna go all the way." I think that was probably a bigger pressure point for me than dropping out of culinary school.

Tyler: Oh, it's no big deal though. It was not an important part of my finger. *(Kim laughs)*
Don't worry.

Kim: I remember this one moment, *Portland Monthly* wanted to do a photo shoot. It was a really big deal for us. And Tyler found this old ice cream maker that I had in the garage that we were going to use for a prop. And he got out his toolkit and retrofitted it and made the ice cream on the spot in this vintage ice cream maker and brought it to the shoot and we did it. And I'll never forget that moment because that's kind of how he's been every step of the way. Just, like, way above and beyond, sort of, mind-blowing feats that you couldn't even imagine. And in the face of, you know, starting a company, you face moments all the time where you just don't think you're going to make it, or *this is going to be the thing that takes us down* or *I can't go on*. And he's always there with this unexpected, brilliant angle on it, but that was definitely a turning moment for me that lives on.

Tyler: The second shop we ever opened, I remember our real estate broker was like, "Well, the only way he's going to give you this lease is if you can do something that can guarantee that he'll actually get rent 'cause no one thinks this ice cream thing's going to work out. So you guys have to do coffee in the morning. So you have a full 24-hour business, basically."

And so yeah, we said, "Okay, now let's do it." I took some baking classes in culinary school. We, kind of, replicated the same energy of our ice cream menu into baked goods and into the coffee program. So we made all of these syrups and custom lattes. And we got it up and running and it was *really* good. And it was insanely distracting as well.

Kim: *(Kim laughs)* It was hard for so many reasons, yeah.

Tyler: It became, like, completely unsustainable for me personally. 'Cause we'd have bakers in there at 3:00am and then I'd be there until 1:00am cleaning up after making ice cream. Coming in at 9:00 or 10:00 and trying to, like, triage everything that went wrong in the morning, you know? So it was this moment where we said, "Oh, can we keep doing this?"

Kim: And then some friends of ours announced that they were going to open a coffee shop across the street. And I remember feeling like the floor fell out under me because we had worked so hard to create this business and now what was going to happen? And I went home for the weekend and thought about it, and came

back, and I think you had the same idea. We were like, "This is great! We don't have to do this more!" *(Kim & Tyler laugh)*

Tyler: Thank God!

Kim: "They can run the coffee shop and we'll run the ice cream shop." And so we shut it down,

Tyler: Yeah.

Kim: And sold the espresso machine and our business actually did better for that!

Tyler: Ugh, it was so relieving.

Kim: Yeah.

Tyler: We were distracting ourselves. Between baked goods and coffee we were shackling the ice cream. And, you know, it was just this huge disappointment from a staffing perspective and a product perspective. And I think, you know, to this day, that coffee shop and bakery is probably our number one lesson of focus.

Kim: The original business plan that I wrote only was for one store and we didn't really have this plan to have multiple stores. 'Cause in the early days, it was Tyler and I working, we could ratchet it together, and hold things together, almost no matter what. But when the company got a little bit bigger, that's when it got really hard.

Tyler: Then the next five years, you just show up, and you keep going, and keep going and fighting and *(Tyler laughs)* for better or for worse, we've had a lot of fails. And I think every single one of them was like, "Oh, wow. We learned a lot there."

Kim: It's a really weird and dangerous thing to be growing, putting all this money into building these beautiful stores and then, you know, there's times when Tyler will come to me and say, you know, "We can do this, but gosh, it means I can't work with this supplier anymore." And so, for me, it's taking that step back and saying, you know, "We're definitely not going to grow at all costs because why? What's the point then?" And so many companies burn fast and bright and burn out, and I can see why.

Tyler: We talk about this a lot, this idea of when we grow, we're growing so that we can use that growth to actually invest back into what made us great.

Kim: I mean, my biggest failure would be to grow this company and, you know, leave Tyler in the flames, burnt out or not enjoying it. You know, if he's not having fun and getting to do what's important to him along the way, then I won't do it.

Tyler: Over the last 10 years, I think we've learned how to work together a lot better.

Kim: I mean, we definitely have heated conversations about almost everything. But I don't think we, in 10 years, have had any big, *big*, big decisions where we had a huge disagreement or a fight.

Tyler: I remember the first few batches of brownie ice cream I ever made. I was cutting the brownies almost, like, two inch by two inch squares because I wanted someone to, like, get this scoop and this massive brownie. I thought that was so cool. And Kim was like, "What are you doing?! You're ruining the ice cream. It's too big!" (*Tyler laughs*) And, you know, I was like, "no, but it's epic!" And we kinda got into it a little bit.

And I went home and I realized, "Oh my God, like, half the people aren't getting any brownies because, like, the other half are getting only brownies. And this is dumb. This is the dumbest thing ever." But I need to sit on something overnight. Kim needs to solve it immediately. And I think we learned pretty quickly, like, "Oh, okay. Let's let some of this ferment a little bit before we rehash it out."

Kim: Yeah. We're complimentary in what we do, but we have such very different areas of responsibility that I think it works.

Tyler: Just even, like, from a personality perspective, our range of introvert versus extrovert, I'm very introverted. Kim's, I think, the opposite, an extrovert. Our signs, our horoscope signs (*Tyler laughs*). I typically wouldn't read into too much of that if I hadn't been here firsthand, but everything just lines up.

Kim: You know, we'll often show up at work and have been, like, reading the same article or thinking about an idea.

Tyler: There is just this inherent, unspoken handoff when we're working on projects, and when we face problems. We almost don't need to talk sometimes and we're like, "Oh yeah. We said the same thing."

Kim: Mm-hm.

Tyler: I think we obviously just got really lucky that way. And I don't think that's just family dynamics.

Kim: When I think of Tyler, I probably think of him first as my business partner.

Tyler: Yeah, I was going to say the same thing.

Kim: Yeah.

Tyler: Yeah. It's almost like, even inside work and outside of work, two different relationships all together. 'Cause it is fun to go over, you know, and drink wine and the kids play around and I think that is, we're like cousins. And then when we're at work, we're partners.

Kim: That's where I see him day in and day out. Or if something just goes terribly wrong and I need to call somebody to say, like, "Gosh, this really sucks." And he's there to say, "Yeah, it does, but we'll get up tomorrow and figure it out."

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Hrishikesh: Kim Malek and Tyler Malek are partners. Salt & Straw has locations all over the West Coast and in Florida. Check out saltandstraw.com to find one. But, if there isn't one near you, they ship pints of ice cream all over the U.S.. You can order from 25 different flavors, including their version of Vanilla.

Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I've produced and edited this episode and made the music. Maureen Hoban is my co-producer. And Chloe Parker and Casey Deal are the production assistants. Kim and Tyler's interview was engineered by Adam Lee at Halfing Studio in Portland. *Partners* is a Mailchimp podcast made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.