



GameChangers
Season 1: Episode 5
Jane Kou

Seth Robinson: Welcome to GameChangers, the show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who have taken the road less travelled and found their niche. I'm your host Seth Robinson.

Jane Kou: In terms of the social component, I think it's also about giving people access to food that they wouldn't otherwise get on a daily basis.

Seth Robinson: How much of your dinner got scraped into the bin last night? What about the cafe where you had lunch? How much of their display case do you think went to waste? The government estimates that food waste costs the Australian economy \$20 billion each year, over 5 million tons of food ends up in landfill, enough to fill 9,000 Olympic size swimming pools.

Seth Robinson: Jane Kou is the founder and CEO of Bring Me Home, a startup that's tackling the issue of food waste head on. Jane, thanks very much for joining us.

Jane Kou: Thanks for having me.

Seth Robinson: You're currently the CEO and founder of bring me home, which essentially was spun off of an app you worked with previously from a Danish company. Is that correct?

Jane Kou: Yes, that's correct.

Seth Robinson: And that was Too Good To Go.

Jane Kou: Yes.

Seth Robinson: Could you tell us a little bit about the process of how you got involved with too good to go and that kind of led to bring me home?

Jane Kou: Yeah, sounds good. I was, I think in my second semester of my master's degree and I took an elective called social entrepreneurship with Professor Ben Neville. And so one of the projects was to look into social environmental issue that you're very interested in. And so I looked into food waste. No doubt, because that's one thing that I've been practicing when I was young and I wanted to understand more about the issue.

Jane Kou: So, I had a look and then I'm like, "wow, that's actually terrible stats about the amount of food wasted in especially U.S., China, and also Australia. And so I started looking into, I guess solutions that are implemented overseas that have worked really well and I wanted to look at how they do it.

Jane Kou: So, I came across this company called To Good To Go. And then I just thought, this is amazing. This is what we need in Australia. And I think it's so good because it benefits the retailers because they are capturing the loss value, they're monetizing food waste and the customers are getting good deals. So, I pretty much just reached out to the CEO on LinkedIn right after my paper was done and I said, "Hey, are you thinking of coming to Australia because I'd love to be a part of your team." And then he didn't get back to me until a week later, which I was not expecting him to reply anyway.

Seth Robinson: That's actually a pretty good turnaround time.

Jane Kou: Yeah. So, a week later it's good. And he was like, "Yup, we're actually talking about expansion to overseas, let me connect you with two of our cofounders." He sent me their emails and then we've just been emailing back and forth. And then one day we decided to do Skype. I didn't expect that the Skype would be actually an interview. So, I thought it was a catch up, but it turns out to be an interview. So they're asking me all these things about Australian market, blah blah blah. But for me it was good because I've already done all the research in the previous class.

Jane Kou: So, I was able to balance back with the answers and then so literally right after the Skype interview they were like, "Great, well let's do it. You're a part of our team now." And I was like, "What, is this real?" I was like, "That's crazy." So, I was so excited because I'm like, "Oh my God, I just got myself a job even before I graduated."

Jane Kou: And then yeah, so we've just been working back and forth. I was working in Australia and they're obviously based in Europe and they're expanding to, at that time I think their sixth or seventh country in Europe. So now they're in eight. They're growing really fast.

Jane Kou: And then, we tried to launch their app in Australia but then halfway through they've got to restructure a problem with the company. And then they also had to pull out from the expansion due to financing issues. And so right after that I actually spoke to the co-founder and the team say, "I really love this mission. I believe there is something here. Do you mind if I just take it forward but I'll create everything from scratch. I'll use my own brand. How does that sound?" And they were very supportive. They said "please do it

like, and we want you to be successful. if you're successful maybe one day we can merge." That was the line that got me started.

Jane Kou: It was just great words of encouragement. These are people that have tried it, done it, and they are telling me that this is the opportunity we the merge one day.

Seth Robinson: Is that still something that you're kind of working towards?

Jane Kou: I wouldn't necessarily say working towards, but is actually one of the options I guess if I were to exit the company at one point, but I kind of don't want to think about exits now because I see a lot of opportunities with this.

Jane Kou: Shortly after that I decided to continue the mission and just launch Bring Me Home and essentially we're pretty much doing very similar things. They're also like an app that , cuts foot ways for retailers. But we've taken a very different approach in terms of marketing and approaching our target audience and the operation's very different.

Seth Robinson: So, what were some of the changes that you kind of found you had to make to adapt it to the local space?

Jane Kou: For example, I think branding is one of the things that are very important. Europeans are very eco conscious, whereas I think Australians, they're starting to catch on. So for example, we've chosen a colour that really spikes the appetite of the people. Orange usually is a more happy kind of tone whereas Two Good To Go use a more eco green/blue kind of colour.

Jane Kou: Because people here, I noticed that they have a, I guess misconception about what surplus food is. They always think that, "Oh, it's like scraps or stale rotten food." And so we're trying to educate people before we even launched the product. And that's one thing that I've done differently.

Jane Kou: And also I guess approaching the market, being more concentrated in the city first and then launching next to universities and encourage students to try it out rather than going too broad too quickly, which is kind of their operating model.

Seth Robinson: When you say people don't really understand what surplus food is, do you want to run us through that a little bit? What is it?

Jane Kou: So surplus food is pretty much food that's unsold at the end of the day. They can be made freshly like every day. For instance, Sushi shops that make a lot of Sushi and display on the shelf. If they don't sell it out by the end of the day, it's called surplus food. It's still safe to eat even after the operating hours, maybe until dinner time. And then it's just not us fresh anymore. But Sushi shops around here close about like 5:00 PM so they have to throw it out.

Jane Kou: So that's what we categorize as surplus food. And even cafe foods as well, like salads and sandwiches. Anything that is unsold is surplus food. It's still quality food. It's just people, they don't sell it out.

Seth Robinson: If I were to open the Bring Me Home app and say, "I want something to eat at the moment," what would that process be like? How would I get there?

Jane Kou: When you open the app, you'll see a listing of cafes, restaurants or retailers nearby that have already put up surplus food to sell at a discount. You simply just choose whatever deals you like. And then once you pay on the mobile app, you just have to show up to the store and show your receipt during a specific pickup time. It's that easy. It's paperless, just really smooth.

Seth Robinson: That's awesome. So there's really kind of a social component to it as well in that you're reducing food waste, which is a pretty major global issue.

Jane Kou: In terms of the social component, I think it's also about giving people access to food that they wouldn't otherwise get on a daily basis. Salads nowadays cost like \$12 to \$15 it's ridiculous. But the surplus salads that we get retailers to discount, you can buy around \$5 to \$6, which for people that have a low-income status could easily access through an app without feeling like they're going into there asking for a discount. So, I think the way I see the app is also to remove that stigma of people coming in last minute and ask for a discount because everything's already settled, the owners know what they're doing. The customers are simply showing mobile app just to pick up their food. I would say that's the social impact that we're also making.

Seth Robinson: That's really, really great. So we actually caught up previously a few months ago. I'm interested to hear how things have changed. You're essentially coming up at the one year mark of being Bring Me Home. What's the last year been like for you as a startup entrepreneur?

Jane Kou: Oh, it's crazy. I think entrepreneurs will be able to relate to this point. It's really just like a roller coaster, like every couple hours you might feel ups and downs. I think there's one thing that founders don't really talk about, which is sometimes they get discouraged or questioned and then they also question themselves. And then there's also moments where we would be like, "Oh, is this the right thing we're doing? What am I doing? Should I just pull out?" There's so many questions like that.

Jane Kou: But I think it's been a really good journey so far and I'm just so excited to see what 2019 has in store for us. Well Bring Me Home and I, we've been through about three accelerator programs by now. We just finished the best one in Australia, which is called Start Mate. And I would encourage anyone to look up, Start Mate if they're interested in the accelerator space. Very competitive, but I think it's known as the best accelerator for a reason for Australia for a reason.

Jane Kou: That was a three months program plus a week in San Fran. So I've just been through that and I came back from San Fran about two weeks ago.

Seth Robinson: Wow. So he caught you at a good time.

Jane Kou: Yeah, you did. A lot of stuff happened. And we're in the middle of fundraising right now. So hopefully we'll be able to close the round fairly soon.

Seth Robinson: And when you say you're fundraising, are you thinking about expansion?

Jane Kou: Yes. So our goal is to go to Sydney next year, and if things go really well, we want to be expanding to Brisbane as well.

Seth Robinson: And then eventually San Francisco, hopefully.

Jane Kou: Actually No. I'm not thinking of going globally. And I think that's actually one of the questions a lot of people ask me, why don't you think globally? I think there's a lot of things that I can play with or experiment in Australia just because I think Australia for me is a land of opportunity. Whereas, people think that that's America. I just see there's a lot of different markets that I could potentially tap into. Not just food, but anything that's perishable. I would love to be able to list that on our app. So for example, flowers, super costly, but if you can buy bouquet of roses for five bucks to impress your partner, why not?

Jane Kou: And you save that bouquet of flower from thrown into the bin. So that's one thing that I want to be able to do. And also there's a lot of adjacent markets that I like to tap into.

Seth Robinson: And I suppose, actually now that you've said that I've had that brainwave, keeping it on the local level, it's all about investing in the local economy again. You're creating these sales that wouldn't happen otherwise.

Jane Kou: Yeah. Yeah. And I think for Bring Me Home, the sort of business model that we're operating in requires hyperlocal density. So to go overseas is actually a lot harder than I guess a lot of different softwares or apps because they can scale a lot easier just by selling to multiple businesses. And those things can easily transfer. But for us, we really need the locals to be jumping on the app to grow the transactions, to grow the user base. So it's not as easy to say, "Yep, let's go to the States and then we can do that."

Jane Kou: I think it's better to, I guess hone into the community and the local aspect of everything as a way to grow.

Seth Robinson: And how have you found the local community response? Do you feel like you have a lot of repeat customers? Are people getting on board? What are your demographics like?

Jane Kou: I would say majority of the users are students and I would assume why because, I was a student and I'm always hunting for cheaper food. So I think people just like the fact that it's cheaper. We also do have young professionals working in the city using the app and quite a lot of repeat

users, actually. There's a couple of customers that buy at least twice or three times a week. So that's great.

Jane Kou: Also, I think it's just about expanding our offerings and getting more people involved and understanding what sort of cuisines they like and then get more of those onboard as well.

Seth Robinson: What are some kind of consumer favourites?

Jane Kou: I would say Japanese cuisine is definitely. Like sushi's definitely. Also Asian cuisines, like Chinese food, Singaporean in food. I think those are also amongst the popular. Cafe foods also depends. I think a lot of people prefer hot food during the time that we launched because it was still pretty cold. So I'm kind of expecting a little flip during summertime that people will be buying more cold food like salads or Sushi rolls.

Jane Kou: So it really depends on, I guess, weather and what are people doing at that time.

Seth Robinson: It's funny you mentioned the weather and these are the little things that I personally, if I was launching a business would just never considered thinking about things like that. Like "oh people like ice cream in summer." What are some of the kind of challenges you've come up against that weren't things you necessarily expected?

Jane Kou: I think just really managing cashflow because I think that's the death of many startups. When a startup runs out of money completely, that's when it just can't survive. And all the operations have to be seized and shut down. And to be completely honest with you, we're not looking too good in terms of cashflow. But good thing is we've already kicked start at the fundraising process. So we will be able to survive. Definitely. So I think that's one of the challenges.

Jane Kou: The other one is hiring. Oh my God, it's so hard. It's so hard to find people that are in for the right reasons. I've interviewed so many applicants and a lot of them are just interested because they want to experience what it's like to be in a startup. But I would say that reason's not enough for me to have them on the team because they could easily just learn things and leave and then go to other startups.

Jane Kou: What I really look for in applicants is about why they want to work for us. I mean if Uber Eats come in and say we want to hire you, what would make them stay for us? So I guess the passion about our mission is very important. Also sharing the fact that we have the same vision that we could go big. I think that's also another big thing.

Jane Kou: Also I guess skill sets, that's pretty basic stuff. But I always look for passion when I hire someone. But it's really hard to find those people. Third challenge probably would be just myself and battling my mindset sometimes. Because I do always think about what's the risk, what's the opportunity costs, whatever I'm doing and always concern or self-aware that

whatever decisions I make, it could go either way. So, I think just really trusting my own sixth sense or guts is another challenge.

Seth Robinson: I bet that's a learning curve in itself.

Jane Kou: Yeah, definitely.

Seth Robinson: Oh cool. Well I guess we'll backtrack a little bit. You mentioned that you yourself were recently a student. You studied here at the University of Melbourne and did a Master of Commerce in marketing, which is a degree they don't actually offer anymore.

Jane Kou: I did the consulting pathway, which is not available anymore. But the research pathway is still available for PhDs.

Seth Robinson: How did you find transitioning from student life into working life? Did you find your study skills were really applicable in launching Bring Me Home?

Jane Kou: I think it's a very interesting question because I think a lot of the things that I learn in Melbourne business school, for example the academic papers and things like that. A lot of the theories that I learned, actually, I hate to say this, but probably are not too applicable to the startup world anymore, just because of how things have changed with technology and the digital world is so different from traditional paper, academic theories.

Jane Kou: But I think what is most important and more transferable is actually the skills that I have learnt from doing my masters. So for example, communication skills, verbal, written, whatever. I think those things are very important because for us it's like we need to be able to convey, for example, pitching: three minutes to tell everyone what you're doing and why you should be invested.

Jane Kou: And that's one crazy skill anyone could have. If you can convince someone to join your team in three minutes or invest money into your startup in three minutes, that's a skill that we all want.

Seth Robinson: And I imagine that's how you would have gotten into those accelerator programs.

Jane Kou: Yeah, exactly. And I think being able to condense your presentations in less than 10 slides as well to explain your whole business to someone that has no idea what you're doing. That's another skill. And I would also say the skill of learning, of being able to pick up things quick and also just absorb and then convey it back. I think that's another very important skill that university students should be aware that they are always doing this. Because, I mean back in my masters degree we were required to read at least 10 papers a week, or 20. and then I think what is more important is about how can you acquire those information and break it down, analyse and read it quick so that you can participate in class, for example.

- Jane Kou: And for us in the startup world it's kind of similar. You have such a short amount of time, how do you acquire information about, for example, your competitors, break it down and then see what applies to you, whatnot, and then come up with a strategy for example? So a lot of these things actually apply in terms of learning skills. And I would say that is the most valuable thing that I've picked up during my studies.
- Seth Robinson: So things that are a little bit more lateral. So things like the critical thinking and the ability to synthesize are really valuable take aways. So with that in mind, is there kind of advice you would give to graduates who are entering the workforce or maybe thinking of launching a startup themselves?
- Jane Kou: So I would break those advice into two parts, maybe. For the grants that are about to enter a workforce, I think maybe really follow what you really believe in. So it doesn't matter if you want to work in a corporate boutique firm or even for a startup, you've got to really be believing their mission. I have a lot of friends that they're dying to get into corporates, but after a few months I see them and they're not really enjoying their work life.
- Jane Kou: And for me, we only have this amount of time. Are you sure you want to spend your days in a corporate that you don't like? Or do you want to spend your days working for something that you actually believe in, and that something that you can actually add value into? So I would advise people to really understand the corporates or the company that they're trying to get into, what their mission is, do you believe in that? And what sort of difference do you think you can bring?
- Jane Kou: In terms of people that want to start their own startup? Do it, just do it. The things you learn is crazy. Like I would say the accelerator programs I've been to, like for example, Start Mate. It was like an MBA program for me because the things that I've learned, you can't learn in books. You can't learn in paper. Everything you do, you have a different scenario that comes to you. And your learning experience only you can have it, like you can't share it with your peers because you're the one that's going through all these things. And also being very proactive is another advice because that's when you create opportunities for yourself. So just do it.
- Seth Robinson: That's incredible. That's fantastic. All right, last question and then I think I'll let you go, but this is one question that we ask all our guests. So I'm interested to hear what you say, but what's one thing that's not on your resume that's got you to where you are today?
- Jane Kou: I would say the fact that my mum was a tiger mom and that's the way I was brought up. She has really set some high expectations of me when I was a kid, and she would use all these tactics or things to get me to do things I don't like. For example, learning a new instrument that I'm just completely not interested in or go into extra tutorial classes, which I never want to on a weekend.
- Jane Kou: But I think the things that she's asked me to do or actually forced me to do, it's taught me a lot of the soft skills from it as well. Like for example,

determination, self-discipline, perseverance and just getting to being a completer in like a finisher and not just stop things halfway.

Jane Kou: I think those are very important skills that I've learned, which has helped me become who I am today. And also I guess her setting expectations for me kind of made me learn how to set expectations for myself. And I have to say I have really high expectations of myself now, which isn't necessarily always a good thing, but I think it's one thing that drives me forward every day.

Seth Robinson: This has been GameChangers. I've been your host Seth Robinson, GameChangers is produced by Sophie Thomas and recorded by Chris Hatzis.