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Monkey business

A difficult infant led to an organic food range.

IF YOU'D TOLD Lizzie Dyer four years ago that having a picky eater in the family would turn out to be an unexpected bonus, she would have laughed. But young Olivia Dyer's erratic eating and her disdain for solid foods were the impetus for The Green Monkey Company, a thriving organic baby food business that Dyer, 34, set up with her younger sister, Charlotte Rebbeck, 31, in 2004.

Dyer despaired when her second child, Olivia, turned out to be a fussy eater who also screamed a lot and seldom slept. "That prompted me to start looking at baby food labels carefully and I was concerned by what was going into them," Dyer says.

She shared her concerns with her sister, who was living in Sydney, and after extensive research, they decided to set up their own organic baby food business.

"It quickly became apparent that there was a real demand for wholesome, natural, very basic baby food – like the 'moulded' vegetables our parents had made and frozen in ice-cube trays. So that's what we decided to focus on – simple good food with no hidden additives," says Dyer.

It was a smart decision. Their natural, hand-prepared, fruit and vegetable product range, targeted initially at the 4-12 month age group, was quickly embraced by consumers after its April 2004 launch. The company remains the only producer of frozen baby food products in New Zealand.



Above: Charlotte Rebbeck (left) and Lizzie Dyer spotted a gap in the market for wholesome, natural baby food.

The sisters confess that there were frustrating times setting up the business when they wondered why they had begun. From the strict rules governing labelling to buying containers, expensive packaging and barcodes, hurdles were endless. "More than once a week I'd wonder what the hell we were doing but there was always a plan B or a plan C, and we could look back on the dramas and learn from them," says Rebbeck.

Their determination paid off. Today the Green Monkey range is sold in supermarkets and organic stores from Kerikeri to Queenstown. Over 400 boxes – each containing 12 30-gram pottles of mixed frozen baby food flavours – are sold monthly. They are now expanding the fruit and vegetable range into beef and lamb, and looking at exporting.

"For us, it's all about raising food standards for babies and young children and showing parents there are healthy alternatives," says Dyer. "We may have had sleepless nights along the way but we know our products are healthy and versatile, that babies love them – and that they have a big future."

