

# Tiphaine, co-founder (Koovee), graduated from the School of Management and Innovation



A committed ecologist and graduate of Sciences Po in 2015, Tiphaine Guerout has channeled her entrepreneurial ambition towards an environmental cause. She is the founder of Koovee, a startup that offers an alternative to disposable plastic cutlery: forks and spoons made of biscuit, made in France, that have the particularity of being sufficiently resistant so that one can eat with them. Interview with a young graduate who hopes to flood the French and European markets in the years to come.

## ***A First Startup at Sciences Po***

“I’d had the idea to create Youni, my first startup, while following Jacques-Henri Eyraud’s course on entrepreneurship at Sciences Po. During my studies in England, where I studied political science and history for three years, I thought it was a shame that those of us who pursued our education abroad were so few in number. I thus created a blog, which became a startup at Sciences Po: Youni, an online platform where students could share their experience of life abroad and help explain the procedures to follow before departure. Incubated at Sciences Po Entrepreneurs, we wanted to become the TripAdvisor of the university world. However, since it is quite difficult to monetise a website, the business had to stop at the end of two years!

After leaving Sciences Po, I took courses to learn coding. Working on Youni made me realise that if one doesn’t know how to code while working for a business that has a website as the product, there is a real power asymmetry. We have neither control nor vision. After these courses, I started looking for work. I joined an Edtech startup, 360Learning, where I worked for 3 years. Working there I discovered what a fast-growing enterprise looks like: in 3 years, the team went from 10 to 140 employees. I recommend this experience to all Sciences Po graduates who want to learn about startups: you’re already part of the veterans after spending only a year there, you must recruit personnel, structure the work... I learnt a lot and I’m happy to have made this choice. After these three formative years, I went solo again with Koovee.”

## ***Simple Idea, Technical Headache***

“In 2016, a law banning plastic cutlery was passed. The idea behind Koovee came from this. I started by doing research about the maturity of the market: I went to see the big groups to present my concept to them. An idea, no matter how good, will not work if the market is not ready for it. For example, 10 years ago, plastic cutlery and bags were a non-issue. Seeing that the reduction of plastic waste started to become one of the priorities of businesses comforted me in the idea that there was potential to do more.

I dedicated 2018 to research and development. A budget provided by the Bank of Public Investment (Bpifrance) allowed me to hire two agricultural engineers to work on the product. This step was necessary because to create edible cutlery, they must be resistant: they must be able to withstand hot water, transportation etc. If the cutlery is not solid, the project is redundant because clients would need their fork and spoon to last the entirety of their meal.

The problem is that this requirement is almost nonexistent in the agro-food domain. When we make a biscuit, we only expect it to be good to not break during transportation, but not to be able to eat with it. This was a real technical challenge: the agricultural engineers helped me elaborate the formulation, the composition and the fabrication process, but they couldn’t do anything about the mechanical resistance of the cutlery. This meant I had to find the means to achieve this goal myself, outside of the agro-food domain, which took me a lot of time and was rather complicated. I also had to find manufacturers for the machines: being an industrial project, I couldn’t simply solve my problems with a 3D printer and plastic pieces. They needed to be robust, with a superior level of complexity.

After a year of R&D, during which a large number of prototypes were conceived, I finally found the right formula. In February 2019, we proceeded to launch our product with three pilot clients: a large

entity in the railway sector, API Restauration and Chefing. This testing period having been conclusive, we opened to the public in April.”

## ***Startup: Behind the Dream, the Harsh Reality***

“The goal of a startup is to no longer be one. If it takes off, the enterprise becomes an SME: here, we have a salary, fixed hours, full-time employees... But creators of successful startups all spent years working from their basements and not making any money. To me, a startup is a business that has not yet found its market and that offers a new product; we don’t know how it will be received. It’s the case with edible cutlery: since the concept is innovative, clients have a lot of questions. It thus requires a work of evangelisation explaining why it’s the best solution, how it works, why it’s solid... My work is to explain all this. More than being just a salesperson, it implies having a vision and being very persuasive.

Concerning Koovee, it’s important to underline that the year of R&D was a long, discouraging and, above all, solitary time. We often present entrepreneurship as something that is ‘sexy’: For a year, I did not have any money, I did not know whether it would work and I was all alone. I spoke only to industrials who negotiated prices endlessly and didn’t necessarily do high quality work. Today, the work seems nice and fun - and it is - but the R&D period was neither of the two.

Being a young female entrepreneur is not an advantage either in such a technical project. In the past, the fact that I didn’t know too much about it and that I was a woman probably encouraged my service providers to take me less seriously. In the same way, I was often asked my age during business meetings. It’s rather surprising to have to deal with these issues when you’re in the middle of a negotiation. They probably didn’t realise what this question implied. There is also a tendency to laugh more easily at an ambitious woman who wants to run a large business. But this doesn’t keep me from moving forward.”

## ***Sustainability and a Large Appetite***

“I’m committed to dedicating my professional life to ecology. This is reflected in my daily life: I’m a vegetarian, I only use bicycles to get around, I avoid airplanes, I buy packageless products... For me, creating an eco-friendly enterprise with a sustainable business model was a means to exert a strong influence quickly. I think it’s a good compromise until we reach the conclusion that we need to move away from growth and get out of the race to profits. Koovee has the advantage of being a positive ecological alternative. I think that one has to take joy in the fight against climate change, and to not see alternative solutions as constraints. The objective is to demonstrate that the ecology is an opportunity. This is not possible for everything, but for cutlery, it is.

The alternatives to plastic cutlery branded ‘eco-friendly’ are in reality much less so compared to my edible cutlery. For example, wooden cutlery, less expensive than those of Koovee, are made from wood harvested from the other end of the world without any traceability of the materials. The cutlery is imported by sea, manufactured in conditions that are problematic and incomparable to those that we have in France, and contribute to deforestation. Bioplastics aren’t much better: they are biodegradable, yes, but only in an industrial compost at 65°C. Nobody has one at home and there is no bioplastics recycling industry in France. Koovee cutlery is made in France, by food industry professionals, and are edible. It is indeed more expensive, but quality comes at a price.

It is true that the most eco-friendly solution remains washable silverware. But the majority of people are not ready to carry cutlery in their bags, to bring them everywhere with them and to wash them themselves.

A year and a half after its creation, Koovee is starting to make waves: the market has been identified and the product is well-received. Production capacities are constantly increasing: today, we're producing 7,000 pieces of cutlery per day. But it's all new, so it's still fragile! The next step is the launch of sweet and savory varieties, the creation of a knife and the development of different sizes. We're also going to be raising funds and expanding the team by hiring a director of operations.

Ultimately, the vision of the company is an ecological project, that of stopping the use of plastic. Our goal is substantial: we want to replace plastic cutlery in France and in Europe. We want to take on fast food chains, not just the small organic restaurants in the area. Within five years, we want 14% of the European single-use cutlery market. It represents billions of pieces of cutlery. It's huge, but we are ambitious!"

Koovee's spoons and forks look like wooden cutlery and taste like breadsticks. Made in France from wheat flour, rapeseed oil and salt, these "biscuits" have the unique feature of being strong enough to eat with. For example, they can last six minutes in hot water before they fall apart. Even if it may seem counterintuitive to bite into ones fork at the end of a meal, the step is quickly taken: "85% of users end up consuming their cutlery", states the founder of Koovee.

For any collaboration proposals, you can contact Tiphaine Guerout by email: [tiphaine@koovee.co](mailto:tiphaine@koovee.co)

Interview by Justine Le Rousseau, originally published in [Emile, no. 17, autumn 2019 \(FR\)](#).

## More information

- [Koovee](#)
- [Start a business at Sciences Po](#)
- [Women in Business Chair](#)