The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Q&A: How a French Sugar Seller Became a Jeweler of Roses

By Alexander Winning

April 05, 2012



“You are always a guest in a foreign country, and the Russian people will give a lot if they trust you,” says d’Aldin, seen in a Kaluga region greenhouse.

Florence Gervais d'Aldin got hooked on Russia at an early age when the Soviet Navy dropped anchor in Cherbourg, a port in northern France.

Eleven years old at the time, she ignored the initially frosty reception that the Soviet sailors received and experienced the warmth and boisterousness of Russian company, which left a lasting impression.

"In the evening there was singing and dancing, and I experienced the Russian soul," d'Aldin said in an interview. "I was lost because what I saw was totally warm and — especially when you are young — you cannot be insensitive to this spectacle. From this, I wanted to learn Russian and had the will to go where I was told not to."

Florence Gervais d’Aldin

Education

1987 – Sorbonne University (Paris), master’s in industrial economics
1986 – French Media Institute (Paris), bachelor’s in information and communication studies

Work Experience

2006-Present: founder and partner, Feya Rozy, greenfield rose-growing project in the Kaluga region
1990-2005: analyst, bookkeeping for Sucden Group’s subsidiaries, Paris (1990-92); part of a team organizing Sucden’s daughter company in Moscow (1992-93); raw sugar trader, Vladivostok and the Far East (1993-2000); project manager for industrial diversification in Russia (2000-05)

Favorite book: anything by Noam Chomsky
Reading now: “The Brothers Karamazov” (1880) by Fyodor Dostoevsky
Movie pick: “Blade Runner” (1982) directed by Ridley Scott
Favorite Moscow restaurant: I don’t have one, I don’t like food enough
Best weekend getaway: Thailand

A subsequent high school trip to Moscow, where she used the excuse of preparing for her diploma to skip the teachers' prearranged tours and explore with a friend, piqued her interest in the still-closed country yet further.

"I was totally shocked. I visited in 1983. There was no advertising, nothing in the shops, and lines everywhere," she said.

The brief excursion also marked the first time that d'Aldin made money on Russian soil, as Muscovites — amazed by the plastic bags that the teens were carrying — came up to them and bought up the bags with relish.

Although university studies kept her in France for the next several years, d'Aldin made her permanent move to Russia not long after, joining major French sugar firm Sucden, which was expanding into Russia via a subsidiary to take advantage of the country's collapsed supply chain and expanding consumer demand.

Operating as a sugar trader out of Vladivostok from 1993, d'Aldin was saddled with as much as 25,000 tons of sugar at a time and faced significant challenges. The Russian market was just beginning to open up to foreign companies, internal market prices were skewed, and the volatile currency situation meant that receiving payments was difficult.

D'Aldin had to build strong relationships with clients spread across Russia's Far East while trying to put in place a system to send money back to Moscow and Europe via banks without losing on the ruble conversion.

"The end of '93 was tough for the ruble and inside payments," d'Aldin said. "Raw sugar from the Ussuriisky sugar factory in Vladivostok was delivered without payment, which was

really very risky. I was only paid after the processed white sugar had been sold."

Sugar trading took d'Aldin to some of the farthest-flung corners of Russia, including Mongolia, Kamchatka and the Jewish autonomous region, but after 13 years with Sucden, she was ready for a challenge of a different sort. Driven by a sense of adventure and used to working independently, in 2006 she set up her own company, Feya Rozy, or the Fairy of the Rose, specializing in growing high-quality roses destined for downtown Moscow's upmarket florists.

"I was ready to try to set up something. I had a strong feeling that the project would work and confidence in my intuition. I knew I would sell a fantastic product," she said.

After d'Aldin battled through a mass of paperwork, consulted with agronomy experts, built the first greenhouse, and organized regular distribution networks, Feya Rozy has now been up and running for two years, offering a selection of 12 choice roses to Moscow customers.

Although the project is still small-scale, there are plans to grow the business in the future, with roughly 50 roses undergoing trials to see whether they take to local soil conditions and meet the businesswoman's exacting standards.

At present, d'Aldin and her small staff of 55 employees supply six exclusive Moscow florists with up to 4,000 roses a day, and their roses command higher prices for their enhanced fragrance and accented hues. Feya Rozy roses cost about 150 rubles at the Tsvetnoi Central Market, double the amount commanded by regular roses at Moscow's flower kiosks.

On the heels of the busy International Women's Day holiday — when top-quality flowers are particularly sought after — d'Aldin, 46, sat down with The Moscow Times in a downtown Moscow cafe to explain how an optimistic outlook and flexible approach have seen her through the two decades she has lived in Russia.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What made you move to Russia after university?

A: A combination of things. I definitely didn't want to work in France. I found my own path in Russia and felt that everything was possible here. In every country, I feel at home. I am French by chance, but I feel like I'm from the world. I like feeling at home and like being a guest at the same time.

It has helped me a lot that I am French and also that I am a woman. When I lived in Vladivostok in 1993, both these things helped make me unique.

Q: How did it come about that you made the leap from studying economics in France to sugar trading in Russia?

A: University studies are, to my mind, a way to develop your capacity to react and analyze. But I have always been motivated by the new and unknown. I started sugar trading as the government company collapsed and private companies started to buy sugar to refine. It was necessary to be able to think for yourself and to analyze with whom you were working, especially as most of the time telephone conversations were not easy to have.

Q: What later inspired you to set up Feya Rozy?

A: I spent many years in sugar trading. But I was ready to try to set up something. There were discussions with foreign investors after I left the sugar business, and I am an optimist. I didn't have any special plans. I was and am very open to anything new.

Then I started thinking about roses. I had a strong feeling that Feya Rozy would work and confidence in my intuition. I knew I would sell a fantastic product, and I'm not subject to stress — I sleep well.

Q: What advice would you give to someone looking to set up a small business in Russia?

A: You have to want to live here and to be very flexible. You have to be ready for anything because the best advice you can get is through experience. There are still many opportunities if you can react and look at the situation in the right way.

I would also say that if you want to do something, just do it. You can't just sit back and manage. For something to work, you have to be involved yourself.

You also should not think that you are the best here because you are a foreigner — there are many very clever people in Russia. A lot of foreigners who came here in the 1990s thought they knew best and ended up having big problems. You are always a guest in a foreign country, and the Russian people will give a lot if they trust you.

Q: Could you describe some difficulties that you have had to overcome and how you coped with them?

A: With Feya Rozy, there were so many difficulties at first. I had never physically built anything before in my life. I had never bought land and set up what is effectively a little factory. I had never grown roses and had to study agronomy to be able to control the process. But the biggest problem was to organize the work in the greenhouse, especially the relationship with the workers. I can build a commercial team in Moscow — this is easier for me. Workers in the countryside are part of a completely different world.

How did I cope with this? I don't like managing people with a controlling hand. I prefer to manage a team of independent people with whom you can have a discussion. Our operation works because we have a person who makes sure that there is discipline at the greenhouse. This is something I cannot do. But at a certain moment, you have to take each problem, find a solution and make it work.

Q: How would you describe your personal approach to business?

A: The important things for me are to have humility, to take pleasure in what you do and to understand where your qualities lie.

In sugar trading, in the flower business, or whatever I turn my hand to, my approach is very personalized. For sugar, I built a very strong relationship with my clients; for flowers, I built a very special proposal.

Feya Rozy now goes against what is done generally — small quantities, a special product

and no mass production.

We place emphasis on romantic and fragrant roses. These flowers can't withstand much transportation without being damaged. We deliver roses to end clients that have been cut the day before, and this helps build a very strong relationship with clients, who understands the product that they are receiving. For us, we don't only produce flowers, but also a certain idea of good taste, the joy of living. We want to be jewelers for roses.

Q: What has your time working in Russia taught you?

A: Patience. I learned this in my first job as well, including waiting for two days for a plane in Kamchatka and planning things that didn't turn out. This is what I learned most of all.

I also learned that in Russia human relations are especially important. We got where we are today with a lot of people's help.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/04/05/qa-how-a-french-sugar-seller-became-a-jeweler-of-roses-a13864