



Women In Wellness: Lauren Berger & Marla Felton of REAL On The Five Lifestyle Tweaks That Will Help Support People's Journey Towards Better Wellbeing



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As *a part of my series about women in wellness, I had the pleasure of interviewing Lauren Berger & Marla Felton, founders & owners of REAL.*

Lauren Berger

REAL Cookies is the ultimate expression of Lauren Berger's many years of commitment to finding a balance between the healthy, nutritious & delicious things in life for not only herself, but for her family and friends.

Her journey as a food entrepreneur first began when she founded City Girl Country Girl — a gluten-free, organic, wholesome cookie company where she developed the business tools and connections to build a successful CPG cookie brand.

After several years of building City Girl Country Girl, she decided to take some time away from the cookie business, but that didn't last for long. With persistent food sensitivities and a continuous struggle in finding healthy and tasty cookie options in the supermarket, she was motivated to venture back into the kitchen. After three years of perfecting her latest recipes with co-founder and longtime friend Marla Felton, REAL Cookies was founded in August 2021 and is poised to compete with the supermarkets' top sellers in the better-for-you snack space.

Prior to her entrepreneurial endeavors, Lauren spent 25 years in marketing management within the consumer products industry working with major CPG brands such as Godiva Chocolatier (Campbell Soup Company), Clairol (Bristol-Myers Squibb) and Revlon.

Marla Felton

When Lauren Berger came to Marla Felton and her husband Gregg with the idea to create a healthy cookie that actually tastes good for those with and without food sensitivities, it was a no-brainer. With a daughter who struggles with changing dietary restrictions from an autoimmune disease, they felt an immediate personal connection to the mission and knew they needed to be a part of the journey.

While Marla plays an active role in every part of the business, her greatest superpower is her ability to research — a skill she acquired through her many years as a litigator in her previous life as an attorney. From thoughtfully sourcing and selecting ingredients to packaging and community partnerships, she ensures that Real Cookies always has a pulse on what excites consumers.

In addition to REAL Cookies, she serves as the founder and Executive Director of Common Circles — a non-profit organization dedicated to making a difference by providing ground-breaking interactive and immersive experiences that seek to improve intergroup relations, increase empathy and respect, reduce bias, and encourage action in our communities.

When Marla isn't busy building the business with Lauren, she actively counsels parents on diet and nutrition for their kids who struggle with an autoimmune disease, much like her daughter.

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Our readers would love to “get to know you” better. Can you share your “backstory” with us?

Lauren: We have been friends for over 20 years. Our kids grew up together and our families have spent lots of time sharing meals. Over the years, more and more of our family members developed food sensitivities or were on restrictive diets to improve overall health. I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and realized that the food I ate had a direct impact on how I felt on a daily basis. I couldn't find baked goods made with the ingredients that I wanted to use, so I started baking cookies and muffins with healthy alternative ingredients so that I could enjoy what I was eating.

Marla: I actually grew up in the Midwest with Oreos in my kitchen and ate this way as well until my daughter was diagnosed with a connective tissue disease. I realized how a diet that helps to minimize inflammation and refined sugar is the key to better health. My husband also likes to avoid sugar and grains, which left him frustrated with finding something sweet. Together, Lauren and I could not find a dessert that everyone could eat that tasted good. We all love cookies, I mean, who doesn't?! So, we put together a taste-testing team and started baking. The rest is history!

Lauren: Starting a business just really came naturally to us. It certainly helped that we both had a background that lent itself to entrepreneurship. My background is in new product marketing and flavor development. Marla is an attorney and specializes in diversity, inclusion, and community building.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career? What were the main lessons or takeaways from that story?

Lauren: Order early and extra! Ingredient sourcing can be challenging and is a full-time job in itself. We were doing our production planning and with a new business had to be very careful of every dollar spent. We were asking ourselves how much should we order/produce.

Marla: One of our ingredients was crushed in transit and was never received. We had to scramble to get extra and overnight the ingredient. Luckily, we had a good relationship with the supplier and they were very accommodating, but that's not always the case. Now, we order early and extra!

It has been said that our mistakes can be our greatest teachers. Can you share a story about a mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

Marla: We have been lucky enough to not have any huge mistakes yet, just little ones which we look at as teachable moments. They usually stem around 1 of 2 things. The first, making sure the communication circle is closed so that everyone is clear and on the same page. The second is trusting one's intuition.

Lauren: You need to often make quick decisions as an entrepreneur, so it's important to be in tune with one another, and trust your gut... that's where a solid yoga/meditation practice can be helpful. You might remember seeing the cute yoga bears on our packaging. They represent the importance of staying balanced — and there can be a balance between healthy and delicious!

Let's jump to our main focus. When it comes to health and wellness, how is the work you are doing helping to make a bigger impact in the world?

Lauren: What we eat directly affects our health. These are some of the most important decisions we make each day. We think it's the single most important choice, especially when you have any auto-immune issues. Making the right food choices for your body can help improve inflammation, clarity, energy levels and emotional well-being. It is so important to understand where our food comes from and how it gets to us.

Marla: We feel so strongly about this, that we created an interactive educational curriculum for young people called "REAL Food is Fuel" which teaches young people how to read nutrition labels. We implemented the program in our local elementary classrooms. It was a huge hit and was combined with a trip to our local Whole Foods to implement what was learned in a real-life setting. Our hope is to continue to grow this program to make a greater impact.

Can you share your top five "lifestyle tweaks" that you believe will help support people's journey towards better wellbeing? Please give an example or story for each.

1. Start each day with yoga and/or meditation — it will set you up for the best day possible.
2. Know what you're eating and make sure each ingredient is a "real" food.
3. Laugh and spend time with the people you care about.
4. Look for things or events to celebrate. Life should be a celebration of our successes, individually and collectively.
5. Say a kind word to someone that you don't know each day — a smile or a thank you to the market cashier can change your day and theirs!

If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of wellness to the most amount of people, what would that be?

Lauren: Definitely expanding our “REAL Food is Fuel” pilot program in elementary schools across the country. It’s a program that offers a nutrition label curriculum to elementary school students focusing primarily on 4th and 5th graders. It’s a fun and interactive curriculum that educates students on the value of knowing how to read a food label to help make conscious food choices.

Marla: The 30-minute experience includes a variety of topics such as learning how to scan your food with your eyes and senses, how to choose food that energizes your body and the difference between fresh food and fast food. Then Immediately following the classroom discussion, we lead a field trip to a local supermarket where students put what they’ve learned to the test. They gain insight about shopping for foods that nourish and energize their bodies and taste a few things along the way. The ultimate goal is to help educate students before they go off to middle school and start making more of their own food choices.



What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why?

1. Get some experience before you start.
2. Surround yourself with people you like and trust.
3. Listen to your intuition.
4. Be prepared for a roller coaster.
5. Plan, plan, change course, then plan, plan again. Be able to pivot quickly. Learn from your mistakes.

Sustainability, veganism, mental health, and environmental changes are big topics at the moment. Which one of these causes is dearest to you, and why?

Lauren: It is very difficult to choose just one of these issues. They are all important and relevant today. We can each do our part by casting our votes daily. On a small scale, by voting with our purchasing power in the markets we shop in and products we buy, and by voting carefully for our elected officials after we have done our own due diligence.

What is the best way for our readers to further follow your work online?

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Thank you for these fantastic insights! We wish you continued success and good health.