

UPSTART

# FOOD IS THE NEW INTERNET

Former tech entrepreneur Kimbal Musk's ambitions for innovation in sustainable farming are as grand as his brother Elon's for space travel and electric cars.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORGAN RACHEL LEVY



**URBAN COWBOY**  
Kimbal Musk at Koberstein Ranch in Colorado. "He's got good judgment overall and has been put through the ringer a few times," says his brother, Elon.

**O**N A BRISK WINTER morning, Kimbal Musk is an incongruous sight in his signature cowboy hat and monogrammed silver *K* belt buckle—his folksy uniform of the past few years—as he addresses a crowd outside a cluster of shipping containers in a Brooklyn parking lot. Inside each container, pink grow lights and fire hydrant irrigation feed vertical stacks of edible crops—arugula, shiso, basil and chard, among others—the equivalent of two acres of cultivated land inside a climate-controlled 320-square-foot shell. “This is basically a business in a box,” Kimbal says, presenting his latest venture to its investors, friends and curious neighbors.

Square Roots, his new incubator for urban farming, aims to empower a generation of indoor agriculturalists, offering 10 young entrepreneurs this year (chosen from 500 applicants) the tools to build a business selling the food they grow. It will take on and mentor a new group annually, with more container campuses following across the country. “Within a few years, we will have an army of Square Roots entrepreneurs in the food ecosystem,” he says of the enterprise, launched last November with co-founder and CEO Tobias Peggs—a British expat with a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence—across from the Marcy Houses, in Bedford-Stuyvesant (where Jay Z, famously, sold crack cocaine in the 1980s).

Entrepreneurial drive runs in the family for Kimbal, 44, a close confidante of his brother, Elon, and a board member (and major shareholder) at Tesla and SpaceX. “If something happens to me, he can represent my interests,” says Elon of his kid brother (one year younger) and worst-case-scenario proxy. “He knows me better than pretty much anyone else. He’s got good judgment overall and has been put through the ringer a few times.”

Kimbal, a veteran of the tech world, has in recent years shifted his focus to food—or the “new internet,” as he called it in a 2015 TEDx Talk. With the missionary zeal his brother brings to electric sports cars and private space travel, Kimbal has launched >

a series of companies designed to make a lasting impact on food culture, through restaurants, school gardens and urban farms.

Since 2010, a nonprofit venture supported by the Musk Foundation has built hundreds of Learning Gardens in American schools, installing self-watering polyethylene planters where kids learn to grow what they eat. Meanwhile, his Kitchen family of restaurants—promising local, sustainable, affordable food—is rapidly expanding across the American heartland, with five locations opening this year, including new outposts in Memphis and Indianapolis. Kimbal hopes to have 50 “urban-casual” Next Door restaurants, 1,000 Learning Gardens and a battalion of container farms by 2020. “I want to be able to reach a lot of people,” he says. “I think we’ve put too much emphasis on preciousness with food—and the result is a real split between the haves and have nots.”

The Musk brothers grew up in South Africa during the last gasp of the apartheid era. Kimbal, the more gregarious sibling, got his start selling chocolate Easter eggs at a steep markup door-to-door in their Pretoria suburb. “When people would balk at the price, I’d say, ‘You’re supporting a young capitalist,’” he recalls. While Elon spent hours programming on his Commodore VIC-20, Kimbal tinkered in the kitchen. “If the maid cooked, people would pick at the food and watch TV,” he recalls. “If I cooked, my dad would make us all sit down and eat ‘Kimbal’s meal.’”

After high school, the brothers moved to Canada, both enrolling, for a time, in Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario (Kimbal studied business, Elon physics). In 1995, they founded a company together in Palo Alto, California, the online business directory Zip2. “I had come over as an illegal immigrant,” Kimbal says of the move. “We slept in the office, showered at the YMCA.”

The brothers were close but also intensely competitive. Sometimes work disputes would get physical. “In a start-up, you’re just trying to survive,” says Elon. “Tensions are high.” Once they could afford it, Kimbal cooked for the whole Zip2 team in the apartment complex they shared. In 1999, the Musks sold their business to Compaq for \$300 million. Though they remain investors and advisers in each other’s companies, their official partnership ended there.

After Elon launched the payment site that would later become PayPal, Kimbal, on a lark, enrolled in cooking school. He finished his studies at the French Culinary Institute in New York in late summer 2001 with no intention of pursuing a career in food. A few weeks later, after two planes flew into the Twin Towers, he spent the next six weeks as a volunteer cook, feeding firefighters out of the kitchen at Bouley. At the end of it he wanted nothing more than to open his own restaurant. “After that visceral experience, I just had to do it,” he says.

Searching for a dramatic change in scenery, post-9/11, Kimbal and his new wife at the time, lighting artist Jen Lewin, set out on a cross-country road trip looking for a place to put down roots and raise a family. They settled on Boulder, Colorado, a “walkable town, a great restaurant town,” says Kimbal at the 140-year-old Victorian home they bought there in 2002 (they have two sons and have since divorced).

The house he now shares with food-policy activist Christiana Wyly—with a cherry-red Tesla parked out back—is a few blocks from the original Kitchen, an American bistro he launched in 2004 with chef-partner Hugo Matheson, a veteran of London’s River Cafe. The Kitchen sourced ingredients from local farmers, composted food waste, ran on wind power and used recycled materials in its décor. For its first two years, the two partners worked full-time as co-chefs, taking turns composing the

menu, which changed every day. Eventually, the daily grind became too much for Kimbal. “I got a little bored with the business,” he says.

By 2006, he was back working in tech, as CEO of a social-media-analytics start-up. The Kitchen might have remained a sideline if not for a series of unlikely

events. On February 10, 2010, at a TED conference in California, he listened to Jamie Oliver admonish America for its childhood obesity problem. Four days later, while barreling down a slope in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Kimbal flipped his inner tube and broke his neck. In the hospital, wondering if he’d ever walk again, he began to reconsider his life, with Oliver’s comments rattling around in his head. “The message I heard was: The people who have no excuse should be doing something about this—and I was one of those people,” says Kimbal. “I told myself, If I get through this I’m going to focus on food and doing things at scale.” Apart from losing some feeling in his fingers, he made a full recovery.

Since then Kimbal has become a cheerful crusader for “real food,” as he calls it, sharing his message on the lecture circuit. “He’s a compelling speaker,” says food writer and activist Michael Pollan. “Particularly in his passion for kids, his recognition that if we’re going to change our approach to eating in this country, it’s about showing kids where food comes from, how to grow it, how to prepare it.”

“In 2004, there were very few local farmers that would work with us,” says Kimbal. “We opened the Kitchen before farm-to-table was a term. We showed that you could be busy and profitable while creating a new supply chain. Now there’s a huge backlash against processed food, industrial food. Real food is simply food you trust to nourish your body, nourish the farmer and nourish the planet.” ●

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—KIMBAL MUSK



**HOME FRONT**  
Clockwise from far left: Elon (left) and Kimbal, at 17 and 16; Kimbal in the kitchen, 2002; in his Zip2 office, 1996; Kimbal’s mother, Maye (right), with her parents at the family farm near Pretoria, South Africa, 1978.