

He's been called a vagabond and a villain, but beneath his much-maligned image as the Kitchen Gangster is the real Vance Miller – the straight-shooting, tell-it-like-it-is entrepreneurial phenomenon.

Interview **Charles Orton-Jones**

Photographs **John Carey**

# I'LL HAVE WHAT VANCE MILLER IS HAVING

**It's hard to meet** Vance Miller with an open mind. For starters, his nickname is the Kitchen Gangster. He's a body builder with biceps that could effortlessly snap the neck of a pen-pushing journo. And his reputation! *The Daily Mail* calls him "the most complained about independent trader in Britain", and he's been investigated by *Watchdog* and *Rogue Traders* more times than anyone else.

His rap sheet is disturbingly long and varied. He's been repeatedly imprisoned, including a two-year stretch for kidnapping; been shot; been tried for gold smuggling; and in November last year his house was raided by 130 police offices in the biggest Trading Standards raid of all time. And he's been banned from being a director until 2014.

But is he really a wrong 'un? After all, he's built a £100m business selling kitchens to some of the biggest retailers in the world. He's long protested he's the victim of a smear campaign, and there is no shortage of customers who defend him. A Channel 4 documentary, *Brits Get Rich in China*, which aired in May, followed Miller on the buying trail, revealing just how diligent he is in hunting bargains.

*Real Business* arranged to meet Miller to find out the truth. Amusingly, a week before the interview Miller

hits the headlines again. He's on the run from the police, wanted for kidnapping.

A few days later, he posted an article on his website explaining his disappearance. He said he had caught burglars at his Oldham mill following a tip-off, conducted a citizen's arrest and called the police. "They responded by dispatching a force of no less than 30 officers," says Miller. "But they were not, as you might suppose, intent on tracking down the people behind the attempted robbery. Amazingly, they were on their way to arrest me for kidnapping.

"I was preparing to leave for a very important business trip in China and I couldn't believe that they were serious about coming to arrest me. The first chance I got, I slipped the police and made a run for it, leaving all 30 of them out of breath and way behind. A trusted friend then took to me to France by boat and I made my way to Amsterdam where I boarded a plane to China to conclude my business."

When we show up at his headquarters, Maple Mill in Oldham, Miller is there to greet us. The kidnapping episode seems to have blown over. "Charges dismissed," he says casually, and suggests we do a quick tour.

Maple Mill is, in fact, two vast redbrick warehouses; one five floors, one six, which tower over the Oldham



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skyline. Miller is an importer: he sources kitchenware from Russia, Italy, Turkey and China. He owns granite mines in Northern China and oak forests in Inner Mongolia. A true trader, he'll buy anything from anywhere.

We stroll past piles of doors and whining laminating machines. “There are two million doors here. I make 6,000 doors a week at the mill. Won't last. No point. I can make them for £2 in China compared with £6 here.” On to another floor, piled high with motorbikes and quadbikes. “Don't know what to do with them. Can't sell them. Trading Standards say they aren't up to scratch.”

Ah, Trading Standards. Are they really out to get you, Vance? As we pass millions of PVC sheets, wood panels and a few thousand ovens, he pauses to give his side of the story.

“They tried to close me down. They shut one company, so I started another. They banned me from being a director, so I became a sole proprietor. They invented a brand new law called a “Stop Now Order” and gave the first one to me. They sent me to jail. I got out, still carried on. Then they took my operator's licence from me, so I couldn't operate a truck. Overnight I bought 60 vans and kept on delivering. The council built a weigh-station outside the mill and weighed every van for a week. That didn't stop me. They tried to blacken my name, calling me a vagabond and a villain and a crook. Now they are trying to get the Assets of Crime Agency involved and take everything from me.”

After the tour we sit down in his office. He describes his early career: “I've always been entrepreneurial. At 11, I was

cleaning cars. Got such a good beat I employed others. I was earning £200 a week. Then I got into antiques. Left school at 15 – I got nine O levels though, to please my mum – and opened an antique shop in Butterlane Market.” The venture was cut short when he was convicted of handling stolen goods. A short spell in borstal ensued. “I didn't realise it was wrong to handle stolen goods. I really didn't!”

The following years are one adventure after another. “I got into gold bullion smuggling, then diamonds – I bought three gold mines and a diamond mine in Sierra Leone.” When the rebels moved into Freetown in 1997, he was caught in the middle. “I was wrestling with a black guy called Rambo over an AK47. I thought: ‘How the fuck did I get into this?’. I let go and ran for it through a forest. Rambo shot me in the arm.” He hasn't been back to reclaim his mines.

Miller hit the big time seven years ago when he started dealing in kitchen hardware. He bought rejects and sold them as seconds. Then he made the life-changing decision to go to China.

“A mate of mine was going. I said ‘I'm going, too’, and leapt on a flight with him.” Success took time. “I lost every penny I'd made out there. The first set of yellow doors I bought were pink. The first set of yellow accessories I bought were blue. But I learnt my lessons and we got through it.”

The Channel Four documentary revealed his extraordinary tactics, such as spraying a coach to resemble an official Olympic Inspection Committee bus. “It stops the police from messing with me,” he claimed. His haggling technique was equally daring. In one scene he dismantled a bathroom unit in front of the vendor, pricing each part. “What does this cost – fucking nothing. And this. Fucking nothing. Two times nothing is fucking nothing!”

“China is perfect for a guy like me,” says Miller. “If you are a bit of a wussy, you are not going to last five fucking minutes.”

His progress in the last two years has been staggering. “I've got three warehouses – one in Guangzhou in the south, Shanghai in the middle and Dalian at the top. I've got eight offices with inspectors to check the goods. And I've got 60 guys on production lines. If you buy from a Chinese factory, they'll have a quality control guy at the end of each line. But he works for the factory. If he sees a reject, he's under orders to put it into the box. So I've got my own guys at the end of each line. I pay them double what anyone else in China gets. If I get one damaged product at this end he loses his job, so it's in his interest to make sure I don't get ripped off.”

This attention to detail is inconsistent with his reputation as a shyster. So how does he explain the 50,000 complaints a year he gets? Miller laughs: “50,000 complaints?



That's what Trading Standards say I get. I asked them what evidence they had I got so many. They said 'Data Protection Act, we don't have to say'. So I went to court and used the Freedom of Information Act. The real number? In 2005 I got 73 complaints. The previous year I got 83." With a flourish, Miller says he's hired libel lawyers Carter-Ruck to take on newspapers that have maligned him.

Then there's his conspiracy theory. Miller has been claiming for years that the source of all his troubles is the local council, which wants to buy his mill and convert it into flats. Since he won't sell, they are trying to bankrupt him, he claims. "Look at this," he says, and produces a several-hundred-page document. It's the council's architectural and financial plan to convert his mill. "I've also got them on tape discussing the plan to bankrupt me," he says.

Trading Standards in Oldham dismisses his victimisation claim, but acknowledges the 50,000 complaints figure is fiction, blaming the media. Other claims also crumble. During the November swoop on the Mill, it was widely reported that guns had been found. Er, no, admits Trading Standards. They were actually toy guns. It also says that despite the mega-raid in November, Miller has only been charged with importing sub-standard motorbikes, though investigations are ongoing.

Miller is pretty adept at explaining away the other black marks on his record. On his three-year sentence for kidnapping, he says: "I caught some lads dropping through my mum's loft. I didn't hurt them – I made them tea! The police didn't want to know. Instead, I got done." He produces a list



## MILLER'S GUIDE TO CHINA

### Official advice:

"Take no notice of bureaucratic pricks. Whatever the Brits say about China is to put you off. They are not going to tell you anything to make your life easy out there."

### Eating out:

"Chinese hospitality is simply a way of winning you over and bullshitting you. It's brainwashing. Most people who go out there are not the bosses; they have to report to the big boss. Once they've been wined, dined and wenched, most foolish naïve English guys fall for it."

### Watch your organs:

"I was once staying in a hotel, when there was a commotion in the room down the corridor. Turns out there was a guy who had woken up in an ice bath with a note on his chest. It said 'Go and find a doctor. We have taken your kidney'. He'd been out drinking with some guys the night before and they drugged him."

of examples of negligence by the police. "Over the past six months my cash vans have been robbed every week. Each time I was losing between £5,000 and £35,000." An employee explains to us how he got held up at gunpoint and slashed with a sword. "We have so much cash here, we are a target," says Miller.

All this evidence points to a man more sinned against than sinning. Trouble is, Miller's brain is so focused on business he's failed to combat poor media coverage. "I can't be arsed with PR," he says complacently.

One thing is beyond doubt: his entrepreneurial nous. Turnover in his China operation is now £60m and rising fast as he sells direct to Chinese consumers. Miller has 40 kitchen showrooms only three months after opening the first. "The target is 2,000 in two years."

His UK operation is also booming. By sourcing goods direct from China he can undercut rivals like Moben and B&Q. Poor MFI have stopped selling kitchens altogether after suffering devastating losses. He really does seem like an unstoppable force.

If only he can sort out his dodgy image. He's certainly got a soft side, being devoted to his nine-year-old son, Kent. "My only hobby is watching my kid grow up. We have a caravan in Wales and go there at weekends." Despite his huge wealth, Miller still lives in a two-bedroom flat.

He seems to have all the credentials for an image makeover. In person he's likeable and infectious enthusiastic. His workforce idolise him. His success in China is truly remarkable. My advice to Miller? Get a better nickname.