

The futuretech discovery platform, a profile of Unruly Capital

With #QVCS, Maddyness profiles different funds to give founders and entrepreneurs the information they need to choose the right investor. Today, we speak to Stefano Bernardi, GP at Unruly Capital.

Temps de lecture : minute

1 April 2024

I've somehow always known I wanted to be in venture. I first read an article about it when I was 19 or 20, and decided then and there that's what I wanted to be doing. Financing cool new innovations seemed the absolute best job in the world. Turns out it's not too far from the truth ☐

So, my first job after a computer engineering degree was in venture capital. Then I tried my hand at startups, as an early employee and then YC-backed founder, but the venture side was always more appealing.

I've then raised a first fund while living in the US, called Mission and Market, which went very well - so I then got hooked on doing my own thing. After helping start Semantic Ventures in 2018, I've switched my focus to climate deeptech and then raised Unruly's first fund in 2022/2023, closing it at \$25M.

Which industries are you working in?

You can think of Unruly as a general futuretech discovery platform. We invest in what is crazy today and normal tomorrow, so we are always

scouting at the edges - looking at what people think about during the weekend or do in their garage.

We are in search of founders who can tell us what the future look like, and have the ability to make it happen.

This, for now, has brought us in many, many different industries: energy, manufacturing, quantum, bioproduction, and so on - and will bring us in others as we continue our journey.

In our search for what's next, we sometimes stumble upon some key areas, thesis or ideas that we believe will yield outstanding companies and try to focus deeply on those. If anyone reading this wants to point us in some weird direction, we're all ears.

What do you look for in a founder?

We don't think exceptional founders always look the same, so it's really hard for us to describe key characteristics we look for - as we just don't.

For us, it's more of a general belief and sense that they are absolutely unstoppable, that whatever obstacles life and the market might throw at them (and they will) they will still be able to endure against all odds. That is also usually combined with an unhealthy obsession with their idea or goal.

Can you talk about your current portfolio?

I could talk about it for days. We run a very diversified strategy at Unruly, so we have A LOT of portfolio companies (we are at 40 now and are only halfway through).

Given we're so generalist and diversified we tend to have companies in

vastly different sectors and with vastly different models.

We have some (but few) purely software companies like Volteras, an API to connect to real world electric assets (think cars, batteries, etc) and some protein design / strain optimisation platforms for bioengineering.

We have animal-related companies like Kateri (which works with farmers to increase and manage rotational grazing of cows with constantly adapting virtual fences), Aquanzo (which farms zooplankton at scale) or Alga Bio (which develops seaweed supplements to reduce carbon emissions in livestock farming).

A big bucket is surely in energy where we have two nuclear companies (a stellarator-based design for fusion, and an AI optimised spherical tokamak design), alternative energy generation (like Global OTEC, using the difference of temperature from deep cold water and surface water to create a giant geothermal heatpump in the ocean), large scale energy storage (a stealth company we've incubated), decentralised fuels production (a US company creating renewable methane from CO₂) and batteries (solid-state electrolytes for giga-scale production).

But it goes so much wider. We have miniaturized MRI machines, enzymes to reduce sugar absorption, quantum photonic chips, large scale metal 3D printing, desert terraforming, and more.

What does the future look like? New trends/technologies, changes in the global/local economic landscape?

We've recently started recognising/developing a *thesis on industrial and real world decentralization*. It's something we were primed for I think, given the amount of time I've spent writing and investing in decentralised computing, but it's also something that has been very clearly emerging

from the market in the pitches that we see.

More and more founders are building decentralised production models driven by many factors:

- The macro factor with a more or less veiled economic cold war with China happening at a time when China has basically monopolised the production or processing of most of the world's commodity materials, minerals and industrial inputs - as well as rapidly scaling on high-tech production processes.
- The political factor, which can be tricky to discuss but which is driving a lot of people to decentralised money, and other non-authoritarian philosophies.
- And especially the technological factor.

This last part is really the core of our thesis, where the combination of advances in additive manufacturing, materials design, robotics and AI coupled with a diminishing global skilled labor force, is giving rise to some incredibly remarkable companies that are reshaping the way that we will produce most of everything - from energy to chemicals to food.

We are currently extremely interested in these ideas and trends, and have already made a vast number of investments that fully build around this thesis - and are looking to add many more.

What makes Unruly Capital different?

In all honesty, not much. VCs are all the same. They (we) will tell you "we're more founder friendly as we were entrepreneurs", "we roll up our sleeves", "our LPs and network are the best" or similar things to differentiate, but we're all sadly in the business of selling a very simple commodity which is capital.

So what we try to do is deep original thinking, be inspired by founders,

and generally be interesting people to be around so that we can continue to do this for a long, long time.

What one piece of advice would you give founders?

To only launch yourselves into this madness of an adventure if you couldn't imagine yourself doing anything else. It's a real slog, shit happens all the time, everyone thinks you're crazy and so on. I think that it's really only the ones that will think "well, whatever - I've got nothing else I can realistically do, and I'll go insane if I don't make this happen" that can actually endure it all.

Stefano Bernardi is a GP at *Unruly Capital*.

Article by Stefano Bernardi