



Ashley Ramirez
Mason Dixon Bakery

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[00:00:00.00]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay, today is January 29, 2019. I'm in Huntsville, Alabama at Mason Dixon Bakery with Ashley Ramirez. Would you start off and introduce yourself for the recorder?

[00:00:13.05]

Ashley Ramirez: Certainly. My name is Ashley Ramirez, and I am the owner of Mason Dixon Bakery and Bistro.

[00:00:20.00]

AA: That's great. What's your birthdate?

[00:00:22.06]

AR: My birth date is December 4, 1986.

[00:00:26.26]

AA: Great. Can you tell us a little bit about when and where you grew up?

[00:00:30.07]

AR: Yeah. Certainly, so I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I have one older sister who's about seven and a half years older than I am. And I grew up with my mom and dad up there. Lived somewhat a little bit out in the country, but not that far, by any means. So I lived in Eastern Maryland, until—all the way through high school, and then moved to North Carolina is where I did college and graduate school.

[00:01:02.24]

AA: Cool. And where did you go and what did you major in?

[00:01:06.02]

AR: Yeah, so I did my undergrad at Elon University, which is a small liberal arts school in North Carolina. And I majored in Chemistry with a minor in Biology there. And then I did my graduate school at Duke, where I did my PhD in chemistry.

[00:01:22.24]

AA: That's good. And what kind of drew you to chemistry?

[00:01:25.15]

AR: So I actually started out in college, well, started out in high school, I thought I wanted to be med school bound. I had some health issues as a kid that kind of got me into the medical field, and that's where I thought I wanted to be, and then when I went to college, I was really good at organic chemistry, which is not something that's naturally something that people excel at. [Laughter] And so I got hooked up with a mentor in college, Dr. Lisa Ponton, and she is definitely the one that kind of brought me over to the chemistry side, and I guess at the time, I didn't realize how many professions there were in the chemistry industry growing up. And so she kind of took me under her wing, and I did research with her for about two and a half years. And she's the one who drew me over to the chemistry side.

[00:01:25.15]

AA: That's great. And I guess, to back track a little bit and ask, what kind of a relationship did you and your family, and I guess you as a kid have with food?

[00:02:31.01]

AR: With food, as a young child, we, you know, my family ate dinner together every night around the dinner table. We didn't eat out a whole lot. My mom cooked primarily. I didn't do a lot of cooking back then. I did bake every year at the holidays with my mom. It was something that I enjoyed. And I made apple pies every year for Thanksgiving and Christmas was my one big staple. But I would say that we definitely didn't, growing up, have a family that was focused necessarily around food, we just, as much families— I would say, twenty, twenty five years ago, as opposed to now did— we sat every night around the dinner table to a home cooked meal as a family, which I think was really important.

[Sirens]

[00:03:25.05]

AA: Was there anything you remember that sticks out in your mind that your mom cooked that you guys ate that was your favorite?

[00:03:31.20]

AR: Oh goodness. [Laughter] We did a lot of just like family style casseroles. She made this thing called goulash that was amazing, that was just basically ground beef and pasta and red sauce and cheese and all the things that we don't eat anymore. But that was probably one of my favorite dishes that she made.

[00:03:57.18]

AA: That's good. And so, I guess, is there anything else you want to add about growing up?

[00:04:06.29]

AR: I don't think so. I did—so I guess my, I did cook a lot with my mom's mom as well. She, my grandfather was Cajun, so we made a lot of traditional, she had our family recipe for gumbo and that sort of thing. I do remember being in her kitchen as a small child, helping her and trying to learn the ropes on that side. But I would say that's probably the most. We were a very close-knit family. I was always very active in sports and that sort of thing, and my family, we were on the road a lot for that. But my parents were very heavily involved in, you know, everything that I did. And very enabling. And kind of whatever I wanted to pursue.

AA: That's good.

[00:05:03.07]

AA: So you mentioned you did your undergrad at Elon, and your grad degree at Duke.

AR: Yeah.

AA: And during that time, I read, you found out you had Celiac disease. How did that impact the way that you as a person ate, and how did you deal with that?

[00:05:18.22]

AR: Definitely. Yeah, I would say that's when my entire family started becoming far more focused on food, was around that time. So my mom, my sister, and myself, we all got diagnosed with celiac very close. Within a year of each other. It was kind of like once one person figured out what was going on with them, it kind of trickled down the line, of oh, hey, you should probably get tested too. And so I would say that that's when my entire family kind of focus shifted towards, you know, being more aware about food and researching autoimmune disease and the tie that food has with autoimmune diseases. And so it definitely shifted everything

in that sense. I was away at college at the time, so I wasn't eating at home anymore, and you know, to be honest, it actually took me a couple of years to actually fully switch over to being gluten free because of being at college. And you know, eating out of the food halls and trying to navigate it without getting exposed to it was really hard. And so it probably wasn't until I got into grad school and living in an apartment on my own that I really started cooking. This was almost twelve years ago, so there wasn't nearly as much commercially available for gluten free options, and so really had to experiment and play around with different ideas and that sort of thing, and that's when I really started to enjoy cooking and baking and everything. Just because that science background and recipe development and understanding why and understanding what, depending on what consistency you wanted, what you wanted your final outcome to be is when I really started to enjoy it then.

[00:07:19.26]

AA: Definitely. Could you talk a little bit, I guess, about the experience of—I'm real interested because you have a chemistry background. There's a lot of chemistry in baking.

AR: Definitely.

AA: Because there are a lot of different variables.

AR: Certainly.

AA: And I guess, what where some tools that you used as a chemist, but also maybe other tools that you used to kind of learn how to bake? Or cook even.

[00:07:45.02]

AR: Yeah. Certainly. I mean, I think that with anything, there's two sides. There's the reading, the learning aspect of it, the studying and everything. But then there's the practical application. And so, you know, I did a lot of early reading on gluten free, and you know, just trying to navigate what I could use and what I couldn't use and that sort of thing. As far as cookbooks and whatnot, there wasn't a whole lot available. There were a couple of things out at that time, but definitely not a lot. And then it really just came down to experimenting. I started with a lot of the commercial flour blends that were out. Bob's Red Mill has a gluten-free all purpose flour and kind of started there and started with that. But then, you know, just by kind of trial and error, learned what I didn't like about their blend and that sort of thing. And that come to find out, I don't really like garbanzo flour. I don't like chickpea. It kind of gives that graininess to a lot of gluten-free foods. And so when I started playing around with developing our one-to-one flour, you know, it was playing around with the ratios, and understanding how much starch you needed in order to make it bind and that sort of thing. Definitely understanding things on a slightly more molecular level and what's happening when you're baking and the reactions that are going on, definitely helped with that side.

[00:09:15.16]

AA: That's super interesting. So I guess let's talk a little bit about how you got started in this business.

[00:09:25.08]

AR: Yeah, certainly. So I finished up my doctorate at Duke, and my husband and I moved down here to Alabama. And, you know, when we came down here, I was

slated to take a job on the Arsenal, working in a lab there. It was around the time of sequestration, and pretty much, my job offer got put on hold for several months during that time. And I had just gotten out of grad school, used to working eighty plus hours a week, and then I came to having absolutely nothing to do, and was pretty much going stir crazy. [Laughter] When we first came down here—back in North Carolina, we were in the Raleigh area. And so, bigger city, little bit more progressive. And we had our set of restaurants that we could go to and I knew were safe and everything. And when we first came down here, it was really hard. I got sick a lot just trying to go out to eat. People weren't very educated on it. I even had somebody, a waitress at one of the restaurants look at me and say, "Honey, you can eat the bread. You can put on a few pounds." [Laughter] Trust me, I wish I could. That's not by choice. So there was just a lack of understanding, a lack of education, a lack of knowledge down here. Not only about gluten-free, but about other food allergies, as well. And you know, understanding if somebody, I think what we ran into a lot with me when I would try to go out to eat was I would order a burger without a bun or something like that and it would probably get plated with it and pull it off and send it out as such. You know, which happens very often. So we realized there wasn't a lot of offering here. And so, my husband has a business background, and you know, when something isn't available, there's two situations. Either one, it's a need that hasn't been met yet, or there's not a need. You know, its one of two things. So we started out small. I started baking and putting some stuff in the local farmer's market. We started back before the cottage laws had been passed here in

Alabama. So we actually had to get a commercial kitchen space in order to sell at the farmer's market. So at that time, we rented an old spot down on South Parkway, rent was really reasonable. We decided we could probably make that much back in the farmer's market each month to cover our expenses. It was really, I think, my husband at that time just kind of did it to appease me, to keep me busy because I was going crazy. [Laughter] and we quickly, quickly realized that it was very much so the latter. That there was a need, it just hadn't been met yet. And that people were needing safer options in the area. So I guess we opened, we officially got our business license in April of 2013. And I'd have to go back and look to see when we officially opened the storefront, but I have pictures from the Fourth of July and painting the space down there to try to actually turn it into a retail space. So it was actually that fall that we—it was just a few months later that we opened it and turned it into a full retail spot down at our first location. And we started with, it was just my husband and I when we first started, and then we got one employee, and then we kept it that way for a while, and it grew and grew. And we added a baker to the team, and added another front of house person. We stayed fairly small while we were down at that location. But during that time, my husband, when we relocated down here, he wasn't necessarily thrilled with his job. He kind of took something, you know, that wasn't necessarily perfect for him. And so he was more so in a sales position, which it doesn't fit him well. So he decided that he was going to come over to the business full time and we were going to look to expand it more. And he was already helping a lot with the business at that time and so that kind of freed him up to be more available. And so

once he came over to the business full time is when we started thinking about expanding. We knew that the location we were in down there, it wasn't where we had ever planned to open a retail spot, because it's not good. You know, when you follow the rules of retail location, and what does it need to have, it had none of them. [Laughter] But you know, I think what we quickly learned was that when we were down there, the people that needed us, we were a destination. Like, they didn't care where we were. They came because they needed those options. We were very intrigued to see what would happen when we got into a good retail spot, and that's this location here. We expanded to offer, when we first opened here, we had breakfast, lunch, and dinner service each day. Which, we only had dinner service for about the first six months. It ended up being way too much to run all three services. So we opened this location in January of 2015. So we just had our fourth anniversary here with the restaurant. And it's just remarkable how its continued to grow every year. It seems like—Huntsville is the perfect spot for it because while we are a city in the South, we have a lot of people who have come here for the Arsenal from other parts of the country. And it's a fairly progressive moving city for where we are in the country, I would say.

[00:15:48.05]

AA: So I have a little bit of a question about baking. So you mentioned you brought on another baker. Was there a transition for that person? Could you talk a little bit about them and who helps you bake? And if there's a transition from traditional bakery to baking gluten-free breads?

[00:16:13.01]

AR: Definitely. There truly it. You know, I've joked numerous times and said I might have better luck taking someone who's never baked before and training them to bake gluten free than trying to retrain people 'cause there definitely are differences. And somebody that's been trained heavily in the classical ways is, you know, that's their comfort zone and trying to get them out of those habits is a little bit hard. Yeah, when we first started, looking back, we didn't even—we made all of the dry mixes for our first baker that we hired on. So I would go in at night and prep out all of the dry blends and then just have them mix in the wet. Because with gluten free baking— and now we've come a long way since then— so whereas traditional baking, you just grab a bag of all-purpose flour, for us, our all-purpose flour is made of six different flours. So where you normally would be just be grabbing a cup of flour, with gluten free baking, back then for us, it was you know, an eighth of a cup of this, an eighth of a cup of that, a third of a cup of this, and you know, a recipe that would have like ten ingredients, now has almost twenty. And there's just a lot more room for error. Now, since then— so that was when we were basically still measuring out our—when we first started, we were measuring out the flour that I was making each time. We then transitioned—the first step that we made, we transitioned all of our recipes to like a true one-to-one flour. And we started blending our flours in house, so we would make be fifty-pound batches of our one-to-one flour, store that in bins, and then bakers would go and pull cups of that. And that's what we did. We mixed our flour in house until about—it's been twelve to eighteen—probably about eighteen months ago is when we got hooked up with a company, Firebird. I can't remember, they're some

where in the Midwest. And they are blending all of our flour for us now. We sent them our proprietary recipes. And they're producing our flour, and we're able to order it by the pallet now, and we get it shipped in now. Which is a huge time saver. Huge, huge help. So its funny just how we went from just starting out very, very small, you know, definitely far more homestyle baking approach to things and processes to where we are now, which is very highly commercialized processes. But yeah. When we first started with her, I was making all the dry batches, and just, even now, to this day, the amount of products that is lost when we bring somebody new on is horrible. [Laughter] Just in that training process. But we do have a pretty good retention rate with our bakers. I would say one of our bakers has been with us for three and a half years, one's been with us for three, and one's been with us for two. So we went through a short period of time where we had high turnover, but the team that we've got right now has been with us for a really long time. And we try to keep them happy just because of that because its always a headache to switch over and try and start with somebody new. Yeah.

[00:19:48.17]

AA: Could you describe some of the breads and biscuits and stuff that you guys sell?

[00:19:56.00]

AR: Yeah, certainly. So we do—we have six different loaf breads, I think. We have two primary. We have our classic white and our ancient grain. Classic white is a little bit sweeter. It has, it's kind of more like our kid-friendly bread, whereas the ancient grain has sunflower seeds through it. It's a darker bread and it has quinoa

flakes on top. It has teff flour in it, whereas the classic white does not. Teff is a dark grain. So those are kind of our two primary sandwich breads. And then we do flavored breads as well. We do a cranberry walnut and a maple cinnamon raisin, which are both really good breakfast breads. And then we do a garlic and herb and a jalapeno cheddar as savory breads. I would say the cranberry walnut has definitely grown in popularity over the years. It's coming close now to being—the classic white is definitely the most popular, but then I would say cranberry walnut and ancient grain are really close to one another. And then, for biscuits, we do our buttermilk biscuits, which are hands-down our number one most popular product that we sell. We sell the most of those out of anything. And they are, they're made in the true, kind of traditional Southern way. They've got butter and buttermilk in them, and they're still rolled out by hand every morning, and they're really good. We do offer a vegan biscuit as well, that's a substitute out from the buttermilk biscuits. It's the same base recipe, its just we substitute out a vegan butter and we make a curdled rice milk in house for it. So those are the two biscuits and the primary biscuits. We do some other fun stuff like a cheddar cheese biscuit. We, of course, made hamburger buns and dinner rolls and pizza crusts. And those are going to be our primary breads. We do make some other sweet bread options. We do like a take and bake cinnamon roll that's sold as a five pack that people can take home and make in their ovens at home, which is nice. And those are popular, especially around the holidays. We have a hard time keeping them in stock. [Laughter]

[00:22:19.14]

AA: I bet. And another thing, you kind of mentioned this in regards to opening your first storefront location and other things, but through the growth of your business, what kind of relationships did you build with people in Huntsville, either consumers and customers or other, you know, business leaders, farmers market people that really helped you?

[00:22:46.17]

AR: Yeah, certainly. So and I think that with the way we started, we started very slow. We started very small. But we've always had a relationship with our customers that they are like our family. With the nature of what we do, we made a lot of kids' first birthday cakes that they've ever had in their life, and so, when you have that relationship with people, that definitely helps. And so, I would say that we have the most loyal customer base of any company in the area, I would say. As far as that goes, they keep up with our lives, they know what's going on. They check in on us. I laugh, I just told this story the other day 'cause talking, you know, just looking back over the years as to where things have grown, but our very first Thanksgiving that we were open— so that was 2013—we had no idea what to expect. And this was back at the time when it was just my husband, myself, and then we had one front of house employee at the time. And we, my husband and I were up for thirty six hours straight preparing Thanksgiving orders because we just got onslaughted. We had no idea about what to expect. So we worked around the clock. And the day before Thanksgiving, that evening, one of our customers that had come in earlier to pick up their order, and she saw how exhausted we were and everything, well, she came back that night right before we closed, and

she had two tupperwares for us. And she had made us each a Thanksgiving dinner. And she was a gluten free house, so she knew that we were going to be exhausted and there was no way that we were going home and cooking thanksgiving for ourselves, so she brought us Thanksgiving dinner for that first year. And so, that's the kind of customers that we have. They're amazing. So I think that's been huge and crucial for us. As far as in the community, I would say the same thing. We got hooked up very early on with our commercial real estate gentleman, Wesley Crunkleton. He loved what we were doing, he believed in what we were doing. And so while we're a much smaller client than he would normally take on, he had a belief, had a passion for what we were doing, and so, therefore, wanted to see us succeed. And I would say that we've had a lot of instances like that, where we've been very fortunate, be it with securing loans for the growth or things like that where people are passionate about what we're doing, they want to see us succeed. So they've taken a personal interest in our business, as well, which has been a huge help. So I remember when we first, the night before we were supposed to open the restaurant for our first soft opening, it was like two days before. And the team that did all of the construction in this space, the owner came in and said, "How's it all going?" and I had just had a panic, you know, because we had just started putting in all of our tables up, and we just realized it wasn't going to work. 'Cause this is back when we were doing dinner service, and they were too small. You couldn't get plates and wine glasses and everything on the table. It was just too cramped and too crowded. And I was like, what are we going to do? The tables, they're not going to work. And so, you

know, we'd just come to this realization when the owner of the construction company came in and he had asked how it was going, and I just turned and said, "Horrible right now, but you just came in at a bad time." And he was like, "Well, what's going on?" And I'm like it's okay. It's nothing that you guys did. And he was like, "Well, what is it?" and I told him about the tables. And he was like, "Well, we can fix that." And they had eight new dining room tables to us by the next day. So we've just, we've had the chance to work with some incredible people. And I think that's also part of being in Huntsville and a small town is that, you know, while it is growing rapidly, it definitely still has that small town feel to it. So.

[00:26:47.02]

AA: Definitely. How'd you come up with the name?

[00:26:54.04]

AR: Yeah, so Mason Dixon. I'm from the North originally, and my husband's from the South, so it kind of has multiple meanings. First of all, it's the North and South coming together. He and I coming together to start the business and grow it and its definitely also the concept of, you know, slightly more progressive foods from the North, a different way of eating from the North, that meets Southern hospitality and Southern charm. So it really is a blending of the two mindsets.

[00:27:24.22]

AA: That's great. And I noticed looking around, you have the coolers and the freezers of bread that you sell here, and also online you sell frozen breads and ship them out.

AR: That's correct.

AA: Could you talk a little bit about the scope of, you know, your customer base? Like how far away do you sell this bread?

[00:27:46.19]

AR: So we, right now are shipping to a customer in Alaska. That has been a relatively new development in the last few months. But they order about once a month from us, and we ship out to Alaska. So we really are reaching, you know, all across the US. I would say what's helped that tremendously is our partnership with the I Love Juice Bar franchise. They have stores throughout the US. They're a franchise that started at about the same time as we did. They just had a very different growth model than we did. And they have expanded, you know, quite rapidly. But the store here in Huntsville was their second franchise location. And I became friends with the managing partner down here, and we were talking about waste and everything, and she was talking about, you know, having some juice at the end of the day that they were having to throw away, and I said, "Well, let me see what we can do with that. I'm sure we can reutilize that so you're not having as much waste." And so we produced a muffin for them. It's called the Sweet Greens muffin. Its one of our muffins that's infused with their juice. And we now ship to forty five of their stores across the US. And so, you know, people email us all the time of oh my gosh, I just had your muffin at the juice bar in Kentucky, and you know, how do I get more? And that's definitely helped with our

nationwide recognition with people, is that, kind of having them as an outlet for us.

[00:29:20.03]

AA: Definitely. I guess, what are some other ways that you guys try to market your product, either in Huntsville, regionally, or nationally?

[00:29:29.12]

AR: Yeah, as far as marketing, we really have done a nontraditional approach, I would say, for our style of business, just because I think it's what you have to do now. Because we did start much slower and much smaller, our growth didn't have to be as rapid to keep up with our expenses. So we really, very much so, relied on word of mouth and being out at public events. With us, you know, being gluten free, being healthy, being alternative methods of cooking and everything, people are very skeptical. And we found that traditional methods of advertising just didn't work because people read it and they're like, meh, that's not for me. And so what we really found is that being, letting people try, letting people sample, you know. We're constantly out at community events with a table just giving away mini cupcakes. Giving away cookies, that sort of thing so people can try, because they're not going to believe you. There's this stigma of what gluten free is. And they're not going to believe you until they try it. They're not going to come in here and pay for something if they think it's going to taste bad. So word of mouth, our customers are our hugest advocates. They bring new people in for lunch every day. They're telling people, you know, you need to go and check them out. So between our customers—we do a ton of social media, as well. That's one of the

other big things. We don't do a lot of traditional print marketing or radio or anything like that. We tried it in the beginning, and we just found that it didn't work well for us with our customer base. So.

[00:31:12.21]

AA: That make sense. This is a little bigger question, but I guess, what are the challenges and what are the rewards of owning a small business?

[00:31:23.01]

AR: [Laughter] Yeah, definitely. Let's start with the challenges. It is—you are tied to your job. It's something—and that's definitely something that is not for everybody. You know, I've learned over the years, you always buy non-refundable—or refundable flights because at the drop of an instant, you know, anything could change, and you're not going. This is, you know, if you want to do it right, you've got—you know, it doesn't have to be your number one priority, but it has to be pretty high up there. Finding work-life balance is hard, you know. But it's doable. But you definitely feel like your job is never done owning a small business. So there's always more that you can do. So when you make that choice of no, I'm going to go to my son's game or practice or something like that, you know that you're setting something else aside. And that's okay, because that's the right thing to do, but you have to be okay with that. Because your job is never done. There's always more that you can do. There's always, always, always more. So I think that was probably one of the hardest things in the beginning for me, was finding that balance and being okay. I'm a type-A person, I'm a driven person. That's why I'm here, so being okay with stepping away and saying, you

know what? This can get done another time. There's obviously a financial stress of it in that, you know, this is your livelihood. And you don't get to pay yourself for quite some time. [Laughter] That is, people say it, and it is very true. So there is a huge financial burden that comes with it as well, and just learning how to, you know, you're going to have good seasons and bad seasons and it takes a couple of years to figure those out so that they don't send you into a panic of oh my gosh, sales are down twenty percent, like what's going on? So there's definitely the financial piece. [Pause, sighs] I would say that those are really the two biggest challenges. I would say that the rewards are so much more. You know, I've told many people that my background, I would have never gotten into this. Like, this is not, I didn't set out in my life to own a restaurant. And I probably don't have thick enough skin to own a restaurant. [Laughter] But the type of restaurant we are, and the service that we're doing for the community is amazing. I mean, when I have moms come here in tears and just say, "Thank you for making our lives easier." It makes my job easy. I think just the style of establishment that we are, the family feel that we have with our customers is just, it's so rewarding, and it's so fulfilling that I know this is what I'm supposed to be doing. Yes, I could go back and get a job in the chemistry field making far more money, but it would never be as fulfilling as this. It's—when you find where you're supposed to be, you know. And this is it for me. I think our employees as well, I think that's a very rewarding piece of it. Because I think one of the big differences between an owner and an owner/operator is that relationship and respect that you get with your employees when they see you here working everyday with them. No job is

too small, no job is below you. You know, they have a huge respect for you as well. So that relationship and knowing that we're providing livelihoods for fifteen people in the community. Like, it's not much, but it's pretty cool. So I think for me, that's really rewarding, as well. You know that you get out what you put in. And so, its one of those jobs where you can, if you slack off, you know. If you put in the effort and put in the work and everything, you also know. So I love it.

[Laughter]

AA: That's great. Now, this is kind of a two-part question that goes along with what you're talking about. I think, first off, you're a woman business owner.

AR: Yes.

AA: Which is really cool, and there's kind of a lack of women business owners. But also, baking is a traditionally domestic practice, traditionally done by women, you know, how do you feel about that? You are a woman business owner and you're doing, you're baking, you're creating a product in a world where most women now—or you know, men—whoever, don't have the time to do that, added with they might have health issues that make them not able to eat regular bread.

AR: Right.

AA: Does that make sense? Let me try to rephrase that.

[00:36:50.08]

AR: Sorry, yeah.

[00:36:57.06]

AA: Let me ask—okay, let me ask the first question—how do you feel about being a woman business owner?

[00:37:01.08]

AR: Yeah. I like it. It is hard, though. Like I said, we do have a small son. He'll be three in April. And it's been a transition with that for sure, just trying to find that work-life balance. I've gone both ways. I've gone through periods where I've skewed too far one way and I've skewed too far the other way. And I think just recently I'm starting to get the hang of it. Now, I'm sure it'll change again and I'll be back to square zero, but I think that, you know, as a woman, you know, you're expected to do the things at home and everything and keep everything else running. Now, my husband has been a huge help, you know. He likes to cook, and he will drop our son off at school in the morning, so I think you definitely have to have a good support network in order to make it happen. My parents are also here. And they are—I could not do this without them. They, you know, there's not many places where I could leave my kid until nine o'clock at night and then go pick him up if we've got a special event or something going on. So my parents, they are, I couldn't do this without them. So I think definitely, as a woman-owned, a woman business owner, you've got to have a strong network around you. You have to have those people who are lifting you up that are helping to support you or it just, it won't work at all. So, but I think its also very rewarding, in the sense that you can do it. You can find the balance. You can do it all, you know. You just have to know, you have to rely on the people around you. And I think that's one of the things that I've learned the most about through this time is

that, you know, focusing on each person's strengths and utilizing each person's strengths. Not trying to take each person and make them strong at something they're not. Just utilizing their individual strengths. And that's the same with all of our employees and everything, is that, you know, we've got—our team is very diverse in what their strong suits are and just figuring out what those are and capitalizing on them. And I think that's how we can stay a successful business. I think that if somebody is not—I'm trying to think of a specific example, but I'm failing at it right now. Just really capitalizing on what each person's strong suit is, so.

[00:39:32.00]

AA: That's great. And I guess, you've already kind of mentioned this, too, with the naming of your business, but there's this really pervasive idea that Southern food is lard and fried stuff and really fatty, and there is a kind of history of veganism and a lot of vegetable based food in the South, but how do you feel that your restaurant and your bakery kind of augments or changes or challenges that narrative?

[00:40:04.18]

AR: Yeah, I think that it definitely . . . I think I highlighted on it in my TED talk. You know, is that, we came to the South to provide healthy desserts—like the king of fried food and the fat and everything and what in the world were we thinking? But I think that people, every year, people are realizing—be it, they're realizing it on their own or they're having their physician tell them their food is tied to their health, in more ways than they realize. So I think there's definitely a movement

towards people wanting to eat healthier, but I think the number one thing that prevents it is convenience. So that's—that is our goal, is to bring convenience to healthy food options because, yes, you can go around every half-mile corner and find a McDonald's. And pull through and get food, so to eat healthy, it's a choice, and it's something that you have to work at. And in our society today, people don't have time. Or they don't make the time. It's not that high of a priority that they make the time, and that, it's true. We're all running around like crazy, going nonstop. And it just gets worse every year, it seems like, and so, I think that we provide those options. We challenge people to try new things that maybe they haven't. We have our Paleo prepared meals program that is kind of like a stepping stone to that. It's meals that people can preorder, and they just pick up and reheat. And they're fully prepared for them. We do breakfast, lunch, and dinner, five days a week. You know, and while the way that we approach that, we're on a six-week menu rotation schedule. So we don't intend for people to stay on it forever. You know, it's kind of just something to get them maybe to try some new things or some new ways of preparing dishes or some new food options that they're maybe not accustomed to and hopefully that will kind of add to their repertoire of things that they can make at home. You know, we have a lot of families that do it for new moms and dads that have just had a baby. They'll do it for the first six weeks that the baby's home, so that you know, the mom and dad have good, easy nutritious food to eat and that sort of thing. So I think that program is definitely slated to try and get people on the right track and make that transition a little easier because it is hard. You know, it's a choice. And if you weren't raised that

way, which a lot of people who were born and raised here in Alabama, like that's not—they know one way of food, they know one way of cooking, and that's it because that's what they were raised on. So you know, you definitely have to make that effort and hopefully, we're helping with that process of—and also proving that it doesn't have to taste bad. It doesn't have to be boring. To eat healthy isn't just eating baked chicken and vegetables every night. You have a lot of options. There's a lot of things that you can do. 'Cause I think a lot of times people think that, too. You know, once they start eating healthy, they lose all the flavor. You know, like butter's flavor, and if you take my butter away, [Laughter] all my flavor is gone. So, you know, we don't cook with butter here. We don't cook with it at all in our food. So, but I think that we can make dishes that are just as rich, just as creamy, just as flavorful as not. So.

[00:43:45.10]

AA: That's great. You kind of mentioned a little bit, too, about the technology and the relationship you have with the Thunderbird with their helping to mill and mix your flour, but also kind of, what are other ways that technology has kind of either challenged the way you developed recipes or as you guys have grown, how have you kind of utilized technology or how has that been a kind of challenge, it has been in making the product?

[00:44:23.06]

AR: Yeah. In making the product? I think that for us, on our scale, we have not—we haven't pursued as many of the challenges as we could, just because we do still make everything by hand. I think that we have certainly looked at going to a

greater wholesale route and looking at more mass-production of things. And in that sense, you know, one of the things that we will and have run into in looking into things is that gluten free products are different. [Phone rings] And so, if we wanted to take a bread to the market, traditional bread machines— Sorry.

[00:45:02.25]

AA: Do you want to get that?

AR: Possibly.

[Break in Recording]

[00:45:09.20]

AR: Yeah, so commercial bread machines that most places use to machine produce bread won't work for gluten-free breads because it is different. Traditional bread you knead and work to basically build that gluten content to improve the elasticity, while gluten free bread is closer to a brownie batter consistency. It's not something that you can knead. It's something that you scoop. So there's definitely issues with that that we've thought about and come across that we just haven't really approached yet. I would say our biggest help with technology is on that online store and being able to ship across the US. It's a completely automated process where somebody goes onto the website, builds their cart, it calculates the shipping rate for them. We basically just get the order and ship it out. So—and that's something that we've only really started pushing in the last year or so, I would say. So we haven't been fully utilizing that until most recently, but there were definitely some hiccups with that in trying to figure out, you know, how to package, making sure we get the right sized coolers, the right thickness coolers,

do we use dry ice? Do we just use ice packs? So there was a long, kind of trial and error process. My sister lives out in Arizona, and I just kept sending her packages and asking her, okay, how did it arrive? [Laughter] But we've shipped cakes to her out there and everything. So it's definitely doable. It's just a matter of figuring out the right way to do it, the most cost-effective way to do it, for both us and the customer, so.

[00:46:50.12]

AA: Definitely. Well, I only have a couple more questions. But what is—can you describe your facility and how, like what it looks like where you bake?

[00:46:59.27]

AR: Yeah, so we do have two facilities. So we have our kitchen here. It is—our kitchen here is small. I wish I knew the actual square footage. It's probably like six hundred square feet here? And that's where we do all of our paleo meals, it's where we bake all of our breads, we do all of our breakfast and lunch preparation back there. And so it's a tight-knit little area back there. So our lead baker comes in normally around midnight and works until like eight or nine AM. And that way, she's in and out before we get really busy for lunch service or anything like that. So the kitchen definitely, it runs almost twenty-four hours a day. And we kind of just shift through the shifts. And we do still have our original facility that we rented way back when six years ago. We now have turned that facility into a production facility. That's where we make our sweet greens muffins as well as some of the stuff for the bakery here. Kind of our bigger batch stuff. That space is actually larger than this. Its about two thousand square feet. The kitchen down

there is about four hundred square feet, and then we use the other sixteen hundred square feet for storage. We have thousands upon thousands upon thousands of pounds of our flour and everything down there because we get everything shipped in by the pallets, and so we store all of our dry ingredients down there, as well. And so the two facilities are about three miles apart from each other, so it's very feasible. We probably make about two trips a day back and forth between the two facilities. But they're close enough that that's doable.

[00:48:44.02]

AA: And I think—I've noticed from your menu and everything that you guys really are thinking about eating locally and local food systems. I was wondering if that, it may or it may not, if that kind of also goes into your bread? Are the flours that you use local?

[00:49:05.04]

AR: No. The flours, most of them are probably gonna come from like Washington state. I actually don't know where Firebird gets most of their grains from, but my guess is, Bob's Red Mill is in Oregon, I think, so most of them are going to be out West are going to be the big productions. I don't think—I don't know that there is somebody that's on the East Coast that does the alternative grain production in that batch size. But we do try—on that front, we will try and bring in strawberries and that sort of thing, local produce when it's available. We always try to bake with fresh and local when we can for seasonal options, but on the day to day, it doesn't show up that much.

[00:49:58.26]

AA: That's great. Just wondering. I know how hard it is just to get like Southern wheat, so I was wondering if there was that connection there. So two more questions for you. One is baking is a traditionally domestic practice. And you kind of already talked about this with the convenience foods. What do you feel like you are doing? You know, how do you feel like you are fitting into that narrative? Of baking and the history of baking?

[00:50:30.01]

AR: Yeah, so I think that, you know, we are taking a practice that is traditionally done at home that maybe people wish that they could do at home, and bring options who are allergen friendly. We do produce our one-to-one flour, and people can buy that. So that is something we try to facilitate, that that's a direct substitution that they can take. You know, because for many recipes on the baking side, the only thing that's really preventing them from being gluten free is the flour itself. You know, your oil, your eggs, your milk, those are all gluten free, as long as you don't have any allergens you have to worry about. So most of the time, I would say that it's really just the flour that prevents that. So we do produce our one-to-one flour. That's a cup for cup substitute so that they can go home and make their grandmother's cookie recipe and what not. So we do try and help that way. We've had a lot of people ask for cooking classes, which is something we would love, love, love to do, just because we do—while people have to come here and eat in order for us to stay open, we also understand that that's not always the most cost-effective option, and we want to enable people to make these choices at home. I don't want them just eating this way when they're here. I want them to be able to

do it at home, as well. And so cooking classes are definitely one of the big ways we can, you know, further that goal. Our problem there is just not having the right space for it. Our kitchen is small. It's just not laid out well for anything like that. So we're still brainstorming ideas there, if there might be a university or something we might could use to start doing stuff because we get people that ask all the time about cooking classes. I'll have people email me all the time, just with generic questions and that sort of thing, and I am more than happy, you know, to answer them about substitutes or that sort of thing or tips or they're having this issue and what might it be? So I'm more than happy to answer questions whenever possible.

[00:52:35.10]

AA: That's great. And I have one last question for you. What do you hope to see for the future of Mason Dixon Bakery?

[00:52:44.21]

AR: Yeah, that's a tough one, actually. It's not an easy question to answer. You know, I thought that we—and I don't know how much you know about the other location—so we opened a store in Birmingham about a year and a half ago. It was open for about a year and we did close it back in August. And so, you know, if you would have asked me a little over a year ago, it was that we wanted to open a couple of locations, I don't know if necessarily ever franchise, just because I like to be in control too much, that that would scare me. But we learned a lot about our business with that expansion and then closure of that store in that if we did want to expand in multiple locations, we really needed to simplify our model, because

it was just far too complex. And so, I think that once we do that, it takes some of the joy of the business away from me. And so it's not necessarily a route I want to go down right now. So I think we're definitely heavily pursuing wholesale options. That's something that, you know, with that bringing convenience to gluten free foods, healthier foods, I think that that's our most direct route. And so expanding and pursuing that wholesale route. That's going to be something that takes a while, for sure, because that's a whole 'nother—to really get into like a Whole Foods level distribution, that's another adventure. So for right now, we're really just looking at growing here. We're growing our catering drastically right now. That's our number one focus. We do a lot of weddings, corporate events and that sort of thing. Which is a lot of fun because you, you know, you have one person that wants to be healthier in their options, and you're automatically feeding a hundred people healthier. So that's really neat, and I enjoy that because it gets us out in front of a lot of new people that maybe would not ever give us a chance otherwise. So that's our primary focus for 2019, is just growing the catering side. I would say five-year growth plan is that further wholesale option.

[00:55:03.29]

AA: That's great. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you want to add?

AR: I don't think so. We covered a lot. [Laughter]

AA: Thank you very much.

AR: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]