



Meredith McMillan
Merry Cheese Crisps

Date: January 31, 2019
Location: Vestavia Hills, Alabama
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Annemarie Anderson
Length: 45 minutes
Project: Southern Baking

[00:00:00.28]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Ready. Today is January 31, 2019. It is—we are in Birmingham, Alabama, and I am here with Ms. Meredith McMillan. This is Annemarie Anderson, Recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Let's start off and talk a little bit about—well, first, introduce yourself for the recorder. Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:25.22]

Meredith McMillan: My name is Meredith McMillan, and I am the founder and owner of Merry Cheese Crisps.

[00:00:33.29]

AA: Great. What's your birthdate for the record?

[00:00:36.00]

MM: January 11, 1972.

[00:00:38.05]

AA: Thanks. And then could you also—tell us a little bit about where you were born and kind of where you grew up?

[00:00:46.11]

MM: I grew up in a small town called Alexander City, Alabama and lived there until I was fifteen and then went to high school at Chatham Hall in Chatham, Virginia. Then onto Rollins College and then on to the University of Alabama for a master's degree and then moved to Birmingham.

[00:01:11.17]

AA: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship with food and

your family when you were kind of growing up?

[00:01:19.08]

MM: Absolutely. We grew up really in a family that was obsessed with food. We lived in a small town, so we didn't really have restaurants to go to, and my mom and both of my grandmothers were fabulous cooks and really, you know, from a very early age, centered around meals and traditional things that they would cook. They really were the original farm-to-table type of cooks. And probably more so with both of my grandmothers because they did have access to farm animals, eggs, vegetables, fruits, more so than probably my mom who became a homemaker in the [19]50s, but I would say that a lot of our memories were focused around the tradition of how to cook something and the sentimentality behind cooking something and taking other people's love of certain dishes. It was a way of showing affection, it was a way of connecting with generations and really showing—you know, it was a love language.

[00:02:54.29]

AA: That's great. So you mentioned some of those things. What were some of the things that your mother or your grandmothers cooked that you know, really stuck with you that was really kind of central to that?

[00:03:06.01]

MM: Well, both were—my paternal grandmother was an exceptional baker, and I would say that was her forte. Cakes, cookies, pies, she was fearless with baking, which anyone who's ever tried to bake knows, is pretty much the

most difficult part of cooking. It's not just reading a recipe. There's so many different variables that can go wrong and she was really an experimental baker, too. So I mean, I would think that she would come up with just a little bit of an edge to something. If it was an icebox pie, she might add a different flavor fruit juice or a different, you know, ingredient, and try that. And usually, it came out great. Every summer, she made fresh peach ice cream, and that is a very good memory because that was something she would always do. And then, my grandfather was obsessed with country hams, and he was known to drive all over the state of Alabama looking for the best country ham that he could possibly find. And then on my mother's side, it really goes back to one of her uncles was a dairy farmer and we have a barbecue recipe that actually starts with a cow. A whole cow. So over the years, they consolidated that down [Laughter] and were able to produce a great baked barbecue chicken from that original, starting with a cow and the gallons of ketchup and the gallons of mustard and the gallons of Worcester and the gallons of sugar and all sorts. So those would be some of the main things that come out. My mom made biscuits from scratch. She made rolls from scratch. Pretty much, she was not a can opener cook. Everything was pretty much from beginning to end. And she was a great entertainer. And both of my grandmothers and my mother were great entertainers, but because of the small town we lived in, and my father was an executive with a big textile company, she really had to entertain well in our home for huge clients, out of state, out of country dignitaries, diplomats, and they raved about her real, Southern cooking. She did not cook on a pretentious level. She cooked what she knew was the best

that she could do that was indigenous to where we lived. And people loved it, from all over the country. So.

[00:06:02.08]

AA: That's great. When you were talking about your paternal grandmother who is a really great baker and then your mom, too, did you ever cook with them? Did they teach you anything?

[00:06:14.07]

MM: Yes, I did. I think my mom wanted me to stay out of the kitchen to get out of [Laughter] to not make a mess, because really, it was a part time job for her. But no. We had fun in the kitchen. I remember making teacakes with my maternal grandmother who we lived with until she died, I think when I was six or seven years old. And I would have liked to have done more with my mom, but I do think that she really wanted us out of the kitchen. [Laughter]

[00:06:52.23]

AA: That's great. You mentioned that you went to Rollins and you went to Alabama. What did you major in when you were there?

[00:06:59.11]

MM: Politics at Rollins, and at Alabama, I got a master's in public administration.

[00:07:07.21]

AA: That's great. So I guess we can talk a little bit about—well, what were some of the things that you did career-wise before you started this business?

[00:07:18.09]

MM: Well, I really worked for my husband and his partner as an office manager in their restaurant here in Birmingham. And that was for about eleven years. And so, I really grew to love the special events part of the business. I did learn a lot about, you know, the business side of a business, being the office manager. And it was a good job and I enjoyed it, but I didn't have much of a creative outlet. And when my husband got out of that business, I had a point in time where I was between careers. And I had always made the cheese crisps for gifts for holidays, and brought some to somebody I was working for part time, a great floral designer here in Birmingham. And she loved them. And she wanted to give them for gifts and kept ordering more and more and more. And I thought, well, I have one customer, can I get more customers? And you know, it was an evolution of putting it at the farmer's market in Birmingham, and then renting commercial kitchen space to put them in stores locally, and then it evolved to going to market and then it evolved into opening my own facility because I had more demand and needed my own place to make them. And it was just an organic evolution of demand and making the provisions to continue.

[00:09:18.17]

AA: Yeah. And I guess this is a more specific question, but what year did you kind of start doing this?

[00:09:26.06]

MM: 2013 would be really the year that I started. 2015 was a year, I would say that I would really got serious, as I would say, going all in, meaning opening my own facility and getting, you know, putting together the capital to do that. And

stepping away from the actual baking process and taking on the role of being a pretty much one woman show, as far as that goes. Doing all of my own sales, and you know, the shipping, the website sales, but you know, mainly wholesale to small retailers.

[00:10:18.10]

AA: Gotcha. And let's talk a little bit about the early days. You mentioned when we talked before about the cottage industry laws here in Alabama. Could you tell me—could you talk a little bit about that and how that impacted selling in the farmer's market and your decision to kind of do that?

[00:10:37.13]

MM: Sure. At the time, Alabama did not have a cottage food law, which is something that the majority of states did have at the time, meaning that you could produce a product in your kitchen— home kitchen— and sell it. That was illegal in Alabama. The only place you could do that would be to sell at a farmer's market with the public knowing that indeed, this was made in my kitchen, this is not, you know, FDA-approved or state approved. And then, I do believe that later on, there have been some amendments to that. I would say, though, that there is more room for improvement with that because it's very cost-prohibitive to rent a commercial kitchen by the hour with a labor intensive and time intensive product that I've got, you know, I was losing a lot of money to get it. But you know, that was part of getting it into retailers, and I knew the only way was the right way. I didn't want to break any laws and I didn't want to, you know, hurt anybody and wanted to do

it right, 'cause I felt like I had a great product, and I didn't want to interfere with the right way to do it. However, it is very cost-prohibitive.

[00:12:14.20]

AA: Definitely. And you were kind of mentioning your first customer. What was it like trying to get other customers? Could you talk a little bit about kind of gaining your customer base and how people responded to your product when you did go into farmer's market?

[00:12:27.27]

MM: Sure. The farmers market was a great, great thing for me because I laugh at the packaging I had at the time. It was terrible. It was like a white, you know, bag with a little window, and it was just terrible labels and it was just so really not—it did not present my product well. And I also had a lot of knowledge about what people were willing to pay, what they thought was fair, and got a feel for what they liked and what they didn't like about the product. And I would say, I was really in good shape. The seasoning was right. Most people did not think it was too hot, not too much heat. They thought it was about right. And I got a feeling for what people would be willing to pay retail for. So the Pepper Place Market really, you know, exposed me to hundreds of potential customers, and along with that, it gave me the confidence to really to start knocking on doors locally and say, hey, I've got this and would you be willing to try it? And I think it's a great addition to fill a void that's really not being filled. And gift shops and local grocery stores here in town. We don't have anybody local who'd making cheese straws. I am, so [Laughter]

[00:14:19.01]

AA: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit more about how this process evolved. How you kind of got where you are today out of those farmers' markets days.

[00:14:28.26]

MM: Well then, from the farmers' market, I was able to then build a local customer base. And that, along—simultaneously with running commercial space was able to get it into local stores. Western Supermarkets, Piggly Wigglys, and other gift stores locally. And then, I just had enough demand to warrant opening my own facility. I only had two days a week to produce the product. And at the time, it was by hand with pastry bags. And you know, I would have to have ten, twelve people at a time. It was extremely slow and labor intensive, time intensive. And in those two days, we could not make what people were ordering. So I reached a point where I thought, okay I need a co-packer, and I talked to twenty seven co-packers in the United States and nobody was interested in doing it because I did not have the volume then to guarantee. And so I took a leap, opened my own place, and along with that, we do Market in Atlanta twice a year, and that helped get me exposed really to the Southeast, and picked up a lot of new customers that way. And also, about two years ago, I have gone with a broker and her team of sales reps who are in Atlanta pretty much all the time. So they bring sales to me, as well.

[00:16:22.01]

AA: That's great. What's that process like, I guess, you know, you have this product and you're going into local stores. Could you talk a little bit about trying to break

through and trying to like sell your product to these different stores here in Birmingham?

[00:16:40.16]

MM: Sure. For some reason, I had a—at the time I was fearless. I thought well, the worst that can happen is they say no. And in fact, one of my best customers in Birmingham, retailers, in the beginning did say no. They didn't see a need for it. And then, I believe, four or five months later, they came back to me and said, "No, no, no, no, no. We've, we want to do this. We like it." I think they had been to other food shows and just hadn't seen anything that was as good. And were extremely supportive. And Birmingham's been extremely supportive. I believe that really word of mouth and being consistent with it. A lot of local companies have used my product as corporate gifts during the holidays, and that gets, you know, the exposure to my product all over the country when they do that. And it's been, you know, just sheer grit of getting out and knocking on doors and, you know, doing my best to make a fair price that people can make money on. And really, you know, especially the local retailers are just proud that somebody local is producing this.

[00:18:14.21]

AA: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about some of the relationships that you've built throughout this journey? Maybe in Birmingham, or regionally, that's really helped you?

[00:18:30.26]

MM: I've had some really great experiences, and that's part of what I love about what I'm doing. 'cause sometimes I do miss the baking aspect. But because I'm not selling to, you know, huge companies, I really have great relationships with small, independent people here in business and we all understand cash flow and we understand marketing on a small scale. And we understand that we're competing with, you know, the online presence. And that we really work together to keep things on the street, as I would say. Brick and mortar. A personal touch. And I think that that gives us all more motivation and gratitude when you have a personal relationship, that it's not just an email or a text or, you know, going through a third party. We get to know each other. And I love that. I've got customers that now, last summer I visited in North Carolina. And we have, you know, a friendly relationship. A lot of us are friends now. How are you—you know, we know things about each other. And trust each other. And I also have some really sweet clients who call me directly because they're homebound. And I have some, two ladies who are in their nineties who order straight from me, and who are just precious. And that—and write me, really, love letters. Just the sweetest letters. And that's good for the soul. There's no amount of money that can, you know. [Pause] What am I trying to say? There's no amount of money that can give you that kind of satisfaction that you're making somebody happy, you know.

[00:20:51.01]

AA: Definitely. Let's talk a little bit about the product itself. I guess, first, going off, why did you decide to make cheese crisps or cheese straws? Why that product specifically?

[00:21:06.23]

MM: It's one thing that I did well. [Laughter] I'm not a great cook. My husband's a chef, restaurateur and has been. We've been married for twenty years. He will tell you I'm not a good cook. The cheese crisps were something that I did well. And people, as I said, I would gift them for holidays and I had people who would sort of hint, hint in October. "Am I getting any? Can I count on you?" Yeah, you can. You can. I'll do it. And it was my way of showing, you know, an affection for somebody and sharing something for somebody that I did well and I knew was appreciated. And it's a big mess, it's hard to do. You know, when you're baking you burn things, you undercook things. But usually, it was pretty much foolproof. I got it down. It was one of the few things I did well cooking-wise.

[00:22:22.04]

AA: That's great. Could you talk a little bit, I guess describe your product for us and then tell us a little bit about you facilities and then how you guys make the product itself?

[00:22:35.27]

MM: Sure. It's not an actual cheese straw, and the reason for that is my mother's mother-in-law tried to teach my mother how to make cheese straws. And my mother found it so difficult to make the, you know, the long straw and the hand strength and tried different mechanisms and grinders and all these things to make

it and she just said, forget it. I'm going to make them round with my hands. So that's how I grew up with my mom making them. And sometimes with pecans, sometimes without. And I loved the round shape. I think that it's a one to two bite piece, and people really love that. They're pretty. They're pretty in a bowl, they're pretty on a tray, with other things. That I was just very stubborn about that. I wanted them to be that shape, and so after a lot of research, I found one company, a distributor in New York, upstate, who distributes an Italian specially made extruder that will make that shape. So that was a big, big deal breaker for me. If I couldn't have it that way, I really didn't want to change that. And I think that is a uniqueness because people are accustomed to the straws, and they're wonderful, but I think what sets me apart is the shape and the taste. I use a great really, really sharp cheddar. You're tasting cheese. You're not tasting flour or really a big bite of cayenne. You're really tasting cheese from beginning to end. There's a slight kick at the very end, but really, I wanted your palate to be, from beginning to end, taste cheese. Okay, and so the facility is tiny. It's less than seven hundred square feet. But we have enough room to do everything that we need to do. The really only thing that is automated is that extruder. We start with grating the cheese, two big mixers, you know. When we're very busy, we'll make up to two hundred pounds a day. So what I call a batch is, you know, about ten pounds of cheese straws. And that takes about forty to sixty minutes from beginning to end to cool off and then we hand package the final product. So no robots. [Laughter]

[00:25:52.14]

AA: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about some of the people who you employ who, maybe the baker and other folks who help?

[00:26:01.08]

MM: Sure. I have an amazing baker. His name is Dale Carpenter, and he is professionally trained. Graduated from culinary school and was working with me part time when I was still renting the facility. And I approached him about doing it full time and he agreed. And so, for three years, really, I have been out of the baking altogether. He does all of the baking, from beginning to end. And when we have, you know, really, really busy times, we'll hire a second person full to part time.

[00:26:42.02]

AA: That's great.

MM: But really it's the two of us.

AA: Did you ever miss baking or was it hard to kind of relinquish that control?

[00:26:51.20]

MM: Yes and no. [Laughter] Yes, I did, but I am so busy doing everything else that I'm happy because I don't really have a dull day because I am involved in so many aspects of the business. I really don't have a dull day. I just, things, you know, are happily crazy, I would say.

[00:27:28.18]

AA: That's good. Could you talk a little bit about the challenges and rewards of owning your small business?

[00:27:38.25]

MM: The challenges are really fear. And that would be the first thing I would say is that if it's not something you've done before, you've always worked for somebody else, and knew you were going to get a paycheck every two weeks, and you had that, you know, security, so to speak. But, on the flip side, to create something from nothing and have failures, have successes, and but be part of a community that are really pushing and pulling you through. And it does seem like every time there's been a defeat or there's been a roadblock or a failure, fairly soon something else comes around to keep me going, keep the business going. And there's a great amount of satisfaction in having your own, as I would call, baby. And birthing it, and nurturing it. And you worry about it, you have a lot of stress. Money is an issue always. But, you do have things like sweet women in their nineties who are eating these. And you know, that's one of the last things they're going to have. And it's bringing them not only pleasure, but its bringing back memories of, you know, their ancestors. And people they loved who made cheese straws. Or at a time where they were able to do it themselves, and can't do it now. I'd say it's a very emotional business. I take a lot of pride and pleasure that people are enjoying the product. And that really has to—you have to have a passion for those moments. And stay positive and stay focused. Fear is always going to be a part of the equation. But as I remember, and I can't recall who coined this phrase.

Okay, fear, you're in the car with me, but you're not touching the radio and you're not giving me directions. And you're not the GPS. You're here with me, and I understand that. But you're not driving. So, a little bit of fear is great 'cause it kind of [snaps fingers] keeps you from making bad decisions and evens things out. But it's a balance. It's a balance.

[00:30:36.05]

AA: Definitely. What does it mean to you, you know, to be a woman business owner, especially in a climate where its more difficult for women and people of color to be able to own their own businesses at times?

[00:30:48.23]

MM: Well, I would say that I don't honestly believe that's done—on the scale of business I do, a lot of my clients are women. And it's actually, I believe, been a good thing because many of the small businesses that are owned that I do business with, again, are women. And we support each other. And if one of us fails, we want to pick the other up. If one of us succeeds, we want to pick the other up and keep going. And you know, I believe if I do get to the point where I want to grow into a more mainstream grocery, yes, I think there could be, certainly, some issues there. I don't necessarily think that it's been an issue, but I know I am one of the few female owned processing facilities in the state. I'm very small, but it's true. And then, I would say the other issue is, and it may not necessarily be a gender problem, but I was very fortunate to have my own means to get this started. And you have to be prepared to lose money before you ever make money. And so I was very fortunate. It's very cost prohibitive. It, you know, that's where the stress

is for most people. And I really do hope that some point in time we can raise more money and have more grants for people who do not have the means to say, okay, for a year, I may not get paid, but have a great recipe, have a great product that should be out there. So I hope the playing field will even out for people. It's very hard. I mean, ninety percent of what we eat and we buy in the grocery store is made by a couple of companies. You really are against a large wall that, you know, you cannot financially compete with. But with also the movement of more of a locally driven economy, I hope that will be not just a fad; I hope that will be a long lasting way that we support each other.

[00:33:48.26]

AA: That's great. I think this kind of goes along with what you've been talking about, about this connection, your product is something that's emotional, that brings back memories, that is emotional for you, but also for other folks who eat it. But I think baking is traditionally a domestic practice, done mostly by women. And how do you feel that you as a person who produces this thing, you know, like a cheese crisp, how do you feel like you fit into that narrative where you augment or you know, change that narrative in any way?

[00:34:27.00]

MM: Well, what I'm doing is a business. I think that, you know, the roles of women, yes, they've been—especially in the South—and really still today, there are—I know executives in Birmingham who are still expected to come home and have this dinner ready for the family. You know, really are being pulled in every different direction. [Laughter] But, yes. It's been a gender defined—baking, it's

been gender defined for several generations. And that was a way of, you know, people like my mother and her mother and my father's mother to express something that they could do well, be proud of, but it was never monetized. And you know, appreciated, but there's a difference in that. And I find that people, especially of my mom's generation, and even older ladies. Like the two women in their nineties, that I was referring to, are proud that a woman has turned it into a business. It's not just something that they're giving at the holidays or taking to a family reunion. It's something that, you know, they were able to make a go of it and monetize it.

[00:36:20.00]

AA: That's great. How do you feel about that? That kind of reaction that those women have? Like, how does that make you feel?

[00:36:23.23]

MM: Oh, [Laughter] it's just lovely. And you know, it does feel wonderful. They're proud, they're so appreciative. And I think they really get a kick out of seeing, you know, a woman in some ways, fearless, say, you know what? I'm going to do it. I'm going to get out there and I'm going to do it. And I know it's good. I know it's great. I know the packaging is good. People love it. And there's—where there's a will there's a way. You know, both of my grandmothers, when they were born, women didn't even have the right to vote yet. [Laughter] So we're talking about a recipe that's from them that, you know, it really has not been that long. And these women who are in their nineties, when they were born. You know? A

lot's changed. A lot needs to change. But no, it's thrilling. It's thrilling to hear women support me, of all ages, really.

[00:37:46.07]

AA: That's great. This is kind of connected to the idea of like baking as a traditionally domestic practice, but I think that the rise of convenience food, with women entering the workplace and nobody has time anymore to bake, no matter what it is or just even cook. How do you feel like your product kind of like, in a way, it's a convenience food, but it's also something that's really substantial. How do you feel like your product kind of contributes to or challenges that?

[00:38:18.10]

MM: Um-hm. And I believe that that is a really big factor in me staying in business and having some success is that it is one of those food snacks that people normally would only have during the holidays and normally it would be only one family member or friend who made *the* best. And there are other cheese straws on the market, and they're great. Believe that mine are different. They're, again, pretty, and small and round. And it's not a difficult, you know, purchase to make. They're not an aspirational product. It's not, you know, truffles or an expensive champagne. It's a good value for a great product. And it is attainable to have that memory any time you want it, all year 'round. So not only do you have them during the holidays, but you can have that all the time.

[00:39:46.11]

AA: That's great. Could you talk a little bit, I guess, about let's see—well, you've mentioned a little bit about, especially those ninety-year-old ladies, some of the

people who buy your product. Could you talk a little bit about any more of the customers that you might have and the kind of relationship you have with them?

And kind of, how far is your scope of where you sell?

[00:40:17.03]

MM: Sure. Mainly in the Southeast. And I do have an online store, you know, through my website. And that is to fulfill the demand for product where I don't have retailers. I don't compete with their prices. I pretty much, once you add in the shipping, to whatever is bought online, it's going to be about the same as it is at any retailer that I'm already in, so I do have people in rural areas that don't want to drive, obviously, an hour, or whatever, to get the product. So they'll call or they'll write and order. I mean, I have diehard customers who, it's almost a monthly thing. They laugh and they say, "Can you just put me on auto order because I'm almost out." But they're great. During the holidays, they'll contact me three months in advance and say, look, I know I'm giving fifty gifts. Please set aside these for me. And so I would say that I'm really proud of the customer service that I've been able to provide to people because I am the only one who's doing it. And you know, I know what the left hand is doing and I know what the right hand is doing. And I don't make promises I can't keep. And you know, sometimes, if I can't fulfill something, they are incredibly sweet, and say, "Well, honey, don't worry about it. When you *can* do it, this is what I want." I just have had, honestly, the best relationships grow from this. And it's been a very positive experience. Very positive.

[00:42:11.09]

AA: That's great. I kind of have one last question for you. And that's what do you hope to see, you know, going in the future for your business?

[00:42:22.28]

MM: [Laughter] Really, I hope to continue a gradual, steady growth. I want to keep the consistency of the product and the integrity of the product the way it is. And yes, I definitely want to grow. But I want it to be incremental and within reason to keep the quality. So I believe that with some strategic planning, I would love to in five years double my sales. But again, to be slow and steady, keep the integrity, keep the consistency. Keep the customer service. Because I do know that we're competing with things online. I get an order, and you know, like other people, they don't understand why the order hasn't come to their door an hour later, you know, we're so spoiled now with just instant, instant, instant gratification. And that's not something I can compete with. It's not possible. So I would say I would be extremely grateful to have a small, incremental growth over the next five years.

[00:44:01.09]

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

[00:44:07.16]

MM: I don't know. You know, some funny things like I have some customers who have to hide them from their spouses or children. Again, like I said, I have some people who say, just put me on auto at the first of the month. Just send me, you know, six bags or whatever I need to get through. Or somebody got into them and I've got to have my fix. But really, it's been extremely positive. Filled with a lot of

gratitude. A lot of support from other people. And so any success that I've had and will have, it's not just me. It's my baker. It's an ecosystem of people. It is truly a loyalty and a, you know, repeat customers. So.

[00:45:16.08]

AA: That's really great. Thank you so much for talking with me.

MM: Thanks. Thank you.

[End of Interview]