



**Ben and Ryan Ray**  
**Millie Ray and Sons**  
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[00:00:00.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Today is December 20. It's a Thursday morning, and I am in Birmingham, Alabama. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I am with Ben and Ryan Ray. Let's start off and, could you guys introduce yourself for the recorder and then give me your birthdate?

[00:00:22.11]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. My name's Ben Ray, 9-9-1978.

[00:00:26.14]

**Annemarie A.:** Great, thanks.

[00:00:27.25]

**Ryan R.:** And I'm Ryan Ray, and my birthday's December 29, 1980.

[00:00:32.14]

**Annemarie A.:** Great. So, let's start off and talk a little bit about your early life. Where did you guys grow up?

[00:00:38.05]

**Ben R.:** We grew up in Birmingham, in the Homewood section of Birmingham.

[00:00:42.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. And what was that like?

[00:00:44.24]

**Ben R.:** It was a great environment. Lots of kids, streets were always packed with kids, and it was a easy place to meet friends, especially for our parents, who—my mom was from Evergreen, my dad being from Birmingham—but it was an easy way for them to meet friends, and that's how we had a ton of friends. We went to Shades Cahaba Elementary School.

[00:01:03.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. And what about you? Do you want to say anything else?

[00:01:11.11]

**Ryan R.:** No, yeah, we just grew up here in Birmingham and, like Ben said, it was a good childhood. Had a lot of friends. Still do, from when we grew up, still are still friends with a lot of people we grew up with.

[00:01:27.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you talk a little bit about your parents? What were their names, or are their names, and then what did they do for a living?

[00:01:35.15]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. My mom, her name's Millie Ray, and she was in—really, at first, she worked for a company called B&K, and she actually did a little catering business on the side with a friend in the neighborhood, in Homewood. Then she got into real estate with Brigham Williams, a company that's still here in Birmingham. Then my dad was in the . . . his name was Ben Ray, Jr., and he was in the furniture business.

[00:02:06.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:02:08.02]

**Ben R.:** Actually, he was in the interior decorating business, which kind of led into the furniture business, as far as that goes.

[00:02:14.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. And what were your parents like? Describe them, kind of how they are as people.

[00:02:22.01]

**Ryan R.:** Well, my mom is . . . as we'll probably get farther in this interview, is probably one of the hardest working people you'll ever meet. My mom, she just . . . she always was working, and just always there. She was just a great mom. If you said, "Mom," in the dictionary, you'd see my mother. My dad was a good dad. He worked a lot. When we were young, he travelled a lot. He was actually in the— before he got into the furniture business, he was really into pharmaceutical sales when he was growing up. He was into furniture business, and then he got into pharmaceuticals, and then he kind of eased back into the furniture business. So, he was gone a lot when we were kids, but he was a good dad. Just good parents, just nothing . . . just run-of-the-mill parents, I guess.

[00:03:23.05]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. Mom was probably the definition of, like, a provider. She would work hard. We would never go without a meal. She was always working to make it easy on Ryan and I to where we never worried about anything, you know?

[00:03:36.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. And you've mentioned that she started off and kind of had a side catering business. Could you talk a little bit about your mom and her relationship to food and how she was, kind of as a cook?

[00:03:49.05]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. I mean, that's exactly what it was. We didn't grow up, like nowadays, everybody goes out and eats Zoës or takeout all the time. At our house, we ate every day. My mom cooked every meal and loved food. Her mom was a great cook down in Evergreen, and food was kind of a gathering at the table. That's really how she transitioned into that catering, when she met Linda Christie, and they had a little catering business, my mom and her did.

[00:04:19.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. Who would they kind of sell to?

[00:04:22.07]

**Ben R.:** Just, I mean, at the time it was pharmaceutical reps and parties and stuff like that. Junior League stuff, I think they did some.

[00:04:30.18]

**Annemarie A.:** Cool. Could you talk a little bit about the orange rolls and how she started to make them. Could you kind of describe the scene and how she got into—why orange rolls, I guess?

[00:04:44.17]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. Well, her catering business when she first started was called Delectable Edibles, and always thought that was kind of a cool name that they came up with.

She was asked there, it was a garden club in the Hollywood section of Homewood, and she was tasked to bring, I guess, the bread for—I guess their fall gathering or their Christmas party or some party they were havin'. She didn't know what to bring, so she called her mother, Essie Mae Stinson—who's still alive today, at ninety-nine years old—and she asked Mae Mae, is what we call her, what if she had a recipe for something. And she did, have some recipe that she had found for this orange roll. Mom thought it'd be something neat to take, something special. She got it and she started workin' with it. She didn't really like how it turned out, and so bein' my mom, she just kind of tinkered with it and found a recipe that worked. We always asked Mom, "When did this start?" You can see on our hats and some of our stuff, it says, "Since 1979." Well, when we asked Mom, "When did you first make these things?" She said, "Well, Ben was born in 1978 and you were born in 1980, and I think it was somewhere in between y'all's birth years is when I started doing this." So, that's why we came up with, "Since 1979." So, it has to be over thirty-something years ago when Mom started doing this from this recipe she got from her mother.

[00:06:36.17]

**Ben R.:** It's kind of funny when we see parents of our friends in the neighborhood or see 'em out to dinner or something, they always talk about, "Well, we used to get those rolls for free." They take pride in, they knew 'em before they started the business. That's always a pretty cool thing.

[00:06:53.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, how did they—I mean, from talking to you guys last week, that they kind of became this thing just within your family and friends circle, how did that kind of start? And just talk us through that process, I guess.

[00:07:09.01]

**Ben R.:** In the neighborhood is where it started. Where Ryan was referencing was in the Hollywood Garden Club, is that's where she took 'em first, and that was a group of people, thirty to fifty people who had parties throughout the year and gathered. That's really when the orange roll came about and came alive. Then Mom started making 'em for family and friends, for holiday events like Thanksgiving and Christmas and stuff like that. Then that's really how it evolved; I mean, that's how the orange roll got started, because everybody—if my mom wouldn't do 'em, they'd be calling her, asking for em, "When can we get these?" So, you know.

[00:07:45.10]

**Ryan R.:** I think it was at that garden club party was where the friends, first, were like, "Man, those are great. Can I get some more?" Then probably they told their friends, or they got 'em or Mom would make 'em for 'em, and they'd have 'em at their parties. And their friends. It just kinda snowballed from there. So, then it turned into kinda like every holiday season, this time of year, Mom was always

making orange rolls at our house. Like she would just, we'd come home from school or on the weekends, Mom would, in her spare time—when she wasn't doing real estate or whatever—she was making these orange rolls for people, 'cause she's never told no to anybody. She would just make rolls for people.

[00:08:33.12]

**Ben R.:** And the orange roll is one of those, is an item where it wasn't just for adults at the parties. The kids loved it. So, when she would give 'em out for the holiday, it was like, my kids love 'em, Ryan's kids love 'em, it was more of that, where it wasn't just a quiche that you take to a dinner party, it was more of a family thing. You sit down and warm up orange rolls in the morning for Christmas or Thanksgiving or at any time, really. That's really how it got going.

[00:08:59.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, what was that like? Describe, as you guys were kids, and your mother was making this in the kitchen. What was that like? Were you guys involved any?

[00:09:14.24]

**Ben R.:** Yeah, we were always involved in the kitchen, really probably messing up more than helping it as young kids and always wanting to stick our fingers in the filling and taste it. Stuff like that.

[00:09:26.19]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, we always kind of joke about it now, is that Mom—we still have some of the original pans that Mom made these rolls in. Man, we just always remember them being all over the house. Just 'cause the process, you have to make them and then they rise, you know, at an ambient temperature or room temperature or higher degrees. We just always remember them being just all over the house, 'cause she'd have to put 'em over the pan, and then you put a towel over the top of the pan. And I remember, as a kid, just always going and looking underneath the towel and seeing 'em rise and checking on 'em or looking at 'em. We just always kind of joke, like Mom, she wouldn't ever have 'em in the bathroom, but we'd kind of joke with people that . . . the Health Department would probably shun us for how my mom started off making those rolls. [Laughter]

[00:10:20.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, can you talk a little bit about—well, let's transition and talk a little bit about your career and your education, that kind of stuff. So, could you talk a little bit about after your childhood, after you graduated from high school, what did you guys do?

[00:10:43.14]

**Ben R.:** I went to Auburn for a year and then I decided to join the Coast Guard, United States Coast Guard, and was stationed down in Biloxi—or Gulfport, Mississippi, from 2002 to 2008. And was in Search & Rescue and Law Enforcement. Probably one of the best times of my life. I had a chance to—which it wasn't a good thing at the time, but to be a part of, Hurricane Katrina hit in the middle of my enlistment down there, so that's all we did for three years was clean-up, recovery, from Pascagoula, Mississippi to New Orleans. So, I was a part of that. After that, I met my wife while I was in the Coast Guard and she was at school at South Alabama, and we were deciding on what we wanted to do, if I wanted to stay in the military or get out. We tested the water with some of my friends about what all's going on and what I could do, and I went to school while I was in the Coast Guard. I talked to one of my friends, a good family friend of ours, Tyre Stuckey, and he was in Zoës Kitchen, and they were just getting started with twenty locations. It was a family business out of Birmingham. We're from Birmingham; just happened that way. I made the decision, we really didn't want to travel every four years, and my wife's from a small town, Brewton, Alabama, and she wanted to be near her family—not necessarily in Brewton, but somewhere in the Southeast. In the military, as you know, you can go wherever they tell you to go. I made the decision to get out, and we got married and started working for Zoës. Had never been in the restaurant business a day in my life, but got trained and took over a store in Montgomery, Alabama, and then had the opportunity about eleven months later to do a partnership with Zoës in Buckhead in Atlanta.

[00:12:39.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great, that's great. What about you?

[00:12:42.28]

**Ryan R.:** I went to Auburn. Well, when I first graduated high school, I got a football scholarship to play football up at Southeast Missouri State, up in Missouri. Went up there for a year and just really didn't care for the school or Missouri, and really kind of wanted to get back South. So, actually, I moved, went to Auburn, got enrolled at Auburn, went there, graduated in 2004. Then went to work for the Homebuilder's Association. Graduated in International Business and spoke some Spanish, so I got this job doing risk management for the self-insurance fund, their workers comp fund. Really loved building and construction and got around it a lot. Went to work for a company in Montgomery that's a friend mine's, Lowder New Homes. Went to work for them, and then had the opportunity to move to Charleston, South Carolina. They were doing some projects up there. Did a couple years up there, and that was about 2007, 2008, and the recession hit. Man, the real estate market really tanked, and we were just in a bad spot up there. So, I knew I was either gonna have to do something different or what, got to talking to Ben and our buddy, Tyre. At that time, Ben had been offered that position in Atlanta to do the Zoës Kitchen. It was the first partnership. So, I just . . . it was an opportunity and it was gonna be good, so my wife and I—I was married at the time—we

decided to move to Atlanta and open the Zoës Kitchen with my brother there in Atlanta.

[00:14:41.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, I guess my question for you specifically, and then open it up—but what's it like to transition from not knowin' anything about restaurants, the restaurant industry, then goin' in . . . ?

[00:14:59.18]

**Ben R.:** Very tough at first. I mean, I always knew food 'cause we grew up around food.

It wasn't necessarily the food part of learning recipes and learning the menu, it was more just the management of thirty employees in a restaurant. When you're dealing with all hourly employees, you have thirty employees, you got thirty problems. So, that was more of the adjustment, and working with cooks in the back and managing the whole thing. We were blessed, knock on wood, when we opened our Zoës, we were the second busiest in the company. The day we opened, we were like the busiest in the whole company. So, that whole volume of people and trying to figure it out was tough. But we did it. We made it happen.

[00:15:44.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. And what was it like—I think you guys are really kind of a family-centric company here—but what's it like working with your brother?

[00:15:54.05]

**Ben R.:** I mean, it's good. Not every day's the best day, but in a family business, I think if you talk to anybody, they'll tell you that family business is you have great days and you have bad days. Everybody has their own opinion.

[00:16:09.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good.

[00:16:11.12]

**Ryan R.:** I think it's, in the family business and probably a lot of 'em, man, you're working with your family and you know everything about everything. Yeah, you might have some arguments or dust-ups here and there, but at the end of the day, you're both working towards the same goal, and you just got to keep that perspective.

[00:16:28.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. So, well, let's talk a little bit about . . . maybe how Millie Ray & Sons, as a business, started. Because your mom's been making this orange roll for a really long time. How did the business start?

[00:16:46.20]

**Ryan R.:** Yep. Well, we were in Atlanta doing the Zoës Kitchen, and we were doing really well. They were about to sell, a group had come in from out in California and they were selling the company. My brother and I were doing this, it was a partnership under kinda like the Chick-Fil-A model. And we were doing really well. There was just some talk out there that they were selling and partnerships might go away. They kind of promised us another partnership, and that wasn't coming to fruition. So, we just knew that there was gonna be some changes. So, we were kind of just looking at our best interests, kinda what the next step was. We'd always kind of talked about this orange roll. 'Cause even then, in 2007/2008, when we'd come home for the holidays, Mom was still making these orange rolls the same way, in the same pans, scattered all over the house. People just loved them. We loved them. It was just something, a neat product. We kind of tested the water with the food business and we're learning. We just had the idea of, "Man, let's just try to do something with this." At the same time, my mother was in real estate, like I was. It was slowing down for her in 2007/2008, and everybody was trying to make ends meet. She needed work and money, and we were just like—well, really just to keep her busy, 'cause it really slowed down for her. So, we're like, "Mom, let's try, do these orange rolls." So, Ben and I, we actually got guy in Atlanta—at S.C.A.D., which is the Savannah College of Art and Design—come up with a logo for us. Made these logos, made these little stickers. We're like, "Mom, make us few pans of these rolls, we'll put some stickers on 'em and go to some Mom and Pop specialty stores, butcher shops, stuff like that.

[00:18:59.08]

**Ben R.:** Markets.

[00:19:01.25]

**Ryan R.:** Markets. And try to get in front of store owners and we'll sell 'em on 'em. So, we went to ten—I say ten, it's probably eight to ten stores in Atlanta—that we just kind of cold-called on 'em and went in there and took 'em, had Mom send over some product, kinda just sold it to 'em on consignment. "Here, try these. Put 'em on the shelf and see if . . ." And man, people loved 'em.

[00:19:31.03]

**Ben R.:** There's a place called New York Butcher Shoppe, was one of our first customers ever, probably.

[00:19:37.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Great.

[00:19:39.05]

**Ryan R.:** We put 'em on the shelf, and like two weeks later, they're calling, wanting more. It just really kinda spiraled from there. People, they just kept calling, and so we'd keep calling Mom, and Mom would keep making 'em, and she'd meet us

halfway from Atlanta—she was in Montgomery at the time, making 'em in her kitchen, and she'd drive halfway or we would go over there and get 'em in coolers and bring 'em back, sell 'em to these people. Just kinda started goin' from there, really.

[00:20:09.16]

**Ben R.:** Then we put freezers, stand-up freezers in her kitchen at her house when we first started. Then we took another freezer, one of our buddies, my buddy lived up two houses down and we ended up putting a freezer in his garage and that's when we really got going. That's when we were getting to the point that we've got to get into a spot. We were still in Atlanta, both working, and Mom was doing all this and doing her real estate, too. Then we got a call from a place called Burriss Farmers Market down in Loxley, and they ordered, like, three hundred cases. I knew, when they called me, that that would take a month, but I was like, "Sure, we'll get that to you." Didn't miss a beat, I called Mom and told her, and she just cussed me out, basically, and hung up. Said, "There's no way we can do that. We'll be working through the night for weeks." But she got it done. She didn't quit. Made it happen. We got that out, and that's kinda—I think right after that's when you left.

[00:21:14.05]

**Ryan R.:** Well, our good friend, David Snyder, he owns Urban Cookhouse here in Birmingham. He was with Zoës, and it was kinda the same deal. We saw, when

this group was coming in to buy Zoës, his job kinda got eliminated. He was gonna open a restaurant here in Birmingham, called Urban Cookhouse. He knew about the orange roll, he kinda knew what we were doing on the side and he was all, "Let me try it." You know? So, we gave him some. Tried it, he loved 'em. He said, "Well, we're doing a menu planning at my house in Birmingham. Why don't you and your mom come up and do a cutting and try—" He was gonna cook up all these different menu items. "And we'll put the orange roll on the plate and see how it does." We did, and man, it just went awesome. Loved 'em, he was like, "Man, I want to put y'all on the menu." So, David started—opened the restaurant and Ben and I were still in Atlanta doing our deal, and man, his restaurant just took off. It just went through and, from day one—

[00:22:21.19]

**Ben R.:** Here in Homewood, too, so that was kinda nice. And he featured Millie Ray's name on the menu with the orange rolls. That was kind of a blast from the past for all the people who still lived in Homewood. When they saw that name, they knew immediately what that was.

[00:22:37.14]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. So, we just, man, started selling to them. Mom was making 'em in her house, and man, we were having to put 'em in big, white fishing coolers and take 'em up to Birmingham. So, at that point, I was kinda going from Atlanta to

Birmingham—from Atlanta to Montgomery—to help Mom, or Ben would go there and we'd take 'em up, take 'em up to Birmingham. About that time, the Health Department calls, and goes, "What are y'all—what is Millie Ray's, what are y'all doin'?" We're like, "Man, we're makin' rolls." They're like, "Where are you makin' 'em?" We're like, "My mom's kitchen." They're like, "Well, you can't make 'em in your mom's kitchen. You gotta get a licensed, inspected facility." So, we're like, "Okay." So, I called—it's kind of full circle—I called my buddy, Josh Lowder, who I worked home building with. They were building a facility out in Montgomery called Hampstead, and he had a little—they were just gettin' goin' with it, and he had a little spot, little six-hundred square feet spot, and we built it out. We put our first kitchen, commercial kitchen, out there. Hired a few people and man, we started makin' rolls out of there. It kinda really took off for us when our sales rep at Zoës was Copeland Wood, and he's part of the Wood Fruitticher family, who's a big food service distributor in Birmingham. Copeland was our sales rep, and we became friends with him. We kinda told him what was goin' on, and kinda told him what we were doin' with—we were takin' the rolls, we're makin' the rolls in Montgomery, and then we'd have to drive 'em up to Birmingham. He's like, "Well, y'all just need to get 'em into Wood Fruitticher, and then we'll deliver 'em for you to Urban Cookhouse." So, we're like, "Okay." So, we met with 'em and tested 'em over there, and they loved the product. Now, I would go to Montgomery and I had a black Ford F-150. We had cases now, we got rid of the coolers, we put 'em in cases, and I would load my truck, drive my Ford

F-150 to Wood Fruitticher, and back up onto docks with 18-wheelers around me. I pull up and I open the dock door and load cases of rolls onto pallets in their freezer. Then, so that got going, and they invited us to do their Wood Fruitticher Food Show, which was down in Destin, Florida. That was in 2010.

[00:25:23.05]

**Ben R.:** Mm-hm.

[00:25:23.05]

**Ryan R.:** Or 2009?

[00:25:25.03]

**Ben R.:** [200]9, that's right.

[00:25:26.10]

**Ryan R.:** 2009, 2009. May, they always do it Mother's Day weekend. 2009. Mother's Day weekend, 2009. And we went down there and set up a booth. They put us right at the front door. Man, we blew it out of the water. We sold for two days, and man, at that point, I said, "I have to leave Zoës to help get this business going." 'Cause we did, I think, seventy thousand dollars in sales in two days. It was just—we took on all these customers, my mom couldn't do it anymore, and someone had

to help manage it. That's when I left Zoës, and went to work for Millie Ray's full-time.

[00:26:12.25]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, what's the official year that Millie Ray's started?

[00:26:14.27]

**Ryan R.:** Probably 2009. We didn't really . . . our L.L.C. started in January of 2010, but we probably were in business of 2009.

[00:26:25.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Gotcha. So, with you guys opening and managing Zoës Kitchen, what was that transition like? How did that experience help you start this business?

[00:26:38.29]

**Ben R.:** Well, I mean, really, the best part of the whole thing was our sales rep, who transitioned us into the food service side. 'Cause there's two different—in the food business, you've got the restaurant side and then you've got food service versus retail. There's a couple different avenues. But definitely, food service is way different than the restaurant business. I think having that experience on that side, and knowing the ins and outs and Copeland kind of leading us along the way, and the relationship we built with them, and Wood Fruitticher being a family-run

company . . . then we have some ties with my dad and John and Dave Wood from many years ago, they were all in and they really helped us get in the door and get going, because in the food service business, you can't just go knock on the door of a distributor and say, "Hey, we make pecan pies." It just doesn't work like that. They just don't let you in. So, having those relationships, I think more than anything, helped us get going and they gave us a chance. A lot of times, you don't get the chance. We have companies call us all the time, wanting us to help them do stuff like that, and we do and would help, but it's so hard in this business when you're goin' up against the big boys of the world, the General Mills, Proctor Gamble, whoever it is. So, some of that.

[00:28:04.24]

**Ryan R.:** I think, also, it helped us being at Zoës, learning food safety, too. And how to run a kitchen.

[00:28:12.18]

**Ben R.:** Recipes.

[00:28:13.03]

**Ryan R.:** Recipes, and just . . . portion controlling and stuff like that. Really kind of . . .

[00:28:22.26]

**Ben R.:** Managing cooks, schedules, hours.

[00:28:24.18]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:28:25.29]

**Ben R.:** How they work. Once you start managing people, they're all—everybody's different, but they're all kinda the same. Finding the right cooks, which one's bad, how to recognize it fast. One bad apple in a restaurant, or any employee in any business, can spoil the whole bunch. Learning a lot of that helped out.

[00:28:48.03]

**Annemarie A.:** Definitely. And you guys had mentioned this, this is kinda goin' back, but you talked about how your mom—what was her reaction throughout kinda the start of the business and her makin' all these rolls, how did she feel about it? How did she kind of react to everybody wanting them?

[00:29:06.27]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. She loved it. We had to get it going, and then it was a transition for everybody. You know, Ryan had a great job with Zoës, we both had to go home and tell our wives, "Hey, we're moving again." I just moved from Mobile to Montgomery, was only there eleven months. Now I've only been in Atlanta two

years, or a year and a half. Ryan had moved from Fair Hope, Alabama to Charleston, and now back to Atlanta. Now, we're about to move again, and to go home and tell your wives, "Hey, we're moving again, and by the way, we're only gonna make half the money we make now," is not the easiest conversation. But they had faith in us. Mom, she had—for her, it was a little scary, too. It was like, "All right, I'm about to put down my real estate license—which I think she kept it, but—put that aside and go full-on business in the food service." Which Mom had no idea. Millie was a worker. She would get in the kitchen and she would make it happen, but as far as the business side of it, that would make her nervous, about doing all those things to make sure the financials are right and everybody's happy. She had never managed employees, so it was a great thing when Ryan transitioned from Zoës to come help her with those hourly employees. To manage them, keep them in check, and make sure everything was going right.

[00:30:35.19]

**Annemarie A.:** Sounds good. What was that like, I guess, from going from one woman who had made these rolls for so long into a bigger space, a bigger volume of product, and then people who had kind of never made this before. Could you talk about, I guess, some of your earlier employees and maybe some of the ones you have now and their experience in baking, if they have any?

[00:30:58.10]

**Ryan R.:** I think that was my mom's biggest, like, obstacle to overcome, was letting someone else make the product. She was always real, real funny about it.

[00:31:12.15]

**Ben R.:** Hands on.

[00:31:14.10]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. She just . . . when we were finally like, "Mom, you can't make all these rolls for everyone. We have to bring someone else on to help." She was real hesitant about it. Finally, we actually hired a few Zoës cooks from the Montgomery location—did they work for you, Ben, when you were at Zoës?

[00:31:35.02]

**Ben R.:** Yeah.

[00:31:35.05]

**Ryan R.:** Manuel? Guy named Manuel. Well, first we actually started with a couple other guys, some we didn't really know. First started with this mother and son—

[00:31:49.09]

**Ben R.:** Through Zoës, we called—I called—some of my old employees at the Montgomery, and then they gave us some names of some guys, and that was our first round.

[00:31:59.07]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. And Mom was still—I think Mom was, at that point, still rolling 'em out herself. But they would help cook 'em and take 'em out of the pans and ice 'em and stuff like that. I think they'd help make the dough. Then it got a point like where we needed to increase volume, and we hired a guy named Manuel and a guy named Gilberto and I think it was just them two starting off.

[00:32:25.21]

**Ben R.:** Gilberto's brother.

[00:32:27.26]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, Fernando. Or Francisco.

[00:32:29.23]

**Ben R.:** Francisco.

[00:32:32.04]

**Ryan R.:** And we hired them to come on full-time, three guys, and Mom really—that's kind of when we really had to tell her, "Mom, you've gotta let these people roll 'em out and take over that part of it." So she sat there and trained 'em how to do it and step by step. First couple days, their rolls turned out just like Mom's, so it kind of gave her a little sense of relief that someone else was—she could trust someone else to do it. But she was still, she'd still—

[00:33:06.04]

**Ben R.:** She's still funny about that.

[00:33:06.24]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, she's still funny about. She would cook 'em, though. Now she became, like, the cook. She would bake 'em. So, they would roll 'em out, put 'em in the pans, and then proof 'em, and Mom became like the baker. So, she was runnin' the oven. So, she always had her eye on 'em. She saw the final product, she didn't like 'em, she'd throw 'em away or whatever. Or train them. That was some real . . .

[00:33:31.26]

**Ben R.:** That was some tough times at the very beginning, getting it going. I mean, just at the start, just even getting Mom to scale the recipe to even know. I mean, she was one of those cooks who adds a dash of this, a pinch of this, and, "Oh, I did this. Oh, I forgot to tell you that"-type of cook. She was an in-home cook. She'd make a

roulade, and if you'd ask her how to do it, she'd tell you all the stuff to do it and you'd make it and it wouldn't turn out. She'd be like, "Oh, well I did this." So just getting her to finally, let's get a recipe card, was challenging at first. It was all fun, though. It was just getting it going and scaling is always tough when you go from making whatever, whether you're making cheese straws or pecan pies to making twelve dozen to making five hundred dozen. That's . . .

[00:34:24.18]

**Ryan R.:** Well, she started off with a little KitchenAid countertop mixer, to where when we started getting in there and getting going, we brought in, I think our first mixer was a thirty-quart mixer. So, trying to scale that recipe and work through all those little details was challenging. At the same time, we were just growing so fast, really didn't have time to sit around and question what we were doing. It was like, "Man, the phone is ringing. The orders are coming in."

[00:34:55.24]

**Ben R.:** They were working through the night. Then it got . . . it got crazy, 'cause the way we do our stuff—and still do to this day, we haven't changed our process—is we have a couple things that go overnight, and then just, we de-pan rolls out of pans manually. Sometimes, you know, where you got in there at six in the morning, you might not leave till one at night. That was very . . .

[00:35:24.02]

**Ryan R.:** We got a six hundred square foot facility, and we're elbow to elbow. It was . . . man, we bought this freezer truck we still have. It's twenty-six foot freezer, just so we could have freezer space. Ben, when he was still in Atlanta, went over and bought it in Atlanta, and one day drove it over to Montgomery for us. We were like, "Thank God." So we would, every morning, we would box up rolls—we'd have these stand-up freezers.

[00:35:48.03]

**Ben R.:** Forgot about that.

[00:35:49.18]

**Ryan R.:** We still have some of 'em in the back there, like we'd have these stand-up freezers, and we would pack 'em after that night and then let 'em freeze, and then the next morning, we'd box 'em. Undo all the freezer, box 'em, put 'em in the cases, then put the cases on the truck. Then we'd do the whole process again. So, it was just, how we did that was just crazy, thinkin' about how we—

[00:36:13.20]

**Ben R.:** You could see a video of that, you'd be like, "How did they get that done?" Because it's just not like a van, where you go—a catering van—where you go out

there, it's a freezer truck where somebody has to get up in the truck and then another person start throwing cases up. We were doing ten pallets of rolls.

[00:36:31.02]

**Ryan R.:** Then we'd take 'em to—then we'd drive that freezer truck up here to Birmingham, to Wood Fruitticher or to Piggly-Wiggly warehouse. I think those are the first two warehouses we were in.

[00:36:44.18]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, let's talk a little bit about, I guess, marketing. We've already talked about Wood Fruitticher and how that helped, but you can tell from even your website, a lot of Piggly-Wiggly, a lot of Foodland, a lot of more regionally-sold places. How did you get in with those companies?

[00:37:07.26]

**Ryan R.:** Well, Piggly-Wiggly, we had—Ben mentioned earlier, Dad was friends with Woods, but he also was friends with a guy who was friends with the Virciglios, who own the Piggly-Wigglys here in Birmingham. We got a meeting with Mr. Virciglio at the Homewood location, and they're very pro-local products. Man, they were our first, first retailer, was the Piggly-Wiggly in Homewood. Then we got in the Crestline one and the River Run one. At that time, we weren't even going through the warehouse. I was bringing 'em up in my black truck. They'd

order 'em, and I'd bring 'em up in my black truck and I'd drop Wood Fruitticher off, then I'd go and drop off the Piggly-Wigglys'. Or I was bringing 'em up with the Urban Cookhouse orders, and I'd drop 'em off and put 'em in there. People knew us here in Birmingham. My wife's from Birmingham, too. And that's just kind of . . .

[00:38:12.10]

**Ben R.:** Yeah, it's more of just knowing people. But as far as working with Piggly-Wigglys and Winn-Dixies, as a new company, it's not easy to get in those places. I think, like, if we had just gone directly to the distribution, to the warehouse and said, "Hey, we're this small company. We want to get our products on the shelf," they probably woulda laughed us out of the building. So, it was more of a grassroots, "Let's go meet the guys who—" The Piggly-Wigglys are independent grocery stores, which means one guy, almost like franchisees, owns five grocery stores. So, we went to Andy [Virciglio] and had that relationship, and he put us in five. We built the sales up enough to get the movement, 'cause that's what the warehouse wants to see, is the numbers. Then, once we got to a volume where we were moving enough, we were able to go. They requested to go into the warehouse. Then we grew it from there. That's kinda the same way we did with Mitchell Grocery and AG in the South, as well. Once we kinda got going a little bit, we had some people calling us, and that helps out.

[00:39:18.19]

**Ryan R.:** Well, we were still in Montgomery when we got the phone call from Winn-Dixie.

[00:39:22.04]

**Ben R.:** That's right.

[00:39:23.19]

**Ryan R.:** It was just one day, I got this phone call, and they're doing this local set. They wanted to do a local set in Winn-Dixies, and man, they'd run across our products at Fig or somewhere, and they wanted to meet us. They wanted to meet down in Mobile. Ben and I drove down there—this is probably 2012, maybe 2011?

[00:39:47.17]

**Ben R.:** Yeah.

[00:39:47.17]

**Ryan R.:** Somewhere in there. And man, met with 'em, and man, they wanted to put us in. They wanted to put us in, like, eighty Winn-Dixies. So, that was a big boost for us. We actually got into the Montgomery Distribution Center Winn-Dixie. Still, we're just still in Winn-Dixie today. So, that was a good hit for us.

[00:40:12.21]

**Ben R.:** Yeah, that was a good one.

[00:40:14.04]

**Ryan R.:** It just kinda snowballed from there, just people . . . get your name out there and people try it.

[00:40:20.20]

**Ben R.:** We've kind of, for the most part, stuck with the independents of the world, as far as groceries. As we've grown, really over the last two years as we've been able to amp up production, we're gonna start going after some of the bigger retailers in the Southeast. So, it's one of our goals for this year, actually.

[00:40:37.20]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. What's good about, I guess, working with independent grocers and markets?

[00:40:44.20]

**Ben R.:** Well, it's getting to where you need to be is not a bunch of hoops. You don't have to go through fifty people to get to one. In the grocery business, as far as in the Southeast where we're located, the Wal-Marts, Publix, and Kroger, they're the three big boys. Then you have the independents. Getting in with them is not

always as easy, but the cost of doing business with them is a lot, as well. So, working through some of that stuff. Just having the right connection to get in with someone, where the Piggly-Wigglys, we had that connection. Then we built it ourselves. Was easy.

[00:41:23.25]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So . . . I had a question, it slipped from me . . . let's see. I guess, let's move on—so, you guys were in Montgomery from 2009 to what year?

[00:41:42.28]

**Ryan R.:** 2013 is, well, my mom was always there. Then in 2010, my wife, Halle, her and her sister opened a clothing boutique here in Birmingham. She wanted to move from Atlanta and move back to Birmingham, and so she was opening up her clothing boutique called Stella Blu—it's in Mountain Brook Village—and so at that point, I was in Atlanta working a few days and then I'd drive to Montgomery and I'd work there, then I'd come up and see my wife and spend a few days with her. It's like a triangle for, like, a year. Then, all of our distributors were pretty much here in Birmingham: Wood Fruitticher, the Piggly-Wiggly, and this is kind of our home. We wanted to kind of get back here. And my parents have always kind of talked about getting back to Birmingham. We had great years in Montgomery, and some of my best friends are from Montgomery. I can say that for Ben, too. We have great friends in Montgomery. But we always kind of

wanted to get back to Birmingham, and it was just kind of—my wife was here, doing her store, so I was going to be moving to Birmingham. Our distributors were here; this was kind of the perfect storm, to be honest with you. So, in 2012, started looking for property up here—or a bakery.

[00:43:04.23]

**Ben R.:** Well, we outgrew that space.

[00:43:04.23]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:43:05.20]

**Ben R.:** We were maxed out through the night in Montgomery.

[00:43:11.08]

**Ryan R.:** So we were gonna either have to find somewhere there or—

[00:43:13.12]

**Ben R.:** Exactly.

[00:43:13.12]

**Ryan R.:** We were gonna have to find another space. So we were like, "Let's just move it to Birmingham." So, in 2013 is when I found the space out in Irondale. It was about twenty-five hundred square foot, and we built out the bakery, put a freezer in the back. Not a huge space, but it was—we were very efficient. We really grew in that space. It was out in Irondale, it was a great space. Yeah. It's 2013.

[00:43:46.20]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. So, I guess, how did it grow? Could you talk about that growth from Montgomery and how it changed in Birmingham?

[00:43:56.09]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. Once we got here, we were really tight with Wood Fruitticher, and we were really doing a lot of their food shows. We were—we actually had a kind of exclusive agreement with them, we weren't gonna do any other food service distribution except through Wood. So, Ben actually had one of their sales reps—their sales manager, a guy named Ronnie Milligan—and Ronnie took fond of us, and took Ben, one of their biggest accounts was Honey Baked Ham. Took Ben with him over to Atlanta one day, and Ronnie had told Honey Baked Ham about us. Ben went over there and demo'd our product for them and actually got us into Honey Baked Ham. That was a huge hit for us, and still is today. We co-pack their items—it's our product, but with their label on it. It's a private label, is what you call it. So, that was huge growth for us.

[00:44:58.13]

**Ben R.:** That was big. That was a big lick. Then just getting out there, I started going, once we got to Birmingham and kinda set up a plan, once we got caught up on operations I took over the sales part of it and started doing ride-alongs with their sales reps, which means I would go get in a car with a Wood Fruitticher salesman, and we would go see eight of his accounts, and we would start selling. In the food service business, one restaurant might buy from two to three different distributors, so then the U.S. Foods, Ciscos, Ben E. Keith, Halsey—which are the ones here in Alabama, for the most part—started seeing it. Then we started getting requests, because they wanted to have the product to be able to sell it. If they don't have it, they can't sell that customer. So, that's kinda how it snowballed to get into more of those distributors, as far as on the sales side of it. It was just building those relationships with those guys. To this day, our strongest relationships are still with the Wood Fruitticher guys and that family, just for getting us started. And we feel loyal to them, too.

[00:46:06.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, I guess we should talk, too—I mean, within this growth, you guys are growing from orange rolls into other products, too. What was that recipe development like, and I guess, why that decision?

[00:46:22.22]

**Ryan R.:** Well, that's kinda what Copeland—we were asking what would be a need, you know? 'Cause we only had one product, orange rolls. And really to get out and sell, not everybody's gonna use an orange roll. Not everybody's gonna use whatever. So, that's when we kinda developed the cinnamon roll, using the same dough we used. My dad really helped out with that, as far as the filling and the icing and coming up with those. Then we came up—Wood Fruitticher had requested, they wanted to have a better frozen yeast roll on the market, and that's when we did that one, as well. Really, to do this day, to be honest with you, those are still our three main items. Now, we do 'em all in different ways for different customers. But actually, we were making a sausage roll at first. That was behind the orange roll, was probably our number one seller, retail. The Health Department shut us down doing that, because we weren't U.S.D.A. and all that. The funny part about that sausage roll is, I could call some people today, ten years later and ask 'em, and they would just tell—"Send a truckload of it." They loved that thing. So . . . we've not said we'll never do it, but we haven't got back around to it.

[00:47:38.15]

**Annemarie A.:** Makes sense.

[00:47:40.24]

**Ryan R.:** We've got a couple recipes we may to tinker with in the next couple years.

[00:47:44.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you talk a little bit, too, about Ms. Millie's role as the company grew and kind of how she felt about it?

[00:47:53.22]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah. She . . . till the day she left, she was still hands-on. When we moved up here, she wasn't doing the rolling, but she was still doing a lot of baking. We got a new oven, and she was learning that new oven. It was a convection oven, spiral convection oven. Then she was doing that, we replaced her doing that, and she moved to—she was still doin'gall the food shows with us, but she just loved being in that bakery.

[00:48:24.06]

**Ben R.:** Icing, bagging rolls.

[00:48:25.13]

**Ryan R.:** She moved to bagging. Her last position was actually bagging rolls. I mean, when we were in that Irondale location, man, she was—we had actually outgrown it, and we were in offices bagging rolls. Like, literally. We'd roll racks from the back up into the office space and bag rolls in that office space, and she would be up there, bagging rolls.

[00:48:52.29]

**Ben R.:** Bagging and helping box rolls in the back, then going to do demos with me or going to do food shows.

[00:48:59.24]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:49:01.10]

**Ben R.:** Mom always had an opinion on everything, so she was always voicing opinion in the bakery, which was awesome.

[00:49:09.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Maybe let's talk about the bakery space. Maybe the one you have now. Could you kind of describe what it looks like and what the different stations are and kinda that process of makin' these rolls?

[00:49:24.09]

**Ben R.:** Yeah. Really what happened after Irondale is we got a phone call from Jack's restaurants, it's a big chain here in Birmingham, and they wanted us to make a cinnamon cluster roll. That was a big lick. That was kinda the last straw, as far as the Irondale location. We were already pretty much maxed out there, like Ryan

was telling you. We were bagging rolls in our offices, on our desks. It got so tight. Employees were bagging rolls while I was sitting at my desk. We were helping, obviously, around the clock. Then we decided, "All right. If we're gonna do it, let's go big." That's when we decided to move down here, to downtown. We were actually kinda in the midst of, "Where do we want to go?" And we actually met with John and Dave Wood, the two owners of Wood Fruitticher, and asked them—they're a lot older than us—and just wanted some of their wisdom about when they made the transition from their first spot to their big spot and how did they pick the location. It's like, you can always go out of Birmingham and move way out and go cheaper as far as land, building, and that, but at the time, Ryan and I each had our first child—who, they're about six weeks apart—and both of us were wanting to have another one. We kind of made the decision we'd rather be closer to Homewood and Mountain Brook, where we both live, to have more of a family life with work. In the bakery world, it's a constant, every day. So, if we had moved out an hour outside of Birmingham, that's two hours travel and going out there. We were running 24/7, so the lights are always on. But as far as, like, the positions and how we do it in the bakery, we actually kept everything the same that my mom wanted, 'cause we wanted to keep the quality of our product and the integrity of what we did. We didn't just want to reformulate the dough, reformulate the icings. We wanted Mom's orange roll that she made in 1979 to be the orange roll we made today, but we just had to find a way with a couple pieces of machinery to be able to produce. 'Cause we were running into more of an

operation problem than a sales problem. Ryan flew up, actually, to Wegmans—that's a grocery store chain in the Northeast—and we went to their bakery and found a machine that would do what we needed to do as far as rolling out our dough. But we still, basically everything was still manual. We just had one part of the machine where it would roll out the dough for us, and then we had guys that would put all the smear on it, cut 'em, put 'em in pans. That's really the only automation we did, 'cause after that, it was back to how we've done it from day one. They would pick the rolls off the line, put 'em in pans. We built a huge proof box, where we used to have this little one, where we could roll probably fifteen racks in there, proof the rolls. Then we bought three spiral ovens, where they could pick up two baking racks and cook 'em evenly. Then we had guys de-panning the rolls, taking 'em out, putting 'em on sheet pans. The next space you would move to is the icing, where we had guys doing it the same way we've always done it with these piping bags, icing the orange rolls, icing the cinnamon rolls. Then it was more to a drying station, letting 'em dry. Then packing, freezing, and then having to box. Now we have a huge freezer back there, where we didn't have to shuffle as much inventory around. That's, in a sense, how it goes. There's a lot more to that, but that's the gist of it.

[00:53:11.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. How many employees do you guys have currently?

[00:53:17.13]

**Ryan R.:** Well, I mean, in 16—well, we moved to this new space we're in now, this bakery in downtown Birmingham, like I said, we're at 2,500 square feet in Irondale, this bakery here's right at under 13,000 square feet. We got that Jack's business and we got some other accounts, and we kinda started outgrowing the space the first year we were in it. So, we had to make some tough calls, of how do we grow? Do we find more money? Do we go to build onto it? When does that end, when does that part end? So, we talked to some mentors and some advisors about kind of, like, how to grow without having to go to the bank, 'cause Ben and I don't come from money. How do we grow how we want to grow without taking on investors and giving up shares of our company that we've worked so hard for? The best thing for us would be something to find, a baking partner, like a co-packer. So, at our height, when we were really baking out of here, we had, I think, around twenty-five employees. But in September of [20]17, we decided to partner with a baking company out of Nashville, Tennessee called the Tennessee Bun Company. They have a bakery in Atlanta called Masada Bakery. They actually have taken over our production of our product.

[00:54:54.10]

**Ben R.:** We moved our line over there, and one of our employees went to Atlanta with it, 'cause we didn't want to change anything. Ryan said that was a tough decision. We wanted everything to stay the same as far as operations, we just needed bigger

space. They came down, and we interviewed 'em a couple times, and they're family-owned as well. They wanted to do it exactly what like we did and not changing anything. So, that was just a blessing that we found those people to do that, 'cause they're a little smaller than the Flowers or Bimbos of the world. It's been great so far.

[00:55:30.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Are there any, I guess, employees or people that were in the bakery who just really got really good at . . . their job?

[00:55:43.12]

**Ryan R.:** Yes.

[00:55:43.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That maybe was really close to Miss Ray or you guys?

[00:55:46.29]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:55:46.29]

**Ben R.:** Yeah.

[00:55:46.29]

**Annemarie A.:** Could you talk about them?

[00:55:49.04]

**Ben R.:** Oh, yeah. We've had, I mean, Gilberto and Leo, they were with us—

[00:55:56.23]

**Ryan R.:** Well, Gilberto, he moved from Montgomery.

[00:55:58.12]

**Ben R.:** He followed us here.

[00:55:59.11]

**Ryan R.:** From Montgomery, he was one of our first employees until we moved the production to Atlanta.

[00:56:08.15]

**Ben R.:** And Mom worked through the night with him many-a nights, when we first started in Montgomery. They became close, and my mom was—at sixty-five years old, could work just as hard as they could, which is rare. Then another guy named Leo, who actually went over to Atlanta and runs our line to this day, was a very special employee, very smart. Figured it out, helped us out with the transition and

the new line we put back there, got back there and just made it happen. That took a lot of burden off Ryan and I, because when you move locations, the sales don't stop. You know? It's not like you can tell everybody, "We're gonna stop making 'em when we go." So, that was awesome, to get that up and running so quick.

[00:56:55.23]

**Ryan R.:** As far as relationships with Mom, Gilberto was probably one of Mom's closer employees. He was actually at my mother's funeral last month, which was kinda cool. Didn't even know he was coming, I thought it was kinda neat, along with two other ladies who were close with Mom. Didn't really even know Mom that well, didn't even work with—they weren't with us that long, but they were there. It was kinda neat.

[00:57:20.13]

**Ben R.:** Yeah.

[00:57:20.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's special.

[00:57:21.16]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:57:21.16]

**Ben R.:** Yeah.

[00:57:22.18]

**Ryan R.:** And then a lot of people like sales reps and . . . you know, like the Wood family, a lot of those people were at Mother's funeral, who she became real close with. Even Patty . . .

[00:57:34.12]

**Ben R.:** One of our first customers, Allegra Farms, Patty down in . . . I guess that's Fair Hope.

[00:57:43.02]

**Ryan R.:** Daphne.

[00:57:43.02]

**Ben R.:** Daphne. Was one of our first customers, and my mom and Patty just—they had a special relationship, so that was cool, too.

[00:57:52.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good.

[00:57:52.14]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:57:53.07]

**Annemarie A.:** We've talked a little bit about this with the Snyders and Urban

Cookhouse and some of the independent grocers and stuff, but I guess, could you talk a little bit about some customers that are . . . I guess further, that you guys really appreciate?

[00:58:09.26]

**Ben R.:** That's one of 'em. It's all about the relationships in this business. The Allegras of

the world or Joe Patti's down in Pensacola, where you build a relationship with someone who you kind of can tell has worked as hard as you to build their business, are the kinda ones I hit it off with. The ones that have been with us for ten years, you know? And stay true to us, and we're loyal to them, I guess would be some of our best customers. And a lot here in Birmingham, as well.

[00:58:39.07]

**Ryan R.:** I think Bright Star out in Hoover, or out in Bessemer, has been a great customer of ours.

[00:58:44.16]

**Ben R.:** Cedar House out in Tarrant. They're a family-owned business, they use our products, and we just love those people. People like that, the Virciglios, the Piggly-Wigglys, have been one of our best.

[00:58:58.27]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:58:58.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:58:58.27]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah.

[00:59:00.08]

**Annemarie A.:** And too, to kind of go off this Birmingham thing, so it kind of seems that the orange roll is special to Alabama and special to Birmingham because of The Club and because of All Steak and Cullman. Could you talk a little bit, I guess, about—or does Millie Ray's fit into that history? Is that somethin' that you guys know about or think about? And then, you mention a little bit about how people knew what the roll was when it was first kind of debuted again in Homewood. Could you talk about its kind of relationship and how people in Birmingham feel about it?

[00:59:40.06]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, it's kind of—you know, when we first started making that roll in Birmingham, Mom was making the roll in Birmingham, I didn't even know All Steak or The Club is this—I had no idea. Then we moved to Montgomery when I was in fifth grade and Ben was in seventh grade, so we were kinda out of this environment and Mom was still making it. Then, even when we started making it in Atlanta, when we were living in Atlanta and Mom started making it, I mean, the All Steak and The Club weren't even . . . we didn't even know they made 'em.

[01:00:11.11]

**Ben R.:** Nah.

[01:00:11.11]

**Ryan R.:** I mean, we didn't really—we kinda heard something about 'em, but it wasn't even . . . we didn't know anything about it. It wasn't part of our history or, we were just making Mom's orange roll. And then, until we kinda got moved up here and started really getting in the business, people started talkin' about it. "You all know The Club makes some?" I'm actually a member at The Club, and man, I've talked to 'em about them before, and actually gone up there for some events, actually met one of the . . . guess he was the chef up there. I don't know if he's still the chef or not, but he says that they—I was like, "Man, I love—" 'Cause we're trying to sell

'em the yeast roll—"I was like, man, I know I can't get that orange roll business." He says, "No, can't give that up." But I will tell you this: they went for about . . . there was a lady who made 'em for 'em, and that's all she did, was make the orange roll up there. And she retired or whatever and the recipe kinda changed, and for about twenty years, they've been making a different orange roll than the original one that got so much fame. He said they've actually, over the last few years, they'd gone back and found the original recipe and started making the original recipe in the last few years, which I thought was kinda interesting.

[01:01:34.04]

**Annemarie A.:** That is interesting.

[01:01:35.04]

**Ryan R.:** But All Steak, I never—

[01:01:38.11]

**Ben R.:** Well, unless someone's from Coleman or around that area, we don't ever hear too much about that one. Unless we have a friend of ours from Auburn or Alabama that is from Coleman who lives in Birmingham, that's the only time I ever hear about it. So, I don't—

[01:01:55.06]

**Ryan R.:** You have to go to the restaurant to eat it, you know?

[01:01:57.23]

**Ben R.:** They don't wholesell 'em like we do, you know? And neither does The Club, obviously, so.

[01:02:01.28]

**Ryan R.:** As far as fitting into that history, I think we're writing our own history. I don't think that—I think we're different, I think it's a completely different product than . . .

[01:02:17.25]

**Ben R.:** We've had both of theirs and ours, and it's . . . they may all be calling it 'orange roll,' but it's three different products.

[01:02:25.02]

**Ryan R.:** And we didn't take it from them, and . . . we didn't even know that orange rolls were a thing in Alabama.

[01:02:32.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[01:02:33.20]

**Ryan R.:** It's kinda weird.

[01:02:33.23]

**Ben R.:** Ours is more of an orange yeast roll, where theirs are more of, like, a breadier-style roll. That's kind of what set ours apart, if you had to pick something. We zest our own oranges and use the real orange zest off the oranges and stuff like that, so.

[01:02:52.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I won't keep you much longer, but I do have another big question. So, an interesting part that I've kind of learned—I mean . . . these kind of rolls, these things, are mostly historically women's work, and made and consumed inside the home. And you guys are men, obviously, so what's that—what does it mean for men to be carrying on this traditionally, quote, women's work? And how do you see yourself fitting within that narrative or not fitting within that narrative?

[01:03:29.22]

**Ben R.:** I think, for us, we can just relate just because we worked with my mom, and that kind of . . . you know, I feel like I can talk to any woman business owner, and I do, just like Patty or whoever else, and have a great relationship, I think due to my mom teaching me, is how I have that instilled in me. That as far as, women doing work like that are just as capable as any man or anything like that.

[01:03:58.18]

**Ryan R.:** Mm-hm.

[01:04:00.09]

**Ben R.:** And Mom's really a big part of that, so, yeah. That helps, her guiding us when we got started, and just watching her work ethic and what goes into making rolls. Where probably sometime, guys are a little . . . let's make it happen, let's do it, where Mom or another woman is more about the details and making sure the roll's rising right, you're using the right ingredients and stuff like that. That's instilled in us, to keep it the right way. Stuff like that.

[01:04:37.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Then . . . the last one would be . . . well, I have two more questions left. The first is, what's your market? Who do you think—or who do you know—are the people who are kind of buying this the most? Do you see this kind of already-packaged, ready-to-eat orange roll as a disruption of a tradition of baking it in the home or something that kind of carries that tradition out?

[01:05:10.18]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, I mean . . . I think, we've talked about it a lot. Everybody's . . . for my wife, my wife doesn't cook. If we cook, it's usually me, but we do a lot of to-go or

pick-up or we did the Blue Apron deal. You see a lot of that now going on. So, I would say that—I don't know if we're a disruptor, but I would say we're just part of . . . I guess just the food chain. I mean, I don't know if it's . . . I don't know if it's disruptive, but I just think we're just . . . we really just, I think rolls are a commodity item. It's not a . . . I think the yeast roll is more of a commodity, but orange roll and cinnamon roll is more kind of like a specialty item.

[01:06:11.09]

**Ben R.:** I think it's refreshing for people to see the orange roll and the cinnamon roll on the shelves, especially people fifty-five and up, where maybe their kids aren't making rolls or they didn't make rolls, and when you try one of our rolls, you can taste that homemade style, where you would say, "Oh, that's something my grandmother would make." That's a big saying in the state of Alabama or in the South in general, is, "Oh, my grandmother made those," or, "My mom made those." I get that a lot when I'm out showing rolls or meeting new customers, was, "Oh, that's something your mom would make," or "That tastes like my grandmother would make," or "That's something like my grandmother would make." This key lime pie, just through that similar homemade aspect of, "These rolls made them, and they're not processed." And they're not . . . so, I don't think we disrupted anything. I think the people enjoy it.

[01:07:08.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. My last question is, what do you hope for the future of Millie Ray's?

[01:07:14.22]

**Ben R.:** Yeah, I mean, that's a big thing right now, is we're trying to grow and do some more retail. Maybe grow more into the Southeast, where most of our business right now is: Alabama or the Panhandle, a little bit in Mississippi and Georgia, expand that. Maybe entertain the idea of some of the bigger retailers in the Southeast, and build those relationships. See where it takes us. Then also, we're building our food service business up, as well. Do more marketing, and Ryan and I hired a company now to help with the social media and that stuff all those millennials do, is what everybody says, with the Facebook and Instagram and really grow that to help build the brand.

[01:08:03.09]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[01:08:05.10]

**Ben R.:** That's one of my mom's things, is she said, "I just want you guys to keep it going." So.

[01:08:11.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Is there anything else you guys want to add, anything we haven't talked about that you guys want to talk about or mention?

[01:08:17.11]

**Ryan R.:** No.

[01:08:17.17]

**Ben R.:** I think we covered it.

[01:08:18.18]

**Ryan R.:** Yeah, I think we did.

[01:08:19.15]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay, great. Thank you very much.

[01:08:20.17]

**Ben R.:** Yeah, absolutely.

[01:08:20.17]

**Ryan R.:** Thank you.

*[End of interview]*