

Interview of: Kristen Farmer Hall
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Interview Date: May 6, 2021



Kristen Farmer Hall
The Essential and Bandit Pâtisserie

Date: May 6, 2021
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Interviewer: Michelle Little
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Michelle Little: Okay. So this is Michelle Little interviewing Kristen Farmer Hall on May 6th of 2021, and we are at her restaurant, The Essential. And the last time I interviewed you, Kristen, was May 27th of 2020. [laughter]

[00:00:19]

Kristen Farmer Hall: That's hard to believe, Michelle. That's hard to believe.

[00:00:22]

Michelle Little: I know. It has been almost exactly a year, and I fully expect our interview to be somewhat rambling, because we're all having trouble thinking chronologically. [laughs]

[00:00:36]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Thinking right now. Exactly.

[00:00:37]

Michelle Little: But I wanted to start out just by asking you about how the rest of the summer went and what you remember about that summer, because I think you guys were just wrapping up doing pop-up dinners here in this very patio. [laughs]

[00:00:52]

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Kristen Farmer Hall: Yes. Where we are sitting right now I believe is where our prep cooler was sitting, because we had actually moved our kitchen equipment outside during service because we really didn't feel like we wanted to cook for an empty restaurant. You know, we were all dealing with such, like, heavy psychological stress, that, you know, it was a beautiful summer, actually, last year, and so we just decided that with the dining room closed, we would go ahead and move everybody outside, like, our team, and be able to sort of like at least be outside in the elements, instead of sort of inside a quiet, empty restaurant wondering, you know, what our future was going to be.

[00:01:34]

Michelle Little: [laughs] Yeah.

[00:01:34]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah, so pretty intense. But I will say, you know, right after we had finished some pop-up dinners and we had done a couple of fundraisers, actually, for some local nonprofits, and then they lifted—I can't remember the timeline on that. They lifted indoor dining bans sometime like, I think, in the early summer, and so we went ahead and opened the patio for dining, I guess, like in-service dining. Then we moved our host station outside. I felt really badly for our hosts, because it was an Alabama summer, of course, and so we were standing outside greeting guests in August, and so we did our best, like, portable fans and, like, all kinds of umbrellas to, like, you know, guard against the elements, I guess. But it's been a wild ride, for sure.

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[00:02:27]

Michelle Little: Yeah. And I know another thing you were struggling with, like y'all had gotten the PPP loans, but they had to be used for staffing, and you were kind of grappling with how to handle that. How did that play out for you?

[00:02:44]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, that was such an interesting time, too, because there was such relief that we had gotten a PPP, because we ended up missing that first round of funding, and in that timeline, you know, obviously you're wondering is the restaurant going to make it, right? Is the bakery going to make it? Because, you know, we were also kind of grappling with we had these two restaurant spaces and what are we going to do with them? Obviously, by that point we all realized that this was going to be a very, very long situation to handle.

And so, yeah, we had gotten the PPP, which was such a huge relief, because it was like, well, at least personally, you know, and for our team, we can pay them. But, yeah, it was so restrictive, and understandably so. I mean, by that point, it was payroll protection, right? So it was super restrictive, but it enabled us to, like, keep our lease, at least, you know, going and sort of up to date and then pay our team.

[00:03:46]

Michelle Little: Okay. [laughs] And your team is, like, coming by now?

[00:03:51]

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Kristen Farmer Hall: Exactly. With beautiful strawberry tarts.

[00:03:52]

Michelle Little: They look amazing. [laughs]

[00:03:55]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, and I will also say—this is really not specifically on this topic of the PPP, but for us in the food industry, I will say that, you know, it's been such, like, a juxtaposition between the food and beverage industry was just decimated, right, by COVID, but at the same time, the seasons didn't stop, right? And so we still were able to have the tiniest sense of normalcy when it was like, "Oh, it's peach season. It is tomato season. Oh, it's eggplant season," and being able to sort of like keep a little bit of a rhythm, a little bit of a natural sort of circadian rhythm, even, for our day and produce and things like that. So as the strawberry tarts just passed by, I was like, "Yes, it's strawberry season."

[00:04:45]

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah, and I remember seeing those types of rhythms pop up on your Instagram. Like, your Instagram was always so inspiring to me throughout even the winter, which, to me, was just the darkest of all times. [laughs]

[00:05:00]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Right.

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[00:05:02]

Michelle Little: And so I've been wanting to ask, like, how—and maybe that's part of it, is like seeing when produce came in and having this little thing to look forward to and focus on? Like, how were you staying positive through—

[00:05:18]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, I think—I actually do think that, you know, it kind of sounds silly, but, yeah, the fruits and vegetables of, like—there was a little bit of solace knowing that, like, okay, winter is here, and winter, you can use that thematically in many forms, right? So psychologically it was quite the winter, but, you know, it's one of those things that the spring always comes, right? And it did. It gave a little bit of—I don't know. There's a lot of hope in the seasons, and, you know, for me, food really is about—it is about the seasons and it is about hope, it's about feeding people, and I think that we tried to also keep that in mind.

We decided to be very community-focused on decisions that we made for the restaurant in terms of what we were going to do and what we were going to serve, and, you know, what systems we were going to have. So I think that really—you know, it just kind of shakes things up and kind of gets you out of the doldrums a little bit in terms of what am I going to do versus, like, what are we going to do for them, and I think that really—it really helps. I don't know. I think that's what leadership is, really, you know. It's making decisions, yes, for yourself, but really, like, how can we serve the

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community? How can we serve our team, you know, through what is probably the craziest thing we've all been through? So I think that really helped.

[00:06:52]

Michelle Little: Yeah, and then speaking of seasons, how did—because, you know, how did the holidays end up going for you guys, you know, Thanksgiving, Chris— [laughs]

[00:07:06]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Right? It was crazy. Well, and, you know, it was so interesting, too, because, you know, we have the restaurant that's sort of an upscale neighborhood café, but we also have the bakery, and right as all of this was happening in the summer, we were under construction for a new production space for the bakery, so we had decided to move the bakery team and all of our equipment, basically all of our production, next door to The Essential, which ended up being such a wonderful thing, but we were, like, also doing a construction project in the middle of a pandemic, also in the middle of holiday season. [laughs]

So, you know, we moved in in early November, so it was right before Thanksgiving, and, you know, we ended up just doing our regular thing, and we did Thanksgiving sales, all kinds of holiday menu things, and by that time, The Essential was—we were at 50 percent capacity, so we were back to a normal schedule, if you will. We had kind of, you know, stopped pivoting quite so much, and I think that was also really helpful, because, you know, there weren't and still really aren't the right things or the right answers. Like, all of the answers seemed—like, they were always—there were

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so many pros and cons, and so we had just decided that the best thing for us, as owners, and for our team was to stop changing anything. It was like, okay, we know how to go back to serving food, you know. We know how to go back to putting food on plates and food in boxes, and we know how to make pastries. And, you know, it was a strange time to be baking, especially in a holiday season where people weren't gathering, really, together with their families, but it ended up being a great season for us.

[00:09:01]

Michelle Little: Yeah, because we were certainly eating. We might not have been gathering, but— [laughs]

[00:09:07]

Kristen Farmer Hall: People were still eating, and they were eating a lot. And we've also noticed they've been consuming a lot of adult beverages too.

[00:09:15]

Michelle Little: Yes! Yeah. [laughs]

[00:09:17]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yes. So both of those things have been very, you know, apparent. Like, people are still eating and drinking a lot, and I think that's obviously because it's super comforting, right? I mean, there's something wonderfully nostalgic about, you know, a thing that you've been eating for your whole life, right? So we, again, kind of

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going back to that community aspect of it helps us to know that we were giving people a sense of normalcy in baking pecan pies, right, in baking pumpkin pies, and also, like, we did, we got a few stories back, too, about, you know, how, you know, “Grandma used to make this specific thing, but now we can’t visit with Grandma because we don’t want to expose her.” So there were a lot of people who were getting pies and things for the first time outside of their family. So I just, like, I took it very personally, like in a—it was, like, a super emotional time, you know? So I just think it was a good reminder about what we do, and food is really important.

[00:10:28]

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah. I mean, speaking for just our family, I think I overcompensated in what I bought and brought, like goodies I could bring in for just *any* special occasion—

[00:10:40]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely.

[00:10:40]

Michelle Little: —to mark it a little more, you know?

[00:10:42]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely.

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[00:10:44]

Michelle Little: Yeah, it was so important to be able to go out and gather those things.

[laughs]

[00:10:48]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yes, exactly, and so I was glad that we were able to play, you know, a small part in that, while also—you know, it's always that balance of trying to keep our team cared for too. So, you know, I think we set some pretty good bars and some pretty good parameters for sales so that we felt like we could do this well, but not over-bake and over-order, just so that our team also didn't feel like, you know, they couldn't spend time with their family too.

[00:11:17]

Michelle Little: Yeah, that's been—yeah. And so how—I mean, this is a great setup, right?

[00:11:24]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Oh, it's so good!

[00:11:25]

Kristen Farmer Hall: I mean, so can you talk a little bit just about the process of getting that space and some of the challenges you went through with the build and— [laughs]

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[00:11:34]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely. Well, you know, a lot of people were doing building, so if you had resources, you know, people were doing a lot of building and they were doing a lot of home remodeling, and so the prices of lumber and other, you know, raw materials were really expensive. And so it wasn't an ideal time to construct things. I think everybody that was also scrambling to, like, build outdoor structures and patios and all that kind of stuff certainly felt that pinch, but, you know, it was a really awesome opportunity because we had a space literally right next door to The Essential, and it had been a juice bar, so it had a few of the elements, you know, the boring elements of floor drains and, you know, grease traps and things like that that we really needed. So the buildout was very straightforward. We tried to minimize investment in the space just because it extended the timeline. It was like we really needed to be next door because we had such a small, consolidated team.

But it's been so wonderful. Gosh, it's made me feel like we can do it, you know? [laughs] Because Victor and I, my partner, we were trying to manage two different spaces that were nowhere close to each other, and so it was sort of like all the kids come home from—you know, it was just everybody kind of came back to home base. Construction was challenging, but we were able to utilize a lot of those resources we had already used in all of the buildouts we had done before, so I was thankful that this, I think—maybe this was our fifth buildout, and so we, you know, we knew a bit what we were getting into, and so it went really smoothly and the move was great.

And we had a really good architect that helped us, like, play equipment Tetris, because we were going from such a big open space to a smaller, more consolidated space

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that had some weird corners and things like that, and so we basically measured and measured and measured again for every piece of equipment that we had, and then we all played Tetris to see if we could fit everything we had into the space, and, thankfully, the answer was yes.

[00:13:51]

Michelle Little: That's awesome. And so it's—just since nobody can see, but it's like walk up, people can, like, come by and pick up.

[00:14:00]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, interestingly enough, so we decided to keep the space as production only. Now, over—gosh, we also used the farmers' market, too, as sort of a retail location for us, too, so Pepper Place Farmers' Market here in Birmingham is really kind of where everyone meets, you know, on Saturday mornings, and there's a ton of bakers and farmers and other vendors, and so we ended up buying a delivery van, so we were constructing and then we bought a delivery van. You know, it was such a time where it was like all of a sudden, we had a delivery van, and I was like, "How did we get a delivery van?" [Little laughs.] But it was our only—the farmers' market was really the only means of retail that we had. And the weather was nice, so we did the farmers' market into the fall, and then we ended up sort of creating what is technically a walk-up window, but we basically opened the front door to the space and put a table in it, and we spent all winter standing in the cold, delivering, like, handing pastries to people out the front door, and it works, you know. It wasn't awesome. [Little laughs.] But, you know, I

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mean, it was a winter pandemic. What are you gonna do? [Little laughs.] So I feel like we did our best to make it work.

Then we knew we wanted another storefront at some point for Bandit, but, you know, obviously we wanted to see how the rest of the pandemic was going to play out before we started investing, you know, dollars and other spaces. But, yes, it is literally right up the hill, so that our pastry team just, like, walks beautiful cakes and pastries down the hill and they walk right back up. So it's been pretty ideal for that situation.

[00:15:48]

Michelle Little: Yeah. I mean, this is such a great space right here. I mean, just—

[00:15:52]

Kristen Farmer Hall: It's, like, an open patio.

[00:15:54]

Michelle Little: Yeah, right in the middle of downtown.

[00:15:55]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely. Right on the historic cobblestone. Like, you know, I will say I'm really glad we decided to make our home base here, so—

[00:16:05]

Michelle Little: I'm so glad that's working out.

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[00:16:06]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah.

[00:16:08]

Michelle Little: Okay. So what are other things that just kind of popped up for you, that maybe I wouldn't even know to ask about, throughout the fall and winter?

[00:16:19]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, I think one of the things that was challenging just in terms of communication was that, you know, our farmers—again, it's so interesting. If you're locally driven like we are, obviously our goal is to be—a lot of our farmers stopped coming to Birmingham because they were trying to feed their communities too. So our access to local ingredients and fruits and vegetables was actually pretty limited. So we ended up having to, like, do a little bit of produce stands for that.

Then same thing with, like, paper products and things like that, you know, it was like—or gloves, all the PPE and all the to-go things, you know, they were in such demand that, like, obviously the demand exceeded supply, for sure, so that was a really hard sort of—we can't get to-go boxes, and it was like, well, right now that's almost the only source of revenue that we have, is to-go food, so just all the scrambling in terms of trying to get raw materials and paper goods.

And also just—I remember thinking—this is actually right at the beginning of the pandemic, and I mean like a week or two into it—this was before we were wearing

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masks, and somebody suggested to us, “Maybe your team should wear masks.” And I remember thinking, “That’s ludicrous, right? Like, there’s no way that we’re going to wear a mask for twelve hours a day or fifteen,” or however long we were producing, and that the world was going to be masked, and then, obviously, like, we didn’t know what we were dealing with, and so all of a sudden, we were in masks, and it’s just been—the masks have been so challenging.

[00:18:05]

Michelle Little: Yeah. I mean, how are you grappling with that with customers? I mean, I’ve just heard nightmare stories.

[00:18:13]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, I mean, I suppose it’s a funny story, but we ended up getting into a pretty significant altercation, verbal altercation, with one of our guests who was picking up. You know, it’s really interesting, too, I am very thankful that the community has supported masks and that our mayor here in the city of Birmingham has also supported masks, and our Health Department, along with the city leadership, put a mask ordinance in place when our state leadership had not done that. And so, thankfully, instead of us having to say, “Well, these are *our* rules,” we were able to say, “We are enforcing the rules that have been put in place.” So masks have been hard, I will say, and we’re still under a mask ordinance right now. The state expired, but the city of Birmingham is in effect until May the 24th, and so that has helped us, you know, to keep our guests safe.

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And, you know, at this point, we're sort of in that weird in-between of our team is vaccinated. You know, the priority, when we were able to become vaccinated, was to get everybody appointments and to make sure that, you know, we were able to take as many precautions as we could. So at this point, we're wearing masks, obviously, to help kind of help lead the charge and to continue to promote, you know, safety, but, yeah, the masks have been quite challenging.

[00:19:44]

Michelle Little: So how did the vaccine rollout go for you guys? I mean, was your team able to get appointments pretty quickly, or how challenging was that process?

[00:19:55]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, the challenge was that there wasn't really any single place to go, right?

[00:20:02]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

[00:20:02]

Kristen Farmer Hall: There was no leadership in that direction. There was no—so it was just kind of a free-for-all. Like, we called it the wild, wild West of vaccines. And, honestly, I personally took the charge, because I knew that my team—my team was here at work, and the way that those vaccine appointments were rolling out is that they would

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release them and then they would evaporate, right, in five minutes. So I ended up making appointments for my whole team.

[00:20:29]

Michelle Little: Oh, great.

[00:20:29]

Kristen Farmer Hall: And that way it was like, you know, obviously there are, you know—we asked if people wanted to be vaccinated, and if so, we wanted to help them get fully vaccinated. So we kind of used—you know, I spent a few days just literally, like, refreshing the page, right? [laughter]

[00:20:48]

Michelle Little: Yes.

[00:20:49]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Like, for twenty-five different appointments, you know?

[00:20:51]

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh.

[00:20:52]

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Kristen Farmer Hall: But that's how we did it. You know, obviously everybody decided to do things in the way that made sense for them, but there wasn't a centralized location for information for vaccines, and so I used American Family Care. They had a new system that they set up. And we used CVS and Wal—like, we just, you know, Walmart, all the options when they became available to us, you know. I just tried to sort of get folks in where I could.

[00:21:23]

Michelle Little: That's amazing that you did that for everyone, because, I mean, yeah, just for me and my husband, it took me—I would spend an hour a day—

[00:21:30]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Right, trying to get one. Right.

[00:21:31]

Michelle Little: —refresh, refresh. [laughs]

[00:21:34]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Refresh. I know, and it feels like you're, like, trying to get tickets to a Taylor Swift concert or something, you know. You're just like you get in line and then you just keep refreshing every ten seconds, and people are like, "What is *wrong* with you?" And I'm like, "I'm just trying to get a vaccine, okay?" Like, yes, it was insane.

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[00:21:51]

Michelle Little: And I remember the feeling when I actually clicked on one and I was typing our information in, I was shaking, I was so excited.

[00:21:58]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Oh, right, absolutely.

[00:21:59]

Michelle Little: Like as if I had gotten tickets to a concert. [laughs]

[00:22:02]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah, exactly. You're like, "I did it!"

[00:22:04]

Michelle Little: "I won!"

[00:22:05]

Kristen Farmer Hall: "I won!" And you're like—I mean, this is a weird thing to win, but I'm winning. That's fine. I'll take it. [Little laughs.] So, yes, it has been—that's the latest, you know, excitement, was all the vaccines and all the appointments and all that stuff.

[00:22:22]

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Michelle Little: So do y'all feel some sense of collective—you said everybody has been vaccinated.

[00:22:28]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely. I did have—I have two team members that chose not to get vaccinated, and, obviously, we respect their choice.

[00:22:34]

Michelle Little: Sure.

[00:22:35]

Kristen Farmer Hall: And so it is nice to know that everybody is vaccinated.

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Michelle Little: Did you—I mean, before you were able to get vaccine, I mean, did you kind of feel—how do you feel seeing customers come in the door every day and you're not vaccinated yet? I mean—

[00:22:55]

Kristen Farmer Hall: It's terrifying. It was terrifying, yeah. And I actually ended up getting COVID the first week of January. You know, after it was—and it was also so frustrating because we made it almost a whole entire year, right, without getting it, you know, super careful, you know, gloves and hand sanitizers and fully masked and all those

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kinds of things, but, you know, we see and touch thousands of people a week. I mean, it was thousands of people. So I did, I felt at risk, obviously, and so that was pretty stressful. But, yeah, you feel like once you've gotten a vaccine, you're like, "I feel like I'm kind of like a superhero now," you know? Like, it really does. There's a huge sense of relief, you know, that you know that you, hopefully, cannot get it, you know, or that you can't get it again. So I feel like we've done everything that we can to protect ourselves.

[00:23:59]

Michelle Little: Okay, I know we need to wrap up here because y'all are starting to get customers.

[00:24:03]

Kristen Farmer Hall: We're good.

[00:24:04]

Michelle Little: I definitely want to ask just what are some things that happened during the pandemic or changes that you've made that you think are going to last? You know, what are the lasting impacts of this last year for you business-wise and personally?

[00:24:24]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, I think—and I think we actually talked about this last time, Michelle. You know, I think all of us in the food and beverage industry were

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working at such a pace before the pandemic that it was obviously not sustainable, but we were all sort of falling away individually, and then I think just out of burnout and the pace and the return, you know, it's like you look at the end of the year, and we were making, what, 2 percent return, and you're working seventy hours a week. You know, you start to question our industry and the sustainability of it, and I think that once we all kind of came to a full stop, you know, by force, you know, we kind of realized that it wasn't sustainable and that we didn't want to go back to the way that it was before.

I would say for me personally, I will never go back to the level—it's not even the level of work, just the level of imbalance personally and professionally. Like, I just—I won't ever go back there again, so I'm really thankful that it gave us all some time to recalibrate, and I think that that has—obviously that will last forever, right? And I was also—am—not past tense, I guess; present tense—also trying to sort of do that with my children and trying to figure out the balance between work and home and being available to them. I don't know that I work—well, I do work less, actually, but I feel like I work more when I'm here because I have tried to protect some time for myself, so that when I get here to work, my cup is full, right? And so I feel like it's probably even more intense sometimes when I'm here because I feel very fully present, which is really nice, you know. And I think that will certainly stay that way.

One of the things that we recently did here at The Essential was something I was pretty adamantly opposed to, which was reservations.

[00:26:34]

Michelle Little: Yes!

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[00:26:34]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yes. You know, it sounds a little bit melodramatic, I guess, but, I mean, I grieved quite a bit when we decided to join a reservation platform, because before the pandemic, The Essential, we wanted it to be casual and for the neighborhood, and it was very community-focused, and sometimes reservations, especially before the pandemic, kind of gave a stuffiness or a seriousness, not even stuffy, but like kind of a seriousness to, you know, to dining, right? It was “We have to be here at a specific time,” and there’s expectations that come with that.

You know, I think now we’ve seen that our guests and the people that want to dine with us have a lot less buffer for waiting. They have actually a lot less buffer for a lot of things, and so that’s made it, you know, really challenging. But people are afraid still, and the idea of going to a restaurant and not knowing, I think really going anywhere in life and not knowing, but restaurants, obviously, because that’s what we do for a living, you know, people are not willing to have unknowns. So for us, we decided, you know, to kind of answer that in terms of, you know, reservations.

So I guess it’s been maybe just two or three weeks since we’ve been doing them, and it has definitely changed the dynamic, but people love it. And what we decided to do is sort of like, I guess, a medium kind of situation, is half of the restaurant is on reservations—we use Resy—and half is open. So, you know, because we just haven’t done reservations before, and so people come to The Essential expecting to be able to walk in, and I didn’t want to say to them, “Sorry, we’re reservation only.” But it’s been really nice, especially for those with, like, with kiddos or with parents that they’re caring

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for or, I mean, even their pets. You know, like, people are—like, they're super excited because they're like, "Okay, well, I get to eat dinner at 6:30 and I'll be home by 8:30," right? Versus before the pandemic, you know, "I'll get to the restaurant at 6:00. There could be an hour-and-a-half wait. I'm going to sit down at 7:30 and then maybe rush through because I have to get home to my babysitter," or, you know, the other things I have to do. So I think people have been—they've been very, very receptive to reservations.

[00:29:13]

Michelle Little: Yeah, I can say personally, as a planner, I actually have reservations here tomorrow night. [laughs] We were very excited about the reservations. [laughs]

[00:29:22]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah, you know, and it's so interesting, because as I talk to guests, especially on the weekends, there are people that are very thankful that we do have walk-ins available, too, because they aren't planners and they just want to, like, kind of breeze into the weekend, and they were like, "It makes me very anxious if I would have had to decide, you know, on a Wednesday what I was going to do on a Sunday," or not on a Sunday, but a Saturday. Because we decided to not take reservations for brunch.

[00:29:46]

Michelle Little: Oh!

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[00:29:47]

Kristen Farmer Hall: But we do take them for lunch and dinner, so, yeah.

[00:29:50]

Michelle Little: And does it help you with ordering? I mean, I imagine—

[00:29:55]

Kristen Farmer Hall: It does. It helps us with ordering. You know, we're able to kind of look on the books and see what we have. And I will also say—and I think it's been a perfect storm of vaccinations, beautiful weather, reservations, but we are busier than we've ever been, like way busier than pre-COVID.

[00:30:12]

Michelle Little: Wow!

[00:30:13]

Kristen Farmer Hall: So it's been nothing short of wild, yeah. The last two weeks has been *wild*, which is great but also challenging, because we're all facing a national shortage in the labor force, and so it's scary. [laughs]

[00:30:30]

Michelle Little: Yeah.

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[00:30:30]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah, it's kind of scary.

[00:30:32]

Michelle Little: Yeah. Can you talk about that a little bit, the labor shortage? What—

[00:30:38]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Absolutely. What do I think? How was it?

[00:30:40]

Michelle Little: Yeah. What's going on? [laughs]

[00:30:42]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Yeah. That's a great question. You know, so I think it's a variety of reasons that have driven this to a pretty critical situation. So, obviously, unemployment benefits have cared for a lot of people, so I feel—it's like I see both sides of the coin, really, in that there were a lot of people that were not able to find work or had been furloughed. Obviously, unemployment was there to care for people. The problem is that there is a little bit of a tweak to that, which is for those people who made less than \$17 an hour on average, well, then you can make more money unemployed than you can employed. So I think there is a little bit of that, to be honest. And I also think a lot of people moved home with their parents. In the food and beverage industry, obviously, we have younger people that work in the service, especially on that front-of-house side, so

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we haven't really had an major back-of-house shortages, but we've had front-of-house shortages, you know, and a lot of those folks are coming back and forth from college, trying to decide if they're going to college, you know, are they going to go to grad school now, and so a lot of them have moved home, which means that their need for financial security is different. So I think those two factors have kind of created a really interesting situation, and we already had a shortage here in Birmingham before the pandemic, and so it has been—it's kind of an extra situation right now.

[00:32:26]

Michelle Little: Yeah, okay. So do you see a way out of it, or do you see any hope, or—I mean—

[00:32:33]

Kristen Farmer Hall: You know, like I said when we first started this interview, you know, these questions are always so well timed sometimes [Little laughs], because just this morning, you know—I mean, we're sort of at a critical point. We had a couple of people not be able to come into their shifts, which means we really didn't even have people to serve people. So, you know, I think long term it will be okay. I feel really great about the culture that we have here at The Essential and at Bandit, and for people who do want to work in the food and beverage industry, I think you will want to work here, you know. I think we've set up a system that treats people like adults, right? And so you have access to health insurance and your schedules are pretty set, so if you want to have lunch with your grandma on Tuesdays, then we'll just give you off on Tuesdays, right? So I just

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think—and the pay is very competitive. So I think all of those factors, you know, I think long term will benefit us.

And we've started—I mean, just today we announced a referral bonus for any of our team members that bring someone to the team. So I think we've had to think way outside of the box in terms of recruitment. Thankfully, retention has been great. I think that, you know, when it's been a really hard day, instead of asking the kitchen to make family meal, we order pizza, right? And on Saturday and Sunday mornings when brunch is starting and most of the servers had also worked the dinner before, then we bring breakfast, you know. It's just small things that I think people—you know, just trying to make things better for them, right? I'm asking a lot of them, you know, we're all working incredible amounts of hours, and so just the small things, they matter, you know.

But, actually, I think I'll be serving some tables this weekend, if you really want to know the truth. [Little laughs.] When The Essential first started, again, we had a labor shortage, and The Essential had not been a restaurant yet, and so a lot of people were not willing to leave the jobs that they had before, you know, to come to work for a new restaurant, so I worked a lot of server shifts for the first year or so, a lot of host shifts and a lot of server shifts. I think most people thought that I was the host at The Essential [Little laughs], and not the owner, but all is well also. And so I think we're a little bit back to that stage, where it's pretty critical. Victor and I are willing to do whatever it takes to make it work, and so, you know, when the dishwasher doesn't show up or they're sick or they need to be off, then Victor works the dishwasher shift, which, you know—or I've been working a lot of host shifts.

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You know, I just think everybody—I think, obviously, you lead by example, and if I’m going to ask my team to do more than maybe they want to, then I’m going to do more than I want to, you know. And so I just—you know, it’s pretty critical right now, especially because the demand is so high. But, you know, we’re going to make it work. I know there are people out there. And, thankfully, for us, we have a small restaurant, right? So, thankfully, like, if I only—I can run a dinner service on three or four servers, right? So I don’t need eight to ten or twelve people to run the floor for me. So I’m thankful that we kind of kept things very small so that if there were gaps, we could fill them in.

So, yeah. So it is nothing short of wild. [Little laughs.] But I’m super thankful. Obviously, that means, you know, that we’re busy, right?

[00:36:21]

Michelle Little: Right!

[00:36:22]

Kristen Farmer Hall: It means that we survived, right? It means—you know, it’s been such a whirlwind of emotions, right? Literally since a year ago, you know, “Are we going to make it? Am I going to lose my house?” to we’re so busy, we have a two-hour wait, you know? Or reservations if you don’t want to wait. [laughs]

[00:36:41]

Michelle Little: Or reservations, yeah, yeah. Oh, that’s wonderful.

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[00:36:45]

Kristen Farmer Hall: It's been good. It's been good. It's been hard, but it's been good, and I'm super grateful and thankful that, you know, that we made it.

[00:36:54]

Michelle Little: Right! And is there anything that we haven't covered, that I didn't ask, that you, you know, that you've been thinking this year or—

[00:37:07]

Kristen Farmer Hall: Gosh. I think—I don't know. I think we covered a lot of it. I mean, I think it's been—it really has been such an emotional kind of whirlwind, you know? But like I said, I'm thankful that, you know, that Victor and I both, I think, committed to have better personal balance, you know, in terms of work, because the demands are so great when we're here, so I just think that for all of those of us that work in the industry or help lead the industry, to take care of yourself, you know? I think that the food and beverage industry has been like anti-self-care only because the demands have been so great, and I think it's time for us to answer sort of back and say, “No, we can build our own system that's sustainable.”

I know you probably read lots of articles about how the customer is always right, and, you know, it's the customer that drives those things, and I think at this point, we need to sort of take that back and say, “No, *we* can set a system where we are in service, we are not in servitude.” And that is a big difference, and I think it really matters.

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I think, along with, gosh, doing away with tipped wages, there's just so many things I think that our industry can really work towards and lead in terms of some federal changes that really empower owners to have better balance between the front and the back of house in terms of wages. It's such an interesting time, and I'm hoping that all of us kind of see where we are and take the opportunity to make the changes that need to happen, right? You know, thankfully, we're coming out of the pandemic. I just don't want us to go back to what we were doing before, where, you know, where the balance was off, right? And so I'm just—yeah, I'm really thankful that we have all taken a season of grief, and I'm hoping that we use that as an opportunity to make changes, yeah.

[00:39:19]

Michelle Little: That's so well put. Okay, well, thank you. I think this is a great place to end.

[End of interview]