



Lauren Cox
Georgia Organics
Atlanta, GA

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Diana D.: Here we go. All right; we're recording. My name is Diana Dombrowski. I'm here recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance on September 16, 2020 with Lauren Cox. Lauren, I wonder if you could please tell me when and where you were born.

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Lauren C.: Yeah; I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1984. I'm an [19]80s baby. It's such a typical name—yeah, Little Rock, Arkansas.

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Diana D.: Fabulous; okay. And is that where you grew up?

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Lauren C.: I did. I did go—I did grow up in Little Rock and I also went to college a little outside of Little Rock.

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Diana D.: All right. And what did you study in college?

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Lauren C.: In college, I studied—I got my undergrad in Post-Colonial African Studies and I got a minor in Photography.

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Diana D.: Amazing; wow. All right. So, you grew up in Arkansas. You studied this particular path and we're talking now today because the COVID-19 pandemic is going on, and we're focusing on foodways in the Southeast that are impacted, in particular the organics industry. So, could you walk me through how you got that fabulous degree and ended up farming yourself and now come to find yourself at Georgia Organics?

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Lauren C.: Yeah; yeah, for sure. So, I actually got really into food in college when I started studying Post-Colonial Africa and I took this amazing class called Culture and Colonialism with this teacher, who was just amazing. She had us read all of these books that talked about food embargoes and just like the culture around food and how that pertained to Indians that came to East Africa and built an infrastructure there, about you know the culture of the dinner table, you know post—post-colonization and how things like that were changed. And I just kind of loved that part of it. I also was hanging out—you know I went to—my college was like this hippy-dippy liberal arts school, and so we were all trying to be like vegans, vegetarians; we didn't shave armpits or anything like that. Yeah and then my friend came back from London and she was like there are all these you know Hindis and they don't eat meat. They don't eat beef. And so, we decided to become vegetarians and that's when I actually started caring about food. And I think that you know coincided with this Culture and Colonialism class. And so, it just connected the dots for me with food, culture, the history of our food, the sense of identity

and place. And then after that I ended up going and getting my masters at the Slow Food University in Italy.

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Diana D.: Wow.

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Lauren C.: Yeah, and I actually wanted to be a food historian for a really long time. But I ended up coming back in the middle of the recession—well, in 2011, so it was still in the recession. But I couldn't find a job. I was thinking okay, I want to work for farmers; I want to work for farmers, I want to represent their interests. And I couldn't find a job in the nonprofit world. Nobody was hiring and there were lots of unpaid internships with college students. So, I ended up doing a one-season stint on a farm in Georgia. I thought to myself, you know, what better way to learn about the people I want to represent than learning some of their skillset. And that just propelled me to end up farming. I did that for eight years and then I decided that I kind of wanted to move to the city and try something new. And I ended up finding myself back, back to where I had originally kind of wanted to be, and I found myself at Georgia Organics working for farmers and supporting farmers in the nonprofit sector, so that's how I got to Georgia Organics.

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Diana D.: [Laughter] That's a huge globetrotting journey. That's amazing.

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Lauren C.: Yeah; full circle.

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Diana D.: Yeah; yeah, and I know that you did an interview, I believe it was in 2014, where you talked especially about being influenced by your Aunt Mary and your mother, food, and nutrition.

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Lauren C.: Yes.

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Diana D.: And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about those two and how you see the threads of those in the different phases of your life working up to this.

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Lauren C.: Yeah; my mom is Filipino and she emigrated to the U.S. in her early twenties when they were—when the US was importing and giving visas to doctors and health industry professionals that had fast-track education systems in Asia and India. And so, she moved here and kind of integrated as much as she could. So, she never taught us Tagalog, like her native language, but the one way we could connect with her culture was through food. It primarily came out during the holidays, so Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, we would have *pancit* and *adobo* and *lumpia* and—and that was the way that I connected to my mother’s culture and her history. And then my Aunt **Mary Keats**, really, I feel like she—she planted the seed of what a gardener was for me and the connection with nature

as a soothing constant. And she had a lot of issues in her life. She lost her son when he was eighteen to leukemia. Ultimately, she passed away at a really young age, but I think that just by all of these troubles that she had in her life and these difficulties, she always found solace in a garden. And I remember being a kid when she would babysit us, sitting in this chair that faced the window and watching her outside doing gardening. And I really wouldn't look at the, you know, Sunday morning cartoons that were on in front of me. I would just look outside and see her. So, that's—I count Mary Keats as you know connecting to the . . . the natural world and my mother in bringing home the idea of food as personal history and an origin story if you will, so.

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Diana D.: Yeah; absolutely. It sounds, in listening to you describe that kind of trajectory that your life is taken that you knew when you were young or focusing on watching operators like in that system, growing food, and then in your college degree studying systems as a whole, and then coming back to Georgia and then operating now in Georgia Organics again, looking at systems and the way that people are able to work and kind of able to farm and able to make different transitions. I think that must probably give you a really valuable perspective of the people that you're working with, operators themselves, and could you tell me a little bit more about what you're currently working on when it comes to Georgia Organics and restaurants, also?

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Lauren C.: Yeah; I think you're totally right, Diana. I think that my perspective is really . . . well, I think that a lot of farmers that I know that have come into it in the last couple of

years, the farmers, there's—you know, there's two different types of farmers that we work with, or there's a couple different types of farmers. But a lot of the farmers that I'm currently working with are new farmers. Their family didn't come from farming.

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They made the conscious decision to get into farming as a way to control their quality of life, to be their own bosses, start a business that was solely theirs as entrepreneurs, in a way, versus something that was handed down to them and something they just took on.

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And so, I—that's where I came from, too. So, I think that getting out of it, it brings a little perspective. I can bring a little perspective to the table and say, hey, I came from where you came from, and I was doing it in some ways for some of the same reasons that y'all were. So, this is stuff that you should think about.

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But yeah, the things that I'm working on right now. I got hired with Georgia Organics to run the Farm to Restaurant Program, which is very different today than it was when I got hired. So, when I applied for the job, it was written as a marketing and branding campaign for restaurants with the goal of kind of nudging restaurants to source more from local farms. And there would be an award ceremony. We'd give almost like in a way that James Beard gives like a James Beard Award, but we created a brand that was like a Farmer Champion brand.

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But coming from farming, I knew all that our farmers, at least in Atlanta that were selling to restaurants and there weren't that many. And I knew the mentality in farming was very much: okay, restaurants for small farms are kind of a third option, after a farmers' market

or a C.S.A. So, I got the job and I kind of flipped it to say, we need to address—before we can talk about demand, we need to really understand what our supply is. And we need to work with the farmers and see if they even want to sell to restaurants.

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So luckily, you know the response was positive. There are farms in Georgia that definitely want to sell to restaurants. There are farms that have been selling to restaurants, but are running into some you know some barriers, or little hiccups in doing that.

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So, the last year and a half, I took on a cohort of twenty farms that said that they really wanted to sell to restaurants. And I ended up working with them. We had a one-day workshop that was talking about everything from crop rotation to get sequential plantings to organic certification, you know, what are the benefits in your marketing to these restaurants, and also—what else did we talk about? Oh my gosh; we were talking about even just, varieties, pricing, packaging, how to communicate with chefs, like how—you know trying to train chefs essentially be like, okay, every Monday I'm going to send you an availability list. Every Wednesday I'm delivering. So, you have to send me what you want on Tuesday.

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And in the meantime, I was also working with the chefs, the chefs that I had sold to when I was farming to kind of figure out what they were looking for, too. And oddly enough, well maybe not oddly, I was like, do you care about—? What is your main priority in sourcing from local farms, right, straight up? And they said: quality and freshness. And I said, well, what do you think about organic versus non-organic? And they said, you know what? It really doesn't matter. It matters just that the product is fresh.

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So, I think that—that was really interesting and also, I was able to pull their invoices. They supplied me with two weeks of invoices and that was back in February 2019 and I got invoices, two weeks of invoices from fifteen restaurants. And from their total food costs for those two weeks, they were all sourcing at very different percentages from local farms. Some were sourcing eight or nine percent of their product from local farms, and this was everything from vegetables to meat to dairy. And just to let you know, there are no certified organic meat farmers in—oh, there's one certified organic meat farmer in Georgia.

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Diana D.: Wow.

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Lauren C.: Her beef is like a Thousand Hills Ranch. So, that was a clear issue, right, and it was like a red flag. And it's like, we can't say to chefs, hey, you need to be sourcing more organic meat in state when we only have one farmer that's growing organic meat. [Laughter] Yeah; that's ridiculous. So, it really kind of like identified and put a magnifying glass to like what was happening.

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Diana D.: Yeah.

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Lauren C.: And then from there, I just decided last year what I would do is focus on the farms and kind of giving them the opportunity to meet with chefs. We did a farmer/chef speed-dating mixer. Like I said, we had the one-day workshop where we talked about all of this stuff. We brought chefs in there to talk to them so they could say, we have questions. What are you looking for from farms, blah, blah, blah? But I think really that the focus last year was on farmers and kind of setting them up for success to sell to restaurants.

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Of course, COVID hits, so these farms you've been working with for a year to be like yeah, we're getting ready to sell to restaurants. And then COVID hits and all of these restaurants have to shutter. So, it's been really interesting seeing what's happened.

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Diana D.: Yeah. [Laughter]

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Lauren C.: Oh my god, like what is—what is all this work for? But, opportunistically, this—or I don't even know if that's the right word—one of the chefs that we worked with last year a lot that we ended up having like three farmers connect with him for the first time, he made three new relationships with these farms, he called me two weeks into COVID and said, hey, I have this crazy idea. Like, all of us restaurants that always source from farms, we want to still support them, but we can't. And my landlord wants to throw money at a project. The landlord is Jamestown Properties. They own developments in New York City, they also own developments in Atlanta and probably elsewhere.

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But a lot of their residents—or their tenants—are restaurants. So, they also have a nonprofit branch. It's like Jamestown . . . oh my gosh, Jamestown Foundation or something like that. So, they have money they want to throw at these people to help them. And so, Chris, the chef at Root Baking Company, said, why don't we do this? Why don't we you know create a program that sources product from these farms and gives that product to our employees at these restaurants because they are now in a situation where they're financially unstable and they don't have income from being able to work in the restaurant industry right now?

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So, yeah, that is a project that happened literally two weeks after COVID started, and we've been running it for six months. And it's been amazing. We've had sixteen restaurants involved, and some of those restaurants were the original folks that were in the six-week pilot program. We ended up raising money to go all the way into the end of October. And I've been able to spend over \$150,000 with farmers who would have lost that income not being able to sell to restaurants. So, even though it has really nothing to do with farms directly selling to restaurants, we're kind of trying to support the farmers in the time of COVID. The benefit is that we're also supporting the restaurant industry as well, so when we all get out of this, we will have a closer relationship.

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Diana D.: Yeah; well, that's fabulous because when you described the initial phase of the project you were working on, where there's an awards show and there are labels and there are you know criteria and that's it; you know, it's very static. You either meet the criteria or you don't.

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Lauren C.: Yeah.

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Diana D.: But you came in and were able to transform this into a dynamic effort where people were giving and receiving. You know? It wasn't like a sort of monitoring checklist. But that wasn't the case at all, and that must have made it more resilient, so that when you hit this huge obstacle, there were actually deeper relationships in place, like where chefs and farmers maybe understand each other a little more.

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Lauren C.: Uh-hm.

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Diana D.: Would you say that was the case?

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Lauren C.: Yeah; I think so. I think that the appreciation for fresh local produce and even things like bread, you know, the chef at—you know, it was his brainchild, like Root Baking Company, he's also providing loaves of bread for all of these restaurants every week.

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Diana D.: Wow.

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Lauren C.: So, that's been really interesting because they were doing retail and what has come of it is that now some of these restaurants that this chef is—this bakery is getting bread to, is also getting wholesale accounts out of this. So, yeah, I think that is just interesting, like there is a deeper appreciation. There's a better understanding of what the products that these people have, like we've brought on some restaurants that have never actually sourced from farms before. But we identified them as potential future partners, right? So, their menus have things that could be sourced locally. There are partnerships with other chefs that we work with, but we've never partnered with them directly. And that's like opened up this whole you know new type of fellowship and like understanding with these restaurants.

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And every week that these farmers bring produce to their employees, they get to see what their employees are eating. So, for six months they've basically had a staged viewing of what farmers have to offer should they ever want to like you know pull the trigger and start ordering from farms.

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Diana D.: Amazing. That's—you couldn't. [Laughter] That's incredible, yeah, because that's such a valuable face-time especially owners, you know like time is money and like getting up with them and—

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Lauren C.: Yeah.

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Diana D.: —just the count of times that they must see and understand and be able to take a look at and assess the quality of something is so high—higher than you’d get at a farmers’ market or anything else. Just thinking of the restaurant I worked in and how busy . . . [Laughter] That would be a fabulous opportunity for someone who is trying to start sourcing with them. I wonder—

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Lauren C.: Yeah.

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Diana D.: —yeah, if you maybe could tell me a little bit—not that count matters or that like the size of a project necessarily matters or anything like that, but just so I can understand a little bit more, pre-COVID, about how many farmers and how many restaurants would you say you were working with or were maybe in your communications loop because obviously it probably varies who shows up to which events or who responds, but how would you describe the number of folks you were working with on either side of that?

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Lauren C.: Yeah; so, with the farm, like on the farm side I took on twenty farms last year, which was a lot and so basically, I was case-managing twenty farms. [Laughter]

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Diana D.: Wow. [Laughter]

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Lauren C.: I thought to myself, I'm going to have this—some of the farms might need more help or more support, I should say, and other farms need less. And so, the farms that had already started selling to restaurants I thought would need less help. But the irony there is that, last year, I found out that the farms that I was working with the most were the farms that were already selling to restaurants and they just needed some tweaking with help with pricing or they said ,oh, should we charge delivery fees? Or, I'm having this miscommunication with a chef, can you help me kind of suss it out and how should I handle it?

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The farms that had never sold restaurants before, there were a handful of them that ended up doing it last year, but it's a benchmark. You know, like I realize that the first sale that you make to a restaurant is a significant you know milestone basically. And if you take it on consciously to create space to be able to do that on a weekly basis, you really have to make a decision to do that. So, I would say even though I took on twenty restaurants last—or farms last year, I ended up working with ten hand-in-hand throughout the year. And so, this year I decided to only take on four more.

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Diana D.: Uh-hm.

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Lauren C.: Because now we have this you know group of farms that are you . . . I also didn't want to just leave these farmers this year, like, oh, it's 2020. Now you're on your own.

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Diana D.: [Laughter] Thank God; it turned out.

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Lauren C.: Yeah; so, I literally brought in—this opportunity came up with the project. It's called Food Fight Georgia, but so Food Fight, this project came up and I was able to be like, hey, all the people I worked with last year, I know you so well, let's which one of y'all, who wants to be involved? And then the new folks that came on this year, four farms, so I think, all in all, really with good-quality relationships. Just digging in with work, fourteen farms, and it's been consistent.

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Then with the restaurants last year we had fourteen restaurants as well that we really worked with kind of hand-in-hand and that number has lessened, I have to say. I think it's just because we don't—you know, part of the thing is, I don't even know exactly how to approach them, like what's proper to approach restaurants right now? They're dealing with so much that unless I can come to the table offering them something, I don't want to really put anything else on their plate because they are just dealing with so much right now. So, that group has really become smaller since COVID, but I know they're there. And right when COVID hit, I sent all of them an e-mail that said, please let us know if

you want us to promote your takeout or anything like that. Let me know. And a lot of those folks are in Food Fight, in that program. But it's gotten smaller.

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Diana D.: Yeah; I can only imagine. And I wonder, at what point have you seen people start to reconnect with you now that we're a couple months into this? What do you see as maybe like a potential forecast? Obviously, it's hard with the pandemic to predict anything at this moment, but I wonder if, after shuttering for a while, there's been this series of staggered openings and so on, has that timeline—how have you seen that play out with your work?

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Lauren C.: Hmm; yeah. It's been interesting. The people that . . . we've talked to a number of the chefs, and they said, we are still down to have this farmer champion—what is a farmer champion and what is the restaurant sourcing-wise, because they are sourcing less in general, but the percentage of their sourcing from farms is still relative. So, maybe not spending you know \$30,000 in two weeks for food costs; maybe they're spending \$15,000, but the percentage of that being local is still the same.

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So, yeah, a lot of the chefs are like, we're still down to participate, but they're definitely not taking on more farms. The restaurants that have always sourced from farms are feeling a lot of pressure to maintain the relationships that they already have with farms and be able to give the farms enough orders to make it worth their while to come into town. And so, everybody is really operating on a tight budget, but they're still doing it.

They're still trying to do it and because their customer base hasn't really changed, you know.

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Diana D.: Uh-hm.

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Lauren C.: They're just ordering takeout and they're not doing it, every night, so.

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Diana D.: Yeah. It's interesting how much of a survival mindset restaurants have had to be in right now and what that strain has done to all different parts of their operation, absolutely. And—yeah, go ahead, please.

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Lauren C.: Oh, yeah, I do think that I have . . . it's been cool to see the social media of these farms, the restaurants that there's almost like this anti-farm-to-restaurant movement or farm-to-table movement in the last eight years, where you want to do it but you don't want to talk about it, because it was such a like—almost like brainwashing for a while. Like, this farm-to-table whatever, and it didn't mean anything eventually. But it's become something I've noticed on social media in the last six months with COVID, that these restaurants are choosing to focus on to differentiate themselves. In the same way that a lot of businesses are like, support local in the time of COVID, right, support the Mom-and-Pop businesses because every—because every penny counts, we're all in dire

straits here, so let's set ourselves apart by saying that we source from farms. And if you're going to eat out once a week, choose to eat out with a restaurant that supports your local community.

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Diana D.: Uh-hm; absolutely, yeah. I imagine there's probably a pretty stark difference between goes on in Atlanta and what goes on maybe in the rest of the state.

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Lauren C.: Oh, yeah.

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Diana D.: [Laughter] Certainly when it comes to that, just the restaurant's response, but maybe not. You know I wonder, do most of the restaurants that you work with, are they Atlanta-based or are they throughout the state?

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Lauren C.: Yeah, the majority of the restaurants are in Atlanta. Right before COVID hit, we had been—I had been talking to The Grey in Savannah; they just won—Mashama Bailey got an award with James Beard. She's an amazing chef. And they do a lot of sourcing from farms. So, we were kind of trying to talk to them about getting in the fold with expanding in Savannah. And then there are quite a few restaurants in Athens, Georgia that source from farms, maybe four or five restaurants that are doing that. So, I think in Athens, as a farming community, has a lot of—there's just a large farmer constituency.

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So, the restaurants in Athens that are kind of for the older crowd, I don't know if you have a lot of like U.G.A. students going to these places on their budgets, but—but you know faculty and staff of U.G.A. and then people that are from Athens or around there, will go to these farm-to-table restaurants, yeah. And there's more; you know there's Little Beacon of Light in Augusta. And Macon, Georgia. We have a partnership with this restaurant in Macon called Dovetail and they source from a cooperative, Middle Georgia Growers' Cooperative that the main farm in that cooperative is certified organic, and she's amazing.

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So, yeah, but the bulk of restaurants that source from farms are in Atlanta.

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Diana D.: Totally; yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I was curious about that and your thoughts, because that makes sense with what I assumed or what my perception of from the outside is. But I know that you dove into the Slow Food University in a really intense way. And I wonder, just before we dive into what's going on with COVID, how you kind of convert or like translate what you learned there to this very different food system in Georgia, that is like where organics is kind of nascent, would you say?

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Lauren C.: Yeah.

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Diana D.: Yeah?

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Lauren C.: Well, I'll tell you this. I've been saying this for the last two years since I've been at Georgia Organics: I think that Georgia Organics' role in helping the organic market is to create something similar to what you see in Europe. You see consortiums that groups of growers that create like the marketing and the wording and the representation and almost like, not the policing so much, but in a way yeah, kind of. They're like we're the consortium of like Parmigiano, so if you're not a parmesan cheese, you can't say these things, or at least we're going to create this body of this group of people that is representing ourselves. And I think so often in Georgia, that has such a kind of commercial agricultural past, things like soy, peanuts, cotton, things like that, in the face of that, I think that the best thing to do is to create a space for organic farmers to convene. And to maybe once or twice a year have a meeting and say, okay, this year this is what we want to use wording-wise, this is what we want to use marketing-wise. We want to all be on the same page, so that the—I know that there are people out in Southern Georgia that are certified organic farms. And the reason why they do it is because of either their beliefs or because they think it will bring in more money. But after a couple of years, being the only person, you feel like an island. If you don't see a direct correlation with your income, you're just not going to renew.

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So, if you can have some type of community building convergence in a way, I think that—that would . . . that's what I learned with Slow Food, honestly, is those systems that you see in Europe, and they were in a really smart place. They said, okay, we know

tourism is coming, so we know we're going to become the E.U. So, how can we differentiate ourselves, each of us, so that we have our own individual cultures, because we're going to become the European Union, right?

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Diana D.: Yeah.

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Lauren C.: How can we differentiate all of our different unique cultural heritages? And that really manifested in the way of food for them. So, I think that having something similar to that in the way of, like, Vidalia onions is a great example. There's a huge group of certified organic blueberry farmers in Georgia, and I don't know any of them, but they're an interesting group. I went on the organic certification website and saw all of these people, or all of these farms and I can't even remember what town it is in Georgia, but they're all blueberry growers. And I thought, what were the conditions for this to be what it is, you know?

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Diana D.: Yeah; that's fascinating. I had no idea. It's not the first, second, or third crop I think of when it comes to Southern Georgia.

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Lauren C.: Yeah. [Laughter]

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Diana D.: There must be a really interesting story there; yeah.

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Lauren C.: I'm sure. You should totally find them and be like, why are you a certified organic?

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Diana D.: Yeah. [Laughter] I love how creative you've been with this work that you've done since COVID and how much thinking on your feet you've had to do and how much it's relied on relationships that you've built already. If I were in your position, I wonder, you know having come from that work with Slow Food, how inspiring to see like a model like that actually working and not just something that you study in a classroom but see it really as a theory, but see it really functioning. That's very inspiring.

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Lauren C.: Yeah. Yeah, thanks. I do think that there are things with Slow Food, like I admire Slow Food and it's . . . nothing is perfect, and the more mindset, set way of thinking tries to claim that as the solution, the less for me—I think I have a healthy bit pessimism about stuff. And we were definitely indoctrinated into Slow Food mentality. But one of the things I always asked myself during the master's program was like, how can we address deep sustainability, monetary sustainability, self-propelled sustainability of a movement? You know, so that it's not just a trickle-down effect.

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So, I think you know it's—it's been interesting; yeah.

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Diana D.: Yeah. And thinking about COVID, can you describe maybe the timeline of when you first heard about it and then when you first realized it was going to have an impact on what you and your partners—or the restaurants you work with—I don't know what word you prefer to use for that, but how the work that you all did together, because usually when I've spoken to people those are two different things? You know, hear about it on the news in January and then in March, you're like oh, this is going to impact me.

[Laughter] Was that how it happened with you? What was that like?

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Lauren C.: Yeah. So, we actually—I flew to California in February. Well, okay, let me reverse that. So, every winter in the Southeast there's Southern S.A.W.G., there's the sod [unclear] conference, which is a huge growers' conference that moves around the South and that was in Little Rock this year. So, it was in my hometown.

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And people were talking about it a little bit then. That was at the end of January, like the 20 of January. And then, right after that was the Georgia Organics Conference. So, we hold a conference every year in Georgia and it moves around the state, and it was in Athens this year, like two weeks after Southern S.A.W.G. And I remember people kind of chatting about it and being like oh, we've got seven hundred people at this conference. This thing is in the back of our head, you know.

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But I think the thing that really like was . . . I am so curious about this, because I feel like everyone had that moment where they were like, okay, I'm fine. We're—you know, I'm fine being out in social situations; I'm fine going to restaurants or whatever. And then eventually there's a moment where you're like, nope, my boundary has been crossed. No, no more. And that boundary—well, I mean maybe some people don't have that at all, obviously. [Laughter] There are people that are protesting masks, so.

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But it was when the farmers' market in Atlanta, they have like five farmers' markets, and every year they do a Lady Locavores fundraiser. So, they give awards to women in food in the community, prominently Atlanta, because they're an Atlanta-based farmers' market. And I was nominated for a Lady Locavores Award. And my award was Everything But The Kitchen Sink, by the way. Okay; but not surprising. But, because I am a Gemini and we just can't . . . But there were all these people; there were all these people at this awards ceremony, and I think it was like March 8 or 9. And I remember all of us being like ha ha ha, like everybody is having fun, but like, you're looking at everyone in the eye, and you kind of like enjoy it while it lasts, because we don't know what's happening. And then literally a week later, it was talk of the shutdown, so.

00:42:51

Diana D.: Yeah.

00:42:51

Lauren C.: Yeah; that's kind of how fast it happened. But I think there were a couple of weeks beforehand where people were talking about it. I don't think that farmers had time to prepare for it, I mean, at all. So, yeah.

00:43:09

Diana D.: Yeah. How did your workplace respond in particular? Were they like, hey, in a couple days don't come in and work from home, or overnight, like what kind of a change did you see just in that functioning?

00:43:24

Lauren C.: Yea. The great thing about where we were when COVID hit as an organization was there was already talk about working remotely for like partial work. There was internal conversations about the fact that a lot of the people that worked in the organization lived forty minutes away from the building. So, if we really want to be like a truly sustainable organization and we want to address issues of inequality, considering that the real estate and the rent around the office building was \$2,000 a month on average, but the majority of us live forty-five minutes away so that we could pay \$1,000 a month for rent or our mortgage, we had already been in conversation about moving to two days remote.

00:44:29

And so all those conversations happened in October and November, so, start right in January. So, I remember going into the office on Wednesday and us being like okay, bye, see everyone on Friday, because we're having a remote day on Thursday, and then on Thursday getting an email that says we're not coming in on Friday. And just T.B.D.,

basically. Then we just never came back in. So, I mean, this is changing the face of office work forever and ever, I think.

00:45:10

Diana D.: Yeah, I think so. It's funny you mentioned the sort of income and real estate, just cost of living, how much it is around where the job is based, because my hope is that it will be really revitalizing for like more rural areas when people have the freedom to choose where they work because it's remote, and you can build all sorts of community when you're not tied to an urban center.

00:45:41

Lauren C.: Oh, my gosh. I love that; let's do it.

00:45:44

Diana D.: [Laughter] Yeah; my friends from college and I already are like, where are we going to live, you know? Where—

00:45:49

Lauren C.: Where are we going to buy?

00:45:55

Diana D.: Yeah. We'll fix up two old Victorian houses and you know it's all going that way. But it would be really fabulous to see that happen in heartland areas, you know. That would be my dream.

00:46:11

Lauren C.: Yeah, and also. that's been a thing with Georgia Organics is like because the main office is in Atlanta, we get a lot of criticism that we're mostly Atlanta-based, and we don't look outside of Atlanta, even though we're called Georgia Organics, right. So, even things like the strike force counties down in South Georgia, like we don't have representatives there. So, even though we can call people on the phone, we can't go out to these farms. I mean, now we can't because of COVID, but I think this will open up the—there's been a conversation for a long time of having like a satellite, having a couple of people working you know in rural areas to address the needs of the farmers that are really far outside of these cities.

00:47:07

Diana D.: Yeah; how fabulous that would be, God. [Laughter] There's hope for—once we're financially stable and are hunkered down and have that privilege, really, to start to be creative, there—there could be hopeful outcomes, you know.

00:47:31

Lauren C.: Yeah.

00:47:31

Diana D.: I wonder, have you been able to see your coworkers since the COVID mandates and separation came down?

00:47:39

Lauren C.: I've gone to a couple of social distanced lunches with folks and eaten outside. Or we'll go to the—there's this really beautiful cemetery in the middle of Atlanta called Oakland Cemetery, and we'll go get takeout and go eat out there.

00:48:01

Diana D.: Oh, that's really nice.

00:48:02

Lauren C.: Yeah; it's so beautiful. Oh my gosh; the grounds are just—it's a garden cemetery. I learned. My neighbor Jeff is a historian of cemeteries. [Laughter]

00:48:13

Diana D.: Awesome. [Laughter]

00:48:14

Lauren C.: Yeah. He's like, there are all these different kinds of cemeteries. There's memorial cemeteries and then there's garden cemeteries. And I guess the memorial ones are the ones that have the headstones that are flat, so you can mow over them, almost like military, you know the ones.

00:48:35

Diana D.: Wow. Yeah.

00:48:36

Lauren C.: Yeah; the plaques on the ground versus a garden cemetery, which is what you would see in like New Orleans, or where there's all of these beautiful headstones and mausoleums and things like that. But he's just—he wrote a book on them, so.

00:48:51

Diana D.: Oh.

00:48:52

Lauren C.: Yeah; that's what we do in COVID. We go like walk around cemeteries.

00:48:55

Diana D.: Right; no judgment. I used to live in Oakland, and I went to the cemetery there in Piedmont on a daily basis because—

00:49:02

Lauren C.: Oh my gosh.

00:49:05

Diana D.: —it was the greenest area around. [Laughter]

00:49:06

Lauren C.: Yes; also, it's like literally an island of greenery.

00:49:13

Diana D.: Yeah; yeah, oh, no, I think it's fabulous that you do that and because they're really beautiful, majestic, sunny places sometimes and I love when they're built to be lived in and welcome people in. And yeah, it's really nice, so—cool. [Laughter] I really love that. So, you found out about things, you started working from home, it was basically T.B.D.; what kind of communication did you start having with your farmers and restaurants? What was it like? Did you start communicating with them in any sort of streamlined way or was it just lots of emails coming in? How did you end up pivoting?

00:49:57

Lauren C.: Yeah. So, when COVID hit, I asked all the farmers to get on a—like on a meeting, like a virtual meeting with me because I wanted to understand what was happening. And I think, at that time, we were a month in to COVID or to the lockdown. So, it was probably like early—it was mid-April. And I was asking them questions, like I think we had like . . . yeah, we had like 15 people on the call. And I said, you know, what's going on with all your farmers' markets, like what's happening to y'all's C.S.A.s, how are you feeling, like what's the tea? And everyone was like, oh my God; we're so exhausted. Like, we don't even know what the hell is happening.

00:50:51

Yeah. Like some of them had their farmers markets were delayed or were cancelled altogether. People were inquiring, because of the farmers' markets being delayed, they were getting inundated by emails from clients and from customers who were like, how can we get your stuff? Can we order this? Is there a way to, like, custom order? Do you do deliveries? Kind of all of these kind of direct market sales, like retail. And the restaurant side, I mean, they were saying that restaurants weren't really talking to them.

The communication just kind of like—it kind of fizzled. You know, because every week the restaurants have to say—the restaurants are in communication with the farms.

00:51:38

So, I think what was happening is the restaurants were like, you know, and we know that we're about to go on lockdown. So, we had to close, so we're not going to order for the next two weeks. It kind of ended at T.B.D. for them as well, you know. All of that was like you know on pause.

00:52:01

And, yeah, so basically, I had this come together moment with these farms, and from that, this idea came to mind of doing a pop-up farmers market. And I was also talking to some chefs about it, too. And we ended up starting a mid-week pop-up market at this restaurant. And we had seven farms that were on that call participate in it. We've been running that program for five months.

00:52:37

Diana D.: Wow.

00:52:40

Lauren C.: And—yeah, and that's been in response to COVID. That's been great as well.

00:52:49

Diana D.: Yeah. I've been able to speak to at least one or two farmers who found—that's necessitated a really big switch. They thought about doing something online or they thought about marketing in that way, but it really kind of forced their hand.

00:53:06

Lauren C.: Uh-hm.

00:53:06

Diana D.: And that you know, although that was probably a steep learning curve, they feel like it's really set them up in the long-term sort of way. And I wonder like, what would you say the mood is among maybe farmers you work with right now; are they kind of taking it day-by-day? I imagine it's probably up and down, but farmers are also a really hardy and tough group, so. [Laughter]

00:53:36

Lauren C.: Yeah; yeah. Yeah. I think that right now, the vibe I'm getting from a lot of the farms is that they're . . . I mean, you know, every year you over, you over-plant one thing or you under-plant one thing or there's disease in one thing and whatever. But outside of that, I think—outside of the regular day-to-day stresses of farming and not being able to predict things—it seems like people are kind of in a rhythm now with COVID and with their customers. You know, it's pretty stable right now.

00:54:24

Now, for the New Year, I think it will be interesting to understand how farmers are going to prepare for the unknown essentially, because we don't know if COVID numbers are going to spike again in the winter. We don't know if that will be the nail in the coffin for a lot of these restaurants, having to pay for their liquor licenses for the entire year, going into the winter, not having outdoor seating to kind of buoy the business. I am interested to

know where farms are. I think that I want to approach the farms in November/December to see where their heads are at, because I think right now, they're just trying to plant their fall crops. And now they have a better idea of what they can move in the fall with their retail like direct customers at the markets and things and with all the restaurants and wholesalers.

00:55:31

But, I think once the season dies down for the year, it's just going to be a guessing game. So, I would really like to work with the farmers to try to understand where we can think about all the options before we get to March of next year, you know.

00:55:50

Diana D.: Yeah. Absolutely. Do you ever find yourself in a position where you're translating maybe some news? Because I know that mandates and requirements change really quickly. And at least in the environment where I'm working, we have a lot of Amish folks. Sometimes, we're the main person to tell them that something is happening with COVID. You know, with their communication, is like with folks off of their farms. Did you ever—that's a pretty extreme example, but did . . . ? Well, did you ever find yourself in a similar position saying like, oh, hey, no; this changed last week. Or, I heard that this is happening now and so we have to pivot this way. Or were most of the people you're working with connected in other ways so that you all were usually on the same page?

00:56:48

Lauren C.: Hmm; yeah, it was—that was like a huge thing in the first like three months of COVID. There was this alliance that formed between the farmers' markets, trying to

understand the safety protocols and then us trying to communicate and transfer that kind of information out to like all the farmers that we knew. So that happened, I think that we—our communications team at Georgia Organics created a page like a COVID resource page and some of it was for businesses for like the P.P.P. And the, oh, God, what was it? There was like a P.P.P. and then there was some other thing for farmers. So, there was a page that we created for that, and then there was also like a general communique with all of our farmer constituents that was like this is what's happening with the farmers markets in Atlanta. Also, we're talking to a lot of farmers market associations all over Georgia. And so, it was like, here's the best practices from these farmers markets. This is what you can also do. You know, so transferring that knowledge from—very often from Atlanta, where there's a high volume of customers and people are kind of watching you, to saying here are these. You know, we set up wash stations. There were wash stations at every entrance. We said that the farmers could only—like, we encouraged farmers to not take cash anymore. We encouraged the farmers to have two people at each booth, one person to receive the money, one person to handle the produce.

00:58:48

You know, taking that kind of information and pushing it out to people even in rural areas was a huge thing. And I don't know where we're at on that now. But in the first three months of COVID, it was a huge deal. And it was changing every day, so it was like, you know . . .

00:59:15

Diana D.: It's going to be outdated because people have to make decisions with more than 24 hours' notice. Yeah; yeah that's really challenging. Were there peer organizations that

you looked to see how they were operating during this time, or would you say you guys were just figuring it out on your own and, you know, blazing a trail?

00:59:38

Lauren C.: No. I mean it was definitely a partnership. We partnered with Community Farmers Markets, which is that farmers market association in Atlanta. Community Farmers Markets. There's also Food Well Alliance, is in Atlanta and they focus on Atlanta and metropolitan cities that—and they work with the City of Atlanta. We also worked with the office of—oh my God, what is it called, Diana? What is it called; it's like the Urban Ag. Office at the—at Atlanta, in Atlanta. It's like the first of its kind, I think.

01:00:27

Diana D.: Quiet while I'm Googling in the background. [Laughter]

01:00:34

Lauren C.: Yeah; the office—yeah, oh the Office of Resiliency is what—

01:00:40

Diana D.: Okay.

01:00:39

Lauren C.: And they started a program called Aglanta where they take—what are they called, like the power line easements and they rent them from Georgia Power, and they get farmers in there to farm?

01:01:05

Diana D.: Oh, man, that's awesome.

01:01:07

Lauren C.: Power easements; yeah, so we were working with them, so the Office of Resiliency, Food Well Alliance, Community Farmers Markets. There are a couple of farmers' markets outside of Atlanta, the Savannah Farmers' Market in Savannah, Georgia. They were working with us. They were really the ones that kind of engaged us, I would say. They were saying—they were basically like, hey, this is what we've—we're having to do with the farmers' markets. We wanted to let y'all know, so you could help you know tell the farmers that this is the deal and that we're—and that you're aligned with us for this if there's pushback, you know.

01:01:59

Diana D.: Uh-hm; yeah. So I'm envisioning you over the—you know, at the start, you tried to figure out how to pivot, you're talking with people, kind of translating, being creative, seeing what works, seeing if people are going to attend these pop-ups and other things. And I wonder how you personally felt during all of that, and whether or not your health was impacted in any way, just to the degree that you're comfortable saying or answering. Because we're also curious you know about whether anyone that we know or work with has gotten sick and—and that sort of thing, and mentally, it's very much a huge shift to deal with people virtually rather than in person, so.

01:02:51

Lauren C.: Yeah.

01:02:52

Diana D.: Yeah.

01:02:54

Lauren C.: Yeah. I'm happy to share how that all feels and the evolution of that yeah. When COVID hit, I mean, I kind of had like an identity crisis. I was like—as far as my job is concerned. I was like, what? You know. We were trying to create this standardized idea of what it means to support farms. I was telling farmers that restaurants are a great option for you to sell to, and all of that kind of went out the window when COVID hit.

01:03:37

And it just became really apparent like it's very much like a house of cards, you know. And what is really important? Is it important as far as like what I am able to do, and like to give to the farmers, and what restaurants are able to do. And ultimately, for my project and my program was a USDA grant. Again, it was like a promotions grant for pushing local and organic food to restaurants. One of the things that we said was, by the next, you know, by the end of three years, restaurants are going to be sourcing more from farms and farms are going to have more sales from restaurants. And we basically promised all these deliverables that ultimately in the face of COVID we have no control over.

01:04:35

And so, it just made me like go back to the table and be like, you know what? Like, those things shouldn't have even been promised because there's so many factors in why a

restaurant would source from a farm or why they couldn't source from a farm even if they wanted to. And what we can focus on is relationships and giving farmers the opportunity to meet chefs and then having both of them do what they want with that you know. And that is a success. The success is having opportunities to talk and to communicate to one another. So, yeah, it was a really hard time. Like, when COVID hit, I was like, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. This is all for naught. Yeah; this was built on a house of cards.

01:05:45

Diana D.: Yeah. Who would ever think that you can't be face-to-face with somebody? There's just no—there's no blueprint for that.

01:05:52

Lauren C.: Yeah; there's no blueprint for that. And restaurants are such a cultural staple of every city. And to have that just kind of all go out the window. But yeah, I mean it—like giving boundaries to work. Farmers, it's really hard to have boundaries because you—it's your life and your farm and very oftentimes you live on your farm. You wake up in the morning at 6:00 a.m. or whenever the hell you wake up, you think about your farm. And when you go to sleep at night you think about your farm. And yeah, there's always been boundary issues with farmers prior to COVID, but on my end, because now we don't go into the office, I am having to really understand what my boundaries are, because also I really care about the farms that I work with and I really care about the restaurants that I work with. So, I want to post on social media all the time, go to this restaurant and support this restaurant. I want to write farmers back on the weekends and all the time, but

then it never ends. And it definitely takes a toll. And it has taken a toll in COVID, so, I think we're all like processing the trauma of—of what we're going through.

01:07:43

Diana D.: Yeah. I hear you because your whole job has been about relationship-building and then tending to other people's relationships, basically. And now, some of the ways you did that, you were blocked from just overnight, and that would be really hard.

01:08:01

Lauren C.: Uh-hm. And the people that we took on this year, the four farms that I took on this year, I've been really limited in what I can help them do. And to just come to peace with myself in that you know I can't help that this happened. And even though they signed up for it, it makes me feel a little better go to the farmers market and I see those farms and I talk to them and they're like we're doing great. We're super busy with retail. You know, I don't even know if they would actually have the bandwidth to take on restaurants right now, because the truth is, the retail and direct sell market has just completely ballooned in the face of COVID. So, the need to sell at a lower price to restaurants is probably less now than it was last year, you know.

01:08:59

Diana D.: Yeah. I'm glad. That must be very hopeful where you're sitting on the other end of the screen wondering how this is going and how reassuring it must be just to like see their eyes over the mask. [Laughter] At the farmers market and be able to know that they're doing okay.

01:09:17

Lauren C.: Yeah.

01:09:19

Diana D.: Yeah; yeah. We are hoping to do with this project a follow-up after the mandates are lifted as a whole markets feel safer. That's such an abstract right now. It's impossible to predict the timing of, but are there any additional initiatives that you have in the work like looking towards the future or are you kind of just maybe solidifying what you already have in place and trying to make sure it's really strong as far as supports go, during this time?

01:09:56

Lauren C.: Yeah; so, I think that like . . . it's been really interesting. Like in the last month, I'm thinking about going into next year. We're in our annual planning for what we want to do next year. And what I've realized is, the last two years, I really focused on farmers and getting them ready to sell to restaurants. But ultimately, my job was to work with restaurants and create a demand for local and organic products. And it got put on the back burner. So, what I see happening next year is keeping the relationships that I have with the farms that I've worked so hard to have—build relationships with this year and last year. And then focusing on supporting the restaurants, where I can, as we move through hopefully like the other side of this pandemic.

01:10:54

So, that's what I'm looking forward to, and I'm planning on doing next year is kind of understanding how this really can be like a marketing campaign for them to kind of set them apart from all the other restaurants because they do source from local farms and they do source organic products.

01:11:16

Another thing I was thinking is like we—where my head is too, is taking this as a lesson and creating. We talked about at Georgia Organics doing like this seeded by—like seeded by Georgia Organics. And there are these programs that we have, right and they have a life span and then they're no longer relevant or they don't get taken up by another organization or whatever, or they don't go as planned. But all of that is a learning lesson. And so, I really next year would love to just kind of have time to reflect on kind of what I was talking about before, like the things that we really ultimately have realized that we don't have control over, and the things that are a priority, like a real priority for us as an organization that wants to support farmers, you know. Is the mission to say, you know, you can be more resilient if you diversify? If you diversify where you sell things, like if you diversify your revenue stream. Or, is it—hey, you should just sell to restaurants? You know, to me, it's the first thing, it's the former, and taking that and kind of synthesizing that like lessons learned from this project. This is where our heads were at when we went into it. This is what COVID kind of said wait, wait, like let's reassess. And kind of—and just putting that into a thoughtful piece that people and other organizations can take and be better prepared next time.

01:13:11

I think the mid-week pop-up market is the same thing. You know, how did—what was the challenge with COVID? How did we choose to respond to it with this mid-week pop-

up market? What were the lessons learned? And then using that. Creating something that you could take that experience and have other people around the country be able to replicate that. So, I think focusing on doing that, because one of the things that happens a lot with nonprofits and organizations in general is people are just running to create new programs or to do new things and they don't really allow time to have reflection. And I think in the face of COVID, reflecting is really important. COVID has forced a lot of people to kind of slow down and sit with themselves and reassess and I want to take that and apply that to what we're doing with farm to restaurant and Georgia Organics.

01:14:30

Diana D.: Yeah; that sounds very wise. And I think I'd probably be remiss if I didn't mention that also during COVID, a lot of different—inequality has also been at the front of mind due to other stories in the news, especially due to heightened very dramatic instances of police violence, structural systemic violence. Do you think a lot of people are trying to understand and try to change and try to grow out of now that it's so inescapable? I wonder if Georgia Organics has done anything similar because you're talking about different types of economic inequality. Have you as an organization made any moves in a sort of racial equality and opportunity direction?

01:15:32

Lauren C.: Yeah. I mean, there's been a lot of conversations within the organization. We have a racial equity committee that was established a couple of months ago and trying to figure out what their role was. Like, what's the role of the racial equity committee? Is it to support the organization? Is it to make executive decisions that are based in racial equity for the organization to hold it accountable or to act as a source of information-sharing

through the lens of racial equity? You know. So is it programmatic, is it administrative, infrastructure, or is it like an educational cultural workplace kind of thing?

01:16:25

So, that's gotten established. And then we have a Thursday group that has been formed where we are—it's kind of a book—it's a book club. But we're reading *How to be an Anti-Racist*, but also, it kind of goes in and out of talking about how these chapters relate to the work we do at Georgia Organics. You know what? I think we were on the cusp of that anyway to be honest. Like, the fact that you know even in like—we're trying to move, we're trying to understand like the inequity of urban versus rural, of white farmers versus black farmers, of landowners versus non-landowners. Those are things that we have to address if we're going to address agriculture in the South. And I think the South is so riddled with inequity because of its agricultural past, you just cannot ignore it, you know. And we have ignored it for so long.

01:17:52

Diana D.: Yeah.

01:17:53

Lauren C.: And I think that also folds into organic certification. You know, like what we had talked about earlier on the phone. But yeah, like the fact that looking at language as a form of power. And if you know the right words and you know the right language then you know within a system. And so, for people that have that language that can follow the rules within this system and I—and we're talking about that even as far as saying okay, when we write job descriptions, we can say you know we want to have experience in this

field. Or, we can say that we want you to have a college degree or a masters in whatever, but we can also say what is your lived experience, right? Like, there's also that.

01:18:54

Or, saying when you apply to a grant, are we going to have somebody that could help people who have never applied to a grant before, or written a grant proposal before? Are we going to have somebody that's there to help people that don't know the language?

01:19:13

Lauren C.: And I think that that's part of the system. Like, we were reading this—we did this racial equity training last year, and it was talking about the like—the white dominant culture in nonprofits and how there's an emphasis on written word. And specific, job-specific language that only certain people know. And so that's been something that we're talking about within the organization as well.

01:19:58

So, yeah. Whenever I started working with these restaurants, I first of all—to understand the supply. I went and said, how many organic farms do we have in Georgia? And then I looked at how clearly you see how many of them are white-owned farms. So, you're like, okay, why are there, at least in Atlanta, the farms that are sell to restaurants that are certified organic are white? White-owned farms? They have infrastructure like hoop houses and green houses, and they are doing over \$100,000 in sales? So, I don't know.

01:20:44

Diana D.: Wow.

01:20:44

Lauren C.: It's just looking at like these—looking at the similarities and saying, why is it like that? What's the barrier? And there are black-owned farms that are certified organic, too.

01:20:59

Diana D.: Yeah, absolutely. But it's certainly true if you say that the proportion—and this is in every state—skews to white farmers being certified organic. And from my, you know from my point of view, it's been really disappointing to see the cost-share decrease this year. Like disappointing, but unsurprising, given USDA's history on a lot of different issues when it comes to access and opportunity, but.

01:21:32

Lauren C.: Yeah.

01:21:35

Diana D.: Yeah. It's been interesting for us as an organization to watch each other and try to talk about things differently and know that something is wrong, but maybe not be sure because so much of this system of inequality is held up by silence, and just passivity, I guess. So yeah, I'm really interested in what other organizations have been able to do because as one group you're not able to change the system that you're in, but you're really unable to change the way you operate within it. So, I don't think it's for me or for many other people even going to be possible to talk about COVID without also talking about the summer and how urgent the need for a type of reconciliation and evaluation has become for people.

01:22:35

Lauren C.: Yeah. I think that the cool thing is that there's so much emphasis on direct communication. You know? I think that, for a long time people didn't want to talk about things directly because it was bad, or we just weren't given the tools. We weren't trained to talk about things in a direct way.

01:22:55

Diana D.: Totally, yeah.

01:22:59

Lauren C.: So, we talk around things a lot, but I think that that's changing. And it's a hard—like it's a sticky process, right? Like it's hard to actually say what you mean and it's hard to ask for what you need. But I think we're getting better at it. I'm so hopeful that all of this, the people that run these organizations are on our, we're all on the same team, you know. At least we say so openly and out loud. But we all just need to hold each other accountable, you know? Like, are we on the same team. I don't know.

01:23:55

Diana D.: I understand. [Laughter] And I understand there are—you know this is a lot different from have I been sick and what are my farmers doing? You know like this is like a really super-personal and also somewhat controversial subject to talk about, so. It would be really hard to talk about it on the record. [Laughter] You know everyone is doing their best, so.

01:24:27

Lauren C.: Yeah.

01:24:29

Diana D.: Thank you for being—for being as open as you can be and as open as you want to be, so, I appreciate that on this topic and everything we've talked about today. And I've reached the end of questions that I was interested in asking you, but if you were to think about maybe what someone listening should really need to know about your experience during this time, is there anything you'd like to add before our interview concludes?

01:24:56

Lauren C.: Oh my god, Diana!

01:25:02

Diana D.: We don't have to stop it's fine. [Laughter] That's just my last question for you. We can totally, like, maybe have a back and forth and just talk about some stuff and see what comes up, but that was like my last formal question.

01:25:18

Lauren C.: Okay; yeah. Okay; cool. Yeah; I don't know. I don't know. Yeah; I don't know.

[Laughter]

01:25:26

Diana D.: Okay; all right, then maybe let's just chat for a few minutes because I don't really want to hang up either.

01:25:34

Lauren C.: Yeah; I have questions for you.

[End of interview]