



EliYahu Ben Asa

Atlanta Harvest

Atlanta, GA

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Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski

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Project: COVID-19 and Foodways Project

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Diana Dombrowski: And we're here to begin the recording on Zencastr. All right. We're recording. And we just started talking about COVID's impact on your operation and on your life. You were giving us an overview of this amazing rollercoaster of 2020 for you and your operation. And I wonder if you can remember the first time that you and maybe your folks started to realize COVID was gonna have an impact on you last year? Was it watching the news or were you getting signals from people you were trying to do business with while you were negotiating with the land or what was that like?

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah. It was totally the news. And what's crazy is that we don't really watch the news. We don't have a TV on the farm or anything, and so we're not super connected. But I think when COVID really started to pick up and people were getting sick and they started labeling it as a pandemic, we were, like, all right, so that means that people are eventually not gonna be leaving their homes.

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People are not gonna want to shop in crowded places. And that's when we decided, okay, all right, so if we're gonna do this right, we have to get the food to the people. How are we gonna do that? Let's convert the CSA so that we start really focusing on home deliveries. You're gonna have to start hiring some people to run the boxes, so on and so forth. And so just having that mindset around the time where they started really labeling COVID-19 as a pandemic, that's when-- 'cause we were getting it before, but it was kinda like, all right, well, people are getting sick, and then they named it, and then they were, like, all right, this is a pandemic. And they

were, like, all right, everybody's gotta do such and such; here are the rules. And so I think by the time they really put the rules down, I think we had a good idea of the direction that we were gonna go. And, of course, we still had the farm stand open, so as everybody's changing their models or closing down, of course, us being in a central business, we're, like, all right, well, we're good. We're gonna be able to stay open. We're still gonna be able to do what we need to do and be able to sustain ourselves.

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But what do we need to change in person, what do we need to change about the business? And so all these things are going on, and, of course, we're still growing 'cause food doesn't stop, and food is not affected by the pandemic, so food is still growing.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

EliYahu Ben Asa: And so we're, like, ah, people are gonna stop shopping at the store, which means we gotta focus-- and this is why, ahead of time, we were, like, all right, so some things are gonna have to change. And this is before they labeled places where you get food as essential businesses. So I think we had a healthy mind about it and were able to transition well and weren't too stuck.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. What was the response like with people that you sold to or that you were interacting with? Do you remember if more people started coming to you because of the grocery stores?

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EliYahu Ben Asa: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: Were people generally acquiescent to wearing a mask or was there some kind of controversy with that? What was it like working in that public-facing part?

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah. For the people that we were working with-- well, a lot of people were closing and so there wasn't really a response in a way where it was, like, all right, this is how we have to deal with each other now. It was really kind of like, we're closed. [Laughter] 'Cause we're dealing with farmers' markets and we're dealing with restaurants, and this is outside of the farm stand. By 2020, **Peach** just had already closed and some of our other wholesale hubs that we were selling to were lowering on how much they purchased from us.

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And so we had already made the transition. We were very sustained at that moment 'cause we had the farm stand. But the reaction from people in the agriculture business, I'd say, like other farmers and things like that, it was rough. It was rough because we were still losing a big part of our business. We were still losing the support that we got from the restaurants and from chefs especially, is that we've built a relationships with chefs, so it's not just about, oh, we gotta sell this produce to this restaurant. It was really about, me and you, we have a relationship; you buy my produce, you make great food, and we're supporting each other. And so I hope to see you successful just as much as you hope to see me successful, and that's why you buy my produce.

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And so having to see that restaurants were closing and chefs were out of work was heartbreaking. And for them, it's not like they have another avenue in order to do business. The food world, the food community was shaking, trembling because chefs were out of work, restaurant workers were out of work, and people were just out of it for a second. For us,

obviously, we still had work to do and we still had different avenues in which we could sell, and that's why we were able to transform the business, but it was scary. It seemed scary, and I was feeling it for a lot of my friends. But there are lots of organizations, thankfully, that are dedicated to really helping and to really doing whatever they could to help sustain. To name a few, I know Giving Kitchen focuses their attention specifically on restaurant workers.

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And then Georgia Organics, we were doing a couple programs with Georgia Organics in order to get food to restaurant workers, and also to sustain an environment for getting food to people outside of what we already had. And so, for instance, we have a drop-off location at the Wrecking Bar Brewpub. That's in Atlanta. Are you from Atlanta?

Diana Dombrowski: I'm not, no.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Oh, **you're not? Okay.**

Diana Dombrowski: I grew up in Florida.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Right, right. Okay. So there's a small restaurant inside a very central and busy part of Atlanta called Little Five Points, and that's where we drop off food and people come and pick up. And so it's a very COVID-safe process to getting food to people, especially in kind of like the heart of Atlanta. With people coming to the farm, there was a lot of mixed reactions, 'cause, especially in the beginning, there's some people that are already working for home.

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And so the shock of COVID and not being able to go to work and maybe not having work for a while before your company adjusts-- the shock of COVID had a lot of different reactions from

people. And so, even for us, I'd say in the beginning we were thinking-- for us it was, like, we're so healthy, we're so set that we felt really comfortable and not afraid of what was going on. I haven't gotten sick in years. And so the most I'll get is a headache from not drinking water. And so that idea, that mindset of being healthy and not having real fear put us at a place where we're mostly changing because of society. We're mostly changing because we have to deal with people, and we know that people are worried. And then we learned that you could be a carrier even if you don't have it.

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And so you're, like, all right, well, now we have all this other information, we're starting to change our mindset. And, thankfully, most of the people that work here-- well, really everybody that works here is family. So it's not like we were really dealing with people that were coming from home or coming to work for us and dealing with a whole bunch of different people. It's very controlled on the farm.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

EliYahu Ben Asa: What can you say? I'm not gonna tell people that we won't serve them because they won't wear a mask, but we tried our best to create a space where people felt comfortable and it seemed like we cared. Because the space wasn't very big. It was like a 24 x 16 space. And there were a bunch of shelves and stuff in the middle, and so there was a very narrow walking path, but we had to have people wait outside before coming in, even though that they could see the produce. And then, we would do it in different seasons-- we did a farmers' market.

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So we had a little ongoing farmers' market right outside the farm stand so that people could be outside, and people could shop with other vendors and stuff like that. So it worked out really well. But I think most of the realization that I got was hearing about how it was affecting people's lives outside of them buying produce from us. So speaking to my chef friends and speaking to people that weren't here on the farm and were out-- and I have family in New York and just hearing about what they're dealing with was really more so where we got our-- okay, now you get all the bad stories and stuff like that, and you're getting all the horror stories. So it's not that we had to educate people, we just had to lead by example, if that makes sense.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah.

EliYahu Ben Asa: We have that kind of responsibility.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. To set expectations.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Right.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. That makes a lot of sense. I'm curious, too, in the middle of everything that was going on, watching these things happen with people you have relationships with personally and professionally, and also navigating all this physical change in where y'all are gonna be, how did you guys, I guess, take care of yourselves, or how did you navigate that as a family?

EliYahu Ben Asa: Physically?

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Mentally.

EliYahu Ben Asa: We have a 40-acre property-- [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] [0:10:50.3]

EliYahu Ben Asa: --three-and-a-half hours away from the city. And so having that is really kind of like a saving grace because it's very peaceful down there, it's very secluded, and so a lot of the things that are going up here don't affect us down there.

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And I think that's a similar attitude for a lot of people down there. There's not a lot of people down there that are wearing masks, not a lot of people down there that really care about social distancing as much. People act very constant. People are very constant down there. And I don't blame them. There's not a lot of exposure, and the people that you deal with on a day-to-day basis, or I guess it's probably better to say week to week basis, 'cause you're probably at home most of the week, on the few days that you may go out are the same people. And so down there it's a break from what goes on up here. But I spent most of my time up here. And so I'm listening to my grandma. My grandma's nagging me, she's, like, you need to do ginger and honey and orange peel and garlic. You need to do a steam bath. And, like I said, we're very healthy. So we drink tonics. We make our own tonics. We eat fermented foods.

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We're very conscious about what we need, what our body needs in order to prepare for such a thing. We also have a tea and coffee company, and so we've got a lot of medicinal blends. We sell that in the store. We have an immune-boosting tea, we have teas for allergies, and if you're getting sick, and if you are sick, if you've got a lot of phlegm, if you're doing a detox. So we got all these type of teas, so we stay on that kind of stuff. And even if you don't feel bad, you're drinking tea. And so those kind of activities, that mental separation, that physical separation, but

also that constant eating fresh food. And the science behind eating fresh food is in the first day you're losing nutrients. You pick the food and in the first day you're losing nutrients. And in order to slow down that degeneration, companies use ice.

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So they'll pack the box of greens and then they'll throw a whole bunch of ice on it and hope that in a week by the time it starts to get sold that it'll still be fresh. But eating food that comes straight off the plant, you're taking it off the plant and you're eating it raw or you may be lightly cooking it, saves a lot of those nutrients. And having that kind of stuff really builds you and helps your body to fight off if you have any contact with any kind of sickness. So I think we're pretty good. And it's the same lifestyle that we try to promote to other people. And so it's this realization that your daily process, your outlook on life and the resources that you take advantage of, create your system, right? And so, whether that be your mental system or your physical system, your health system.

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But if you're eating fast food, then you've got a system that's already full of toxins, it's already full of bacteria that's already filled with insoluble foods. And so you're not creating an environment that will negate sickness or negate disease. You're creating a system that will inhabit those things. And so if you can learn to change that or if you can learn how to grow food at home, if you can sustain some kind of environment where you're incorporating these good values and these good habits in, then you'll prepare your body to take care of you.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. It's really interesting hearing you talk about your experience of COVID because so many people suddenly struggled with food access and really big changes to their daily routine.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Um-hm.

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Diana Dombrowski: And the way that you and your family had structured your lives for many years was to sustain yourself in terms of food access and have a routine together that didn't insulate you from changes that were happening, but whatever those external forces were, all of the change that you were dealing with, you decided to navigate, right?

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Instead of having to--

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah, instead of being forced.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Um-hm.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Yeah.

EliYahu Ben Asa: I'm very grateful. And before we did Atlanta Harvest, I was going back and forth to school in New York, so I was going to school in the city. And so I was very much ingrained in the city. My dad actually sent me to art school, and so I do all the media and stuff for the farm.

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And that's why I'm so comfortable, and **Em** will tell you, anytime that they need something, whether it be a video, or they want to just promote something or they want to do something where it requires public appearance, I'm, like, yeah, just ask me for anything. 'Cause I'm behind the camera and I'm directing people, but I'm also very comfortable being in front of the camera. So my dad, he likes to say that I'm here 'cause I'm the better looking one, but you get your genes from your father, so, I mean, hey--

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

EliYahu Ben Asa: But, anyway, so I'm very comfortable with being in this space. And so having that experience and then in the things that we do, having our own routines and being separate, it makes us-- everything happens for a reason. You're taught things and you start these lifestyles, and you don't know why-- not that you don't know why, but you don't know how beneficial that they'll be at a certain point in your life.

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And so our outlook on our lifestyle coming from New York, coming from Pennsylvania, being able to really dissect that and say, well, this is not how I want to be; this is what I want. And then being able to move forward in that, whether it took ten years or not, enabled us to be at this specific moment in our lives so that we could be leaders, that we could set an example, and that we could help people to do the things that they need right now. And we made that sacrifice ten years ago so that we could help the people right now, so everything happens for a reason.

Diana Dombrowski: That's amazing. Great. I do want to say, just for the record, that Em did write **in** chat, it's true, "EliYahu is great when it comes to [0:17:47.8] media." [Laughter]

EliYahu Ben Asa: [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: So just for the record, we've got that on there.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. The questions that I have we've mainly answered.

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And like I said, this is a really unique interview because a lot of other people are more enmeshed in food systems that are not--

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --they're just big and hard to change and kind of brittle when something falls apart.

EliYahu Ben Asa: **Um-hm.**

Diana Dombrowski: And what I've been so impressed with in these interviews and also in talking to you is that resilient spirit. I think you need, working in agriculture long-term, to develop that in the first place.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Um-hm.

Diana Dombrowski: But I'm really just so impressed with what you guys have done in navigating a huge year of transformation. That just sounds so powerful. Yeah. I'm just really glad to have been able to spend some time talking to you about it. Thank you.

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EliYahu Ben Asa: Thank you. I appreciate it. And we had that small conversation about history before, and so I appreciate, I truly do, what you guys are doing. And it's so important.

And people don't think about the importance of it while it's going on. But they're going to look back-- I think I might've mentioned it when we talked before, but I was just talking to my brother the other day and he was talking about his grandmother on his mother's side. And I was, like, man, that she had been through so much and had so many experiences, and her husband was a World War II veteran, and that went right over my head. I'm, like, World War II? I don't know anybody alive that's from World War II. And so just having those experiences, I was, like, you need to get from her as much as I can. And I think about my own grandmother and I'm, like, I need to get all her recipes and all these little things that she does.

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I use this joke sometimes when I talk to people about COVID. I'm, like, my grandmother used to make this ginger, lemon, honey, and rum mix. And so I'm, like, this is a good mix for building up your immune system and helping with sore throat and all that stuff. And they're, like, man that sounds great. What's the recipe? And so I'm, like, I don't know the recipe; you just make it. And everybody's, like, man, I need that recipe. I was, like, it really doesn't matter the recipe, whether you use a little bit of honey, a little bit of ginger, a whole lot of rum, you either get drunk or you're healed.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

EliYahu Ben Asa: So it's great to have those stories and all that stuff from the past. And I just want to be able to cultivate that. So what you guys are doing, it means the world.

Diana Dombrowski: Well, thank you. And I'm so grateful that even in the midst of what's going on, we're able to connect this way because, even a few years ago, people would just write out

these experiences and then maybe someone would get to them on the other end with a recorder a few years or months later.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Um-hm.

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Diana Dombrowski: And right now we can talk--

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --**in the** thick of it and also be able to see each other and be used to using that technology.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So this is a really unique moment, I think, for a lot of reasons and it definitely opens up a lot of possibility for doing documentary work that, at any other point, would not have been possible.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah. People weren't thinking about it like this. Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah. Thank you.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: The next step is gonna be to send you the audio file and a transcript of the interview.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: Southern Foodways Alliance has also hired a photographer who'd like to come visit maybe sometime around March.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: So those two files are gonna be coming your way soon. I'll be writing a message introducing you to the photographer in case you guys would like to participate, and I hope you do, but, of course, it's up to you.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: And then we're gonna stay connected as the project evolves as a whole.

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So Southern Foodways Alliance employs a full-time oral historian who's working with other universities doing similar work so that when we put these interviews online, they'll all be able to amplify each other in this kind of extended network for anyone who's interested. So we've got those files coming in the short term and a photographer. I'll stay connected to let you know how the project is growing, and then hopefully, when these mandates are lifted, we can do a second interview in person, maybe--

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: --in six weeks or a year and see how things have gone.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Okay. Sounds good.

Diana Dombrowski: And I'm really excited to do that.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So thanks again. Yeah.

EliYahu Ben Asa: We'd be happy to have you.

Diana Dombrowski: Great.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Hopefully, the store will be up and running.

Diana Dombrowski: Awesome. Awesome. I'm pulling for you. I'm so excited.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah. Well, thank you.

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you. Are there any questions you have for me before we sign off?

EliYahu Ben Asa: No, I think I'm good. Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. Great. Okay. We'll just stay tuned.

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I'm also gonna write a thank you card, and that's coming in the mail soon. So thanks again so much for your time.

EliYahu Ben Asa: Yeah. No problem. No problem. Thank you.

Diana Dombrowski: This has really been fantastic. I appreciate it. All right. I'll stop the recording here.

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