



Laura Hester
Red Gingham Gourmet (closed)

Date: January 9, 2019
Location: Athens, AL
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts
Length: Fifty seven minutes
Project: Southern Baking

Annemarie Anderson: Today is January 9th, 2019. It is a Thursday morning, and I'm in Florence, Alabama, with Miss Laura Hester.

I'll start the interview and get you to introduce yourself. Give us your name and what you do.

[0:00:15.5]

Laura Hester: I am Laura Hester, and I'm the owner of Red Gingham Gourmet, which is a wholesale bakery. My main industry is frozen cornbread muffins that I sell in the grocery stores.

[0:00:27.7]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Let's talk a little bit about—well, first I'll get you to give us your birthdate, and then tell us where you grew up.

[0:00:38.9]

Laura Hester: Okay. My birthdate is October 6, 1961, so I'm fifty-seven years old, and I grew up here in Florence, actually. I was born and raised here. My mother is from West Virginia and my father's from here. They met at college at David Lipscomb in Nashville. My mother was a Home Ec major, which is kind of going to help you with [laughs] how this came about. And my father taught chemistry, or his degree was in chemistry, and he moved back here to Florence to teach at Mars Hill Bible School, a local school. He was

dating my mom, and then when she graduated, they married and she moved here, and her and my father both worked at Mars Hill their entire life.

My mother taught school. She had a Home Economics degree with an English minor, so she taught school, and my father taught school, both, and my daddy taught chemistry and math, all the classes I didn't want to take. So, growing up, of course, we had Christmas holidays off and summers off, and we traveled a lot. We'd visit relatives and things at Christmas, and we'd visit—my mother's parents were in West Virginia and her sister was in Ohio, and then, like I said, my other set of grandparents were here in town.

But my mother, having a Home Ec degree, was an excellent cook and cooked—I mean, back then, people ate homemade meals a lot more than they do now, but I remember my mother experimenting with recipes all through our life, and she would say to my daddy at the end of the meal, she'd say, “Well, is this a can or a keep?” So if it was a can, it went in the garbage, and if it was a keep, she kept the recipe. I remember Mother did fried ice cream way before I even knew what fried ice cream was. [laughs] So I've kind of had that experience in my life, you know.

But I grew up and never wanted to teach school. That was not what I wanted to do. And when I graduated from high school, I went to the local junior college. And, actually, my first degree was in back then what they called secretarial. I learned shorthand and I went to work for an accounting firm, and I lasted there one year and I hated being behind a desk and I realized that that was not my thing, sitting there typing all day.

And a girlfriend that I had graduated with actually called me and said that there was a local orthodontist and he was looking for somebody to work on the patients, and that really interested me. So I quit that job and went to that, and they self-trained me there, and we did braces. But he sent me to hygiene school at UAB. He liked for all of his assistants to actually have a hygiene degree because it made it a little bit, you know, more—he felt safer for the patients and things, you know, for us to have the experience.

So I did that and I worked for him until my first child was born in 1988, Logan. I married in '85 while I was in my hygiene program, and that was not smart. Don't get married in the middle of trying to graduate from a hygiene program. [laughs] But I did. I fell in love and got married in 1985, and we had our first child in '88. So I actually quit working and stayed home for about seven months. And finally one day, my husband, he came home and he goes, "You know, you really need to get out and be with people." [laughs] He's like, "You're too much of a people person."

So there was a local dentist that was looking for a hygienist two days a week, and I took that job and it was fabulous. I worked two days a week, raised my children. So it was enough to get me out of the house. The hygiene pay was better than your average job, so working two days, it was well worth it for me to do that.

So I continued that, actually. I went to work for that dentist and worked for him till he retired in 2010, and I was there about twenty years. But in 2005, my boys were starting to be teenagers, and—I'm going on with my story. Is that okay?

[0:04:50.9]

Annemarie Anderson: That's okay. Yeah.

[0:04:51.6]

Laura Hester: I didn't know if you need to stop and ask me a different question.

[0:04:53.4]

Annemarie Anderson: No, this is good.

[0:04:54.4]

Laura Hester: Okay. But I'm getting to why I'm in this business. So my boys were teenagers, and I needed a little bit more income. My husband is a boilermaker. That's construction work, but he worked union jobs and always made a good living for us and carried our health insurance so I could just kind of be a part-time working mom. But I needed some extra cash with teenage boys/

I've always loved baking, and I bake sourdough bread, and I started, one summer, selling my bread at the local farmers' markets. I remember thinking when—I baked sixteen loaves and I went to the market and I thought, “Everybody's on a low-carb diet. They're not going to buy this bread,” and, like, I couldn't even get it out of my car till they had bought every bit of it.

So the next week, I made thirty-two loaves, and the next week, I made sixty-four loaves, so it just kind of blew up, you know. So that's what I did, so that was flexible enough to do it on the weekends and stuff and then have the extra money I needed to kind of help with my expenses of the teenage boys.

But then that rolled over into my business. Do you want me to go into that?

[0:06:02.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Sure.

[0:06:03.5]

Laura Hester: Okay. So I was at a market and they had a local chef come each week and do a cooking demonstration, and he would use things that people had for sale there, usually go around and get vegetables or whatever. But he came by my booth, and he was the chef at our local—it's called the 360 Grille. It's the restaurant we have on the tower. It's a circular—rotates. And he asked me—it's a fine-dining restaurant, and he said, “Could you do dinner rolls for me? I'd love to work with somebody local.” And he said, “I need a dinner roll and I need a cornbread muffin.”

And I said, “Well, my mom makes a *mean* Mexican cornbread,” is what we called it at the time.

He said, “Yeah,” he said, “that's what I want.” He said, “I want a Mexican cornbread.” Because it had cheese and onions and all that.

Well, he'd order like four hundred. Well, I couldn't make exactly four hundred, so whatever I had left, I packaged up and took to the farmers' market. Well, they sold like crazy because of the fresh vegetables. Everybody wanted them with their fresh vegetables, and I'd never thought of that before. I'd just been selling—I made bread, cinnamon rolls, and, like, banana nut bread, cream cheese pound cake.

So anyway, I did that, and at the end of the market in September, a customer, she said, “You know, this would be great with our soups and stews in the wintertime.” And

she said, “Why don’t you go up to the local grocery store and see if they’ll sell them for you till the market opens back.”

So I went to the store, and he was like, “Yeah, we’ll sell them here.”

So I had to go and get some packaging and figure out a lot of things, but I knew they had to be sold frozen because they wouldn’t have a shelf life. So that’s how all that evolved. [laughs]

[0:07:37.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That’s great. So, well, this is a clarifying question. What are your parents’ names?

[0:07:44.1]

Laura Hester: Jane and Linville Hanback.

[0:07:46.4]

Annemarie Anderson: Can you spell your dad’s name?

[0:07:48.6]

Laura Hester: It’s L-i-n-v-i-l-l-e H-a-n-b-a-c-k.

[0:07:54.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Thank you. Okay. So I guess a follow-up question to what you were talking about, so you were making sourdough bread and you were making

cinnamon rolls and cream cheese pound cakes. Where'd you get your recipes? Where did you learn how to bake?

[0:08:16.5]

Laura Hester: Well, I learned how to bake from Mom, just being at home, you know. That was all I did at home. Mother fixed meals, but I baked cookies and cakes and that.

The sourdough bread is really just—I mean, it's just a recipe that's just kind of out there. You have a starter and it's just your basic ingredients. And I think the reason I could sell it so well is that a lot of people said—you know, I sold my first loaves for \$3.50, and they said, "I'm not turning my oven on for \$3.50. I'll pay *you*." And a lot of people are scared of breads because the rising process. Yeast scares people, rising scares people. If you don't do it properly, you'll have a cracker instead of a piece of bread, a loaf of bread. [laughs] And people love, love homemade bread. So that recipe really was a—it was just an out-there recipe. I just took it and sold it, you know.

Now, my other breads were my grandmother's or my mother's recipes just kind of passed down through the years, you know. And then the cornbread was my mother's recipe, and she's kind of just had it around forever, and we used to make it in a nine-by-thirteen and take it to, like, church dinners, and everybody just had a fit over it. It was just the right combination of ingredients. And then my grandmother actually had what was her recipe—well, she was from West Virginia, and they put a little more sugar in their cornbread than southerners do. But I ended up turning her cornbread into a food service pack I sold to food service, that then turned around and sold it to, like, restaurants and hospitals and things of that nature.

[0:09:50.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So I want to talk to you about where we are and about the Florence Business Incubator and the Culinary Academy kind of inside of that. Could you talk a little bit about that and how you got connected with them?

[0:10:07.3]

Laura Hester: Yeah. So I'm very, very lucky to have in Florence—it's called the Shoals Kitchen Incubator or the Culinary Center, and it's housed under our local entrepreneurial center. It's in a separate location. It's in an old school that had a cafeteria that they turned into a health-coded kitchen strictly for people to be able to come in, produce a product to sell. You can't sell to a grocery store without being in a Health Department-regulated kitchen, and so that's what they did for us or for anybody. Now, each client, which I'm a client, had to have their own health permit, their own business license, and their own insurance, and the insurance was to cover I guess if you burnt the building down [laughs] and a general liability, because if you've got a product out there, you've got to have some form of insurance.

So each client had to carry that, and then you rented the kitchen for \$25 an hour, which if you had to go out and set up your own kitchen and pay to have all that done, you would be in the thousands of dollars, you know. So to be able to start a food business with maybe 1,000 to 1,500 dollars is really, really great. And what's happened over the years is a lot of people have come and gone. It's hard to stay in the industry. The food

industry is hard. It's hard to break in if you're not Kraft or Pillsbury with a lot, a lot of money, you know.

But the Kitchen, the way I found the Kitchen, actually, was when I worked for the dentist I was talking about, every year at Christmas, we received gift baskets usually from oral surgeons or orthodontists, kind of promoting us to refer people to them, and inside one of the gift baskets was a jar of salsa. It was called salsa. It was Two Mamas Salsa. It was delicious. It was two girls out of Moulton, Alabama. I read the jar and I was like, "This is made right here in Florence," and I Googled or pulled up their website and went and found where they were doing their production, and it was here at the Kitchen. And so I called and made an appointment to come meet with them to start using the Kitchen.

I actually first—and I didn't talk about this a minute ago—when I was working at the dentist, every year at Christmas, my mom and I made hard candy and we would just pour it out on powdered sugar and cut it. And one of the girls that I worked with, the other hygienist, she wanted to learn how to make it, so she came to my house, and every year at Christmas we made this hard candy and gave it as gifts to our teachers and stuff.

And one time, she said, "Laura, everybody wants this candy." She said, "Let's start a business making candy." So her and I actually came originally and we tried to do this hard-candy business, but it didn't work out. In the South where there's all the humidity and stuff, that hard candy turns into a big lump of sugar after very long, so there just wasn't any shelf life to it. We promoted it more to like gourmet gift shops. We never tried the grocery store industry with it. It was too expensive to make. But that was actually how I first got my foot in the door here at the Kitchen, and then because of it, I

rolled over into the bread. I just saw an opportunity. I had a partnership with her in that, but this business I just did totally as a sole proprietor.

[0:13:23.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So, going back a little bit about you started off in farmers' markets, what's the transition like? What was the difference from kind of doing it yourself, by yourself, now you're making that into kind of like a viable business?

[0:13:41.1]

Laura Hester: Well, actually, I was selling so much bread at the time, I had started employing people to help me, because we were doing sometimes four and five hundred things, like either loaves of bread, cinnamon rolls, in a day, so I had to pull in some help, which a lot of it started out as family. My boys got up every morning—not every morning, but the mornings, and would come mix the bread with me before school and stuff, and then they would go with me to the markets a lot, because I thought it was kind of good education for them to learn how to change money and things with the customers.

But I had already started employing people, but when I got into the grocery stores, what really happened was—like, at a farmers' market, you can just stick a label on it that says “sourdough bread,” but when you put something in the grocery store, you've got to have a barcode, a nutrition label, and the ingredients have to be correctly listed on there. So I really was all of a sudden scrambling to learn all that, you know. So my first packaging was just a bag over a pan. I used the aluminum muffin pan. It had six muffins in it, because I knew if I was going to do this in fast production, I couldn't handle the

muffins. I couldn't bake them, then dump them out, put them in another package. I needed to put them in and bake them and sell that with it, because that saved a lot of labor. So I just put the muffin pan in a clear bag and I actually peeled and stuck labels on bags.

I got in about five grocery stores my first time, and I actually just delivered them to the stores. I'd put them in a case, like twelve in a case, and take it to the store and invoice them, and then they would write me a check. But I had to figure out all of that packaging. I had grown to about seventeen stores and I was still sticking labels on at night, and my family kept saying, "Mom, you've got to order the bags already printed." But what's hard about a business—and this is something that I learned kind of the hard way—I could buy, say, two or three thousand of those labels and pay for them maybe \$200, but when you buy a bag with a printed label on it, you're, minimum, going to order ten to fifteen thousand bags in order to get the price down. Well, then, all of a sudden, you've got this huge bill you've got to pay.

So it's all about cash flow, and I didn't understand cash flow. I didn't understand that I'd have to pay for all these bags, but then it might be six months before I sell all that. And so I really learned—I was kind of borrowing from my personal money to then pay for that and then try and pay it back, and it can be a vicious cycle, you know. I eventually ended up going and getting bank loans, because I got in Walmart and that blew up so big that I couldn't do it personally financially anymore. So there was quite a big step from just selling at farmers' markets to getting into the grocery stores. [laughs]

[0:16:30.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Well, I guess let's talk about that, too, because you're mentioning kind of marketing your products to local stores. Could you talk a little bit, I guess expound upon that and how you built those relationships and how it kind of got to the biggest that it was?

[0:16:52.2]

Laura Hester: Yeah. So, well, what happened, when I first started, I delivered to the stores, which that's called DSD, direct store delivery, and you actually go in the back door with your product and an invoice and they check you in. I was in small what I would call family-owned grocery stores. Like, this is just an example. There's Mitchell Foods in Alabama. Well, Mitchell Foods is a warehouse in Albertville, and they have grocery stores throughout the whole state that are owned by various families. Like, they probably have five hundred stores that order groceries from their warehouse. But, let's say, in Florence, all the Foodlands in Florence were owned by a man and all the Foodlands in Huntsville were owned by a different man, and so on and so on. It goes like that.

Different than, like, for example, Walmart. Walmart has distribution centers, but Walmart owns all their stores too. Piggly Wiggly has a distribution center in Bessemer, and they're the same way. They have about five or six hundred stores throughout five stores, but they're all owned—some people own one store, some people own ten stores, but they choose to order their groceries from this Piggly Wiggly distribution center. Because I used to tell my girlfriends after I got into this, I'm like, "Y'all have no idea when you pick something up off the shelf at the grocery store what it took to get it there." [laughs] You know, it's a very involved process.

So I went to the local stores here and they let me deliver—well, I got a really good—I kept up with my sales. Like, I was delivering to these stores almost weekly. They were selling it. It was selling, selling, selling. And I started in the stores with what we called jalapeño cornbread. We decided not to call it “Mexican” just to be politically correct, and so we called it “jalapeño.” So that’s what I went in with.

I had a local store call me, and they said, “People are loving the concept of this.” My muffins are fully baked and ready to eat. So, you know, people may cook a pot of beans or a pot of chili, but they love the fact that in ten minutes, they’ve got cornbread. And mine has ten ingredients in it, and so you’d have to have a lot of stuff at your house to make this cornbread that fast, and so they loved the fact that they could pop out one or two muffins if it’s just one person at their home or whatever.

So I had a store call me, and she said, “People are loving this concept of this fully baked cornbread, but a lot of people can’t eat jalapeños.” She said, “Could you make one without?”

And I was like, “Sure!”

So I started making what we called “classic,” and it was the exact same recipe, I just left out the jalapeños, because the recipe with the cream corn and the cheese and the onions, it just produces a really delicious-tasting product. So I did that, and, actually, my classic ended up outselling the jalapeño two-to-one, because people liked the idea, but they just didn’t like the jalapeños. I think they were scared of it, you know, scared of the name. But then you’d run into some people who were like, “It’s not hot enough. We want it hotter.”

So I did that and had the two products, and so I was delivering to the stores and I was like just running myself ragged, and I thought the only way to really grow this out of the Northeast Alabama is to get the distribution centers to pull me into their warehouse. Then I'd be accessible to all these stores all over the five states that they supply. I think they supply Alabama, the Panhandle of Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

So I called the buyer. In the grocery store industry, in the distribution centers—and this is across the board—you have a buyer for each category. So, for example, at Mitchell, there is a frozen food buyer. He buys all the frozen food. At Walmart, there's a frozen bread buyer and there's a frozen pizza buyer and there's a frozen ice cream buyer. So, you know, the bigger the industry, the more buyers they have.

But at Mitchell, there was one frozen food buyer. And I'll never forget, I called him—I had kept a record of my sales, because I thought, “If I show him these stores in Florence are selling this much cornbread every week, I think that will be impressive.” And I called him on the phone—I'll never forget it—and told him, I said, “I'm Laura Hester. I make cornbread in Florence, Alabama. I'm in my local stores. I'd like to come meet with you about getting in your distribution center.”

And he said, “Uh,” he said, “everybody thinks they're going to be Sister Schubert.” Because, you know, Sister Schubert had done the dinner rolls and it had taken off. And she entered the industry in a different time period too. She got in at a really good time when there was not so much competition like there is now. But anyway, he goes, “I'll give you a meeting,” but he was kind of rude to me.

And I hung up the phone and cried. I cried and cried and cried, and I thought, “Oh, my gosh. What am I going to do?”

So I called the local store owner that was here that had helped me, and he said, “Don’t you worry.” He said, “Your product is selling great.” He said, “*I’ll* call him and talk to him.”

Well, when I got to that meeting, he had changed his mind. He handed me all the paperwork. He said, “I want your product in my warehouse.” He said, “The local guy there just gave you rave reviews.”

And, actually, that buyer ended up becoming one of my best friends and just like really—and I still give him credit to this day about really helping me to launch my business, because he was just—but I told him, I said—after about a couple years, I said, “You know, I cried the day on the phone.”

And he was like, “I’m sorry.” But he dealt with that all the time.

So he took me in. Well, when that happened, it just really blew up my business, and so then I really had to start thinking about faster ways to produce my product and more employees and all that. And then I also went to the Piggly Wiggly warehouse, and when I was already in the other one, they were like, “Yeah, we’ll take you in.” So that’s kind of how that all rolled.

I went along with that for a couple years, and I finally just thought, “You know, I’ve got to take the next step.” And I, for some reason, decided I’d go with Walmart. I was a Woman on Business and Walmart was really catering to that, and I had a unique product. There was not another frozen cornbread. So I was at a meeting and approached a man from Walmart and I said, “I’ve got a product that y’all don’t have in Walmart.”

And he looked at me like, “You’re crazy. We have everything.” And I showed him, and he said, “You know what? You’re right.” We had had a luncheon that day and

all the Alabama food people brought their food, and he said, “I had your cornbread at lunch and it was delicious.”

So he got me a vendor number with Walmart and I did the DSD, direct store delivery, to about twenty stores in North Alabama. I drove across the state. I did that for about six months, and then I went to the buyer again and I said, “Okay. This is—I’m just exhausted. I’m driving around.”

I actually had a van, an old Chevy van, and when you checked in at Walmart, they were strict. They checked the temperature of your product. So my husband—we had a chest freezer. My husband put that chest freezer in the back of my van. We took all the seats out and my husband put that chest freezer in the back of my van, and I would pull in the garage and plug it up. Well, we kept it plugged up all the time, but it was plugged up, I’d fill it up with cornbread, and I had to leave at like 4:30 in the morning, because you had to check in between like 6:00 and 8:00 a.m. And if the Pepsi truck got there before you or whatever, you just had to wait. But I would unplug the freezer and start driving, and it would hold long enough even to go all the way to Huntsville and back, and so my temperature was always way below what it needed to be.

But I drove around and delivered to these Walmarts. And so I told the buyer, I’m like, “I can’t keep doing this.” I said, “It’s too hard on me to do that, plus trying to produce the cornbread and deal with everything.” And I said, “I really need to get into the distribution centers.”

So they agreed, but they wanted me to go into a box. I was still in the bag, and they said, “Well, you need to go into a box, a little more better-looking packaging and stuff.”

So I agreed, and I actually got in—my first order from Walmart, I got in four distribution centers and I had—it's called a SKU, but like at the grocery store, the little barcode, that's one SKU. So I had eight hundred SKUs in Walmart. It was insane, really, and so that kind of just blew me up and I ended up buying some equipment, different pieces, to kind of speed up the production of that. So that was kind of my Walmart story.

[laughs]

[0:25:42.0]

Annemarie Anderson: It sounds like that was quite a crazy ride.

[0:25:46.9]

Laura Hester: It was, it was. That was when I went to the bank, got some money.

[laughs]

[0:25:50.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, so, I guess, kind of going off that, you know, what does it take in recipe development and testing to—you're producing a certain amount of product and then you're making tons more. Does technology play into that? And how does technology change your product or how do you combat that, I guess?

[0:26:18.9]

Laura Hester: Well, I don't know if I'd say technology did anything. Being older, I'm not as tech-savvy. My son, who's thirty now, helped me a lot in recipe development,

because, like, for example, when I started, we did a small batch and, all of a sudden, I had to turn that small batch into whatever. Well, he did an Excel program, you know, that we could put in the original batch, then—like, for example, our homemade batch used the small-size canned corn, cream corn, but when I went into the big production, I wanted to buy the corn in the big cans. Well, I wanted to develop the recipe to make—I wanted to open one can of corn and not have to—you don't want to have to measure—it's easier to measure dry cornmeal than a can of cream corn, so I kind of based my batches, honestly, on that can of cream corn. So I guess technology did—what he did for me with the Excel program, because then I scaled the recipe to match that, you know. Well, then from that, it went from one can of corn to four cans of corn in a batch as I got bigger equipment, more whatever.

But I've stayed true to the recipe. Like, I've used real milk, real onions, real cheese. I never compromised, because that was what I thought kept selling my product. I never had the money to really advertise, but it was repeat customers, because I had a quality product out there. And I could say “all natural” because I use no preservatives, no anything, and so I think that kind of helped with the growth of the business, because people would come back to it, because they said, “This tastes just like you made it at home.”

I'm like, “Yeah, and that's what I wanted.”

Because of that, it was expensive to make, which, you know, in the end, became a problem, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't vary from the recipe.

[0:28:16.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Well, could you describe the products that you made and sold for us?

[0:28:20.6]

Laura Hester: Well, my jalapeño cornbread muffin, and then I have a classic cornbread muffin. I did try my hand at a cream cheese and banana nut muffin that were based off the recipe from the ones I sold at the market, and they were in frozen breakfast and they did not sell well. They sold okay, but not well enough to stay in. I only got one order from Walmart on those, and I think it was twofold. I think people didn't expect to find that in the breakfast section. They're not real sure about a frozen muffin for breakfast. I think people think more of the deli when they think of breakfast muffin. And so that little endeavor did not work out. Walmart's now coming out with a section called frozen bakery—I'm trying to think how they worded it—pastries and stuff, where I think it would get more attention.

But, you know, in the freezer section, you have doors. You open a door. So, like, for example, frozen bread has three doors, at the most, usually. You've got biscuits, garlic bread, dinner rolls, and then my cornbread. Breakfast has about ten to twelve doors. Well, you can buy a whole stack of pancakes for \$1.99, where my muffins were about 4.69, and so I think it just—people, there was too much stuff for them to see in breakfast. They came through, grabbed their pancakes, grabbed their waffles, whatever, and kind of moved on. So it wasn't a good fit. But anyway.

Then I did do a food service pack of cornbread, which I would bake, which was my grandmother's recipe, and the reason I did that is food service wanted the muffins a

lot less expensive, because if you go to a meat-and-three and get a plate of food and a cornbread muffin, they're practically giving that muffin away. You know what I'm saying? They're not—whatever.

So I did my grandmother's recipe, which was flour and cornmeal, eggs, oil, and powdered milk, and then I added the cream corn to make it moisture and I added jalapeños to the jalapeño one. But then we did bake those and dump them in a box, loose. There was ninety-six muffins in a loose box, and then the customer would just, you know, take one out or however many they wanted and heat them up. So those are really the products besides—the breads and things I don't really do any more. I do some specialty stuff at Christmas, but I don't do them like all the time.

[0:30:55.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Makes sense. So another question I had, well, could you kind of introduce us to your kitchen and how you make the cornbread? Talk about that and kind of the process of that and how it grew over the time of your business.

[0:31:16.6]

Laura Hester: Yeah. In fact, I've got some pictures. I've just gone back and made a whole historical thing from the beginning, because when we first started, I mixed in just big tubs, and we actually hand-dipped with scoops, like ice cream scoops, and that went on probably for a couple years. And then we hand-packaged into the bags, and we had a little closer that we clicked down.

Now, in my kitchen down there, which we'll go look at in a minute, I do have—the Entrepreneurial Center provides some things, and they do provide two large walk-in Hobart revolving ovens, so that allowed me to bake a lot of cornbread at one time. Past that, you pretty much have to—all the equipment, I purchased myself. So I eventually purchased what was called a depositor. It has a huge hopper, and we would fill it up with cornbread and then it comes out into a handheld nozzle that deposits exactly two ounces into my muffin pans. Instead of hand-dipping them, a man just sat there, somebody fed him the pans and whatever, and then they went in the oven. So that was my first big piece that really sped things up.

And then I had a bagging machine that we bought. I can't remember the exact timeline on it. But you just dropped the pans in the bags and it sealed them and they came out, and then people packaged them in the boxes. Now, I still, at the end, was gluing the boxes with hot glue guns. I employed quite a few retired schoolteachers. They loved to come, and they just sat around and visited each other and glued boxes all day, you know. And so they glued on one side and we stood them up in a box, and then somebody would put the pans in and they'd glue the other side shut.

And then we date-stamped all the boxes. We dated it with the date of production plus a year, so that was kind of the expiration date, but it was also my lot number too. There's a lot of recordkeeping in grocery items because of recalls. You know, there's recalls all the time, and so there's a lot of recordkeeping. If you had a recall, you have to be able to pull by the lot number. Fortunately, bread is not real easy to have a recall because, you know, it's baked, everything's baked to a certain degree and temperature. So anyway.

So that was kind of my process. Over the period of time, I just bought pieces of equipment that sped that up, but we started very, very hands-on. [laughs] And even at the end, I had a big handheld whisk that mixed the cornbread, and then I had another machine that actually took it out of the bowl, big bowl that we mixed it in, and dumped it into the hopper. We used to have to lower the hopper and dump it in that, and so everything got real fast. Like, for example, probably when I started, we might do two, three, four hundred pans a day. We can now do about 3,500 pans in a day. So we greatly increased the production, which saves a lot of money [laughs] on rent and labor and all that.

[0:34:11.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Well, could you tell me a little bit about—you mentioned your employees, but I guess at the height, how many did you have? And could you tell me about two or three who were particularly involved?

[0:34:24.1]

Laura Hester: Yeah. I had probably on any given day about sixteen people working. That was my maximum. Now, unfortunately, I never got full-time. I always was just part-time. We usually worked one to two days a week, is what we produced, and I basically produced on order. Like, whatever my orders were for the weeks, we produced. And here at the facility, we only have one walk-in freezer. We never had enough freezer space to store pallets. I actually shipped on pallets and tractor-trailer trucks picked it up. But I had

to move it to another warehouse, frozen warehouse facility, here in Florence. It's not far from here down the road. But they were real instrumental to help me do that.

But when I very first started, my mom and dad both worked, which they're both still living. My dad just is about to turn eight-four. My mom's eighty-one, and my mom still worked up until last year. [laughs]

But there is also in this kitchen, they do Meals on Wheels, and they work from about 8:00 in the morning—about 7:00 to 10:00. Well, I really needed some guys because the lifting and whatever, and so there was a couple guys that worked there for Meals on Wheels, and I said, "Would y'all want some extra part-time work?"

And so Cedric Crowell [phonetic] worked for them, and he said, "Yeah, I would," you know.

So "Ced" started with me probably right off the bat and is still with me today, well, until I closed my business—and we'll talk about that later on—at the end of the year. But Ced, I couldn't have made it without him. He handled all the—he, like, loaded the trucks. He would come in and we were—by the time he got in here after he would deliver his meals and then come back—I got here around 12:00 o'clock—we'd already have some cornbread ready, and he would start loading the truck. And he always kept up with the pallets, how many went on a pallet and what was on the truck, and then he actually drove the truck to the freezer warehouse and then unloaded it on the pallets and wrapped. He knew how to stack the pallets and whatever. And he's just been real precious to me over the years. I could count on him to be there.

Then when I got in Walmart, it just so happened a lady was here catering, and she had a girl that was looking for some extra work, too, Linda Mitchell [phonetic]. I mixed

every batch of cornbread myself. I was just so scared of the recipe. It had to be perfect and all. When Linda started working for me, I gradually let her mix the recipe, and it got—she was with me for about four years, and I bet in the last two years, I never even looked at the ingredients and the recipe. She did it. You know, I had everything here. I did all the ordering, all that, but she took it and ran with it, and she knew. And we had the recipes posted and we had two girls helping her, but she mixed every batch and she made sure every batch was right.

And then she also—I let her clean my equipment. The cleaning of the equipment's very involved because you've got O-rings and you've got parts, moving parts, whatever, and I trusted her to do that. So, yeah, she was my key man in all—I just couldn't—in fact, I would not work if she couldn't work that day. It was that important that she was here. I did two times and it about killed me. [laughs] So, yeah, she was real instrumental to me also.

But I had a lot of other great people through the years off and on. You know, I had some come, some go. But I did hire a lot of retired schoolteachers because they wanted to kind of get out of the house. They didn't want a full-time job. And then they would recommend, "Well, this girl wants to work," and, "This girl wants to work," so I had a good little handful of the retired schoolteachers.

[0:38:11.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. That's great. Well, I haven't asked this question yet.

What year did you start your business officially?

[0:38:20.0]

Laura Hester: Well, the candy business that was my very first little thing was actually in 2005, maybe '04, maybe 2004. I'm going to take that back. It was 2004. And then in 2005 is when I started baking the breads and started that little venture, and I did that until—in 2009, actually, was when I got in the first grocery store. So I just sold at the farmers' markets, like I said, in the summers, for all those years.

And in 2010, my youngest child, Thomas, graduated from high school, and that's when I really kind of decided—well, and the dentist I worked for retired, so it was kind of a combination. I had three job offers instantly from other dentists, but my family was like, “Mom, you've got this cornbread in the grocery stores. Let's just do it. Let's just see where it'll go,” you know. And like I said, my husband works and has our insurance and all that, so I kind of—I always said he let me play. [laughs] I've been playing for all these years. [laughs] So that was kind of, you know, fun. So, long time. [laughs]

[0:39:30.9]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I guess this is a two-part question, but over the past couple of years you've been doing this, what's the big challenges and what are the rewards of owning your own business?

[0:39:46.3]

Laura Hester: Well, the challenges in the grocery industry have been hard. With Walmart, I started at eight hundred SKUs. The next year, they dropped me to seventy-six SKUs. Walmart's so big, they really don't listen to you. I hate to say that, but they just

kind of do what they want to do, and I, at the time, was not very vocal and I should have been more vocal. I got a broker in Bentonville, which helped me a lot. He then was vocal, and I got my stores back up to four hundred stores. But then a year later, I was back down to three hundred. So Walmart was kind of scary being my biggest retailer.

I tried to get into Publix. I never had any luck there. They kept saying, “Well, we’re going to watch your sales. We’re going to watch your sales,” you know. I was a very small, small company, and so a lot of them were, I think, a little scared I couldn’t keep up with the production or whatever. I assured them I could, but that’s their side.

Then there’s also a thing, Walmart doesn’t do this, but, like, Winn-Dixie, they were interested in me and would have taken it in, but to get what they call a slot in their warehouse, they wanted \$60,000 and I couldn’t do that. I offered them five and they didn’t take it, you know. So there’s a lot of money that’s needed. In fact, someone told me every time a company introduces a new product into the grocery store, it’s about \$15 million, which really blows your mind when you go in the grocery store and see how many new items there are all the time. But, you know, some companies can afford that and some products hit and then it was worth it, you know, and some don’t. So anyway.

But the reward, I mean, has been—and my husband and Woody that works with me too—and I didn’t speak of him a minute ago. Woody came onboard with me about four years ago when I got Walmart. Giles McDaniel that’s over at the Entrepreneurial Center, he knew I was kind of getting in over my head. He knew I could cook cornbread all day but I didn’t know the money side, and Woody does some work with the Entrepreneurial Center and he’s a consultant and his background is banking, and Giles knew that he could come in and help me get the financing that I needed and that kind of

thing. And so I was very glad to have that help, because he wrote, like, a five-year business plan. He could do projections, things the bank wanted that I couldn't do, you know. So Woody's really helped me a lot. In fact, I used to joke and say he does all the things I don't want to do. He makes the phone calls I don't want to do and answers the emails I don't want to do. I'd rather be down in the kitchen, you know, with my apron on. But, anyway, I was going somewhere with that and I got sidetracked.

[0:42:42.2]

Annemarie Anderson: The rewards.

[0:42:43.6]

Laura Hester: Oh, yeah. So my husband and Woody and everybody said—I did have to close my business at the end of 2018 for various reasons, which I can talk about in a minute—but they've all said, you know, “Hold your head up high, because getting your items in the grocery store is about like winning the lottery in this day and time. It's really, really hard for a small company to do that.” And to have the sales that I had and the repeat customers that I had, so that has been rewarding. I really never intended to be an entrepreneur. I kind of always liked working for somebody else, but it kind of fell in my lap, and I was like, “Okay, this is selling, this is going, this is good,” and I just thought, “I've got to keep pushing.” I really had hoped to grow it bigger and move out of the Entrepreneurial Center into my own place and all, but it just wasn't meant to be, sadly.

[laughs]

[0:43:35.4]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, you know, you are a certified woman-owned business, and that's a big deal, especially when it's hard for women and people of color to get into entrepreneurial things. How did that make you feel? What do you think about that?

[0:43:56.9]

Laura Hester: Well, I guess, yeah, I say a woman in a man's world, you know, whatever. I didn't really think that much about being a woman-owned business until I went to a seminar and they mentioned that it was really beneficial for us, like you said, minorities—like, Walmart likes to work with minority manufacturers, you know. And sadly, a lot of companies, actually, they try and blanket it to look like it's a woman-owned business when it's really not, and I'm like, mine really was. You know, it was totally me, you know. When they come and interview you for—it's a very involved process to get certified. You can't just say you're a woman-owned business. You have to do certification, and they come and interview you and you have to show them checks that you've signed and all the stuff. And the lady, she said, you know, she goes, "You're really a woman-owned business." She's like, "I run into these where I can kind of see through the cracks," you know. But she said, "This is—"

I said, "Yeah, it's me." I said, "My husband's been supportive and everything, but," I said, "it's all been me," you know.

But I have tried to look at the positives of what I've learned. I've learned a ton of stuff over the years that I never would have, had I stayed being a dental hygienist. You know, employing people is very educational. [laughs] You've got great ones and you've

got not so great ones, and that's been hard on me to have to—I really have never had to let anybody go. I think they just knew it was time to not come back, you know, and all. But I'm a little too soft. A lot of them have said, "You're too soft. You're not—," whatever. But I wanted to make it a good environment, you know, and so it's just like that. But, you know, I don't know. I think that it's good that they have the opportunities that help the minority businesses, so I'm all in favor of that.

[0:45:53.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. I mean, are there any difficulties associated with that [unclear]?

[0:46:00.7]

Laura Hester: I don't know. I actually did get some pushback from some men about it. They didn't like it, you know, and I can kind of see their point on that too. They're like, "Well, why do y'all get special treatment?" whatever, you know.

And I said, "Well, I think it's because it's harder for us to get the leg up from the men sometimes." And I'm not a womanist, feminist, or whatever, by any means, but I just said, "Well, it just helps us. It's a steppingstone to get us in the door."

[0:46:28.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, definitely. Well, I guess there's also this kind of—this fits into the rise of convenience foods and women going into the workforce and this kind of

connection. Where do you think that Red Gingham Gourmet kind of fits into that, or does it?

[0:46:48.9]

Laura Hester: Say that again. Like— [laughs]

[0:46:53.1]

Annemarie Anderson: So with the rise of women, I guess, from the 1950s to the present, going into the workforce more and [unclear] kind of like—

[0:47:02.2]

Laura Hester: Convenience, yeah.

[0:47:03.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

[0:47:03.9]

Laura Hester: Well, okay. So, actually, when I told my mom, I'm like, you know, "This grocery store's interested in me selling this cornbread in their store." I said, "Maybe I should sell it raw and let them bake it at home," because that would have saved me a step in my process of baking.

And my mother said, "Laura," she goes, "twenty years ago, first of all, you couldn't have sold cornbread in the freezer section because we all made it." She said,

“But things are changing now. Women are working and whatever.” And she said, “They want it fast, they want it quick.” She goes, “They’re probably going to put it in the microwave, to be honest. They’re not even going to wait for the oven for ten minutes.” So she said, “No, I think you need to go ahead and bake it and make it.”

So, yeah, I feel like it fit in that category of people want to grab and go, and it’s convenient and whatever. So it was definitely a convenient food, but it was a delicious convenient food [laughs] and something different, too, you know.

[0:47:55.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, definitely. Well, okay. So this is a question I have too.

Where did you come up with the name Red Gingham Gourmet?

[0:48:03.5]

Laura Hester: [laughs] That’s kind of a funny story. Red’s my favorite color, and growing up, I don’t know why, I was just kind of always attracted to red gingham. My mother, actually, my mother sewed too. Being in home economics, she sewed. They did everything, you know. She made a comforter for my bed that was the big red gingham check. I still have it to this day.

And then when I started selling at the farmers’ markets, I took red gingham tablecloths and spread onto the bench or table or whatever I had to sell off of. And I actually sold for about a year before I actually went and bought an official business license, because I had a business license at the kitchen already under my other business, so I was kind of just blanketing myself under that, because I didn’t know where this was

going to, and when it blew up so that first summer, I'm like, "I've got to go and turn this into a real business."

So I went down to the business license and he said, "Well, what's the name of your business?"

And I was like, oh, I hadn't really thought—I just hadn't thought about it, and I just said, "Red Gingham Gourmet," out of the top of my head, because I thought, well, it's red gingham, because I use that. That makes you think of tablecloths in a restaurant, food, but then it's gourmet because it's a little bit higher end, you know? So anyway, it just stuck.

But it's funny, because a lot of men don't know what red gingham is. Women do, but men don't, you know, and so over the years—and people have pronounced it wrong. They say "ging-ham," you know, instead of "ging-um." But anyway, so it's kind of—I think if I had to do it over, I might have named it something a little simpler to pronounce. But that's how that evolved. [laughs]

[0:49:52.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I guess we can talk a little bit about the decision to kind of like—

[0:50:00.6]

Laura Hester: Close?

[0:50:01.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

[0:50:02.2]

Laura Hester: Well, I grew up, you know, in a religious family, and I've never been one of those that just talked religion, but I really have said God closed about four doors this year and it just was time. I actually did bank financing, but then a couple years ago, I was blessed to have an investor, and it was a local investor who he just—they loved to help the community, and he said I had to keep the business in Florence and employ people from Florence or the area and all, and really helped me to grow, you know, to expand. Well, we had certain goals that needed to be met, and so in October this year when we met, I just hadn't been able to meet them and I couldn't get the next retailer. I couldn't get that. So he just said, "Well, I hate it, but we're going to have to end the relationship," which, graciously, he just walked away, so that was easy on me financially.

Then the freezer warehouse where I store all my cornbread, they decided to go out of business at the end of the year, and that came from two things. One, they had two compressors went down, and it was about \$40,000 each, and the owner was in his seventies and he just said, "I've done all I can do." And I actually did try and find other freezer storage space, but it's hard. Everybody's full. Nobody has room, you know. So I was lucky to have that spot for as many years as I did.

I did decide maybe I was going to try and stay, keep doing it, and I approached Walmart for a price increase, because my aluminum pan was twenty-five cents apiece, and when Trump did the tariffs, my pans went to thirty cents apiece, so that's five cents. My shipping was just going through the roof, you know, whatever. So I asked for a price

increase with Walmart. They require a margin between them and their competitors and they still had plenty of room, and they denied my price increase, too, so that was kind of the end of it, you know. So I had the freezer warehouse, I had the investor pull out, and then the Walmart price increase. And I had one more thing, because I kept saying four doors. It'll hit me later.

But I'm older, too, and it was physical, the work was, and it was stressful. The employees, you know, I had a hard time keeping men because of it being one or two days a week, and I needed men. The retired schoolteachers were great, but they couldn't load and unload the truck. And Ced was always here, but he couldn't do that by himself, you know. I needed someone to run the depositor. So it just all just kind of just came and I just decided that it was time to just let it go and walk away. But I've had a great time. I've enjoyed it, you know, and it's been, like I said, a very learning experience.

A couple of funny things that happened. When I first got that buyer at Mitchell, I was emailing him about how to ship it, you know. I said, "Do I ship it on a palate?" And I spelled "palate" like the roof of your mouth because I was a dental hygienist.

And he wrote back and he said, "Yes, you ship it on a p-a-l-l-e-t, not e-t-t-e."

[laughs]

And I was like, oh, my goodness. I was so embarrassed.

Then when the truck was coming, I had called the shipping department for the truck was coming to pick it up, and I said, "Well, what do I need to do?"

And she goes, "Well, you need a bill of lading."

Well, I had no clue what a bill of lading was, so I ran to Office Depot and I said, "I need a bill of lading." And they sell them, fortunately, in like a carbon-copy thing.

Well, it's the weight that you're shipping on that truck, and if that truck gets pulled over by the police or whatever, they can say, "Here's what all I'm shipping." Or they have to go through weigh stations, you know, and stuff.

So I didn't know what a bill of lading was either. [laughs] So, anyway, so, like I said, I kind of learned as I went along.

[0:54:08.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. So I guess after all these years, what's the thing that you're most proud of?

[0:54:17.1]

Laura Hester: Wow. I guess that I did accomplish getting a product in the grocery store and that I employed a lot of people, and I think I helped a lot of people. I actually employed—Woody wrote a story, it's called "Second-Chance Employer." I had a lot of people that had been in jail, had been in drug rehab, but worked for me because they couldn't get a full-time job, but I could use them a day or two a week. And, actually, I had several homeless people, actually, and I had one man right till the end that him and his girlfriend ended up being able to get an apartment and not be homeless anymore. And so I felt like, you know, I wanted to grow this business to help people, help the community and help, and I think that's probably the most rewarding thing to it and I'm going to miss that the most. I'm going to miss the employees. I'm going to miss the people. I made a lot of friends and all.

But, you know, it's bittersweet, but it did relieve a lot of stress off of me when I decided to stop, you know, because it was always looking for invoice—when you own your own business, you don't go home at 5:00 o'clock and you're done. There's many a nights I got back in bed on my laptop and answered emails that night or, you know, would be ready to return phone calls the next day. And you always felt like if you weren't doing something, you felt guilty, because you should be pushing for the next sale or pushing for the next whatever. I don't know that I had enough—I had a drive for a while and then just I got so frustrated. You get turned down so many times and then you're just like, "Oh, I just can't keep pushing anymore." But I guess that, like I said, I'm just happy to look back on it and say I did accomplish that. For eight years, I was in the grocery stores and always had orders.

The other thing I really think I'm proud of is that I didn't compromise. I didn't cut my recipe just to make more money, you know. I really was strict to that standard. And, I don't know, I probably should have. [laughs] Maybe I'd still be in business. But I just really—I just didn't want to. I just couldn't, you know. That was what I was, you know, proud of. I was proud of the recipe and proud of the ingredients and the quality of the product.

[0:56:37.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's awesome. I don't have any more questions for you. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

[0:56:41.8]

Laura Hester: Oh, gosh. I don't know. I've said a lot of stuff. [laughs] I don't guess so. I think that just about covers it. I was trying to think if there was anything else, but, no, I think that's all. I'm excited you came and that maybe there'll be a little bit of history documented about it. Like I said, I went and did an album of all my photos and things and I made a little video that I'm probably going to put on Facebook in a couple weeks just kind of thanking everybody and telling them that I've ended. So, yeah.

[0:57:10.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, thank you so much.

[0:57:12.3]

Laura Hester: You're welcome. Thank you.

[End of interview]