



Lisa Fain
New York, New York

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[Begin Lisa Fain Interview]

[0:00:00]

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Friday, May the 4th, 2018, just after 10:00 in the morning, and I am in New York City with Lisa Fain, and I'm going to have her introduce herself, please.

[0:00:19.7]

Lisa Fain: Hello. My name is Lisa Fain, and I have a food blog called *Homesick Texan*, and my birthday is June 3rd, 1969.

[0:00:29.3]

Rien Fertel: Okay. We're in New York. You're not from New York.

[0:00:33.6]

Lisa Fain: No, I'm not. **[Laughter]**

[0:00:35.1]

Rien Fertel: Where are you from originally?

[0:00:36.8]

Lisa Fain: I am from Texas. I'm a seventh-generation Texan. My family is primarily from the North Texas area, outside of Dallas. I come from a long line of farmers, and my grandma still lives on land that's been in the family since the 1840s.

[0:00:51.0]

Rien Fertel: Where is that?

[0:00:52.5]

Lisa Fain: It's outside of Dallas. It's a county called Collin County, and the nearest town is McKinney, so it's probably about thirty minutes outside of Dallas, but actually the way Dallas is spreading now, it's all kind of considered part of the Dallas metropolitan area. But she lives there. And I was born in Dallas, born in Oak Cliff, but my family moved to Houston, actually, when I was nine, so I kind of consider both Dallas and Houston my hometowns. I actually grew up in Houston, went to high school in Houston, and my mom still lives in Houston, and so when I go home, I go to Houston and the Dallas area.

[0:01:25.8]

Rien Fertel: You spent time in Dallas growing up?

[0:01:27.5]

Lisa Fain: I did. Oh, yes, both.

[0:01:29.9]

Rien Fertel: Texas is famous for—I like how you introduced yourself as a seventh-generation Texan, and you do the same thing in your books. Why do Texans do that, I guess? It is a thing that Texans do. **[Fain Laughter.]** And the follow-up question to that is how do you know that? Like, are there family records or is it just family lore?

[0:01:48.7]

Lisa Fain: Texans are very proud of being Texans, and there's a sense of pride if you're a native Texan, and then going beyond being a native Texan, people kind of do the whole swagger about how many generations of Texan you are. So, a seventh-generation Texan would trump a fifth-generation Texan, and I have a friend who's a ninth-generation Texan, another who's an eighth-generation Texan. So, it just kind of gives you sort of credence to being Texan, which is all kind of silly when you think about it, but Texans are very boisterous and boastful and things like that, so that's just kind of why you do it. And especially for me, coming from someone who lives in New York City, there's always just been this whole sort of—what's the word? Well, there was—like, back to the Pace commercial, “New York City? Get a rope!” So, there's a little bit of suspicion that I live in New York City, so by establishing my cred with the Texans, by saying, “Oh, don't worry. I'm a seventh-generation Texan,” then that gives me the ability to talk about Texas with some sort of sense of authority.

[0:02:54.1]

Rien Fertel: One more question about your Texas family. In the seven generations, is there anyone that has ever struck you, or is there family lore about someone who is more

Texan than the rest? **[Fain Laughter.]** I mean, “Texan” has a history for having these, like, big characters and personalities, from politics to criminals, and everything.

[Laughter] Is there someone that was really Texan that you really knew as the most Texan of Texans in your family?

[0:03:21.0]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. It’s interesting. Now the perception of Texans is big oil and things like that, but I came from farmers and businesspeople, doctors, and politicians. I’m related to Ma and Pa Ferguson, who were governors. And then I had a multiple-great-uncle who was—what was his exact title? He was the Treasurer of Travis County—Travis County is where Austin is—and he was a very prominent citizen in Austin in about the 1890s, and one of his best friends was O. Henry. And so he and O. Henry were kind of—they hatched this plan. O. Henry had some friends, some Native American friends, who had a treasure map in Pease Park. And so my uncle—his name was Albert—and Sydney hatched a plan to get this treasure out of Pease Park, which is in Austin, but they didn’t have enough funds, so he embezzled from the treasury of the county. And it all went to pieces, and O. Henry went to jail and Albert was going to go to jail, and so he killed himself in office.

But, at the time, I went back and read all the newspaper articles, and he was called “Dad” Jernigan, Albert “Dad” Jernigan, and there was all these articles about Dad Jernigan, and everyone was just shocked because he was this pillar of the community. He ran a quarry and he had lots of kids and everyone loved him, and they were just so

shocked that this had gone down, and so kind of O. Henry was painted as like the bad influence. **[Laughter]**

[0:04:58.8]

Rien Fertel: That's a good Texan story. **[Laughter]**

[0:04:59.6]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, and there's more, but those are probably the two most—I'm related to Sam Houston.

[0:05:04.4]

Rien Fertel: Really?

[0:05:05.6]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. So, when you've been there for so long, as my family, you kind of just acquire all these relatives. **[Laughter]**

[0:05:12.6]

Rien Fertel: Where did your family come from?

[0:05:14.1]

Lisa Fain: My family has pretty much been in the South since the early 1700s. They came from Virginia, Tennessee, and Alabama.

[0:05:25.3]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So that leads to my next question. Do you consider Texas a part of the South? Is Texas Southern?

[0:05:31.9]

Lisa Fain: Yes and no. I think you can pretty much divide it almost like in half. I would say Dallas and Houston and even Austin to a certain degree, that whole Central to North Texas is Southern, East Texas, very Southern, but then once you start heading out to the west, like El Paso, the Valley, even the Panhandle, it doesn't really feel Southern anymore. They identify as Texan, of course. Even in El Paso, they're very proud of being Texan, but whether or not it's considered true Southern, I would say it just depends on the person.

[0:06:05.9]

Rien Fertel: So why and when did you move to New York?

[0:06:11.6]

Lisa Fain: Well, even though I'm a seventh-generation Texan and I come from a very—most of my family's still there and they're very proud, and I grew up going to the cemeteries and hearing all the family history and stuff like that, I could not wait to get out. **[Laughter]** And so when I was twenty-five, it was the [19]90s, and I was your classic slacker, but I got a job managing a bookstore on the Upper West Side, so I moved

here with a bunch of friends, we were really young. And it was pretty much a dream come true. We were here, Texans in the city, but there was a lot of—I mean, for me, it was like I was very excited about the big buildings and the energy and the arts and all of that, but for me, I became very homesick almost immediately because the food was all wrong, the people were very different. They weren't unfriendly, but they were just a little bit more brusque, and the rhythms were different. And so for me—and this is kind of how I started on my path as a food writer. I had no ambition of being a food writer. It was just the only way I could figure out to connect with home was to cook Texas food, and so that's kind of how that all came about.

[0:07:22.5]

Rien Fertel: And before you started doing the blog and the cookbooks—you said you didn't want to be a food writer. Did you have aspirations to be a writer?

[0:07:31.0]

Lisa Fain: Yes, yes. Interestingly enough, I wanted to be a novelist, like a YA novelist, and the bookstore that I managed, I had actually worked in a bookstore in Austin before I moved here which is no longer around. It was called Toad Hall, and it was a beloved children's bookstore.

[0:07:44.3]

Rien Fertel: Were you there for college?

[0:07:46.2]

Lisa Fain: No. I actually went to college outside of Dallas at a place called Austin College in Sherman, but I moved to Austin after college and I worked in this bookstore. So I moved to New York, and I'd written a novel and I'd written some picture books and things like that. So I was working in this bookstore, and I didn't have an agent or anything, so I was submitting manuscripts. And in the bookstore, because it was New York, a lot of editors would come through, and people in the industry, but I could not catch a break **[Laughter]** and everything I got submitted got rejected for years and years and years and years and years, and that was frustrating.

So I basically just quit and I became a personal assistant to a *New York Times* bestselling mystery author, and then I got into magazine work, and so that's what I was doing when I started the blog.

But all along, I mean, I'd always enjoyed cooking, and there was a brief period before I quit my job at the bookstore where I considered going to culinary school. I had gotten into French cuisine, and so I was, like, cooking Julia Child and [Jacques] Pépin and all these French—I was working through French cookbooks and a bunch of others. Who else? Well, I was also doing Zarela Martinez, and I was just kind of going through the canon. And so I applied to culinary school.

[0:09:05.4]

Rien Fertel: Where at?

[0:09:07.5]

Lisa Fain: I applied to the CIA and I applied to—it was called Peter Kump’s back then, but now it’s ICE, I think. Yeah. And I got a scholarship, and I was all set to go, and then I decided not to. Actually, it’s funny. Okay, so a friend of mine, my best friend at the time—

[0:09:28.4]

Rien Fertel: Who was Texan or—

[0:09:30.2]

Lisa Fain: No. Well, she was Texan, but she wasn’t a native Texan, and she had moved to California. **[Laughter]** Anyway, so I was going out to California for her wedding, and we were kind of toasting her wedding in 1998, and we went to—where did we go?

[Laughter] My mind is a blank. Alice Waters’ restaurant. Why can I not think of it? You know what I’m talking about.

[0:09:54.4]

Rien Fertel: Sure.

[0:09:55.0]

Lisa Fain: The one in Berkeley. What is it called?

[0:09:56.6]

Rien Fertel: Chez Panisse.

[0:09:58.0]

Lisa Fain: We went to Chez Panisse, and we were sitting there in the kitchen, and actually her uncle is a chef, and we were talking, and it was beautiful watching—because it’s an open kitchen, and I was watching them do the things. But it was very repetitive, and I was like, “I don’t want to do that.”

And her uncle said, “You don’t want to work in a kitchen because it’s repetitive, and you have to be in that mindset.”

And I’m not. I’m very ADD, and I like to keep busy and do all these sorts of things, so I was like, “I’m not going to spend \$100,000 to go to culinary school, because I don’t want to work in a kitchen.” But I still was a very dedicated home cook, still was cooking Texas food for my friends, and then, 2005, I started the blog.

[0:10:40.3]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And one question before the blog. When you moved to the city and up through 2005, were there any restaurants in New York that were kind of faking it as Texan or that could be considered Texan, that were authentically Texan? Was there anything—

[0:10:59.0]

Lisa Fain: Yes.

[0:11:00.2]

Rien Fertel: —that would, like, sate your need for the homesickness?

[0:11:03.2]

Lisa Fain: Not really. I mean, that was kind of why I started cooking. There was a place on the Upper West Side called Yippie Yi Yo, and it was all right. I almost don't want to name names because some of the places are still open, but I would go to places and I'd order queso, which is the cheese dip that you serve with chips, and, like, one place made it with Swiss cheese, and I was like, "This is disgusting." And I was there with a friend of mine from Dallas, and she and I were just picking at it, and we were like, "What *is* this?" And barbecue in the city at the time was pretty awful. It was almost like it had been steamed and then just sauced. It didn't have that smoky flavor. And so, yeah, there was always this pursuit.

I actually talk about in my first book—well, another thing was you couldn't get, like, classic Texan ingredients, like Ro-Tel tomatoes. So I tell this story in my first book in the introduction, but I guess it was probably like [19]96, [19]97, I read in the *New York Times*—this is pre-Internet and I get all my information from the daily morning *New York Times*—I read about this international grocery store in Hoboken, and the article touted about how it was going to sell every ingredient under the sun, and I had not been able to find Ro-Tel tomatoes, which is tomatoes and green chilies that is good for making queso and other Texas dishes. I had not been able to find that in New York, and so I was like, "I'm going to go to this grocery store."

It was January, and I took the PATH train over, and it's about a mile from the train, and the public transportation there really doesn't exist, and there wasn't a cab or

anything, so I'm walking on this cold, rainy day to this grocery store. And, like a fool, I didn't call before I got there, so I get to this grocery store and it was just this miserable—I'm walking along a freeway and cars are honking and it's windy and your umbrella's blowing out like it does, and I get to this grocery store and they don't have Ro-Tel. So it was just kind of like, "Ugh."

So it was like things like that, because I was very energetic then because I was so young. I mean, I would, I would go to *way* out to the middle of New Jersey because I'd read about a Mexican restaurant that was supposed to be good, and it never was. So I was always off. And at first, my friends would join me, but then they stopped, and so I was just like this woman alone on a mission trying to find food that tasted like home when I couldn't. I mean, and it sounds ridiculous now, but it really was that way. **[Laughter]**

[0:13:18.3]

Rien Fertel: And so when did the Ro-Tel shift happen? I imagine you can get it everywhere now, or a lot of places.

[0:13:24.7]

Lisa Fain: Pretty much, yeah. I would say probably about ten years ago. Now you can even get it at Duane Reade, which is a drugstore. It's pretty common now. But, yeah, I mean, it was like—I remember there's a grocery store out in Brooklyn, I think it's called Key Foods, and around that time, a friend of mine found a can there, like one lonely can, one lonely, dusty can, and she called all of us, and we all convened at a friend's apartment on the Upper East Side. And another one had found Velveeta. And Velveeta

was another thing. In Texas, you can get the big, like, two-pound bricks and things like that. Here, you can only find the half-pound, the little one, or maybe the pound, but it was *so* expensive, like eight bucks a pound for Velveeta.

[0:14:08.0]

Rien Fertel: I think of it as so American.

[0:14:09.8]

Lisa Fain: I know, I know. I mean, it's also more easily found, but you don't get all the big varieties and things like that like you do down in the South. But anyway, so, we had this brick of Velveeta and this can of Ro-Tel that we were just so excited to find, and that was a nice moment. **[Laughter]** But it was like little things like that.

[0:14:27.3]

Rien Fertel: So you start the blog, I think, in 2005?

[0:14:32.5]

Lisa Fain: I did start it in 2005. It wasn't a food blog. I mean, it was just kind of like—back then everyone was on Blogspot. It was like the place to be, and so *everyone* had a blog in 2005, and so it was just something to do, you know? When you have an office job and there's downtime, people would blog. And so at first, it was just kind of—and I've since hidden all these posts, but it was just commentaries on Texas things.

[0:14:54.5]

Rien Fertel: I see. Was it called *Homesick Texan*?

[0:14:57.4]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, it was called *Homesick Texan*. I talk about Wes Anderson, or occasionally I would talk about food. Actually, my very first post was about refried beans. Refried beans, that's my favorite food.

[0:15:09.3]

Rien Fertel: Right. I found it. I went back and read it.

[0:15:12.1]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, oh, you've seen it? Yeah, that I kept up because I was like, "Well, it's about food and it's a good start." But it was kind of like that was, for me, the most sad thing was that refried beans is a very simple dish. It's beans, add some seasoning, maybe some fat, some pork fat, but nobody made it right. I'd go to all these Mexican restaurants in Queens, Brooklyn, New Jersey, Manhattan, and every single refried bean dish I was served was so flavorless, and so that for me was also kind of like, "Why can't they get this right in New York?"

So anyway, so it wasn't until, I think, the summer of 2006 that I got my first digital camera. I only had a film camera up to that point, and when I got a digital camera, it just made it so much easier to load photos to the site. And then my friends were like—I

would travel a lot and I would take pictures of my food when I traveled—but they were like, “You’re always cooking. Why don’t you take pictures of your food at home?”

I was like, “I don’t know.”

So I did, and they were like, “What are you cooking?” So that’s kind of how it evolved.

And then around that time, I discovered the world of food blogs. I hadn’t really known about that world. I got hooked into Flickr and I saw all the food bloggers there, like Matt Armendariz, who’s now a very famous photographer, but he had a food blog at the time, and he reached out to me. He’s like, “I’m from Texas.” And so at the time, like back then, it wasn’t a large community, it was probably about 100 people, maybe a little bit more, but it was before social media, so the only way we could reach out and connect to each other was through blogs, so you were always reading each other’s blogs, you were always reading comments, and the conversation was on the blog, and it was just this really wonderful time.

And because there still wasn’t other ways to connect besides the blogs, there were meet-ups all the time. So we’d meet up in Manhattan and have dinners or meet for coffee, and it was just a lot—I don’t know. I kind of miss it sometimes because it was a more manageable group of people, and at the time, no one was doing it for commercial reasons. Everyone was doing it for passion. They loved a certain dish or, like me, they were homesick or they were on a diet, but they had discovered all these great South Beach recipes. So it was just—I don’t want to say it was more innocent, but it was a lot more fun.

[0:17:21.2]

Rien Fertel: And it something that's disappeared from the Internet, for the most part.

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Lisa Fain: Absolutely, absolutely.

[0:17:24.7]

Rien Fertel: People don't do that on Twitter now. They don't do meet-ups.

[0:17:27.4]

Lisa Fain: No, no.

[0:17:28.5]

Rien Fertel: They yell at each other, right? **[Laughter]**

[0:17:29.8]

Lisa Fain: I mean, yeah. I mean, I'm still kind of like—I don't want to say nostalgic, but I'm still just in awe that it changed so fast. It was just like this friendly medium, and now it's just so not. So, yeah.

[0:17:42.8]

Rien Fertel: So did other homesick Texans find the blog early on?

[0:17:47.2]

Lisa Fain: Yes. Well, that was the biggest surprise. I was doing this for my office friends and my New York friends, and I let my family know, but I had no aspirations because I didn't know that there was a path. I just did it for the heck of it, and it was like a way to show stories and recipes and photos. But, yeah, it's a cliché, but that first comment you get from someone who you don't know, and they're so excited about what you're doing and how they connect with that, you're just over the moon. You're like, "Wow!" And so, yeah, it pretty much blossomed. At the time, there weren't really any other bloggers focusing on Texan cuisine, so that was a good niche. People would say, "And if you want to do queso, look at *Homesick Texan*. If you want to do these enchiladas, look at *Homesick Texan*." So it was a way to get my name out there, because I was one of the first to do it.

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Rien Fertel: And so how did that turn into a book?

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Lisa Fain: Well, I guess from 2006 till about 2010, in that four-year period, the blog exploded. A bunch of us started getting recognition from the press. Like, *Saveur* contacted me to write an article, and then they did their awards and I was awarded Best Regional Food Blogger. *The Times of London* did this whole thing, the fifty top bloggers in the world, and I was one of those.

[0:19:15.7]

Rien Fertel: Wow. Not even food bloggers?

[0:19:17.6]

Lisa Fain: No, I'm sorry, food.

[0:19:19.3]

Rien Fertel: Oh, food bloggers, okay. **[Laughter]**

[0:19:19.8]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, I mean, it was like fifty top food bloggers in the world, but that was, like, a big deal. And so pretty soon, like starting in 2007, I was mentioned in the *New York Times*. So, yeah, I was getting press from people like Houston press, I mean, yeah, Texas press was calling me for quotes and things, so my name got out there, and it was just a very—it was kind of like this food-blogging, food-world renaissance, this new generation, the bloggers.

And starting in 2007, literary agents started contacting me, because Julie Powell had done her thing just a few years previous, and her movie, the movie version of *Julie & Julia* came out around then, and so everyone was basically looking for the next Julie Powell. And so they all wanted me to write a memoir. I'm like, "That's dumb." I was in my thirties. I was in my mid-thirties, and I was like, "I am not going to write a memoir. I'm not going to do, like, some project, and I really don't have that much of a story to tell."

But that was kind of like—well, they would take me out to lunch and they'd be like, "So what's your memoir?"

And I'm like, "I'm not going to write a memoir." **[Laughter]** "I don't want to do that."

And I had lunches for four years. I was just like—I'd do it because it was free food and it was fun, but I was like—I really didn't want to write a book. I didn't want to write a memoir, nor did I want to write a cookbook. I didn't really see that as what I was supposed to do.

Then in 2010, in the spring, I met my current agent. She just sent me this brief note. She actually had sold a book for a friend of mine, Luisa Weiss, and I knew of this agent, Brettne Bloom, and she contacted me. And she's from Houston, and she introduced—"I'm a fifth-generation Houstonian," because that's what you do.

[Laughter] And she goes, "Just long story short, I love your blog. Would you like to meet?"

And I was like, "Okay," because I knew of her, you know, because she had sold my friend's book.

So we had lunch and we just totally hit it off, and she goes, "I want you to write a memoir."

And I'm like, "I'm not doing a memoir."

And then Ree Drummond's book had come out and it had done *really* well. And there was always this like—because I was from Texas and she was from Oklahoma, people would want to compare us. I'm like, "We're nothing alike."

But people were like, “Well, that book—.” So then they had that model. “Well, Ree Drummond’s book did really well.”

[0:21:33.7]

Rien Fertel: And that book was called—

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Lisa Fain: *The Pioneer Woman*. **[Laughter]** Now she’s huge. But they were like, “So *The Homesick Texan* can be like *The Pioneer Woman*.”

And I said, “I’m not going to be like that. We’re very different.”

But that was enough. She convinced me, that she said, “Well, there is probably a niche for a cookbook.”

And at that point, I had accumulated enough recipes and stories, and I had started, probably two years previous, creating a spreadsheet of things I wanted to make, and that’s since grown to over probably 1,500 recipes. But at the time, it was extensive enough, I was like, “Yeah, I can do this.” So I got a cookbook deal.

[0:22:12.8]

Rien Fertel: Just back up a bit. So these recipes, would you have dinner parties? Would you be cooking—that’s a lot of recipes, a lot of cooking. Was it just a decade of just cooking Texas in New York?

[0:22:25.6]

Lisa Fain: Well, not always just cooking Texas, but, yeah, I'd have people over or we'd get together and cook together at someone else's place.

[0:22:33.0]

Rien Fertel: And you would write out the recipes? It was almost as if—were you ready for the cookbook? Were the recipes—

[0:22:42.9]

Lisa Fain: Well, for the cookbook, we probably did probably about twenty percent blog recipes, so for those—because when I started the blog, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know how to write a recipe or anything, so I went back and cleaned all those up. And then, of course, being a cookbook, I had everything tested. So I kind of like I took twenty of the recipes from the blog, because I'd done so many greatest hits already, like biscuits, chicken-fried steak, cornbread, things like that that you can't have a Texas cookbook without those. So my publisher was fine, because usually they want less already published content, but it was fine. And also, it wasn't like they'd been in the *New York Times*. They were just on a blog.

But then for the new recipes, what I do is for my spreadsheets, well, I have a huge collection of family recipes, like files of handwritten cards. And then I had a relative whom I never met, named Aunt Sis, and she was obsessed with clipping recipes, like in the early 1900s, so I have all these, like, clips, which are from—

[0:23:43.1]

Rien Fertel: From local newspapers?

[0:23:44.1]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah, yeah, which is so cool. And then, like, I have my great-grandmother's cards and things like that. And then there's an online Texas newspaper portal called The Portal of Texas History, and it's a very extensive database of all these newspaper articles, so I would troll through there and read the food pages of some small town from the early 1900s. So, I mean, I had lots of access. And then I'd talk to friends and families and sometimes restaurateurs, but not usually, because I find that restaurateurs aren't going to give you—it's going to be completely different than what the home cook needs.

But for me, for access to finding ways to make things, that wasn't difficult, but then I like to get creative, so I'd put like a little twist on it. I was very inspired by the Lee Bros., and that was kind of like—their whole thing was, "Okay, we take this classic recipe, and then we just add one ingredient and it just freshens it up."

And I was like, "That's a great idea."

[0:24:38.6]

Rien Fertel: And it's still part of a place.

[0:24:39.5]

Lisa Fain: Absolutely, absolutely. It tastes as it should, but it tastes better because it's new.

[0:24:45.4]

Rien Fertel: So I want to skip back just one second before I ask you more about the book, but was there a cook in your family growing up that you identified with then or identify with? Or who taught you how to cook or who—

[0:25:03.7]

Lisa Fain: Well, everyone in my family cooks, which is fun.

[0:25:08.3]

Rien Fertel: Men and women?

[0:25:09.6]

Lisa Fain: Men and women. In my house, my dad, he would do grilling, but he would also do things like chicken-fried steak. And then my mom did a lot of very Southern things like casseroles, and she was a very passionate baker. And then my grandpa was really into pancakes and grilling, and my grandmother cooked. She was also a baker and just cooked the classic Southern repertoire.

But even my uncles and my cousins, when we get together for Thanksgiving, it's almost a family joke, everyone takes pictures in my family, so everyone has a camera, and everyone's in the kitchen jostling, trying to get access to the stove and stuff. So everyone cooks, so it was always just that's what you do. We would only go out to eat maybe once a week. The default was home cooking, so I grew up in a home-cooking

environment, so for me, when I was on my own, I was going to cook for myself because that's how you fed yourself. So I guess probably the person—the two people that have probably inspired me the most are my mom and my grandma, because those are the ones that I cooked with the most.

[0:26:14.7]

Rien Fertel: And everything they did, was it identifiably Texan or would they also experiment with Julia Child or something?

[0:26:21.2]

Lisa Fain: No, no, not really. My dad was the more fancy cook. He would be the one that would get like a Thomas Keller cookbook and explore. My mom, she was very set into Tex-Mex, very into the Texas canon. And my grandmother is an old Southern farm woman, and so she does that kind of cooking, lots of cobblers, lots of biscuits, eggs, hearty food.

[0:26:48.5]

Rien Fertel: Is it still a working farm where she lives?

[0:26:50.4]

Lisa Fain: No, no, no, no, no. No, no. Well, actually, it isn't, but it might become again. My uncle has just retired and he's moving up there. My grandmother hasn't been able to

garden probably in about three or four years, but he's actually putting in a garden this year.

[0:27:05.7]

Rien Fertel: Oh, good.

[0:27:07.1]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. So I think it's about to become one again, which is nice.

[0:27:10.6]

Rien Fertel: I have your first book, and I was flipping through it right before I came here at home. It was a great surprise that you took your own photos, right?

[0:27:22.7]

Lisa Fain: Yes.

[0:27:23.6]

Rien Fertel: Which I had never—I have too many cookbooks, I think, like we all do in the food world, and I don't think I've ever seen that before, at least not from a big press and everything. So how did you gain that trust? I know you're a photographer. You said that everyone has a camera in your family. That's so rare. How did that happen?

[0:27:45.8]

Lisa Fain: I think that ties back into the whole blogger phenomenon, because food bloggers, for the most part, would share photos, and it would be photos that they had done themselves. So at that time when publishers were giving book deals to bloggers like Deb Perelman and Heidi Swanson of *101 Cookbooks*, that was the package. Like, “Okay, we want the whole deal. We want the book to look like the blog.”

[0:28:09.7]

Rien Fertel: “Shoot it yourself.”

[0:28:11.1]

Lisa Fain: “So shoot it yourself.” So for the first couple books, it wasn’t even a question. It was just like—they didn’t even bring up not to do it, so I did it.

[0:28:20.5]

Rien Fertel: So you shot the second book too?

[0:28:22.9]

Lisa Fain: Mm-hmm.

[0:28:23.3]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:28:25.2]

Lisa Fain: I took a break with the third one. **[Laughter]** It's a lot of work.

[0:28:27.6]

Rien Fertel: So how would you do that? Did you rent a space or did they rent you a space?

[0:28:31.1]

Lisa Fain: No, no. My apartment and my bedroom, actually, has amazing light. And for me, what it would be like, the process was, is that as I would cook something and test it, and once I got it to where I wanted it to be and my recipe testers had come back with a good report, then I'd make it again. So most photo shoots for a book happen over a week, and it's a big affair. You have your stylist and you have all these people come in, the prop person, and then, of course, the photographer and her assistants. It's very concentrated, and you do seven to ten recipes a day. But for me, I would have a year to write the book, and so I would shoot it as I was writing it.

[0:29:12.8]

Rien Fertel: That's really great.

[0:29:14.5]

Lisa Fain: Yeah.

[0:29:15.4]

Rien Fertel: So you had so much time to—

[0:29:16.9]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah. For me, it wasn't that much different than when I'm producing a blog. It was a very similar sort of structure.

[0:29:26.7]

Rien Fertel: So the book did well. Like, it did really well.

[0:29:31.0]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah.

[0:29:32.4]

Rien Fertel: Did you have any thought of not continuing the blog with that—because the blog still exists.

[0:29:38.1]

Lisa Fain: Oh, I love the blog. I mean, it's funny. I mean, I have, like, a James Beard Award, and I have it for the blog. **[Laughter]** I mean, the blog for me—the books are a lot of fun too. The thing about the blog is, though, it's all me. I'm my own boss. I can do whatever I want. And for me, coming from—I'd worked with people before at magazines and stuff, but that was a less personal sort of work. But when I started doing the books, then I had to answer to editors and designers and a whole slew of people, and I enjoyed

the collaboration, but you did give up a bit of that freedom to do whatever you want. And I would say, “No, this is how it should be,” because they weren’t Texan and they didn’t know, and I’d have to compromise. And it was fine. It all worked out, and it’s kind of like nobody knows but me. But with the blog I have that freedom. I can do whatever I want, and I enjoy that. It’s a good outlet.

[0:30:31.8]

Rien Fertel: And so this led to a second book, right?

[0:30:36.0]

Lisa Fain: Yes.

[0:30:36.3]

Rien Fertel: The first came out in 2011, three years later.

[0:30:37.9]

Lisa Fain: Yes.

[0:30:39.1]

Rien Fertel: How would you describe the feeling, the differences between the two books?

[0:30:43.9]

Lisa Fain: They're actually pretty similar, I would say. Okay, *The Homesick Texan's Family Table* is the sequel, and I think a lot of people, especially when their first book does so well, they struggle with the second book, and I certainly did. And because your first book has done so well, everyone's coming after you immediately like, "Where's your next book?"

And I'm like, "I don't know. I want to take a break."

And so I struggled coming up with a theme. My publisher was like, "Let's do a party book."

And I'm like, "I don't want to do a party book." And they have all these preconceived sort of set notions. So, for me, I was like, I want to celebrate the whole concept of Texans and the South and everywhere, is just family recipes and just that special time you have when people cook together. And so, to me, it was a little bit ephemeral, and I had a hard time kind of conceptualizing it and verbalizing it, but for me, it was just like I wanted to capture that—you know, people were not cooking together and eating together. Everyone's so busy. Or when they do, they get takeout or they go out to eat, and it was just kind of like let's think about, maybe one day a week, at least, just gathering with your people, your friends or your family, whoever. It doesn't have to be your core family, but just gathering with people, cooking together, and sitting around a table. And that's what I wanted to celebrate.

[0:32:00.9]

Rien Fertel: And it felt more kind of road-trippy. Like it felt—

[0:32:04.3]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. **[Laughter]**

[0:32:05.5]

Rien Fertel: Like, it was, yeah, just more kinetic in that maybe it was it shot more in Texas? Did it take place in Texas more? Did you do more on-the-ground research?

[0:32:15.2]

Lisa Fain: Yes. Well, that was the thing. Yes. I mean, well, road-tripping, actually, I've always wanted to do, like, a road-trip book. Road trips are, like, my obsession. I could spend my life on the road. I should probably be a truck driver. **[Laughter]** I love being on the road driving. I don't want to be a truck driver, but, I mean, that is my obsession. Like, my vacation, always my favorite vacation of the year is if I just go to Texas for a month and just drive around and meeting people and eating.

And, for me, Texas especially, it's so *big* and there's just always something new to discover, and I love that because there's a lot—especially now, not so much ten years ago, but now, the obsession with Texas food has exploded, you know, especially with barbecue, but people are really into it now on a national level. So there's plenty of press about Texas, so for me, it's even more remarkable when I'm in a place and I discover something that I hadn't heard about, or where I don't know anyone. So anyway, I still kind of look for those little holy grails.

So but anyway, for this book—my first book was kind of like the greatest hits of Texan cuisine, because that's what I'd been focusing on in the blog, but for this one, I

was more personal, and it was, it was like I'd travel around and I'd talk to friends about what their family memories were and things like that. So, yeah, I never thought of it as a road trip book, but I guess—

[0:33:31.6]

Rien Fertel: It feels—maybe, yeah.

[0:33:34.2]

Lisa Fain: But it was. It was a lot of like, “Oh, so I'm in Austin today with, you know, my friend.” Yeah, I mean, there was a lot of driving around.

[0:33:39.4]

Rien Fertel: And once you started writing the book, were you cured of kind of that hesitancy of the second-book blues? Was it like, “This is the right book”?

[0:33:50.6]

Lisa Fain: Oh, yeah, once I got into it. For me, the most difficult part of it was coming up with the book proposal. That's why it was—there was a long lag time. I think the publisher, if they had had their way, it would have come out the next year. They just want you to pump them out, and I was like, “I got to figure this out. I want it to feel right.”

But, yeah, no, I loved it, and I love all the photos in it. It's very personal to me, so to have other people respond to it is very rewarding. I felt like the first one was more

broad and this one was more personal, so it's my grandma's favorite book. **[Laughter]**
She's always like, "Don't tell anyone, but that one's my favorite." **[Laughter]**

[0:34:31.2]

Rien Fertel: I love that. What is the response in Texas with these books? My guess is that they are embraced? Are they?

[0:34:41.1]

Lisa Fain: Oh. Well, that's the irony, okay? I'm the Homesick Texan. Most of my readers, most of my sales occur in Texas. **[Laughter]** So, I'll do events in New York. I did an event in Michigan once, which was bizarre. I'm not going to go into that.

[Laughter] But my events in New York are fine, but I go to Texas, and it's just crazy, like sell out of books and there's long lines, and I'm like, "But y'all live here."

[Laughter]

[0:35:12.0]

Rien Fertel: All over the state too.

[0:35:12.0]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah. I mean, like, I mean, it's very—I mean, it's like "Wow!" But I'm like, "You live here. Why do you need my books?" But, yeah, I think it all ties back into Texans love Texas, and so here they have this person who lives in New York, has chosen to live in New York, and yet she's still celebrating Texas, and I think people connect with

that. And I think also a lot of Texans do leave home at some point, for school or work, and it's kind of this running theme with Texans when they leave, how soon can they get back, so I think most Texans do identify with that. And then Texans that haven't left, again it ties back into just a celebration of being a Texan, but also their almost maternal, like, "You've got to get back here. You've got to get back here." They're worried for me. **[Laughter]** I hear that a lot too.

[0:36:02.5]

Rien Fertel: Does your family do that?

[0:36:03.5]

Lisa Fain: Oh, yes. Yeah. I mean, I've been trying to figure out a way to live both places for a long time. I just haven't yet.

[0:36:11.3]

Rien Fertel: How often do you go back nowadays?

[0:36:13.3]

Lisa Fain: Probably about—I usually end up spending, over the course of a year, probably about two months, but I go back probably about four or five times a year.

[0:36:21.8]

Rien Fertel: Growing up, was there a Texas cookbook that your family used, whether from a major press or from—I know where I’m from in Louisiana, spiral-bound, comb-bound, community cookbooks. Is that a thing in Texas?

[0:36:40.1]

Lisa Fain: Oh, yeah. I mean, there wasn’t—I’m trying to think if they had a major press book. No, it was all community cookbooks. I think the one my mom used most often, I want to say it’s the Houston Junior League cookbook that came out in the late [19]70s. I think it’s called *The Star of Texas*. I’m not for sure. But anyway, that was one of her favorites. But, yeah, it was church cookbooks, Junior League cookbooks, school cookbooks, which, tragically, living in Houston, all of her cookbooks are gone because of the flooding.

[0:37:15.5]

Rien Fertel: She lost her house?

[0:37:16.7]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, she lost all her cookbooks—

[0:37:17.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, I’m sorry.

[0:37:18.0]

Lisa Fain: —in Harvey, which was—yeah, it was just so sad because there was like—I mean, it was all pretty much community cookbooks, and it was her 1965 high school cookbook and all these very much treasures, and so that was pretty devastating. That was kind of like, for me and her, she was like, “And all the cookbooks are gone.” And she wasn’t alone. A lot of people lost their cookbook collections.

But, yeah, it wasn’t national press. I mean, she had, like, *Betty Crocker* and *Joy of Cooking* and things like that. And then my dad did all the fancy things. He would have, like, Diana Kennedy and Thomas Keller and high-end chefs. But, no, the Texas stuff was all local.

[0:37:57.9]

Rien Fertel: So I have to ask, because I’m a storm person, but is your mom rebuilding there?

[0:38:05.5]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, she actually just moved back in.

[0:38:07.6]

Rien Fertel: Okay, good.

[0:38:08.4]

Lisa Fain: Sadly, her story is awful. Okay, she’s an Episcopalian priest, and she has a rectory and it had flooded. Houston floods all the time, not just with Harvey, and it had

flooded in 2016, so she moved out. And she had just moved back in after they rebuilt, and then two months later, Harvey happened. And Houston has kind of like a three-strikes-and-you're-out with the insurance. I don't know what it's like in New Orleans. So her house has to flood one more time before she'll get any money. The church owns it. But so she's just moved back in, so hopefully it's—but, yeah, it's been rough.

[0:38:44.7]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, that's—wow.

[0:38:46.6]

Lisa Fain: My heart goes—and she's not alone. There's so many people in Houston that it's just—it's been awful.

[0:38:52.3]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. We've talked about—I want to ask this. How do I ask it? So we talked about the Texas restaurants here in New York when you moved here. Were there Texas restaurants? There's Tex-Mex restaurants. Maybe—I don't know if they're the same, but were there restaurants that were similar to the type of cooking represented in your book growing up in Houston and Dallas?

[0:39:23.1]

Lisa Fain: Oh.

[0:39:25.4]

Rien Fertel: Do you consider those Tex-Mex restaurants that are now nearing a century old and those family dynasties, are they part of the same thing?

[0:39:35.5]

Lisa Fain: Let me get the—so you—

[0:39:35.5]

Rien Fertel: So, the food in your book, is it—was it—

[0:39:39.5]

Lisa Fain: Reflective of what I grew up eating?

[0:39:41.5]

Rien Fertel: In—were there any restaurants that did cooking like that beyond—or the Tex-Mex restaurants that are so famous—

[0:39:48.1]

Lisa Fain: Yes.

[0:39:49.0]

Rien Fertel: —is that the same thing?

[0:39:51.4]

Lisa Fain: Yes. I mean, yes. I might change things a little bit, but, you know—

[0:39:56.5]

Rien Fertel: Like Ninfa's and all that—

[0:39:57.3]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah. I mean, no, I'm very much inspired by, you know—Tex-Mex is my passion food anyway, but, yes, I mean, I was very much inspired by Ninfa's or, you know, Herrera's in Dallas. And then—my mind is a blank—but more recently, like, L & J's in El Paso. In Austin, you know, places like—well, Matt's El Rancho is my favorite.

So, yes, the food that I cook, when I was living in New York, I was trying to basically approximate that, and so, you know, for—like, for Ninfa's, for instance, I'd find recipes in the *Houston Chronicle*. But this was also kind of like when I started to learn that restaurant recipes are very different than what you're going to eat in a restaurant, because it's a whole different scale. And also I have a theory that a lot of restaurateurs don't want to give out, you know, their secrets because they want you to come eat it in the restaurant, unless it's their own book. So, I mean, so I would take the information that I got either by eating it or by seeing a recipe and then try to approximate it, but a lot of times, then I'd make it my own thing too. But, yeah, so I was very much inspired by restaurant food, Texas restaurant food, of course.

[0:41:11.4]

Rien Fertel: Sure, sure, sure. So your most recent book came out last year, I believe?

[0:41:16.1]

Lisa Fain: Yes, yes, in the fall.

[0:41:16.9]

Rien Fertel: And it's called *Queso!*.

[0:41:19.3]

Lisa Fain: It's called *Queso!*.

[0:41:19.7]

Rien Fertel: With an exclamation point, right?

[0:41:20.5]

Lisa Fain: Yes. **[Laughter]** That was my editor's idea. **[Laughter]**

[0:41:22.8]

Rien Fertel: I like it. So I guess the question is, how do you write a whole book about cheese dip, right?

[0:41:28.3]

Lisa Fain: Yes. **[Laughter]**

[0:41:29.2]

Rien Fertel: For someone who only knows this, you know, in a nominal fashion, how?

[0:41:35.4]

Lisa Fain: Well, it was a very hard sell, to be honest with you. Okay. So, going back to 2014, at that time in the fall, I was on tour. I was on my second leg of tour, because the book came out in the spring and I'd done a summer tour and I was on the fall tour, and at that time, I gained a ton of weight, I had no energy, and I was like, "What is wrong with me?" And I got diagnosed with thyroid disease.

And so we worked on getting that right, but I had no energy, and, of course, the book does well, the second book does well, and they're like, "We want you to write another book," and, you know, they wanted me to do like an Instapot thing or something like that.

And I'm like, "I just don't have the energy."

And at this time in that—I guess it was 2014, I kind of became obsessed with chile con queso because—okay.

[0:42:23.1]

Rien Fertel: And tell us what it is, because—

[0:42:25.1]

Lisa Fain: Okay. Chile con queso, it's a dip made typically with processed cheese and chile peppers, and it's ubiquitous in Texas. When you go to a Tex-Mex restaurant or any restaurant, it's served in a bowl, it's served hot, and you use tortilla chips to scoop it. And it's a very communal thing when people eat it. It's not something you eat by yourself. You're always having a good time. And it's also a ubiquitous party food. You get a block of Velveeta and a can of Ro-Tel and you put it in a crockpot at, you know, any house party and people'll just be standing around the crockpot dipping their chips and eating this cheese dip.

So, around that time, I heard that Arkansas was claiming that it came from there. **[Laughter]** I was like, "That's crazy!" And there was just all this press and a documentary about how queso came from Arkansas, and that made me angry. And even, like, *Gravy* had this article, and I was just so angry as a Texan, because I knew it couldn't possibly come from there, because, first of all, Ro-Tel, I mean, now it's, like, ConAgra, I believe, but it was originally a valley-of-Texas product. But beyond that—okay. The full name is "chile con queso," and I'm like, "Okay. It either comes from the border or maybe, just maybe, it comes from Mexico."

But I just could not believe that something called "chile con queso" came from Little Rock, Arkansas, so I became obsessed. And one of the nice things about living in New York is you have access to a fabulous library, and so I started doing research, and I did so much research in December of 2014 tracing the history. And I went to my agent and I was like, "I've got all this great information about chile con queso. I'm going to defend its honor. You're a Texan. You understand."

And she's like, "This is a terrible idea." **[Laughter]** She goes, "Nobody wants a book about chile con queso." She goes, "Go write the crockpot book. Go write the Instapot book."

So for a year, I just—I wasn't angry, but I tried to write—so I said, "Fine. I won't write about queso."

So I spent a year writing this book proposal for this one-pot thing, and it was a struggle. I wasn't into it. And at the time, though, I'd slip to the side and do queso research, and I had this huge spreadsheet of over 250 recipes and all this information. And it wasn't until almost two years ago today that I met with my agent again, and she was like—I was presenting her with the book proposal for one-pot. She's like, "Thank you."

And then we just started talking, and I talked—was like, "Can we try to do the queso book?"

And she was like, "You just light up when you talk about queso." And she goes, "Okay. I'll try Emily one more time." That's my editor.

And it worked. **[Laughter]** And then it turns out they didn't even want the one-pot book. They wanted *Queso!*

[0:45:18.1]

Rien Fertel: That's a good agent.

[0:45:19.0]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah. But I had a very short timeline. I had to hit the ground running to do it. I only had four months, five months. But, yeah, I had been researching it for so long. So, to write this book, I went to Texas, and I had this theory—nobody knows exactly where it came from, besides Mexico, of course. The chile con queso that you get in Mexico, though, is very different than this processed cheese dip, so I wanted to come up with a timeline how it evolved, and I went to what I thought was like a spiritual home of chile con queso, which is Juarez, El Paso, southern New Mexico, and then I just kind of drove around the whole state and Southwest, and I made several trips, and I did go to Arkansas, and I had to give them props for what they have. I was like, “You didn’t invent it, but, you are very passionate and you have a good product.” **[Laughter]**

[0:46:05.7]

Rien Fertel: And they eat it cold there sometimes, right, don’t they? In Memphis, at least, they eat it cold.

[0:46:09.6]

Lisa Fain: **[Gasps]** Well, I didn’t even know that. **[Laughter]** Actually, cold queso is not so bad. Like, if I have cold queso, I put it on a salad. But to serve it in a restaurant cold, that’s kind of like just one step from pimento cheese. **[Laughter]** But, no, but it was just a lot of fun.

[0:46:24.9]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. When you go on book tour, when you do events, do you demo or do you read? What do you like to do?

[0:46:34.5]

Lisa Fain: I've done both. I don't really read. I like to come up—I mean—

[0:46:39.3]

Rien Fertel: Or tell stories?

[0:46:40.4]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, I pretty much kind of tell stories. I talk about my process for writing the book. *Queso!*, of course, I had *tons* of things to talk about because I was like, “I’m defending our honor.” So *Queso!* was actually a really fun one. I did do some demos, but I also just talked about queso. The other books, same thing, just talk about my history and Texan cuisine and things like that. So I do a mixture of all things. Or I do a lot of Q&A’s. Like, they’ll have a local journalist come, and we’ll do a back-and-forth.

[0:47:11.1]

Rien Fertel: And so what was the response in Texas to the *Queso!* book and finding this history and defending the honor?

[0:47:17.9]

Lisa Fain: Oh, they were—yeah, they were like, “Oh, we knew that. We knew that.”

But the thing that made me the most, like—that spurred me on the most was when the the *Dallas Morning News* totally took this guy’s, like, claim and said, “Well, I guess that’s true.”

I’m like, “You’re the *Dallas Morning News*!”

[0:47:35.1]

Rien Fertel: Of Arkansas?

[0:47:35.6]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah. They said, “Oh, okay. Well, we can’t find anything to prove otherwise, so, yeah.”

I’m like, “You are the *Dallas Morning News*. You need to dig deeper. You need to defend queso’s honor.” **[Laughter]** So, yes, I mean, it was like—for me, it was just a lot of fun just to say, “Okay. Here it is.” But I learned so much more. It really doesn’t matter where it came from. That was just kind of like what got me going, but for me, it was just really exciting, just the history and all the quirks and things like that.

[0:48:02.3]

Rien Fertel: So how many queso recipes are there?

[0:48:04.3]

Lisa Fain: In the book, there are fifty-one. I said, “Can I do this big book?”

And they were like, “No.” **[Laughter]**

I was like, “I have 250 recipes.”

And they were like, “No.”

[0:48:12.8]

Rien Fertel: Really? You had 250 queso recipes?

[0:48:13.9]

Lisa Fain: Yes! Yeah, yeah. Not like all written out, but things I’d found.

[0:48:17.4]

Rien Fertel: Right, right, right. Historical—

[0:48:18.7]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah.

[0:48:20.1]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:48:20.8]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. I know. Who knew? So, I mean, so for me, there’s a chapter on history tracing the evolution. And then classic Tex-Mex quesos, from Matt’s El Rancho, Molina’s, places like that, just the heroes of Tex-Mex. And then I do quirky quesos like vegan queso, things like that, or Indian chutney queso, Queso in the Wild, so queso on

chicken-fried steak. Or in southern New Mexico they do this kind of like queso—they do this green chile ice cream sundae, so I was like, “Well, it’s a stretch, but it’s dairy plus chile peppers, so I’ll put it in there.” So, things like that.

[0:48:59.8]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So is there a next book on the horizon? And if you can’t say anything about that or don’t want to say anything about that, which I get, is there a dream book you want to write or think about writing?

[0:49:15.7]

Lisa Fain: Well, I have several. This is going to be on the Internet, right? **[Laughter]**

[0:49:22.5]

Rien Fertel: Well, it will be—let’s see. There’ll be a short clip, not of this part, but of something more, you know, identifiably you, two-minute clip online. The rest goes into the archive. Oh, but there will be a full transcript online.

[0:49:37.3]

Lisa Fain: All right. I don’t want to give all my ideas away.

[0:49:39.0]

Rien Fertel: So we won’t talk about it. We won’t talk about it.

[0:49:39.6]

Lisa Fain: Well, no, no, no, no, no. I mean, there are things that I want to do. I mean, they're all Texas-related. One thing that I would love to do and I haven't quite figured out how to do it, there are city cookbooks I want to do. I wanted to do a book on the Rio Grande, the foodways along the Rio Grande. My agent said no. **[Laughter]** That becomes a pattern. I want to do something, and then it takes me a couple of years to convince people, but Texas is so rich. I mean, I actually—there are several things I want to do. Right now I was just taking a break, but I'm kind of gearing up—it's funny, I was just talking to people last night at dinner, I was like, "Okay. I think I am going to write a proposal again." But, yes. But one book I would love to do—and I don't think it's going to happen next, but I would love to do the road trip book, just a book totally focused on just being on the road and things like that.

[0:50:34.1]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Yeah, it needs to happen, especially for Texas. And let me ask you this, which is kind of the follow-up. Is there a cookbook writer that you kind of hold in the highest esteem, that you respect, that you mirror yourself after, that is your person?

[0:50:49.7]

Lisa Fain: Well, there's several. There are several. I love the Lee Bros. I love the Jamisons. Bill is no longer with us, but, like, Cheryl Alters Jamison, they did a lot with Texan foodways and also with grilling, which I have no experience with yet because of living New York, but I would like to someday. I love Robb Walsh. Those are kind of the

books that I go to most often, besides my community cookbooks. I love my Texas church books and Junior League cookbooks.

[0:51:17.1]

Rien Fertel: And then you went into the restaurant business—

[0:51:22.7]

Lisa Fain: Yes. [Laughter]

[0:51:23.5]

Rien Fertel: —and I know you're no longer in—

[0:51:25.2]

Lisa Fain: Well, that was a drama. That was a horrible experience.

[0:51:27.9]

Rien Fertel: Well, I want to ask one question about it.

[0:51:30.6]

Lisa Fain: Oh, I'll talk about it.

[0:51:31.4]

Rien Fertel: Okay. You'll talk about it?

[0:51:32.2]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. I mean, no, it's fine.

[0:51:33.4]

Rien Fertel: Because you're no longer in the restaurant business.

[0:51:34.4]

Lisa Fain: No, that was very brief. Okay, what happened was—

[0:51:36.3]

Rien Fertel: So, why?

[0:51:37.1]

Lisa Fain: Yeah. Well, what happened was it was—okay. So I had been diagnosed with thyroid disease, and I didn't really want to write the one-pot cookbook, so I was trying to come up with all sorts of excuses not to do it, and this guy from Fort Worth approached me—we had a mutual friend—and he says, "I'm opening up a Tex-Mex restaurant. Do you want to get involved somehow?"

And I said, "Sure."

And he goes, "What we'll do is we'll use your recipes and we'll attach your name to it and we'll pay you money, and you'll come in, and you can make sure things are up to your standards," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

It all sounded really good, but it all went to just pieces. I was the only woman, so there was a lot of that whole male-ego thing. The people working there were—they didn't make my recipes. They were doing their own things, and some of them hadn't even—they had no idea what Texas food was, and they were just doing things wrong, like making cream gravy with chicken broth, and I'm like, "But it's not—" Just little things, and on and on and on, and it was a struggle. And I said—and there was a lot of disrespect, because I was the only woman, I was treated poorly.

And I kept—I'm a very persistent person and I'm a very faithful, loyal person, and I really—I liked the owners a lot, and they weren't chefs, they were just businesspeople, and I was like, "I want this to work," so I stuck with it way beyond I should have done, because the reviews were terrible, people were upset, and my name was the only name out there. I was like, "Wait. It's a group thing." But it was just once the press latched on to something, I was the owner, and I'm like, "I'm not the owner. I gave them recipes and I consulted."

But it just became, "This is Lisa Fain's restaurant. She's in the kitchen and she's making bad food."

And I'm like, "No, that's not the case!"

But I wanted it to work, and I just—it never worked, so I had to leave. But it was just awful because it never turned around. The food was always bad, and people would come there, they would travel there, and I just felt so bad for them because they were not getting what they wanted.

So, actually, after that, I went into a huge depression, and I was like, "Maybe my recipes suck. Maybe I'm just no good."

And it wasn't until we actually did the photo shoot for *Queso!* and I had someone else making all the recipes, I had *nothing* to do with it, and this food stylist made all the recipes, and they tasted as they should, and everyone ate everything, and it was delicious, and I was like, "Oh. My recipes are good. It was *them*." That was like, for me, the final, like, "Okay, that chapter's over. It was just a bad experience. They didn't know what they were doing. They didn't respect me."

And so people like, "Would you do it again?" Probably not. It would have to be—I don't know what the circumstances would have to be, but it was just—it just made me sad. It made me sad for people that went there thinking they were getting one thing and they weren't.

[0:54:26.1]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So you mentioned being a woman in the restaurant world, and over the past six months to a year, this is finally a well documented, now, problem in the media. Is there women in the publishing world or specifically women in the cookbook world—is it—have you ever run in against anything? Do you think women cookbook authors get equal respect as male cookbook authors?

[0:54:58.1]

Lisa Fain: No, no. I think some do, but I've seen it with myself, even. It will supposed to be like a profile of me, and yet the whole article will be about someone else, like a man and their contribution to Texan cuisine, and then they'll mention me, and I'm like, "This person had nothing to do with why—" It would be frustrating to me. They haven't done

this research. And it's not like I don't like this person, but it's very frustrating that it's like because I'm a woman, I assume, or whatever, it's like I can't also be an expert. That's been frustrating for me on a personal level, yeah. I see that sometimes. Or, yeah, it's just kind of like—oh, there was something else. Oh, I can't remember what it was, but it was kind of like—I don't know. It was meat, like I couldn't talk about meat because I'm a woman, or I don't know.

[0:55:54.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, that came up in the—

[0:55:56.1]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, like, “Well, what do you know about meat? You're a—what do you know about brisket? You're a woman.”

I'm like, “What?”

[0:56:02.2]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Do you think there's a special—I want to ask a question about Texas and women, because Texas seems to have kind of a culture and history of these women with big personalities, so governor, writers, restaurant people. What is it about women and Texas culture that—are they held in higher esteem than in America? Am I just dreaming this up?

[0:56:30.5]

Lisa Fain: I think—well, I think within the state especially, I think because Texas women, they aren't withering wallflowers. They're very bold. They'll go out hunting with their men, and they—even if they're wearing a skirt, they're wearing boots, and they just don't take any gruff or anything. They will stand up for themselves. So that's—I mean, Texas women are strong.

[0:56:53.9]

Rien Fertel: Do you think you'll keep writing the blog forever? [**Fain Laughter.**] Or how long do you think the blog will go?

[0:57:02.3]

Lisa Fain: I don't know. I don't have an end point in sight. I enjoy it. The Internet has changed so much. Sometimes I feel like I'm just writing for myself, but I still get a lot of response from people. For me, it's just an exercise. It's almost like a discipline, but I do enjoy it. It's like an instant gratification.

[0:57:24.5]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And how long have you been in the city now?

[0:57:27.2]

Lisa Fain: I've been here—it'll be twenty-three years next week.

[0:57:30.1]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So, congratulations.

[0:57:31.7]

Lisa Fain: [Laughter] Yeah, a long time.

[0:57:33.4]

Rien Fertel: Have you ever—was there ever like a deep moment of consideration of moving, whether 9/11 or if you ever had to move? And it's hard to find a place to live sometimes in the city, and expense of the city. Was it—

[0:57:51.0]

Lisa Fain: No. I mean, I think now—

[0:57:53.2]

Rien Fertel: Or what's your relationship with the city?

[0:57:55.5]

Lisa Fain: It's touch and go. I love the city, but I also sometimes just hate it. But I think people that live in New York that stay here, you acclimate. There's no other place that I know of in the country where you live this way. You're packed on each other. You're just subjected to so much stimulation, smells, noises, but there's a lot of greatness as well, arts and kindness and anything you want is within a block of yourself. So there's a lot of good and a lot of bad.

Most recently, with my family getting older, my grandma's still alive, but she's ninety-two. She's not going to be here much longer. My mom's older. I would like to be—I don't know if I want to be in Texas full-time, but I would like to be there a larger portion of the year. I'd like to have a place there. So back to your point, after 9/11, no. After 9/11 all my friends left. I was the last Texan standing. I was even *more* determined to stay here after 9/11. I became *very* passionate about New York.

[0:58:56.5]

Rien Fertel: From that original group?

[0:58:57.4]

Lisa Fain: Yeah.

[0:58:58.2]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:58:58.6]

Lisa Fain: Yeah, I'm the last one standing. But at that point, I was like, "No, I'm staying here."

[0:59:04.8]

Rien Fertel: Where would you—if you moved back to Texas or if you relocated there more, where would you choose to live?

[0:59:17.0]

Lisa Fain: Well, see, that's the problem. I don't know. I love El Paso a lot. I don't have any friends or family there, but I love to visit El Paso. Most of my friends and family are concentrated in the DFW, Austin, Houston area. I probably—I love Houston, especially coming from a place like New York, and even Dallas to a lesser degree, but just the access to arts and culture and just especially Houston with the food scene, it's just like going to Queens. It's just so multicultural. But I love the beauty of the Hill Country. I have a lot of good friends like in the Fort Worth, Dallas area. That's always been like, "Where would I go?" And my friends and family are always like, "Come here! Come here!" **[Laughter]**

[0:59:58.4]

Rien Fertel: So I guess my last question is, it seems like, to me, and other people have certainly written about this, but over the past decade, I'd say, which is interesting, like since the last Texas president left office, America has almost become very Texan, it feels like? Like maybe this city in particular, but Texas culture seems to dominate. Barbecue restaurants we mentioned, brisket is everywhere, and a lot of these restaurants do very good brisket. And it just seems that people are more in tune with Texas and Texas culture over the past decade. Do you feel that? Do you feel a part of that? Have you—

[1:00:44.2]

Lisa Fain: Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, I feel a part of it in that it's exciting to see Texas cuisine reach a national level. It makes my living experience a lot easier. And it almost begs the question, okay, do I need a blog called *Homesick Texan*? Because New York, young kids move here now and they can go to Hometown or Javelina. They don't have the same problems that I did back then. But it kind of also goes back to most of my audience is *in* Texas, so that's—it's almost like I'm kind of past the whole Tex-pat homesick bit and I'm just doing it because I love Texas. But, yes, I think it's exciting. And in L.A. and Atlanta, there's excellent Tex-Mex. My mom goes—Ford Fry, who's an Atlanta restaurateur who's actually from Houston, he has a place in—I think it's called—do you know?

[1:01:44.1]

Rien Fertel: I don't know.

[1:01:45.0]

Lisa Fain: I think it's called Superica. It's a Tex-Mex place in Atlanta, and she says it's almost better than anything you can get in Texas. So you have these people that are from Texas moving outside, like this gal in L.A. who has a place called HomeState, and they're opening restaurants and things like that. So, yeah, I think for the longest time I don't know why people were prejudiced against Texas cuisine or Texans in general, but they eat this food and they discover it's spicy, it's big bold flavors, it's comforting. What's not to love? So there's—I'm all in for this national embrace of Texan cuisine.

[1:02:19.1]

Rien Fertel: Okay. I think that's a good place to end.

[1:02:21.4]

Lisa Fain: Okay. [Laughter]

[1:02:23.0]

Rien Fertel: I want to thank you so much.

[1:02:23.9]

Lisa Fain: Oh, yeah. This was fun. Thank you.

[1:02:25.2]

Rien Fertel: Thank you.

[End of interview]