



Amanda Arafat

Amanda Makes - Fayetteville, AR

Date: July 10, 2023

Location: Fayetteville Public Library

Interviewer: Jordan P. Hickey

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: One hour, thirty-one minutes

Project: Southern Baking: Arkansas Cottage Bakers

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Jordan Hickey: Today is July 10. We're here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I'm Jordan Hickey. I'm speaking with Amanda Arafat. Amanda, would you mind introducing yourself for the recording?

Amanda Arafat: I'm Amanda Arafat. I am a baker, a cooking teacher, an organizer with Big Gay Market, and owner of Amanda Makes, a cottage bakery in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Jordan Hickey: Nice. What do you specialize in? What do you bake?

Amanda Arafat: My specialties have certainly evolved over time, but at the moment, I specialize in Palestinian-American influenced baked goods.

Jordan Hickey: Nice. As I said, we're here in Fayetteville. But are you from Fayetteville?

Amanda Arafat: I am not. I am from, well, all over, it kind of feels like. I'm Middle Eastern American. I'm Palestinian on my dad's side, and American on my mom's.

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I had a pretty mixed upbringing between the United States and the Middle East, and most significantly I grew up in Cairo, in Egypt.

Jordan Hickey: When you say that you split that time, was this a 50/50 split? Also, how do you go from being—I assume Cairo, Egypt, not Cairo, Illinois, or something—

Amanda Arafat: No. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: —I think they call that “Kay-row” [pr]. But how did you get here, too?

Amanda Arafat: Great question. My upbringing was not exactly 50/50. I was actually born in Gaza City, in Palestine, where my dad's side of the family is from. And then, when I was pretty little, we moved over to the part of the world that my mom is from, which happens to be Utah, actually, specifically. So, we moved to Utah when I was three years old.

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And then, from then I think we had a few trips back and forth to the Middle East and then ultimately settled there for a good while. I personally settled there for like a decade, when I was nine years old; a little over a decade, actually. I moved away when I was just about 21.

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Amanda Arafat: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Where did you move?

Amanda Arafat: We moved—oh, from Cairo back over to Salt Lake City, actually, so back to Utah for a minute. And then, to Memphis, Tennessee, where there's actually a pretty good, pretty thriving Muslim and Arab community. And then I moved here to Fayetteville, Arkansas, just before the pandemic. December of 2019 is when I moved here.

Jordan Hickey: Why Fayetteville, Arkansas, of all places?

Amanda Arafat: Yeah. Well, cheesy reasons to do with love and romance.

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But yeah, my partner is Arkansan and has given me a weird sense of Arkansan pride that I never thought I would ever have, if you ever asked me in my life before this. But now, I'm a very shy Razorback, so—

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Obviously we're talking about cottage baking today.

Amanda Arafat: Yes.

Jordan Hickey: How did you get to baking? Have you always baked? Do you have people in your family that bake?

Amanda Arafat: Yeah. There is a very, very strong heritage of baking within my family. There is a bakery that specializes in Middle East baking that has been in my family since 1912.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh.

Amanda Arafat: It's called Heluwiat Arafat—that's the Arabic name—but it translates to Arafat Sweets. It's just the most traditional Middle East baking you can think of, and with some kind of new influences, now, in the 21st century, with some of my younger relatives working there.

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So, that has been in my family, I mean, forever, it feels like. With that, there has always been that influence. But it was really something I started to play with, just like this general idea of baking, when I was a teenager, out of like—when it's a choice, it's kind of different. So, picked that up out of interest, when I was about 17. Then, it took a very long time to get there professionally, because it's not—it wasn't ever a profession passed down intergenerationally to women.

Jordan Hickey: Ohhhhh.

Amanda Arafat: It was always something kind of intergenerationally passed down to men.

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So all the men in my family who live in that part of the world have worked in the bakery.

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Amanda Arafat: So I was kind of I think the first woman to pick up baking professionally, in my family, or cooking, in any sort of means like that, in the kitchen.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder, especially, if your entire—so much of your family is working there, what was it like to go there? Did you ever picture yourself working in that kind of a line?

Amanda Arafat: Never until—it was never something that was maybe promoted to me as like a future that was available *to* me. But I, when I was 17, did start to pick that up, just out of fun, and started to realize, “I wonder if this is in my blood a little bit.” But then promptly forgot about it, a little bit, for like—

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Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: —almost a decade? Because of life stuff. Also, we are told very young to pick up more realistic dreams. And so, I tried that, but then came back to the dream that was kind of always there.

Jordan Hickey: I gotcha. Could you give me a brief breakdown of what—so, from 17 to 27, what were you doing, professionally?

Amanda Arafat: Oh my gosh. Well, I think like a lot of millennial and young Gen Z'ers—personally I'm on the cusp—so a lot of us I think were just trying to figure it out. I think there are a lot of people in my generation who probably tried out a lot of things in more formal settings, and then we kind of get to this point of burnout. Personally for me, I was really just kind of working my way through retail, like a lot of people my age.

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And like a lot of people who do have this kind of passion for the food industry, you're kind of either ending up in, I feel like, one of these two industries, retail or food service. So, I was doing retail up until the pandemic. Had worked my way up to like middle management sort of retail positions. And, oh boy, did the pandemic change how bearable that job was. So, it was something that really—I mean, the pandemic, I don't really think any of us can call it a blessing for any reason, but I think it made a lot of us think really hard about what we were doing previous to our lives just changing so drastically, and what we would do if we were given the opportunity to live our lives somewhat normally again. And, it also gave so many of us just so much time to work with, and no good excuse to put your energy towards like just capitalistic things, because there was—I mean, there was no industry, then.

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So it gave me a great opportunity to really just be able to hone in on hobby baking, which I started to realize I had a real knack for. And then within that bubble of lockdown, I ended up baking just so much, for fun, and really just for a purpose, that it just—it was clearly something I couldn't just keep a hobby anymore.

Jordan Hickey: You mentioned you had that spark of interest, but then you dropped it for a little bit. Just to firm up the timeline—so, you're 17, and what year would that have been, roughly?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, gosh.

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I want to say that would have been 2011, 2012.

Jordan Hickey: So from 2011, 2012, are you baking at all, from then, for the next decade?

Amanda Arafat: Honestly, I had pretty much dropped baking and cooking kind of completely. I remember really distinctly at one point in my life really—like definitely out loud saying to someone, “I hate cooking.”

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Amanda Arafat: Which is ridiculous, because that’s my—I mean, that’s just my focal passion of my life, at this point, is cooking and baking and just culinary arts in general. But, I guess I wasn’t in a position in life to enjoy it? And also just invest in a passion.

Jordan Hickey: The question then becomes, why did you pick it back up? Was there just like this moment where the clouds parted, and “Ah! It’s a souffle!” Or what was this moment like? And why?

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Amanda Arafat: I think the moment that I realized, “Oh, this is not—this does not have to be hobby baking”—was I had made a batch of brown butter chocolate chip cookies with flaky Maldon salt on top. This was lockdown times. I gave them to like all of our neighbors on our

floor, and I had so many comments on them from neighbors. Also just personally, as a pretty serious chocolate chip cookie lover, they were the best chocolate chip cookies I had ever eaten in my life! And that sounds so ridiculous to say, and so like—you know, pretty cocky—but it was the best thing I had eaten all pandemic, and it made me so happy that I was able to produce that and share it with people.

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And it just did something. And it was in a period of time that I was also, I think like a lot of other people, becoming aware of food and beverage business models, during the pandemic, that didn't look like what I was used to.

Jordan Hickey: What do you mean?

Amanda Arafat: I remember seeing articles online about like popups that people started doing during the pandemic from their homes, where a guy in New York City was making like some of the best pizza in town from his apartment, using like an electric oven. And just seeing that sort of like incredible culinary skill that people could maintain and achieve in these really unconventional ways was really inspiring, and sort of I think subconsciously sparked something. Because again, this was heavy lockdown. And I think it was before the point that we had kind of figured out workarounds like really regularly doing curbside pickup.

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We were still a little scared. But I was making meals in our apartment that were—I mean, obviously, I did not have much time to explore Fayetteville before the pandemic, but they were some of the best meals I had had in a long time, and it was just because we really wanted them and put forth the effort to make them.

Jordan Hickey: What would be an example? I'm just curious.

Amanda Arafat: Okay, oooh—this was a lockdown *banger*. Okay. I made johnnycakes. Are you aware of what johnnycakes are?

Jordan Hickey: I know what johnnycakes are. I've never had johnnycakes.

Amanda Arafat: So, this is very Southern Foodways, I feel like. But it's a cornmeal pancake served savory or sweet, but I served them savory with—I think just like a stir-fried sort of hash of bacon and mushrooms, peppers and onions over it.

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Sounds super simple, but it was like—it just brought us so much joy during the pandemic to make that little meal, and eat it on our tiny little balcony, to have like some interaction with the outside world. I remember making a really comforting like biscuits and gravy, with like a homemade scallion biscuit. And that was so good. We have so many lockdown-era photos of really delicious meals that we made during that time that were just so, so good.

Jordan Hickey: Especially if you had dropped cooking and baking after you were 17, and you pick it back up, where did you learn how to cook? And how did you learn how to bake, too, for that matter?

Amanda Arafat: I think I learned how to cook growing up out of necessity. I am the third child of six, and so, total, that is a family of eight. Both parents would intermittently be working full time at different times; sometimes both would be working full time.

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And so, I also was the caretaking sibling for a good period of time after my older siblings moved away. So it was really just necessity of feeding myself, feeding my family, having a dad that was naturally great at cooking, and kind of just like observing. A kid just observes a lot. And then, once you have to do, you have to do. You're not great at it at first, but—yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Something that I can't help but think about—obviously, the pandemic was a really socially isolating time. And you moved to a new place right before it happened.

Amanda Arafat: [Laughter] Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Looking at you now, having had conversations a little bit, you're a huge proponent of the community here, and a community facilitator.

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Just knowing of the—working with the Big Gay Market, and all these things, I guess the question I would have is—you had mentioned giving chocolate chip cookies to your neighbors. Were baked goods like what helped first develop this community? And how did you develop that community here?

Amanda Arafat: That's a great question. I think the baked goods helped. But I think that a part of my story that really cannot be told without being told in tandem with the baking story and vice versa is really the story of like Big Gay Market. Those things really emerged in tandem in my life, here in Fayetteville, and I really don't think I could have done either of them anywhere but in northwest Arkansas, honestly.

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I think that moving here, I definitely—I have never been a social butterfly in my life. I have never been someone with like a huge social group, or somebody very outgoing in the local scene, anywhere I've lived, before northwest Arkansas. I honestly don't know if it was just the pandemic really creating a void where social connection would have been, but during the pandemic, I think it was a lot easier to focus on single-minded tasks. Sometimes that was a positive, and sometimes it was a negative. But I do think the pandemic changed our brains a little bit.

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And so, for me, I think that living here, post-pandemic, there were things, politically that were happening. [Laughter] And I don't know how much we would want to get into that, but there were things that, maybe because of my post-pandemic brain, were so difficult to just kind of ignore. It was also at a time where I think my confidence was growing in that culinary respect. I had started to work in restaurants and stuff. So I think it was all this in-tandem thing where my confidence was growing, from growing my skills in the culinary respect, and then also it was just really difficult to not be very single-minded on what was going on politically in the area. So, Big Gay Market emerged really at a time that was the infancy of my cottage baking career.

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Our first event was kind of the kickoff event for my bakery. I think almost still—I'm not sure; they're almost matched—but this past Pride Market with Big Gay Market, and our very first one, I think were my biggest markets ever, that I've ever done. And I've participated in a good amount of, at this point, three years into cottage baking, markets, popups, solo sales at home. Nothing compares to what we do at Big Gay Market. For me personally, and I think for other

vendors, it's the same. But there is that extreme like tethered community feeling there, where it just feels like you're not just going up to a vendor—and I feel like I benefit from this as well—but you're not just going up to a random vendor; you really feel like you are helping a member of the community buy their prescriptions, feed their family, continue to work on their dream that makes northwest Arkansas better.

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That was an extremely convoluted way to answer your question [Laughter]. But, yeah, the community factor—gosh, I don't know. I just feel like northwest Arkansas had this perfect storm of factors going on when I moved there that have just made me much more integrated into societal life than I think I ever have been as a resident of *anywhere* before this.

Jordan Hickey: I do want to come back to—especially how community supports everything that you're doing.

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But I do want to ask, what *is* the Big Gay Market? Just before we jump back in time to cover some stuff.

Amanda Arafat: Yeah. I gave you a *lot* there, so, my apologies.

Jordan Hickey: No, you're good. You're good.

Amanda Arafat: Big Gay Market was founded by myself and Grayce Holcomb, and it's essentially a—ooh, can I start over on that? I almost have to think about it.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah, no, that's okay.

Amanda Arafat: I had to give this direct quote to someone via DM recently, and it's something I have to think about every time, for some reason. Do you actually mind if I look at my actual like official thing?

Jordan Hickey: Oh, no, yeah, go for it. Go for it.

Amanda Arafat: Otherwise, I have this tendency, when people start prompting me for questions about Big Gay Market, where I say the word “queer”—like I'll say it eight times in a minute.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: I don't know why. But it's an inside joke with my partner.

Jordan Hickey: I also just want to say, for the record, that you are pulling your phone out of a—the Big Gay Tote [sp].

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Amanda Arafat: Yes. Yes, that is correct.

Jordan Hickey: I imagine that is from the Big Gay Market?

Amanda Arafat: Yes, that is correct. We sold these at Pride, and that is one of my Big Gay benefits, is that I get a free whatever piece of merch.

Jordan Hickey: Nice.

Amanda Arafat: And I claimed that, you know? I love it. Okay. Okay. Perfect. Thank god I explained it well to this person. [Laughter] Okay. Whenever—

Jordan Hickey: Oh, no, yeah, go for it, go for it.

Amanda Arafat: So, Big Gay Market was founded in June of 2021 by myself and Grayce Holcomb, and it was really a response to the anti-trans backlash in our state, and when queer vendors had no real common space to promote their goods during Pride Month. So essentially, our whole thing is to help put money directly into the pockets of local LGBTQ+ creators, while also fostering a space for advancement, connection, and joy in the queer community locally.

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Jordan Hickey: Like I said, I do want to come to Big Gay Market, and especially the community because the thing is, it's not like it built the community; the community was already here. But the way that it's—I don't know—how would you describe it? Did it bring the community under one roof, or like streamline? I don't know what the right word would be.

Amanda Arafat: That's a great question. I feel like we memeified the community into submission.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: But, no. I would say we just put out calls to the community that resonate and people feel drawn to come to the events to just be together and feel that community.

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Jordan Hickey: To take a little bit of a step back in time, so, you made the chocolate chip cookies. Your neighbors love them. You love them. And I think you had mentioned you had started working in kitchens. But how did you go from making chocolate chip cookies to eventually opening your bakery and going full time?

Amanda Arafat: There was definitely still time in between that, of like just lockdown, figuring-out-what-we're-doing time. But as soon as it really was safe to work again, I did have to go back to my retail job for a little bit. And then, very quickly realized it just—it was never going to make me content ever again. And so, I had to quit.

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Only very soon after, I think within a week, I had an interview at a Japanese restaurant, as a line cook. I had pretty much zero relevant experience on my resume that they would take, except for, like, being a daughter of a big family. And so I brought a makeshift portfolio to the interview, which was literally just like photos I had taken of meals I had made during the pandemic that I tried my best to get the lighting and the angles together. But they looked at those photos of like pork chops and risotto and all that stuff, and they were like—well, honestly, they were probably thinking, “This is a lot for a line cook position”—and probably very unnecessary—but I got the job, and it was the most physically demanding job I had ever had in my life, and probably still to this day.

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Well, aside from cottage baking, because 40 hours of tough labor is nothing on like a bazillion hours of cottage baking labor. But, it was the toughest hourly job I had ever had in my life. I fried that rice until I couldn't fry it no more. [Laughter] But I dealt with some pretty—pretty strong introductory experiences of what it's like to be a woman in the kitchen, and what that experience is like, and so sought out better, which really is just like seeking another kitchen. So, moved to another kitchen where I had a job with a lot more creative freedom. And then I feel like *that*—ooh, they gave me that creative freedom and, I—yeah, I had to have more.

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That was really what I think started me down that path, was having a job where I could express myself on the plate, and add to the menu, and really impress people with not my execution of other people's recipes but with my own recipes. And *that* was intoxicating. So, at that point, you get those good reactions, you start to understand your skill level, and your imagination starts to overwhelm the position that you're in. That's where it started to get very frustrating, where I just knew that there were so many ideas that I had no idea when I'd ever be able to get to. That's where things became really constricting. I'm sure so many chefs have that same feeling.

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I had already known about cottage baking at that point, so it was almost just a matter of time, I feel like. Really just gradually the desire for that extra creative freedom, that extra bandwidth to be able to have the energy to pursue my creative ideas. And then also just, you know, not have to ask for permission. That's really the best part. I can have the most ridiculous idea for a dessert, and—no one can stop me. I can actually just make it. And, it might not go to market, but I get to scratch that creative itch, which is so freeing. I can knock things off of a bucket list, literally. So, that is really what I was chasing in leaving the kitchen world behind was just being able to cross more ideas off my list, not have to find some workaround to get what used to be a good idea onto a menu but is now just very cut-cornered and—yeah.

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Yeah, so just the desire for creative freedom got me closer and closer to that point.

Jordan Hickey: If you're working in the kitchen space, were you also doing stuff on the side? Were you baking on the side at all?

Amanda Arafat: At that point, no. I would, especially with the job at the Japanese restaurant, regularly bring in baked goods that I was just making for fun, for coworkers. I had brought in like sourdough bread. I had brought in little cake truffle balls. Black sesame brownies I remember bringing one time, and people really enjoyed those.

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And, I do remember a coworker saying to me, “You know, you could make these, in your house, and sell them.” And I think I made up like five excuses on the spot as to why I couldn't do that.

Jordan Hickey: Like what?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, “I have cats,” and “I don't think that would be allowed.” It is allowed; spoiler alert. Just be clean, you know. And I think that was the primary one. I said, “Oh, I live in a studio apartment. I couldn't do that.” Which was true at the time; that was a real hindrance for a while. I just think I didn't think I was capable of it, at the time. I didn't know that that was something that could be for me. So I was baking, but really only to have people enjoy it. And then, actually, the most significant part of baking I think I did during that time was towards the end of my time as a chef.

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I was able to successfully get my bosses to stop stocking a third-party cookie that was awful, terrible.

Jordan Hickey: Was this at the Japanese restaurant?

Amanda Arafat: No, not at the—well, the second one was actually a Japanese fusion sort of place, so—

Jordan Hickey: Gotcha.

Amanda Arafat: This was at my more creative-freedomy job. I convinced my bosses to get a really bad third-party cookie off the menu, and I ended up developing for them what is probably still one of my best sellers, which is a salted miso chocolate chip cookie. It fit so much better for the theme, and people loved it. We had a local food influencer start picking up the cookies and featuring them on his story and stuff. Eventually he came *to* the restaurant to film me cooking and just making some dishes that we had put on the menu.

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That—oh, man—that probably ruined me. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] What do you mean?

Amanda Arafat: Just the recognition of my efforts in that, and just understanding that the seed idea for that item that the food influencer was featuring came from my brain was just like so insane for me at the time, because I just—I had no experiences like that.

Jordan Hickey: So, you're starting to get some recognition. You're scratching the creative itch a little bit. You've seen the stories about the guy in New York doing the pizza. But you were also making excuses about why you couldn't do this.

Amanda Arafat: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: At what point—and this is the biggest hurdle, I think—what pushes you from working full time and maybe baking a little on the side, to going full time? Getting over that hump is I'm sure not easy, and probably it requires a big push, I'm sure, right?

Amanda Arafat: Yes, absolutely.

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It's a privileged position to be in, to really make that leap. So, for me, I think the factors that came together to allow me to do it were I have a very, very supportive partner, who encouraged the crap out of me, and told me I should. And really I think like a lot of people—and I'm going to make a lot of references to post-pandemic versus after the pandemic, and those attitudes—but I don't think—for me personally, I'll just speak to myself, I was not willing to handle disappointment in the workplace the same way I did before the pandemic.

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Again, I had referenced before just the pandemic making me think very long and hard about what I really wanted out of life, and what I didn't want out of life. There was just a sort of career chef that I didn't want to be. I didn't want to be a career line cook. Not that there's anything wrong with that path in life, but at that time, it was the deadliest job to have during the pandemic. It was the most dangerous position to have. I had two parents that were very high risk during the pandemic as well. And so, it was just a constant fear. There was this incredible appeal with cottage baking that you were almost in your own vacuum. Creatively, but also health wise, safety, you had so much control there.

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And so, that really just not wanting to expose myself to a lot of different factors in the workplace—health and safety wise, but also just the limitations and just the mistreatment that is really very common in our food industry—those factors I really think just pushed me over that edge, where I was just like, “You know what? Let's just do it. Because this is *not* comfortable, or the safest.”

Jordan Hickey: Gotcha. Again, just to get a sense of time, when did your last kitchen job end, and when did you pick up full time baking?

Amanda Arafat: I feel like my last kitchen job ended—March? I honestly want to say it ended about a month before I started cottage baking.

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Jordan Hickey: What year was that?

Amanda Arafat: 2021.

Jordan Hickey: So you moved here, and you had done a little bit of retail, and then—how long had you been working in kitchens at that point?

Amanda Arafat: That I started cottage baking?

Jordan Hickey: Or the first—like the Japanese restaurant?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, yes. So, I started at the Japanese restaurant—I'm not going to know the exact month. I want to say I probably had less than two years in, at that point, in the restaurant industry. I had worked some like very not impressive or fun jobs, like back of house at like Einstein Bagels, back in the day. Things where it's not any sort of inspiring creativity. People are not making things from scratch there.

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Jordan Hickey: So you get to March 2021. We're still in the pandemic. But you decide that you're going to go full time.

Amanda Arafat: Mmhmm.

Jordan Hickey: You mentioned some of those factors that pushed you in that direction. What gave you the confidence that you could do it? Because even with the health and safety stuff, that's still—financially even, that's a big leap to make. What made you think you could do it?

Amanda Arafat: Like, delusion, most likely.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: Like I'm not gonna say anything except—overconfidence and delusion, at the time. Because it has been a very storied reality, these three years.

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You had touched on glamourization of this industry a little bit. But there is a very idealized and romanticized idea of this industry a little bit, and cottage baking and what it can be, and what it can allow you to be able to do in your life, with the idea of course being that you're not cooped up in someone else's business all day. But it was really just like confidence based on the strength of my recipes, and the strength of people's reaction to my creations. I'd have people go to the restaurant I worked at, and then the next day, they would like text my boss, like, "Oh my god, I had x, y, and z last night, and it was amazing." And they had no idea who I was, but those were menu items that I had developed, that I wrote. And so, based on that, really just that exposure, I felt like, okay, if people can eat this, if I can get the food to the mouths of the people, I feel like they will love it. I feel like they will respond.

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And so far, that pretty much has been the case. We don't ever have—I mean, honestly, I've been doing this three years—and I would hope this is the case for every cottage baker; I would never want anyone to complain in anyone's DMs—but I have had really great feedback all throughout this time on my flavor. And that has always been I think, even when I started, the thing that I was most confident on. Like, I know how this tastes, and I think other people [Laughter] are going to also respond the way that I think they're going to. Because this area also doesn't have the most wide-ranging flavors available, sometimes especially if you are from areas where there's more ethnic food available, from a more diverse palate.

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It was just so fun to be able to put something like a salted miso chocolate chip cookie in someone's face. And so, yeah, honestly just confidence in the flavors that I had already demonstrated, and straight-up delusion, got me to make the leap.

Jordan Hickey: So you go full time. What was the first thing you started doing? Were you doing popup markets? Were you selling via Instagram? How was that working?

Amanda Arafat: The very first sale I ever did was via Instagram, and honestly that's still my really primary way of operating the business. It is a very comfortable platform for people. Obviously people are making the switch to TikTok, but it is still a very comfortable platform for my customers, and it's the one that allows me to really cut to the chase and show people what they're going to receive.

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The very first sale I ever did was a focaccia sale, decorated focaccia, on Instagram. Did a few more Instagram sales, I think. Then became cognizant that in my neighborhood there were

makers' markets being thrown, right by a little neighborhood market—Walmart Neighborhood Market. So, I approached who I found out was running the markets, in their brick and mortar store. I don't know why I approached this like a formal interview; it is *not* that serious. I have since found out it is customary to DM people about markets. But I approached this person with a very makeshift business card for my business that was probably a month old at that point, and said, "I would like to join your markets, please. I am a baker, and this is what I do."

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They were probably thinking, "Wow, this was very unnecessary," but they were super nice, and they were like, "Yes. Join our markets." They were so accessible that it made it so I was able to do that and get that experience. Which is not—accessibility is an issue in this industry with cottage baking. Everything is so small, so that accessibility was huge, for me to gain that experience. And, yeah, started doing those markets. And that same lot that I did my first-ever bake sale market in ended up being the lot where we did the very first Big Gay Market. So it's, yeah, a very fond history there. And I still live right by it.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder what the experience was like.

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At that point, you had worked in restaurants, and you were probably not having the same face to face interactions—you had to *hear* that someone liked your food because someone texted your boss to say that they liked x, y, and z. This to me says you're not having a lot of face-to-face interaction. I wonder what it was like to be having that face-to-face interaction with people who were literally coming right up to your face and saying, "I would like to buy—blank." And also for that matter, what *were* you selling, at that point?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, man, let's see. The market I think of as the big first one where I was having just so much great interaction with people was honestly again the very first Big Gay Market, Pride Market. We had just so many shoppers that day. It was a crowd of—we estimate—like a thousand people.

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First of all, I did not have enough baked goods on me. But, it was so cool. Because especially for someone like me—now, at that point, I really didn't have what my—the theme of my bakery was down pat, but I was still bringing things with a Middle East influence. So I had like focaccia with Za'atar spice on it, which is a Middle East spice blend. It was so cool to have people come up excited. You could hear it in their voice. They're so interested in what you've got. They ask you about whatever is unfamiliar to them and it gives you an opportunity, especially which is cool for me, as someone with a really complex, rich, cultural side, to get those questions and explain to someone what Za'atar is, something that I grew up with and love and is so intrinsic to like Palestinian culture.

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To have that experience with someone, have them so excited to buy it, see them eat it—because they can't—I mean, people usually will take a few steps and then take their first bite—see them eat it, and then see them walk back by, and just immediately tell you that they loved it—that is so—it's just something that really fills your tank. It really just inspires you, makes the really tiring night you spent beforehand, baking it all, just feel so worth it. And it makes you want to do it all over again the next week. That interaction was probably—it still is—what gets me through.

If there is a really dry month, if I'm having a few weeks where sales are kind of stagnant, having that really great market refills your tank in retrospect as well.

0:45:01

Jordan Hickey: We've talked a little bit about flavors. You said at that point, thematically, what you were doing wasn't all the way solidified. We live in northwest Arkansas. People are used to chocolate chip cookies. Maybe they're not as used to miso chocolate chip cookies, or, these different flavors. The question I have is, at what point did you decide that people *were* going to be—? I mean, was there any doubt, like, “Oh, are people actually going to bite on this?” No pun intended. And at what point did you decide that, “Yeah, I'm going to give people something—these flavors that they've never had, and that's going to be my thing”?

Amanda Arafat: I just feel like ultimately, if you have an art, there is something kind of self-centered about it, where you are ultimately producing for yourself, in a sense.

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For me, I just knew that when I went to bakeries—I mean, I still, if I go to a bakery and it's mostly cupcakes and cookies, I'm probably—my wallet is probably safe. Unless there's some really interesting things going on. So that was just something I understood about myself as a consumer for a long time. Like, I want to try the outlandish thing. I want to try the flavor combination that I haven't yet. Because simply put, life is short; we should experience things. So, for me, I knew that that was something I was going to set out to do in this cottage baking endeavor. So much so that before I really started baking *anything*—like I was still just in the sourcing stage, and figuring out what packaging cost—I made a big Google Doc that was literally just called like “The Type Of Stuff I Would Buy.”

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Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: It was just a list of like hypothetical dream sort of dessert names that I know that if I saw it on the menu, saw it in a dessert pastry case, I would buy it impulsively. And there are things on that list I still haven't made. A brown sugar boba cake is on my list, at some point. I want it to have real boba pearls in it. We'll get to that at some point. But just I wanted to fill a gap that I knew was in the market, flavor wise. And ultimately, that's really what keeps me going. Flavor is *the thing* to me. I am chasing flavor. I want to live in Flavortown. So.

0:48:01

Jordan Hickey: Especially as people responded to what you were doing, did that give you confidence to be like, "Oh, okay, yeah, I can go full force on this"?

Amanda Arafat: Oh my gosh, yeah.

Jordan Hickey: What would be some other examples of things that you've made that you haven't seen around here before? I've looked at your Instagram, and I've seen things with like orange blossom or rosewater. What all are you making?

Amanda Arafat: At the moment, I think what I've been really emboldened to make, based on these reactions, is really a lot more goods that reflect my culture and directly reference that experience. So, really things that have had a great response as of late have been like my orange blossom walnut baklava. People have, again, just going on that customer interaction, that's something that I have and continue to have people purchase and then circle back to my booth like 15 minutes later to tell me how much they loved it.

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Which it's always nice to see, you know; a double visitor. Then, the pistachio rosewater baklava, people have been just really enjoying that. The salted miso chocolate chip cookies—we mentioned them already, but people do ask for those, and still do order them, like by the dozen, because they are just—I like to call them an adult chocolate chip cookie. But flavors like that, anytime I do something that is experimental, and people are like, “Oh, hmm”—I do a matcha cheesecake pie that people really enjoy. Any contrasting flavor duo, people seem to really go for.

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I'm like wracking my brain. Also it's been a minute since I've baked, so—but yeah, oh, people love the crème brûlée pie, too, because it's just—it's something familiar in a new format. And people really enjoy that, too, something where it's like, “I know I like this, but I haven't had it *this way*.” Enhancing that experience and like giving them something new to try is really fun. People have really enjoyed these baklava compost cakes we do, where it's like a layered dessert of crumbled almond cake, and then crisped-up phyllo pastry leaves that are soaked in the syrup, and then we also take like the nutty filling and sprinkle that on top, and it's got a rosewater whipped cream, too. People love that, when you just like shake things up and give them a new experience. Yeah, it has definitely emboldened me to keep chasing that for the customer.

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Jordan Hickey: To go back especially to those early days—you've made this leap. You're doing it full time. You've done some of the neighborhood markets. You've done the Big Gay Market. At what point did you start thinking, “Hey, this could actually work as a long-term thing?” We have talked about that idealized, like, “Oh, man, here's the Instagram version of

baking, but here's the reality of baking." How did you decide, "Yeah, the reality of baking and doing this is something I can do long term"? What factors went into that decision?

Amanda Arafat: I would say really the first year was very much dipping your toe into water that you're just—you're not expecting it, but it's like freezing, but it just seems like a good time, so you're like, "Just let me get used to this." [Laughter]

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That first year was really getting used to the routine of this, really. You start running a full—and I don't think everyone accepts it in their mind at first when they begin cottage baking, but you do have to start running a full food business in your home. It's not just something that you can like turn on and off when you do have an order, is what I've found. And really changing my mindset to suit that is what has allowed me to look at this as a sustainable thing, and has allowed *it* to be sustainable. Because the turning on and off of like that "I am a food business" mindset—boy, will that put you back.

Jordan Hickey: What do you mean?

Amanda Arafat: Well, there are things that are set up in a brick and mortar food business, in a restaurant, in a bakery, that you are teaching yourself when you start out cottage baking, as if you're like just in your infancy, for real.

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You are teaching yourself to walk. You're teaching yourself to inventory in your own home. You have to rethink storage in a way for your home that just far surpasses like your linen closet and like putting away the winter coats. It becomes a compartmentalization of your home, and

therefore your home life. So, that first year is really like setting up a foundation that would be like setting up a new brick and mortar business. Figuring out what your inventory sheets look like. Like very basic things that at first you take for granted how official they actually do have to be in your own home.

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Like, they do. You do need that baking rack. You do need to actually set up a Google Sheet with your inventory. It sucks. It *sucks*. [Laughter] But I think the image of this profession from the outside is that I am going to set up my tripod in the corner of the room, I am going to do some cool-looking stuff and then upload it to Instagram and I'll have like so many orders and it will be great. But—I mean, first of all, you do have to do that. [Laughter] First of all, you do have to do that, because it's 2023, and marketing is everything. But, you are every other employee. You are not just the marketing person. And so, really setting yourself up to be every person for your business is a task that, I think to set yourself up for happiness and longevity in this industry, you have to take very seriously.

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It could take time to take that seriously. In my case, it 1000% did. So I would say to the baby Amandas out there, it is worth the time—it's okay, I'm ADHD also—but it is worth the time to really structure yourself and structure your business so that you can go about it as if it's just a day of work, even though it's really like your whole life. But you really free yourself up and almost liberate yourself to be an employee once you structure all the stuff behind the scenes as if there are a billion other people there to do it.

Jordan Hickey: Who taught you how to do all this? You're talking about inventory sheets, and baking racks. Who taught you this and how did you learn it?

Amanda Arafat: Well, some of the structure that I have given myself has come from just working in restaurants. Knowing that they have those sheets, and knowing that there *is* a theoretical structure is a great tool, and really was a privilege to have.

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I was still kind of slow learning, but having that backbone of just knowing that there are theoretical systems for all of these things that can be translated to my home business was really helpful. But honestly, a lot of it I had to teach myself, piece by piece, Google search by Google search. Because I am a proud college dropout—community college dropout, so extra pat on the back there—and I am super privileged that I found my way to this profession that allows that to really not matter and allows all of my other skills and the other ways I'm super smart to shine. But it's definitely something that I didn't have the formal background for. And, luckily in northwest Arkansas there are also things set up for people like me to hopefully get an opportunity to get a better education.

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I had the insane privilege of being accepted into the first cohort of Ccreate, here in northwest Arkansas, which they work with diverse food and beverage business owners to help give them that business knowledge and that jumping-off point of, well, how would I wholesale my goods? And how should I be structuring this, without that formal knowledge. So I had that, which was an incredible experience and gave me just so much information I would not have had access to otherwise.

Jordan Hickey: When did you do that?

Amanda Arafat: That was in 2022, I want to say?

Jordan Hickey: Especially going through that, what was it like to do that? Was it, again, like the light bulb is kind of going off, and like, “Oh, this is how you can do it”? What was that like?

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Amanda Arafat: Honestly, Cureate was awesome because it kind of made me understand that I was smarter than I thought I was. Because they don't go through things from a very like cold, steely, capitalistic sort of perspective. It is pretty like person-first, and there's almost like you realize a sociological element to running a business. As a very person-first sort of person, it resonated with me, because it wasn't that cold, steely like representation of business that I think a lot of us tend to receive. That's the impression that we meet business with. So, having something that was centered around diverse business owners, somewhere where it was like a strength to be learning about business as a woman of Middle East descent, that was awesome.

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It was a sort of landscape that made it so I could just relax and try to understand and apply. And, it was great, because things were resonating to me that I didn't think would, and it made me realize I wasn't such a business dummy. [Laughter] And so, it was awesome.

Jordan Hickey: We've talked a lot about these different elements that make business possible. We've talked about inventory sheets. We've talked about getting that extra business acumen, like doing the wholesale stuff, all that. But obviously a business doesn't run unless you

have customers and a community and all of that. So, I wonder, can you tell me about what has made your business possible, especially like from the community side of things?

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Like who's buying your stuff? And how do you do this, here?

Amanda Arafat: That's a great question. Definitely in the last three years, my customer base has changed a lot. When you first start out, it's usually like the people closest to you who are supporting you. So, when I first started out, I remember like I had a good friend who worked in the restaurant I had just come from working for, and they had bought several pieces of focaccia from my very first sale. So it starts out with like this core group of people who are just like—they know you, they love you. And then they share it with someone. Then also, social media takes hold, and they are sharing it to who they know. So things start to kind of snowball a little bit. Then, with time, things like Big Gay Market happen.

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And say you're at a random market or a popup and someone just happens to be there, decides to try your cookie, whatever, is really how it feels like it happens. But I have customers now today who I remember brought friends to the first ever Big Gay Market and they all in a group bought things from me. And I just saw them at the last Big Gay Market, and they came and bought a meal from me. So, that's a great question, because sometimes you're in this bubble of like, "Well, who's going to buy my stuff anyways?" And then you forget who your group is, your support network and your customer base. But it seems like someone finds out, will try a thing, remember the thing, and then continue to seek you out. Especially with social media, which

makes it so easy for people to just like get notifications whenever you're going to post that you're going to be somewhere.

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Like I have customers today who I count as my most loyal, probably really contribute to a good amount of my cottage bakery's income, who I could not tell you how they first heard about me. I have no idea. All I know is, when it's Thanksgiving or Christmas time, this person will buy three or four pies from me, at a time, for their family. And they'll come to the Big Gay Market and buy like three meals from me. It's very confusing in this day and age of social media, how one finds out about you. But man, once they do, you know their username, they know yours. There is that recognition of, you're like—"Oh, you're username"—whatever it is.

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I definitely know a lot of customers by their Instagram handle rather than their first name.

Jordan Hickey: You said people buy meals from you at markets.

Amanda Arafat: Oh, yeah.

Jordan Hickey: How has what you've offered changed over the last couple years?

Amanda Arafat: Cottage baking has given me such a—I feel like a launching off point, that it has allowed me to really evolve over the last three years. People have been super open with what I offer. And so, I've made changes to my influences that were really apparent, and people have been like all for it. So I had like a very strong pie era—I wouldn't say I'm totally out my pie era, but—where it was primarily all I was doing. Like I would make six different types of pie for a market.

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And I was doing things that were really like almost the cornerstone of my business model for a while, which were pie samplers, where I would do six different slices of pie in one pie pan, and you get a sampler to be able to try one of everything of that season. And so, people rode with me through that, super enjoyed it. I still get people who DM and are like, “Please bring a pie to the next thing.” Then, just personally, I’ve started to embrace my Middle East culture and that heritage a lot more in my baking and my cooking, and so that has 100% manifested itself into my cottage baking. So, going with that, I’ve started to—essentially I’ve rebranded, very subtly. With a cottage bakery, there’s so much grace there, that you don’t have to invest an insane amount of money in a total rebrand. People are just like, “My favorite baker is doing something different now.” So it’s cool.

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So, at the moment, I bake much more Palestinian-American inspired goods, and people have responded to it so well that it’s allowed me to take some liberties and just roll with their enthusiasm. For example, the last Big Gay Market, I decided to not do a dessert, and instead I basically did the most cottage baker friendly meal that I could for the occasion. So I made Manakish [sp] which is a traditional Levantine flatbread with different toppings on it. And this was my dad’s recipe, so I was super proud to serve that with my dad’s recipe of hummus, and also a slice of baklava. And, yeah, just sold it as a meal set. It was really cool, because it gave me that control back from when I was a chef in a kitchen, almost, and I could feed someone an actual meal.

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That is so gratifying. And I got so many DMs after the fact of people just letting me know how much they loved the meals. And that was just an awesome thing to come back to, after such a busy market. So, yeah.

Jordan Hickey: You had mentioned your dad, and your dad's recipes. You had mentioned at the very beginning how, especially coming from a family bakery, it's very—it's a father-to-son-passed-down kind of thing, right?

Amanda Arafat: Yes.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder, has your family, especially seeing you be successful with this, how has their—if I can ask, how has their opinion or impression of what you're doing changed?

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Were they supportive at the very beginning, and has that changed?

Amanda Arafat: Basically the same concern that my dad had when I was 17 was the same concern that he had when he found out I was doing cottage baking as like a 26-, 27-year old, which was, "I just want to make sure you can take care of yourself, and that you'll be able to like pay your rent, and be good, and provide for yourself." And that ultimately his daughter would be okay. So that was the very same concern he had, to begin with. And I gotta tell you, for the first two years of doing this bakery, if I called him on the phone, I would totally be telling him about like, "Oh, I did this great market last week, and people loved it. I made a good amount of money. It was so successful." And we'd have this whole conversation, and then like at some point in the conversation, he would definitely sneak in a "So, I have a friend who's hiring at the university—just so you know."

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So there was definitely that to contend with, still. But I definitely think two and a half years was when he was like, “Hmm. I guess she’s paying rent all right,” [Laughter] and maybe dropped the concern, the very fatherly Middle East concern. And also, I know that it makes him very proud to know that somebody in his direct line is going on and keeping on that legacy to a certain extent, of keeping the Heluwiat Arafat kind of legacy going, in some sense. Because it’s just great to see that in the United States as well, and see that influence. It kind of seems to me a little bit—because I catch him being kind of proud sometimes—it does seem like just an extension of this family dream a little bit.

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Because I do come from that seed of like, the bakery that started in 1912, and my grandfather worked at, and his father worked at. And all of my uncles—my dad included—all of the men on my dad’s side of the family have a little nub missing from one of their fingers, on one hand at least, from the mixers [Laughter]—

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: —just like in training. Like it seems like a rite of passage; they had to lose a little nub. And so it is honestly kind of really cool to think about, and I know he is proud from that aspect, of like somebody is carrying this on, and it’s living past Gaza City and it’s living past that.

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Jordan Hickey: Do you have any recipes that you're doing from that bakery?

Amanda Arafat: No. So I will say, I do not have the proprietary baklava recipes.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Amanda Arafat: I do not. [Laughter] Because those are very much in use. And I will say, my interpretation of baklava is very much my—it's a child of my history and my heritage, but also my personality. And it's that flavor chaser in me, also. Because I honestly wouldn't even say that either of my baklavas probably closely resemble the one that my family is making to a T. I highly doubt they're using fresh orange zest. That's a little—that's my little Amanda spice. But yeah, it's definitely a creation that is an amalgamation of my modern sort of personality and influence, and that heritage.

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Jordan Hickey: I love that. It would be one thing to be like, "I want to do it *exactly* like what my family has always done for over 100 years." But the fact that—I feel like this fits so much of what we've talked about, which is, you take this existing concept, and like you said, you add the Amanda spice. You make it your own. Which I think is amazing. And honestly I think that's probably why people respond to it so well.

Amanda Arafat: Oh, thanks.

Jordan Hickey: I do want to touch on a little bit some of the challenges, a little bit, of this. Not to be your dad as literally as he's like, "So—"

Amanda Arafat: [Laughter] No, you're good.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] But how *do* you make it work financially? Is it difficult to do?

Amanda Arafat: I think it certainly can be. I think that the one thing that has helped me is mentally, I am never satisfied. Which can be a hindrance, but I am not necessarily satisfied to set up like a month's calendar of a few popups and then just like, "Okay, cool, we're good for the month."

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I do want to find new ways of exercising this culinary muscle. And so, cottage baking for me has been so cool because it has allowed me the flexibility to be able to build that month ahead, and figure out if I want to experiment with other ventures aside from the popups I've got slated. It has also allowed me just this recognition from the community that if I wanted to—for example, what I'm doing now, and really am probably going to start doing a lot more of, which is education, when it comes to cooking and baking—it has allowed me that connection to the community, and that set recognition and that set like little group of core supporters that—I know that I can go and try these other things, and broaden my horizons within the culinary landscape of northwest Arkansas.

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And, I feel pretty good about it! I actually feel pretty *great* about it! It has worked out amazingly, so far. Just being able to exercise new muscle sets, shall we say, if we're continuing that metaphor of just the culinary skills that I have. So, it has been—it's hard to balance, right, the very bare bones kind of like cottage baking finances. And one of the reasons being is that we are in northwest Arkansas where flow of traffic and money is so dependent on students. And I am Fayetteville-based, which is like—I *will* tell you, those little neighborhood markets look very different at some points of the year than they do in others.

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So, we do have to keep that in mind. That's a constant sort of—there's a constant ebb and flow to the sales that we have here in northwest Arkansas. I know that's something that I think all of the cottage bakers here feel. After the holidays, especially, it's very hard, at times. But you have to keep yourself very self-motivated. You have to understand that, okay, we might have had a dry couple of weeks, but we do have to keep pursuing events. And you really do have to, I think more than any other profession I can think of, as a cottage baker, you are creating your opportunities. You are really creating your work. Especially because so many of us are so reliant on social media. It really is part of your job to find the motivation to post, and like remember to create hype for yourself, create that marketing, but also create, what is the next date that I'm going to be baking?

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What is the next popup date, market date, or home pickup sale date? So you really have to be like insanely self-motivated, I think.

Jordan Hickey: Is that ever hard?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, yes.

Jordan Hickey: To do that week after week?

Amanda Arafat: Oh, yes. Yeah. And just being very frank, having it be so intrinsically linked to social media the way my business and so many others are, there's a kickback from that. Social media is not the healthiest place for us to be all the time. And in a world that it's very—makes it extremely easy to compare yourself against others, running a social media based

business is just a constant like flip of the coin, of like, I'm either going to open the app and be happy, or open the app and like be stressed.

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And so, yeah, it's hard at times, for sure, to keep that motivation.

Jordan Hickey: You mentioned earlier about this idea of compartmentalization, of if it's in your house, it's tough not to always be thinking about it. You mentioned flipping the switch, or not flipping the switch. One of the big questions as I've talked with some bakers has been, how do you keep this balance between your baker self, and your personal self? Because it sounds like a lot of times, for a lot of folks, it's like those two selves end up clashing a lot—when in fact they're actually the same person—whatever.

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But it's like, how do you keep that balance? Especially when social media *is* always at your fingertips, all the time?

Amanda Arafat: I think it's something I've found with time. I think at a certain point, I think cottage bakers will burn out from social media a little bit, and you do have to take a little bit of a break. But it's not something you have at first. Because especially earlier I had emphasized how important it is to *not* flip off that switch of being like a food business owner. In a lot of respects, that is super true. But that was something that in the pursuit of learning that, I really couldn't turn off for the first like year of doing this. At least. But I definitely think it becomes tiring for you, too, where you do want to start to enjoy life outside of baking as well.

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I definitely had times like in the first year, year and a half of my bakery, where I would be at dinner with my partner and just very randomly pick up a train of thought about the bakery. And it was like, “We don’t need to talk about this on Saturday night.” You know? But you eventually get to that point where it does become a bit more routine. It becomes a bit easier to walk by the baking rack and not think of the top three things you have to do baking wise, cottage baking wise, that day. But it’s something you really have to learn. With being so tied to social media, it is something you have to try and untether, eventually. Because you don’t want to be like falling asleep and have the panicked thought before you fall asleep of like, “Oh, god, I didn’t mix the dough for the day ahead,” or whatever.

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Or, random thoughts about flavor combinations that don’t need to exist in your brain, minutes before you’re falling asleep. But it just becomes more routine, I think. This is such a novel way to make a living, still, and it’s such a new experience, that you’re figuring out every day. It’s not routine, for the human experience yet, I think, to work and live in the same place. [Laughter] The pandemic has come, but it’s still not the most natural way for humans to live. So it happens with a lot of time, a lot of time and intentional separation.

Jordan Hickey: Something I want to ask about—we had talked about the oven, before we turned on the recording.

1:20:00

Obviously there are things you can control, things you can’t control. You can control to some extent, like, how much time you take away. Something you can’t control is an oven going on the fritz.

Amanda Arafat: Yes.

Jordan Hickey: I'm wondering, how do you respond to stuff like that?

Amanda Arafat: Honestly I feel like the best way to respond to any setback of that nature since I've started this has just been with like transparency. Transparency, and making it abundantly clear that you are human. And I've never been the sort of person to uphold any sort of brand that would make it seem like I'm not a human. So that has helped a lot. But being super transparent when it happened.

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I let my followers know that, "Welp, the oven is broken, but, we will persevere, we will find a way." So letting people know when things are not operational is really helpful, because people want to see you operational again. People are waiting for you to be like, "Okay, this is the first sale back. Here's the menu." They want to be a part of that. I have seen this community really support cottage bakers in their very human moments and that includes myself. When my oven broke, it took me like two days to get around to responding to all the DMs I had of people just letting me know, A, that they were excited for me to get this figured out, sorry it was happening, and that they loved me. And this was not just like people close to me; this was just like, you know, my regulars.

1:22:00

And then I had so many people who, some of them I didn't really even know that well, offering to let me use their home oven. Which was so generous. Yeah. So, in dealing with this, first of all, I'm so grateful that cottage baking has allowed me the other opportunities that I get to have that allow me to still make income while this is going on. That I can treat this as a little reset. And

then also, the community has been very helpful with resources and suggestions of, if this doesn't get resolved very quickly, suggestions and resources I wouldn't have thought of myself, actually. Oh, like, for example, I had mentioned this earlier, but chapels in northwest Arkansas—some churches and chapels here have commercial grade kitchens and do rent them out to bakers.

1:23:03

So, that is a thing I'm looking into. But I've also had good friends who have reached out and been like, "Listen. Here is mine and my partner's schedule. We are not in the house or using the kitchen from these hours to these hours. You can put the puppies up. It's all right." So there are these workarounds that just feel like a result of the community building that I have been able to do in these three years. It's just great to see—not to give it up to karma, but it is kind of nice to see these things come around, when things aren't going super well for whatever reason. And yeah, it has been great.

Jordan Hickey: Just one small detail question—you had mentioned having that other income, and that allows you to do the reset. Is that just the cooking and baking classes, or are you doing other things as well?

1:24:00

Amanda Arafat: Primarily right now I'm doing the cooking and baking classes as my secondary means of income. But throughout this time of doing cottage baking, I've also been able to do private cheffing gigs, which has been incredible, because those as well just give you the opportunity to create a menu, develop recipes, in a very restauranty sort of format, in that the dishes can have that same sort of ambition. So it has just been a great opportunity, because I get somewhere to put that part of my creativity.

Jordan Hickey: Probably the last question I would have is, looking forward, what does this look like? Is it a brick and mortar? Is it a cottage baking business split 50/50 with the private cheffing? Which, by the way, I don't think I realized that. That's such a—having that diversified income stream I feel like makes something like this possible as well.

1:25:00

Amanda Arafat: Absolutely.

Jordan Hickey: Going forward, what does this look like?

Amanda Arafat: That is a great question. I think if you had asked me the ultimate goal when I had started this bakery, it would have been extremely straightforward. The goal was to have a brick and mortar eventually and do that very traditional sort of streamlined cottage background to brick and mortar pipeline. But I have been able to have such a varied experience and so many different opportunities have arisen from doing cottage baking that I don't even know that that is the answer anymore. Really doing this for the last three years has awakened me to the idea that my culinary future could be whatever I want it to be. Cottage baking really opened that up for me, personally.

1:26:00

It really gave me that launchpad that you really have the power, if you have the talent, and you have the work ethic, the motivation, and the desire to do it, you can really create an opportunity for yourself. Which is something that as a Middle East, queer, woman I would have never in a million years thought was a reality. But I really do feel it is a reality at this point. I mean, that sounds so privileged to say, again. But I mean, no one gave me permission to start Amanda Makes. And no one gave me permission to start thriving on that, and discovering new parts of

myself on that for three years. But I did it. And no one gave me permission to cofound Big Gay Market, and continue *that* for three years, and continuing it doing what it does, but, we did it.

1:27:01

And so, at this point, the brick and mortar idea almost seems small. It doesn't—it would be contentment, but it would not equal, I think, fulfillment at this point. The community-building part has been so linked to the baking this entire three years that I do see myself seeking out more experiences with the community. Whether that is teaching the community in new ways and linking with them in that way of just skill sharing, or continuing to create places that foodies and perhaps queer people could meet up, whatever intersection that is. But education just feels like it is a big part of it at this stage in my life. And so, along with baking, I think in tandem with that, it's just going to shake hands with community-building and whatever that looks like.

1:28:00

So, if there was a brick and mortar, it just wouldn't look like a normal brick and mortar, is what I would say.

Jordan Hickey: Just one clarification. You had mentioned the community. Do you mean like the queer community, northwest Arkansas community, all people gathered together, as a concept?

Amanda Arafat: I think I've really found a lot of fulfillment in the queer community, and linking together really queer and POC communities in particular. It has been incredibly enriching to represent myself as not only a queer person in northwest Arkansas but also as a Palestinian person here. And to have been really embraced for that, from the frame of food, from that viewpoint as well, has been really cool. Because, I mean, there are maps you can look at where

Palestine isn't on the map. And so, to have served something like a Palestinian flatbread that was my Palestinian dad's recipe, at a queer event recently—like I—I'm a little bit emotional just like thinking about that, a little bit.

1:29:13

So, as many times as I can hit that intersection of being fully myself, and somehow, encourage others to be fully themselves, as queer, as Middle East, as whatever they are, I want to keep doing that, is really the thing.

Jordan Hickey: I love it. We've talked about a lot. Is there anything that we have not talked about that I've completely missed, or that there's other aspects that you wanted to explore further? Anything that we need to talk about?

Amanda Arafat: No. [Laughter]

1:30:00

We need more hot pot places in northwest Arkansas. I don't know if the people from Southern Foodways are interested in that take, but—we need that.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah, I—I think—I'll second that, as an objective observer. Cool. Well, like I said, I think that about covers it.

Amanda Arafat: Sweet.

Jordan Hickey: I'm going to leave 30 seconds on the end of these recordings for editing purposes. But yeah, thank you so much for taking the time. This has been wonderful.

Amanda Arafat: Thank you! This has been great. Thanks so much.

1:31:00

[End]