



Mai Warshafsky

Richmond, VA

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Sarah Adams: This is Sarah Adams with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is June 19th, 2022, and I'm at Hatch Kitchen in Richmond, Virginia speaking with Mai Warshafsky, who is the owner and head baker at Café Warshafsky Shortbread. Good morning, Mai.

Mai Warshafsky: Good morning.

Sarah Adams: Mai, just a quick question to start, could I ask for your date of birth, please?

Mai Warshafsky: February 6, 1982.

Sarah Adams: Thank you so much. All right. Well, why don't we start at the beginning, and tell us about where you're from.

Mai Warshafsky: I am from Woodstock, New York, which is a small town in the Hudson Valley about two hours north of New York City.

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I was born and raised there, and yeah, grew up kind of in the country.

Sarah Adams: What was it like growing up in the country?

Mai Warshafsky: It was very pretty. I liked to spend a lot of time outdoors. I hiked a lot, and I rode my bike a lot. Woodstock was kind of an interesting small town 'cause it's a pretty famous small town. [Laughter] And it's also really close to New York City, so a lot of people who settled there were either former New Yorkers from the city, like my parents. They started off as weekenders and then when they decided to start a family moved up full time.

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So as much as it's, like, this cute hamlet that's nestled in the mountains in the Hudson Valley, you still do meet quite a lot of interesting people, and I still think that you do get exposed to things that maybe other small towns you wouldn't get exposed to. And I think also 'cause Woodstock has the history of being an artist colony, it attracted a lot of creatives, and it still does. I think it has continually done that. So yeah, it was a small town, but I feel like you did get a lot of exposure.

Sarah Adams: Any specific food memories from growing up there?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah, actually. My mom is an incredible cook, so I definitely grew up eating really good Japanese food. She's Japanese. But she was better than a home cook.

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She really excelled at it, and she had a natural talent for it. She wasn't professionally trained or anything, but she would tell me, she said, "If you know how to eat, you know how to cook," and I think that's kind of true. [Laughter] And she always made really elaborate meals and people would always want to eat at our house. And when I was really young up, until the age of six, my parents had a store in Woodstock on **Tannery** Brook Road, and my mom would cook a lot in the back. And I think for a little while when they were struggling a bit, she was selling Japanese food. She was making futomaki, which are the big sushi rolls that have egg omelet and vegetables in them. And she was selling them to the local health food store.

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I think she might've even probably been selling stuff out of the back of the store. It was the [19]80s, so you could probably still do stuff like that. But yeah, I feel like, in a way, yeah, she kind of leaned on it, I think, when she needed to— when they needed to. And I also think that she really wanted to open a restaurant. I think that's what she wanted to do, and she couldn't for financial reasons, and just the family dynamic and everything. I think she still kind of wants to. I'm not even kidding. If she could, I think she would. She always kind of mentions it every now and then, and she really loves that I married a chef. She was very excited about that, which is funny. [Laughter] So yeah, I think it started with her and, yeah, it was normal for me to grow up eating— I just ate really well, I think, from the beginning.

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Sarah Adams: You're a baker now. Was your mother a baker on the side?

Mai Warshafsky: She was a horrible baker. [Laughter] A horrible baker. Actually, I think my sweet tooth comes more from my dad, because my dad definitely has one and it was really normal for my dad and I to go out for a coffee and a pastry. We would always share something sweet. So I think that actually comes more from my dad. It's always a really good memory that I have of my dad. My dad's from Brooklyn. When we'd go visit my grandmother— she lived in Sheepshead Bay— I remember we would go to Brighton Beach, and we would go to the International Food Market, I think it was called. It's closed now. It was this Russian specialty food market, and then upstairs they had a deli and they prepared food. And we used to go there and get lunch. And then we would get a pastry, or we would go a couple doors down. There was this— I think it was Turkish— this tea shop.

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They sold a lot of confections. We'd get something sweet, we'd get a coffee, and we'd walk to the boardwalk, and we'd share something. And that was really normal for my dad and I to do, so I feel like my sweet tooth and memories of coffee and baking and treats actually comes more from my dad.

Sarah Adams: Are there any specific Eastern European pastries that you remember eating with him on those trips to Brooklyn?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah. There was this poppyseed— it's like a sweet bread. It's a little more dense than a brioche, but it's definitely like a enriched dough. And there would be these poppyseeds— I might have said sesame; I meant poppyseeds— and it's in some kind of syrup or something. They bake it into the sweetbread and then they put a glaze on it. And I loved that with coffee. That was so good. We'd get that a lot.

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And I am a sucker for a cheese Danish.

Sarah Adams: Who isn't?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah.

Sarah Adams: When did you start working in the kitchen alongside your mother, if you did that?

Mai Warshafsky: I think I was older. I was always in the kitchen. I remember watching her a lot. I didn't really help her, though. She's very self-sufficient, and when she gets in the kitchen, she really is like a chef where she's just highly organized and she's just, like [*gestures with*

hands to indicate moving through steps of a process]: this, this, this, this. And she executes very efficiently, and I definitely got that from her. So I don't really remember helping her cook, really, but I definitely remember watching a lot. I was always in the kitchen with her when I was little.

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And then, I think around high school, my brother— she started traveling to Japan and working, and my dad had some health issues, so I remember she wasn't around, so I started cooking. And I had retained what she did, and I started making things, and I don't think I really realized that I knew how to do it, but I did 'cause I had watched her do things so many times. And then, maybe later on I started helping her because I had been practicing on my own. I don't know. I feel like when she's home, she cooks. That's what she wants to do. It's like her enjoyment, her pleasure, you know? So yeah, I'm not really sure when I started cooking with her. Definitely after she had her stroke, because then she really needed help.

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She couldn't chop things as quickly or as nicely as she had before.

Sarah Adams: And how old were you then?

Mai Warshafsky: Um, gosh. I was probably in my late twenties. Yeah.

Sarah Adams: At what point did you parlay what you had grown up immersed in and learning about at home into working food service outside of home? Is that something when you were still in Woodstock?

Mai Warshafsky: No. That came— well, actually, yeah. My first job was bussing tables at this Mexican restaurant when I was sixteen, so that was my first job. But it really didn't have anything to do with food so much.

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Actually, that's not true, because I think I started working in restaurants— I don't know if that was a deliberate choice of mine. It might've just been something that was available and there and I applied myself to it. But I think once I started doing it and was involved in that industry, I think it felt very normal, and it felt very comfortable because it was social and it was food-centric just like my home, like the way I grew up. So I think it was kind of a comfort zone, actually, in retrospect when I think about it. And then, I think when I got to New York, then you started making real money doing it, and then there was a bigger picture there. In Woodstock, it was a summer gig, something I did maybe when I came home from— no, I guess I was doing it in high school. I was doing it in high school.

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And then moving to New York, yeah, I think working at Balthazar I realized that I could actually make money.

Sarah Adams: What brought you to New York City originally?

Mai Warshafsky: College brought me. Well, I had always wanted to move to the city. I remember when we used to go to the city to visit my grandmother— I have this really vivid memory, actually, of driving by NYU with my dad. We'd always drive. We didn't take the train or anything, 'cause we had a car. And I remember we were driving through downtown, I guess, I

don't know, but I definitely saw signs for NYU, or flags, who knows. But I think I was twelve or thirteen, and I just remember saying to myself in my mind, "I'm gonna go there," just 'cause it was New York University. I didn't know about college really, yet, but it was, like, New York University, "I'm gonna go there. That's obvious." I did not go there.

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Way too expensive. But I went to Hunter College which I think was better anyway.

Sarah Adams: What did you study at Hunter?

Mai Warshafsky: I studied studio art. I went in for linguistics 'cause I was really interested in languages and at that point had already spoken three, but—

Sarah Adams: What three languages do you speak?

Mai Warshafsky: Japanese, French, and Spanish. But I had transferred from art school to Hunter, so it took a little while to get there. So that's what I thought, when I transferred, I wanted to do, but then what I really wanted was to just live in New York City. And I was getting a little bit sick and tired of college, and I just had the most credits in art, so I wound up just finishing up in art 'cause that was going to be the fastest way to get out of there. But I minored in Spanish literature.

Sarah Adams: And what medium did you work in in art?

Mai Warshafsky: Printmaking.

Sarah Adams: Printmaking?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah. I did mostly etchings and woodblock prints.

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Sarah Adams: And so when you were moving to the city for school— and you said that’s when you really started working in restaurants— then once you were in the city, can you tell us about— was Balthazar the first restaurant you worked at down there?

Mai Warshafsky: No. I worked at this place called Enoteca on 25th Street and 3rd Avenue. I worked there. I got the job. My boyfriend’s best friend from high school was the manager there or whatever. So yeah, I started doing coat check ’cause I didn’t actually have experience. And then I became maître d’ because I was good at it, and I was clearly capable. But that’s how I started. I was the coat check girl for a little while.

Sarah Adams: What’s something that you learned working as a coat check girl?

Mai Warshafsky: I learned a lot about brands and who makes really nice coats, and which coat I wanted for sure. [Laughter]

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I was definitely, like, “Oh, my God! This Prada coat is so nice!” [Laughter] That was fun. That was a tough one, ’cause you’re definitely not really seen, when you’re coat check. You’re definitely at the very low end of the totem pole. You have zero power. So I wouldn’t say I learned much. You kind of learn more as a maître d’ ’cause you are actually in a position of power, and you can either give people what they want or withhold it.

Sarah Adams: Did you enjoy being a maître d’ and enjoy holding that power?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah, I did.

Sarah Adams: And then, from there, where?

Mai Warshafsky: So from Enoteca, I went to Balthazar, and that's where actually I learned more about that dynamic, because Balthazar was a very busy, desirable place where people wanted to be. It was a place that you would go to see and be seen.

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There were VIPs, there were celebrities, there was a protocol. So I learned a lot about that kind of dynamic and that idea of, in New York City, the desire to be at the hot spot, to be at the place where everybody goes. Yeah, a desirable place to be, and status and all of those things, which I don't think I was very privy to until I worked there.

Sarah Adams: And through all of this you were front-of-house. Where did your own professional cooking and baking start to enter the picture?

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Mai Warshafsky: It probably started there actually. No, it definitely started there. I think what Balthazar really taught me was how to see— not even really understanding, I think understanding came later— but it was really how to see what people want. How to make something that's desirable. How to make something that people are gonna pay money for, and maybe even pay a lot of money for, and wait for. I think it taught me more about that than food in a way, because it really was— it was drama. People walked through the door, if you didn't have a reservation, you were gonna wait two hours. And they did. It had that much power that people did, they would just wait. And then it also was dealing with difficult people. It's like delivering bad news nicely.

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I think it taught me a lot of life skills and social skills, and definitely taught me a lot about business. And Keith McNally, the owner, I liked his ethos. He is a very interesting person. He's somebody who I had only met in meetings once or twice, but what was relayed to me through management, what he believed in, the way he wanted us to be at the restaurant, I thought I liked. And from what-all I understand of him, too, he's a very detail-oriented, perhaps even a bit—I just remember him being very specific about lighting, about setting the mood, a tone. Where he played music, he would only play music in the bar area. It was these little details though.

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But actually when Baltazar— when you were there, people would call it a well-oiled machine. It really was like it was magical. It really was. And I think I took a lot away from that job, and it really didn't have anything to do with my position. I think I absorbed so much more about how to create a desirable space, something that people want, a place where people want to be, a romantic place, also exciting. And I will also say, I think my happiest time in New York was at that time and it was by far my favorite gig, my favorite job. I was there for three years, maybe a little over three years, and the people that I worked with, we were like family. Our whole team was incredible. We all worked together. It was hard work.

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It was really high volume, high paced. You had people who came in with high expectations, demanding people. Some people were amazing. We all worked really well together. We were all a team, the busboys, the runners, the bartenders— they were actually a little bit grumpy; I feel

like they were the only grumpy ones [Laughter]— the kitchen, the maître d’ stand, the hosts, the servers. It was actually fun. It was fun and we made money.

Sarah Adams: So a social education and a business education and an aesthetic education all in one job.

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah.

Sarah Adams: And then at some point you started baking.

Mai Warshafsky: Well, I definitely was baking then, ’cause I always would bake to decompress. It was just something for enjoyment for me.

Sarah Adams: Just at home?

Mai Warshafsky: Just at home.

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But I don’t think it really became sort of in the forefront of my mind until I started working for Dean and Maya at Jack’s Wife Freda. That was hard. That was very hard, ’cause that was a very small space. It was really high paced, high volume. We turned tables like crazy.

Sarah Adams: What kind of place was it?

Mai Warshafsky: It’s like a mom and pop— it’s a restaurant/café, but was just constantly busy. I really feel like Maya was kind of a pioneer in making— now people take photos of food, and restaurants are Instagram-famous, and food is the new fashion. And I really think Maya was really at the front of that, and I think she really kind of paved the way for that. That’s what I think personally.

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So we were just constantly busy. She made them Instagram-famous. And also her and Dean are coming from Keith McNally, too, the restaurants. Maya was actually the person who hired me at Balthazar, and Dean managed Schiller's for a long time. They had met, I think, at Balthazar. I think they had opened it together, actually, something like that. So we all came from the same kind of hospitality family in that way. And I went to work for them when they opened their own place.

Sarah Adams: And what was your role there at that—

Mai Warshafsky: I was a server. Yeah, and a lot of just really high paced, multitasking. We ran food. We took orders. We did coffee service. I absolutely hated doing coffee service.

Sarah Adams: What didn't you like about it?

Mai Warshafsky: I hate foaming milk. I just hate it. I don't understand it. I don't even want to drink foam. I think it's gross. I'm, like, can we just have warm milk? Why are we foaming milk? It would just be so much faster if there was just heated milk we could just pour on top of the coffee and serve it.

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Why are we foaming milk? Okay. Hate to foam milk. Totally cool with pulling espressos. That's fine. And that was intense, though. I worked from eight to four, so I did the breakfast/lunch shift. And we were in the heart of SoHo, on Lafayette Street between Spring and Broome, right around the corner from Balthazar, which is funny. But I think when I finished that shift I went home and

closed the door and turned the lights off and I didn't want to speak to anybody for at least two hours. It was very intense work. It was loud. It was so loud. There was no sound, whatever they call it. I just definitely would leave my shifts with my ears ringing. It was intense.

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And at that point I was doing that full time. I was going to the Art Students League, I was doing my own personal creative work, but my sole income was restaurants, was Jack's Wife Freda at that time, and Balthazar, too. But I think Balthazar— 'cause it was dinner service and there's just a larger team, everyone has a position, you're not doing four different positions— I think it was a different level of energy exertion. So that was hard. I don't even remember how long I was there. I might've been there a year. But I think that that, particularly— I'd go home and bake and then eat something, you know what I mean?— I think that that really was how I decompressed, and how I meditated, I think, after my shift. And that's actually where I started Café Warshafsky, is when I was working there.

Sarah Adams: What kind of things were you baking when you would go home to decompress?

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Mai Warshafsky: I like pound cake a lot, so I was making pound cake for sure. I am not a big chocolate eater, so I probably didn't make much chocolate stuff. I made banana bread a lot. I think I just made easy things like quick breads. Yeah, I don't really know.

Sarah Adams: And you said this was the origins of Café Warshafsky. Tell us about that.

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah. I think at that point I had some pretty good experience with hospitality in New York City.

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I think that, from a business perspective I, too, was frequenting stores that had been there a long time, longevity, had been successful for a good amount of time. And I think that's something that I always wondered, how they did it and why they did it. Some of my favorite places to go to were Joe's Pizza, which I think opened in the [19]70s. And they just make pizza. Nothing extra— I think it's the best slice in New York, in my opinion, but it's not like they're making anything like pizza with truffles. It's nothing like that. It's, like, a slice of cheese pizza, pepperoni. I like to go to Ferrara's because I do like Italian desserts a lot, and they had, I think, had their hundred-year anniversary while I was there.

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And funny enough, my grandfather had a watch repair shop on Canal Street and would get pastries from Ferrara's and take them back to Brooklyn. So not only did my grandfather and my father go there, I went there, which was something that I really loved. My Dad came of age in Brooklyn in the 1950s, [19]60s— more [19]50s— so I think I definitely, like many people, have this image of this really incredible, romantic time in New York City, which does not exist anymore, I think, the way it was, 'cause it's a city that is constantly changing. But I think that my attachment and my connection to that also made me really curious about these places that had just been around for a long time, like Joe's, Parisi Bakery, Ferrara's.

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And I was really thinking to myself, “What keeps people going back? What is this?” And to me, I think, the conclusion that I had was partially nostalgia, and also, I think a simple product actually sticks around longer than a complicated one. And I think that’s kind of partially what led me to a butter cookie, because it really is something as simple as a slice of pizza or a buttered roll or biscotti. It’s really simple.

Sarah Adams: Do you remember the first time that you baked shortbread?

Mai Warshafsky: I do. But I had Café Warshafsky in mind already.

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I don't know if I actually made shortbread prior to this idea that I had, and I just remember having this epiphany. I was literally with a girlfriend of mine, and we were at the public pool in East Harlem, and I really remember telling her, “I got it. I know what we’re gonna do.” Her and I were going to do it together in the beginning. She didn’t want to do it. I was in the pool, and I was like, “You know those Danish butter cookies in the blue tin that everybody remembers, and everyone has a good memory of?” And she was like, “Yeah.” And I was, like, “I’m gonna do that.” I was like, “I’m gonna do that, but I’m gonna do it in my style, the way that I want to do it.” And that’s really where the idea— that was the epiphany, that moment. ’Cause I was like, those have been around forever, everyone remembers them, everyone has eaten them no matter who you . . .

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And every time I bring it up, people are, like, “Oh, yeah. Of course.” And I’m, like, “Yeah, exactly.” And I do feel like the longer you’re around, the longer you’re most likely going to be

around. Those cookies will probably be around forever, and so will pizza, and so will the buttered roll. So that's kind of how that happened.

Sarah Adams: So you decided on shortbread, and then what did the process look like from there?

Mai Warshafsky: I guess it was about coming up with flavors that I thought were interesting and tasted good. The Earl Gray flavor was the first flavor that I did. And the rosewater was the second, I think, or maybe it was vice versa. I'm not completely sure. But the inspiration for the rosewater flavor came from working at Jack's Wife Freda, because they had a rosewater waffle on the menu.

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We sold so many of those waffles, and it is an incredible flavor. I love it. And I knew it would translate well, 'cause it's the same ingredients, but in different ratios, basically. So I definitely had experimented with that flavor, and then I experimented with the Earl Gray flavor, which, actually, a friend of my brother's in Tokyo, his wife made an Earl Gray cookie and I had one and I loved it. And I never forgot it. And it must've been five, six years before that happened, but I just never forgot it. I just thought it was brilliant and so good. So that's how I started on those two flavors. So those two flavors actually came from a prior experience, kind of came from somebody else. And then I made them into my own with the development of my personal recipe.

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And then, the other flavors, the lavender-and-coconut was my flavor. Lavender, I think it's so beautiful, and it's something I really wanted to work with, but it's difficult 'cause it's potpourri, it's soapy. It's a hard flavor to make tasty, where you want to eat it repeatedly. And I remember I

was taking this hike with my brother, and I was talking to him about it. We used to always go on hikes to brainstorm. And I remember getting in the truck after, and I was, like, “coconut.” I was, like, “It’s coconut.” ’Cause coconut is warm, it’s creamy. I was like, that’s gonna balance the lavender out. That’s gonna balance that strong flavor; it’s gonna soften it. So that’s how that flavor happened. And then, matcha just came from the matcha craze in the city at the time.

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It was, like, everyone wanted matcha lattes, all these matcha shops were popping up. And people might’ve asked me— I can’t completely remember— they might’ve asked me, and then I gave in. I think I gave in. I think I didn’t want to do matcha, because I just was like, I didn’t want to get on the trend train. [Laughter] But I think after being asked multiple times, I kinda gave in and was, like, you know, sometimes you gotta give people what they want. And that’s definitely something I learned about business, that it’s actually not about you, it’s about giving the people what they want. You can offer them something, but if they don’t respond to it, then you should not be so hard-headed, and you should actually change it. And then, actually, the peanut flavor was inspired by my move here because Virginia peanuts.

Sarah Adams: So at this point when you’re launching a business, you’re still baking out of New York, still baking out of your home, rather?

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Mai Warshafsky: Yeah.

Sarah Adams: And were you just testing on friends, testing these flavors?

Mai Warshafsky: I was testing on friends, definitely. I brought them [shortbread] to work at Jack's Wife Freda. We had a staff meeting, and I brought the rosewater and the Earl Gray to the staff meeting and we all ate them, and I got really good feedback. Everyone loved them. And then Maya especially loved the rosewater flavor, so we started selling them at the restaurant. And I was a server, so I was pushing them. I was selling a lot of them. And I wasn't even telling people that I made them. I'm kind of shy in that way. Yeah, I was just selling the hell out of 'em.

Sarah Adams: And what year was this?

Mai Warshafsky: 2014. I have my first invoice that I wrote to Dean. It was March of 2014.

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Sarah Adams: And what happened with the business over the following years?

Mai Warshafsky: I was still working at Jack's Wife, but the feedback was good, and I was getting really excited about it, so I started walking into places and just cold calling and just doing all of that. I really started in the neighborhood, because logistically, that would just be easier for me to do deliveries, 'cause I did have to do that. I was either gonna do deliveries before my shift or after my shift, and it was just me, so my brother made me these Cordura tote bags that would perfectly carry two orders, and I would tote around the city, Manhattan, and deliver cookies.

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And then eventually, got a granny cart, and I really got made fun of for that.

Sarah Adams: One of those little wire shopping carts?

Mai Warshafsky: Oh, yeah. No, it was covered. I had to protect it because rain, you know, New York you gotta walk everywhere. I was, like, I'm not gonna sit in traffic in a cab and I'm not gonna waste money on a cab. And I didn't have the money for it anyway. So I was toting stuff around on the subway, up and down stairs, rain, snow, ice. My second account was Ground Support. They were on West Broad[way], one of my favorite places, and I think what's so funny is that I didn't really love the café at first, and I think it was one of the places where I was not sure that I wanted to sell. And this taught me something, too, and they wound up being, like, my best account for years. They were one of my first accounts and I was in New York for six years. And he moved so much product.

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He did so well with it. And then, the owner, Steven, and I became friends, peers. We'd talk about business. I would drop cookies off. We would talk in the office for a little bit. Huge supporter when I was first starting out, when I was experimenting with flavors and I wasn't buying things from a supplier yet. I didn't have those connections. I was buying butter and stuff from Fairway. He offered to order things for me, and I would just pay him. He was a really, really great supporter from the beginning, and became a really good friend, and we actually share the same birthday. So it's funny: I don't see him that much anymore, and he— I think— sold the business, but on our birthdays, we always say, "Happy birthday! Happy birthday to us!" So it's pretty funny. But he was great. And then, Harney & Sons was my third account, and for that I remember being so nervous.

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I remember standing outside with my business card, and I probably had some samples with me, and I was, like, coaching myself. I was so nervous, and I was outside the doors, like, “All right, what are you gonna say? All right. You can do this. Just do it. Just do it, Mai!” [Laughter] ‘Cause they had a beautiful store, beautiful building. I think I did feel a little bit intimidated by that. And then I met the buyer, and he was probably younger than me. He was so sweet, so fun, and we became buddies, too. And then Café Integral, great coffee shop, still— they have a great business. It was a mother and son team. Really nice people. It’s so funny to reflect on this, ‘cause I haven’t actually thought about this in a really long time. And they were all within, like, ten blocks of each other. But New York is, like, there’s so many people it doesn’t matter. You know what I mean? And everyone kind of has their own spot where they go to, so it’s not that weird to have your place in so many— like, close by.

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So those were my first solid four accounts, and they were easy to handle ‘cause they were all within ten blocks of each other, so, toting stuff around.

Sarah Adams: For how much longer did you continue baking out of your home kitchen?

Mai Warshafsky: Oh, gosh. I don't remember. It wasn't that much longer. I did get a home processor's license, but I'm pretty sure that I started— Dean and Maya were nice enough to let me bake out of their kitchen. And then I moved on to this other kitchen that was owned by another baker, and I just rented space from him.

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He wasn't there all the time. They would go in and start baking croissants really early, but they were usually done by, like, 4:00, and then I would come in at 4:00 or 4:30 and I would stay until 10:00, midnight, whatever. So I did shifts, and I paid him. And I did that till I left. So yeah, I was there probably longer than any other place, though, for sure. But I think that was also what partially—it entered my mind to move, to leave New York. I think that was one of the reasons, one of the catalysts, because I really couldn't afford my own space. I didn't really know what to do. I felt a bit trapped by that, which I'm sure a lot of people do.

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And I think it became a question of, okay, how do I want to grow this? Do I want to get investors? Do I want a business partner? Where do I get the money from? At that point it wasn't time for that yet, though. Now I feel closer to that, but at that point, it wasn't. Even from moving here the last two years, I feel like the brand has become more solid. I've made adjustments that I'm really happy about, and I think I've made it more of a saleable product in a way, whereas in New York I was still stamping paper bags. Now I get custom bags made. So yeah.

Sarah Adams: You conceived and launched Café Warshafsky around 2014 while you were still working in other restaurants, and then you grew it over the next five or six years through a client base, grew into bigger kitchen space in other kitchens.

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And then, you were thinking about that it was time to move someplace where you could actually have more ownership over the space and production. And you're in Virginia, so you moved to Virginia. Can you talk about what drew you to Virginia, and what that process was like?

Mai Warshafsky: Sure. Well, my husband is a chef. We got married. I think we'd been married about a year. And we were both pretty deep in hospitality, deep in the industry. And I had a bridge job. My last job was at Estela, and I quit in December of 2016. So I was really only doing Café Warshafsky from 2017 until 2020 when we moved. So I was baking, I was doing deliveries, I was going to work. You're on the hamster wheel for sure. And my husband was the same. He had a really good job.

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We met at a restaurant. He was a sous-chef at Narcissa, and then was offered a position as the chef de cuisine at Nix when they opened Nix. Same restaurant group. And so we were working a lot. And also New York, especially when you work in hospitality, you work hard and you party hard, too, because you gotta let loose. Your job is— you're giving so much to the guests, and when you get off your shift you're starving and you want to drink alcohol, too. And then you're doing that late at night and then you're waking up and you're doing it all over again. And I always say— I make fun of my husband 'cause he asked me to marry him, and then he took the CDC job at Nix and then I didn't see him for a whole year.

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We were just like two ships passing in the night. So I think we were both sort of like, maybe for the next step this isn't going to work for us anymore. And so we were trying to figure out how we could do what we do, but not as intense, if we could take it down a couple notches. So we were starting to do a little bit of traveling to see if there were other cities, maybe smaller cities— with what we do, we need people with expendable income, so you can't really move into the

middle of nowhere, basically. So we were looking at other cities just to see if the quality of life could be a little bit better for us. And we never really found— we went to L.A., we were in Portland, Seattle, we went to Chicago, we were in Houston.

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We really traveled. And I think at that point Houston and Chicago were actually kind of at the top of our list, but we weren't a hundred percent; we didn't feel it. And then we bought a car, which was very exciting, and Garrett's dad lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, so we took a road trip. We were, like, we bought a car! Let's just drive. [Laughter] So we drove to North Carolina, and usually we would stop in D.C. That was our pitstop, and then we'd get dinner and then keep going, whatever. And on the way back one time, Garrett was, like, "I have this buddy"— They used to work at The Meat Hook together, in Brooklyn— "He lives in Richmond. I think he would like it. Do you want to stop there on the way home?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." And whenever I go to places, I always research cafes and bakeries if there's something I want to eat, somewhere I want to go. And I found Sub Rosa and I was, like, I want to go there.

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So we did, and it was funny 'cause James lives around the corner, and he met us there. And it was world class. I've traveled, I've eaten a lot of good stuff, and I was, like, this isn't just good for Richmond, this is really excellent, good for anywhere. So I was, like, wow. I was impressed. And then we kind of just spent the day. We went to The Veil. We finished up with dinner at Brenner Pass. And I just remember Garrett and I looking at each other and we were like, "Where are we? What is this place?" I didn't know this place existed. It's part of being from New York,

you're a little bit ignorant about other places. [Laughter] And we were, like, "Should we put it on the list?" And so we put it on the list, and we went back to New York, and I started doing a lot of research about the city and it became the top on our list. And then, actually, when I thought about it in terms of business, it's more centrally located for shipping purposes.

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And it was interesting because at the time I listened a lot to *How I Built This*, and I listened to an episode about Burt's Bees, and they started in Vermont, and they actually moved to Durham, North Carolina also because it's more centrally located, and I was, like, interesting. And it's true, for shipping purposes, you are. And then I started researching ghost kitchens, where could I move my business, what the cost of rent is, all of those things. And I found Hatch and we made a couple trips down here before we moved, probably like three or four, and we came to Hatch and I met Jordan, the head of communications and marketing.

Sarah Adams: And Hatch is the commissary kitchen that you work out of?

Mai Warshafsky: That I'm working in now, yeah. And she met us on a Saturday 'cause we came, I think, just for a weekend. She was nice enough to do that, even though I don't think they normally do that. And I was, like, "Do you have a dough sheeter?" 'Cause a lot of ghost kitchens did not have dough sheeters and I was like, I need that.

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I'm not gonna roll out hundreds of thousands of sheets of dough. It's not gonna happen. So she did, she was like, "We actually have two." And I was, like, "Okay." So they had the things that I needed at least to get started. And then, she was so sweet, and she was going to the farmers'

market after in Forest Hill. She invited us. We went. And then Cobra Burger was doing this popup at the barber shop— I forgot the name of it 'cause I don't go there— but it was just really nice. We had a really fun time. And I remember we would talk to people; we would say, “Oh, we're thinking about moving here,” and everyone was like, “Oh, move here! You're gonna love it. I love living here.” We were like, wow. I don't think I've ever been anywhere that's been endorsed so well. If you ask people in New York, “Oh, I'm thinking about moving here,” I think people are, like, “Oh, God!” [Laughter]

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They're like, “Get ready to suffer.” So we were like, wow, people love it here! So we did some research, but I think we also just took a risk. And like I said, I think we had been married maybe a year and we moved January 2nd of 2020. We just loaded up the car, loaded up a van, and drove down here and, yeah, we took a chance.

Sarah Adams: So you took a chance and you arrived in January of 2020 and then, very shortly after you arrived, things changed in Richmond and in the world.

Mai Warshafsky: Yep. Two months, three months. Yeah, about three months after, the third week of March. Yeah.

Sarah Adams: What do you remember from that time, specifically, as a business owner and someone who sells a luxury product, but sells a dessert?

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Mai Warshafsky: Yeah. I definitely remember—I don't think I was scared until I woke up and there was nothing to do. Actually, I remember Jordan mentioning something to me about it 'cause she was going to New York to see a show, something fun, and I remember her saying that “there's this virus, though, and I don't know if I should cancel my trip,” something like that. And I was, like, “Don't worry about it. There's always something that we should be afraid of. Just go, have a good time” kind of thing. And then, not too long after, I think it became a bit more serious. It wasn't a false alarm. There was something serious actually happening.

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And I think it was the second week of March or maybe it was the third week of March and then I feel like Richmond, our shutdown was about two weeks later after that. But at that point also, remember I had come here, and it took me a little while to set the kitchen up and then I had to do the footwork here. I went to Stella's Grocery, I went to Blanchard's. I had researched the places I wanted to sell, and I had done the footwork and approached these people, which is something that I hadn't really had to do in a while because I had been pretty established in New York and I had my fifteen, twenty solid accounts. So I did that, and Stella's did pick me up prior to the pandemic. I think they might've been the first ones that did, and then Truckle Cheesemongers. I had maybe gotten my foot in the door with two or three accounts here, and then the pandemic hit, but what happened was that the majority of my business and income was still coming from New York.

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I was shipping to all of my coffee shops, all of my regular customers that I had been working with for four, six years. And I just remember that week, just getting emails from everybody just to hold standing orders, they're closing basically, and we'll see in two weeks. At that point they were saying two weeks, we'll see what happens. And then two weeks later no one had reopened, it got worse, and then we closed.

Sarah Adams: Hatch closed?

Mai Warshafsky: No, Hatch never closed. Richmond was starting to close. And yeah, I just remember waking up one morning— I don't think I'll ever forget this— and I was just in a daze. I had no purpose. I woke up, I had nothing to do. Normally when you wake up, you're like, oh, I gotta do this, I gotta feed the dog, and then I gotta go to the bakery, and then I gotta do this . . . You have your to-do list, and if you're busy it's, like, the second you wake up— at least for me, the second I wake up it's like the to-do list is there in my mind.

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And I just remember waking up and I just was, like, I had nothing to do. It was, like, no purpose. There was no reason to even get out of bed. And it was a bizarre feeling, 'cause I don't know if I've ever felt that way before, 'cause I've always been working on something. It was horrible. It was a horrible, horrible feeling.

Sarah Adams: Did you have any orders going out at this point?

Mai Warshafsky: I don't think so. Probably no, not at that point. I'm not really entirely sure. And then it got worse, definitely got worse, and I think at the point where I realized that the

wholesaling business in New York was not going to come back, and I was not established here.

This area was not going to support me.

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I literally wasn't sure what I was going to do, and it was tricky for us, too, because when you're self-employed you don't have the same requirements. I don't know. I also don't have a lot of experience—I never had to file for unemployment or things like that. When you work in restaurants, restaurants are always open, especially in New York. You're never short of work. You're never short of fast money. So it was really the first time that I was, like, I don't really know anyone here. I don't have a network here. And I can't get a restaurant gig 'cause all the restaurants are closed. I don't have business for my business, so I really was, like—I didn't know what to do. I was really, like, I don't have experience with any of this. And also for us, we had just moved here, so even for the unemployment we didn't have any tax records in Virginia yet. It was all in New York.

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And I think that's the first thing that they ask you, was to send something like that, and we couldn't do that 'cause we didn't have any income here 'cause we had been here three months. So I wasn't able to— or maybe I could've if I'd had help and someone else had understood the process better, but I didn't understand it. And I think out of frustration and probably anxiety and fear just from everything that was going on, I think I just was, like, I can't do this. My husband, luckily, was able to get the pandemic funding 'cause he was a chef. [Laughter] He wasn't gonna get a job either. All the restaurants were closed. So for me I was just, like, okay, I have to make

this work. This is the only way I know how to make money. I just have to try. I have to try to make money and try to make this work. And Hatch never closed.

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And so I think what I started was here with Kate from Kate Uncorked. I started asking the people who stayed to work if they could add my stuff on as a dessert option for their meal prep businesses, stuff like that, and people were kind enough to do that to help me out. And then I figured that would also help me just be a part of the community and get my product out there. And then, Donnie from Grisette— the restaurant closed, but he pivoted and was doing a market-type thing— and he took on my stuff for the market. And then Booth, from Barrel Thief, started ordering my cookies. He was my neighbor at the time. And these people, they helped. That really, really helped. And also, it's not so much even about money, it's like, it's the purpose. If you don't have purpose, it's really hard to remain upbeat and remain positive about what you're doing on this planet, at least for me.

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So of course it's financial, but I think, for me, there's that, too. And like I had said, some people work to live, I live to work. I like work. It's kind of my enjoyment, too. So I was lucky that that happened. And then, I was also really fortunate that I did an e-commerce business. Coming from New York, the majority of my business was wholesale, and e-commerce was kind of like the cherry on top. But people in the community, they really stuck up for us and supported small business. And people were doing posts saying, "Support small business, I like these people, buy from these people." People were doing that.

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From my past, people on Instagram, social media influencers, people with larger followings than me, the community really did come together. And I was able to survive and get through it through the smaller relationships I was developing, the newer ones I was developing here, and then, the e-commerce ones, which are national. And that's actually what kept me afloat for kind of the remainder of the year. But I was in a bad place, and I wasn't gonna last that much longer. 'Cause also they were nice enough here to— they were really kind about if you were late on rent. They weren't penalizing you.

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But my rent at my apartment— he raised our rent, actually, which is crazy, in August. [Laughter] But we were going to get kicked out. They weren't being nice about that. So I had to still pay two rents and I wasn't bringing in even half the amount of income that I was used to. So I remember in July, I really didn't have a lot of money left, and I asked them [Hatch] if I could take August off, and they were nice enough to not charge me rent here for August. Because August is generally my slowest month, and I was, like, I'm not gonna have enough for my apartment and this. And August is slow anyway, so let me just pocket that money and then come back in September and hope that in the fall things will be a little bit better and pick up, and I'll survive. But I really wasn't sure, and I really only had enough rent for one more month.

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So I was, like, if it doesn't get better, I'm really gonna go out of business. And then it was amazing what happened. [Laughter] *The Wall Street Journal* reached out to me. They wanted to

include me in the Holiday Gift Guide, Ten Best Food and Drink Gift Guides, and that was my lifeline and I got a lot of business from that, e-commerce business.

Sarah Adams: The Christmas of 2020?

Mai Warshafsky: Yeah, I guess it was. Yeah, 2020. I think the article came out in November. So I knew if I hung on it was gonna be okay. I just literally remember getting that email and the first thing that came to my mind was, I'm gonna be okay. Because I had been in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2017, and had also made out really well with it. And this time I had learned a lot from that experience and was better prepared for this. It was crazy 'cause I was still working alone. I didn't have anybody 'cause there wasn't business.

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So I remember being, like, I'm gonna be okay, but this is really gonna hurt. This is going to be painful. But I didn't have a choice. I was, like, you have to do this or you're gonna go out of business. In 2017 *The Wall Street Journal* I started clenching my jaw and I've actually never stopped because my phone just every five minutes was lighting up, like, a new order has arrived, a new order has arrived. When you have to deliver, when you take someone's money and then you have to deliver, for me I take that very seriously. So I know I have to, and I want to do it the best way possible. So yeah, so starting in November it was, like, November through December, even trickled into January.

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But definitely at the height of it, mid-November through December, all I did was eat, sleep, and work. My husband fed me, I worked, and then I slept, and that's all I did for six weeks. And it

was a lot. It was a lot of work. I remember at one point, I had had enough, and I think I threw a box and was like, I don't want to pack one more box of cookies. [Laughter] I had kinda hit my limit, and I remember telling my husband, I was like, "I can't do this anymore. I'm really kinda losing it a little bit. I don't want to do it. I just want it to be over." [Laughter] I just remember him going, "Not yet. It's not over yet." [Laughter] And I was, like, "You're right." I had to muscle through it. It was really hard. It was a lot of work, but I had to muscle through it. And the money always makes you feel better then.

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And coming from restaurants to, like, you work really hard, and you can hate your life for that evening, but then when you start counting that money, you're, like, okay, I feel better. [Laughter]

Sarah Adams: So then, going into 2021 on the other side of this publicity in *The Wall Street Journal* and this huge holiday push of business, things looked brighter in 2021?

Mai Warshafsky: No, I wouldn't say they looked brighter, but I will say two things that I do want to be clear about. I started Café Warshafsky with fifty-four dollars of my own money when I was a waitress. I've never had outside funding. This has always been self-funded through my hard work, working in restaurants and hospitality. I've also done all the creative. I've not paid for third parties to help me do the branding or anything. This has all come from me and my hard work and my experience. And second, I want to say that in 2020, I was gonna go out of business; I really thought I wasn't gonna make it through September, October. And then I wound up finishing 2020 doing the most in gross sales I've done.

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So, yeah, life is pretty amazing like that. You just really never know sometimes. And I think that's another thing that comes from New York, too, and I always tell this to myself: it only takes one. You can be at the bottom, and the next day, you're on the top. And I still believe it. Now it's a little bit harder, but I still do really believe that. It really only takes one.

Sarah Adams: And what does the business look like now?

Mai Warshafsky: Interesting. Going into 2021 was interesting because in the spring, people were getting vaccinated, stores started to open again. The only thing with that time, it was still kind of inconsistent because people were then closing.

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If someone got COVID and then they had had to close, so it wasn't consistent quite yet, but it was definitely getting better, and stores were definitely reopening, and I was getting some emails about wanting to order. But some people didn't want to put the minimum order in, and I said, that's okay. I understand. I was just happy to be speaking to people again. So 2021 was interesting because wholesale started coming back and my e-commerce was really strong, so e-commerce was stronger but then it became kinda equal. And now, actually, wholesale going into my 2022 wholesale has actually started— it's an uptick now again, so that's actually becoming majority again.

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But it was really interesting how the growth of ecommerce during the pandemic did make my business stronger once wholesale started coming back, too. So I do kinda like when they're about even. Because I think another thing I learned from the pandemic is, you shouldn't put all of your

eggs in one basket, like I did coming from New York when everything was wholesale, and then I lost that and then I had zero. So this is kind of a nice balance, and I do like the idea of being able to serve people just directly. I do like that. Like, I made the products, I know how I left it, and that's how I'm sending it to you, and that's how you're receiving it. Whereas when you work with retailers, you don't know what they're doing, where they're putting it sometimes. So I do actually really like both.

Sarah Adams: And you're still working out of Hatch?

Mai Warshafsky: I'm still working out of Hatch.

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I'm really thankful that they remained open during the entire time; it couldn't have been easy for anybody. Because, like I said, I didn't know what else to do. I didn't actually even really feel like I had a choice. And I was able to get a private room in April.

Sarah Adams: What's a private room?

Mai Warshafsky: So there's the main kitchen which is gigantic. I'm not good with square feet stuff, but it's very big and it has all the equipment that we share. And then there are these private suites. Mine is very small. It's the smallest one; I think it's 250 square feet. But I have privacy, I have more autonomy about my space, and I like now that I can just leave all my stuff in the room and lock the door when I leave. I don't have to be taking things out of my cart, setting up. That takes a lot of time and energy, actually.

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And then, when you leave, you have to clean everything up and put it away. It's nice when everything just has its place and it's there ready for you to work in the morning. You lock the door, you can go home, you can leave stuff, whatever. So that's been great. And also, it's the first time— 2022 is year eight of my business, and it's the first time I've had my own space that's all mine. First time. 'Cause in New York I was sharing space, you know, the kindness of Dean and Maya, and then sharing bakery space. And then coming to Hatch and sharing— it's a ghost kitchen. I'm sharing it with twenty other full-time businesses. And then finally getting my own space even though it's only 250 square feet was a very big deal for me, because when you do something for eight years . . . it did. I was, like, oh, gosh. Really, it took a very long time.

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And even after COVID and everything, it does feel like just a step up.

Sarah Adams: And how does Virginia feel after you've been here a little over two years now, so about twenty percent of the age of Café Warshafsky? How does it feel?

Mai Warshafsky: Um-hm. I like it. It's different. I will say that I really like the community aspects of Richmond. I feel like people are very inclusive, and they're willing to help you. Like I said, here when I didn't know what to do and people really extended kindness towards me and included me in their businesses, which was so nice, where I feel like in New York it's more cutthroat.

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There's a lot of competition. I think in New York, even if you are a good person, if a person approaches you, you see them more as competition than as— yeah, in that way. So I don't feel

that way here. I could be wrong. It could just be my experience. But I feel like people here don't have that attitude. And even good people have that attitude. So I've really appreciated that, and I like that. And I really like the size of the city. I like being in a smaller city. And I like the weather. It's not as cold, which is cool. [Laughter] And it's a beautiful city. It's clean. There's a lot of greenery.

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I love having a car. That's amazing. I'm not toting stuff on the subway anymore, all sweaty and ridiculous. [Laughter] I can't believe I did that. It's so crazy when I think about it in retrospect. Yeah, it's been really good. And it's been good for my business. Yeah, I'm happy here.

Sarah Adams: If someone had told you ten years ago that in ten years you would be running a successful bakery business out of a small southern city . . .

Mai Warshafsky: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not. No. You can blame my husband for that. Well, he was a big part of it. If we had never met, I would not have ever left New York, no. But I'm glad that I did. Yeah, never would've thought. Yep. Definitely kind of a shocker. I think I shocked the world with this one. [Laughter]

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But that's cool.

Sarah Adams: Thank you so much for sharing all of this, Mai. I guess my last question would be whether there's anything you'd like to add? You've told us such a fascinating and personal story

about the transition from being a New Yorker, front of house, to, again, a southern-based business owner and baker. Any last words?

Mai Warshafsky: Last words, hmm. I definitely think I'm gonna be here for a while. I guess those are good last words.

Sarah Adams: Great. Thank you so much.

[End]