



Lara and Robert Swan
Great Bagel - Lexington, KY

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0:00:00

Rosie Moosnick: And I am Rosie Moosnick. It's August 23rd on 2023, and we are at Lara and Robert's house on Briarcliff. I won't give your exact–

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: –address in Lexington, Kentucky. You all want to just say your name?

Lara Swan: Oh, I'm gonna correct you on my name pronunciation [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, please.

Lara Swan: It's just Lara.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, mm-hmm.

Lara Swan: It just kind of sounds like a D, but it's an R. So I'm Lara Swan, and my birthday [laughter] is 5/22/79.

Sarah Jane Webb: And here with Sarah Jane Webb.

Robert Swan: I'm Robert Swan, and I was born in 2/7/73.

Rosie Moosnick: Nice. Yuckitz.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: What?

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: So–

Lara Swan: Haven't heard that in a while.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: –you all wanna start by just telling us where Great Bagel came from?

0:01:00

Sarah Jane Webb: How was it born?

Lara Swan: Take it away, Mr. Swan.

Robert Swan: Where the Great Bagel came from? We moved here into Lexington 14 years ago-ish.

Lara Swan: I have no idea [laughter].

Robert Swan: Yeah, it was 13–

Lara Swan: It was a long time ago.

Robert Swan: –yeah, 13 years ago, right about 13 years ago. And we had the idea to start a new restaurant, and we had a couple of different ideas, and we were kind of going back and forth.

And then one day, we were like, hey, there's no bagel shops in Lexington at all. I wonder why that is. And then I just started doing research, and it was like, oh, there was three at one point, they all closed, and yada, yada. It was like, all right, well let's do that 'cause who doesn't like a good bagel shop? But we wanted to put our own kind of gist on it. We wanted it to be like clean food, like organic, you know, everything made from scratch kind of thing. And that's kind of how the project started.

0:02:00

Sarah Jane Webb: And do you have a history in restaurants or like how did–

Robert Swan: Yeah, I did–

Sarah Jane Webb: –how did you–?

Robert Swan: I have worked in restaurants for years. I went to culinary arts–

Sarah Jane Webb: You did? Okay.

Robert Swan: –yeah, high school culinary arts, and worked in restaurants for years. And I got out of it, and got into, you know, computer science in college and that kind of thing. And then we just happened to have the idea, we want to get back into restaurants.

Sarah Jane Webb: Did you have a background in any restaurant work?

Lara Swan: No, I had never worked in a restaurant until we opened the doors to our restaurant.

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Lara Swan: Yeah [laughter]. But, I mean, the culture that I come from is very like hospitality-based, so I felt like I could do a good job front of house.

Robert Swan: You had to.

Lara Swan: And–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: You didn't have a choice.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: We were opening a restaurant.

Lara Swan: And we're both insane, so we made it work.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

0:02:58

Lara Swan: But I think that, I don't know, I think that where I am– my weaknesses are his strengths, and vice versa. So it worked out. It worked out well.

Sarah Jane Webb: What are your strengths and weaknesses?

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: He has a really great mind for operations and systems, and I feel like I come up with really great ideas [laughter] all the time.

Sarah Jane Webb: And then you make them work?

Lara Swan: Yes, correct.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, that's great.

Lara Swan: Well, first he'll say no, and then I'll keep talking about it.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: I'll keep poking at him, and then he'll make it work.

Robert Swan: Sometimes.

Lara Swan: And, yeah, sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. But as an entrepreneur, those are the risks that you take, and you just have to keep going.

Robert Swan: Yeah, I think originally, it was all me, and I just kind of pulled her in to help–

Sarah Jane Webb: To help, yeah.

Robert Swan: –out on everything. So I sourced everything, and built everything, and made all the recipes, and put everything together.

0:03:57

And Lara helped a lot with, you know, "Hey, how should we look or what should we have?" And then it's kind of morphed over the years to a little bit more of her ideas, and her going, "We should do this," and me going, "I dunno if we can do that."

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: "I don't know if we should do that."

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: How did your y'all's backgrounds– you talked about having a Jordanian background, and you're from Dorchester. I'm assuming you came from a Catholic–?

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: Safe assumption, yeah.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: A safe assumption, I grew up very Catholic. I don't know. I don't think for me it did; for me it was food. It was just I loved food and always was into food and always, you know, was passionate about it being good. And so starting my own thing where I knew– and it seemed like Lexington was ready for that sort of independent restaurant culture 'cause at the time there wasn't a lot of independent restaurants going on.

0:05:02

Sarah Jane Webb: How did you guys get to Lexington?

Lara Swan: My sister was living here, consulting at UK, and we were on this like [laughter] a couple month-long– we quit our jobs, and we were like, forget it. We don't wanna live in Chicago anymore. That's where we were. And we just were like driving around the country, trying to find– I don't know, having fun, and trying to find somewhere new that we wanted to live.

Robert Swan: To settle, yeah.

Lara Swan: Yeah. And she was here, and we came to visit her, and I discovered I was pregnant [laughter].

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Lara Swan: Yes. So this is where we stayed [laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Lara Swan: And it's been–

Robert Swan: Plus it was good. Like I said–

Lara Swan: It's been– you know.

Robert Swan: –just coming here and visiting, we're like, oh, this would be a good town to start a new restaurant.

Sarah Jane Webb: Start something.

Robert Swan: Yeah. It was affordable. It was ready, like, just the culture and the city and the people.

Lara Swan: It was ready.

0:05:59

Like, they were putting so much money into planning in and around UK. And there was nothing here that could offer food the way we liked to eat it. There was no, like, clean-label restaurants, and, I mean, a very small handful of people who were doing that stuff. So we did it.

Robert Swan: And it worked.

Sarah Jane Webb: And it worked.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Yeah. But I think that the timing of it was really significant, and we were just– I don't know. Looking back, I just think– I don't know that I would do it again [laughter] if I–

Robert Swan: Yeah, 'cause we're older. We're not that insane anymore.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Yeah. It's funny how, like, when you're younger, you're just like, yeah–

Sarah Jane Webb: You can do it.

Lara Swan: –fuck it, let's do it. I had a one-year-old too.

Sarah Jane Webb: I was gonna ask, so you were pregnant when you were opening this, but you already gave birth at this point?

Lara Swan: We had already given birth, we.

Robert Swan: Once—

Lara Swan: I had already [laughter]—

Robert Swan: Once we opened—

Sarah Jane Webb: You did that job.

0:07:00

Lara Swan: I did the job.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: When we opened, Tad was a year old.

Lara Swan: Tad was—

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, okay.

Lara Swan: He had just turned a year old when we opened.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh wow.

Lara Swan: I know.

Sarah Jane Webb: How did you do that?

Lara Swan: I don't remember a lot of it. It's a blur. I do remember [laughter] putting Tad to bed, and Robert going to bed at the same time—

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: –'cause he had to get up and bake the next morning. So they would go to bed, and then I would run the errands once they were in bed. Like, I don't know, back then, we used to buy stuff from Target for the shop, like pitchers and frickin timers and stuff for– I don't know. I don't know. It was such a blur. It was such a blur, but it worked. It's working. And then some years later, we decided to start making our own flour. And that's been a really interesting, cool, hard project.

0:08:00

Sarah Jane Webb: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: It seems like an alignment with the idea of the clean eating and the sourcing.

Lara Swan: Yeah. So we, as we've discussed, we always sort of were looking for– and, as Robert's mentioned, his standards around food, both of our standards [laughter] around food but him in particular, like, his approach is just he doesn't bend when it comes to quality. So like the more– and he's a true chef in that regard, and a true baker in that regard. And I think that he can take these raw ingredients, which I think is the test. I think that's how you can know if you're a good baker is if you can– it's not just about following a recipe or it's not about taking an ingredient that's been manipulated so much that it's easy to work with. You know what I mean?

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Baking and food, at the end of the day, is agricultural. And you have to take that ingredient and make something delicious out of it. And if you can do that, I just feel like there's so much talent there that I envy. So, anyway, we started learning about flour. Flour was the thing that was– it was in our blind spot. And we thought we were buying good flour. We thought we were buying organic flour from a small mill and in–

Robert Swan: Not necessarily small.

Lara Swan: Yeah, maybe they weren't small.

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: Well, we had bounced around, because their pricing– I don't even remember what it was called now. Dakota something?

Robert Swan: Dakota Prairie.

Lara Swan: Dakota Prairie, that's it.

Robert Swan: There was a bunch of places that we were sourcing flour from. They would get bought up and–

Lara Swan: Yeah, so that was the process.

Robert Swan: –then we couldn't buy flour from them anymore–

Sarah Jane Webb: Then you couldn't buy– yeah.

Robert Swan: –and we had to find someone else. We bounced around to four or five different places.

Rosie Moosnick: Why couldn't you buy from them anymore?

Robert Swan: 'Cause they got bought out by Conagra, and Conagra wanted to use them for their bigger projects.

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Rosie Moosnick: I see, right. Well, they wouldn't source to small?

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: They wouldn't, and then also the pricing became really like–

Robert Swan: Yeah, a couple times, we got priced out.

Rosie Moosnick: Prohibitive?

Lara Swan: Prohibitive, yeah. We had started, when we first opened, we started buying that flour at like \$19 for a 50-pound bag or something like that.

Robert Swan: Yeah, around 50 cents pound.

Lara Swan: Yeah, and by the time we switched, it was almost at \$50 a bag for a 50-pound bag. So we buy pallets at a time. This is [laughter]–

Robert Swan: You have to pay to get it shipped. Yeah. Well, we end up– we were over \$1 a pound at the end.

Lara Swan: Yeah, and at that point, we were very hesitant to do anything with pricing. You know what I mean?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah.

Lara Swan: A small mom and pop. Like we– that was such a stressful time.

Sarah Jane Webb: How far in, once you've opened the business, are you now, or this, like, now the pricing has increased?

Robert Swan: Six years.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, wow, okay.

Robert Swan: Yeah, six years.

0:10:59

Lara Swan: Yeah. But at that point, the pricing had become a real issue, and then we started looking for other providers, not just because of the pricing but also because of the availability of it.

Robert Swan: Other providers?

Lara Swan: Vendors, sorry, flour vendors.

Robert Swan: Yeah. But we did change. We kept changing.

Lara Swan: Yeah, we kept changing.

Robert Swan: Find some, a mill or someone that could sell it, and then we'd just get priced out and get priced out, and it's like, ah, man.

Sarah Jane Webb: With the exception of being priced out, did you notice a big difference in the flour that you were using from this one?

Robert Swan: Oh, from one vendor to another? Absolutely. It would change everything, and you'd have to back up and fix or figure out how to make it work with that flour. Even from one farm to another, or one vendor to another, one flour to another, you had differences that are pretty

remarkable as far as like gluten content and water content and stuff like that you just have to deal with.

0:12:00

Lara Swan: Right. So we took all that information like over the years. It just feels so stupid talking about it now, 'cause it's like why the hell didn't we think about this from the jump? This is our main ingredient.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Yeah, like, let's stop–

Sarah Jane Webb: The foundation of your–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: –getting involved with all these people.

Sarah Jane Webb: –entire business.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Stop buying flour from resellers, or flour from other people. Why don't we just–?

Lara Swan: Commercial mills or just–?

Robert Swan: Yeah, why don't we just mill our own flour? Buy a mill, and mill our own flour?

Lara Swan: So it just became something that we were no longer okay purchasing from like a veiled place. Like, yeah, let's pull the veil back. Let's figure out where this stuff actually comes from, and what they're doing to it before it comes through our doors and we get our hands on it.

Robert Swan: Yeah, 'cause even organic flour is irradiated before you mill it–

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, woah.

Robert Swan: You know what?

Lara Swan: Yeah. So you just start learning like all of the things that these commercial–

Robert Swan: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: –the commercial processes around flour and wheat production and this commodity.

0:13:03

You just start learning about all the shit that they do to it. And we just couldn't look away.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, once you know–

Lara Swan: Once you know–

Robert Swan: Once we knew, yeah–

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Once you know, you can't unknow. So we moved forward, and discovered, frankly, that a lot of other small bakeries were doing the same thing.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, interesting.

Lara Swan: Yeah. Our buddy Andrew, who made the mill, is in Vermont. He and his wife Blair had their own bakery, and they went through the same process.

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Lara Swan: Yeah. So–

Robert Swan: But they went to like a whole nother end. He was like, "We're just going to start making my own mill 'cause nobody makes stone mills anymore."

Lara Swan: Yeah. He didn't wanna buy a mill from Germany or overseas, and he didn't wanna buy a composite mill. He didn't wanna buy a vertical mill. Like, he wanted the kind of grain mill that used to be in every town throughout the East Coast, throughout the country.

0:14:02

And that didn't exist anymore.

Sarah Jane Webb: Which is stone? Which is the stone mill?

Lara Swan: Yeah, stone mill. So he started making 'em, and then he started using it, and then they started making–

Robert Swan: Mills for other people, and then now he's made 200 mills.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Lara Swan: Yeah, he's made 200 mills. He was just here.

Robert Swan: Our mill is number 60.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: How did you all connect?

Lara Swan: So we used to live in Boston, and we have these friends up there that started their own bagel company, I guess, but retail bagels, so–

Robert Swan: Way, way after us though. This was–

Lara Swan: Yeah, way, way after us. They started this business called One Mighty Mill.

Sarah Jane Webb: One?

Lara Swan: Mighty Mill.

Sarah Jane Webb: Mighty Mill, okay.

Robert Swan: One Mighty Mill, yeah.

Lara Swan: And they went through the same process, like, the why hadn't bread and flour gone through the same farm-to-table evolution as other ingredients. And so we just reconnected with them.

0:15:01

I thought, initially, I was like, "Hey, can we buy flour from you?" 'Cause we're always like on the hunt, right, like chasing flavor. And they gave us a price [laughter], and it was–

Robert Swan: It wasn't even that. We didn't even get to that point.

Lara Swan: It was insane.

Robert Swan: We just kind of–

Lara Swan: Yeah, and then we went–

Robert Swan: –met with them, and talked with them, and went down there and looked at what they were doing. And we were like–

Lara Swan: Well, no, first, Tony came here.

Robert Swan: At first, we were like, oh, maybe we can–

Lara Swan: First, Tony came here.

Robert Swan: Yeah, they came here to learn how to make bagels from us.

Lara Swan: Correct. I gotcha.

Robert Swan: And then we went there to figure out– because we were like, "Oh, you're milling your own flour?" And we were like, "How are you doing that?"

Lara Swan: What does that mean?

Robert Swan: And then we went there, and we were like–

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, what does that mean?

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: –why don't we just do that? And then it was kind of like it all just kinda intertwined together.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, interesting.

Lara Swan: Yeah, it was cool. It was a cool process of discovery. And then we committed to this sort of like regional, local revitalization of food systems, and that meant for us buying the mill from Andrew, who is in Vermont, who makes it here.

0:16:02

There's no other mill builders here.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Lara Swan: And connecting with–

Robert Swan: There are other mill builders, but they're different. They build different types of mills, so you can–

Sarah Jane Webb: Like you were talking?

Lara Swan: vertical, composite mills, yeah.

Robert Swan: Yeah. There's a mill builder in South Carolina, necessarily, but they don't build– it's not a stone mill. It's a vertical building.

Lara Swan: How long has that guy been in business? I don't remember.

Robert Swan: Yeah, he's been around a long time.

Lara Swan: I don't remember learning about any other mill builders.

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: Anyway. Okay. Well, there were very few at the time.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: It sounds like you all put a lot of research into it.

Lara Swan: Yeah, we did.

Robert Swan: Oh yeah.

Lara Swan: Well, 'cause this is like a foundational change, you know?

Sarah Jane Webb: Well, it's what your business was built on too is this concept, which–

Lara Swan: Yes, and we were committing to it, and we were doubling down. So we partnered with some regional organic generational farmers, and committed to buying a certain amount of grain from them.

0:17:00

And that's kind of where we are now.

Robert Swan: Yeah. They committed to planting a specific type of wheat that we wanted. And so all that stuff kind of worked its way in as we moved along. We got involved in the grain industry and the grain conferences outta UK that happened right outta here.

Sarah Jane Webb: How did you find the specific grain that you wanted?

Robert Swan: Well, it was– we had some bars that we needed to set, so it needed to be an organic grain. It needed to be a grain that wasn't messed with. What do they call that? An ancient grain, it had to be an ancient grain. And it needed to be a high-gluten grain, so it had to be a hard red spring wheat. And so we found a couple of farms that would be willing to grow it for us, source it for us, and that's where it started.

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Lara Swan: We worked with the farms. They would send us samples. And at the time, we just had a little like tabletop mill that we were messing with. So we tested a bunch of single-lot, single-varietal grains, and that's how we figured out what we were going to use.

Rosie Moosnick: So your mill is in the kitchen though, or is it in the restaurant?

Robert Swan: It's in the restaurant.

Rosie Moosnick: I'm so naïve, I don't know–

Lara Swan: Here, I'll show you some pictures.

Rosie Moosnick: –yeah, the stones there.

Robert Swan: Well, I was there. It was down the other day, and we had to replace the shaft, the main shaft that drives the mill, 'cause it had rotted because we got some wet grain. But that's with it apart. So they're 40 inches. It's a 40-inch stone mill. So you can see that there's two granite stones. That's the bottom one, and that's the top one.

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Lara Swan: You have some pictures of it apart.

Robert Swan: Just of... This is what we were working on it the other day.

Rosie Moosnick: It looks heavy.

Robert Swan: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Each stone is 700 to 800 pounds.

Sarah Jane Webb: Wow.

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: Cool.

Robert Swan: It's pretty intense to take it apart.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, I bet.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: This was them fixing it 'cause the stones themselves, see the etching on the stones, those have to get redressed as a form of maintenance, and this was –

Robert Swan: Yeah, because after running on top of each other, they flatten out.

Lara Swan: This was during COVID. That's them moving them back together. That's Andrew the mill builder there.

Sarah Jane Webb: So he came down to –

Robert Swan: Yeah, he was here last week.

Lara Swan: And Andrew's so great. He doesn't charge for his time.

Robert Swan: He'll charge for –

Sarah Jane Webb: Like travel?

Robert Swan: You pay for his travel, and his hotel, and any parts that you need.

Lara Swan: But he's just like, you know, I feel like all the people who like participate in these passion projects, we just have to keep it going, you know?

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He's not gonna charge for his time because that would be – you know.

Sarah Jane Webb: That'd be stressful for perhaps your business?

Lara Swan: Correct. Because he was here for two days, and he didn't know what he was walking into. You know what I mean? Like, you don't know what the job's gonna entail.

Robert Swan: But I think he feels like a responsibility because he built the mill.

Lara Swan: 'Cause it's his.

Robert Swan: It's his mill and, you know–

Lara Swan: It's his design.

Robert Swan: – two years in, we're doing all this stuff that, you know, he feels like it should have worked longer than that because it is. It's all new design, it's all new engineering.

Lara Swan: I don't know. I just think it's cool.

Sarah Jane Webb: It's incredible.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: It's so cool. How often do you happen to mill the grains?

Robert Swan: Every day.

Sarah Jane Webb: So every day, so what you're gonna use for that day is milled right there and then?

Robert Swan: It's milled the day before, typically, a day or two before. But we have to keep a par because people also buy flour from us, and they don't know when that's gonna happen.

0:20:56

So we have, like, we mill every day, but we're not using the– sometimes when we use the flour, we mill that day, but not very often. It's usually the day before but it's used the next day.

Sarah Jane Webb: Has any larger restaurant purchased flour just specifically because of what you're doing?

Lara Swan: Yeah, there's this – well, the company in umm Frankfurt –

Sarah Jane Webb: Locals?

Lara Swan: No. Yeah, Locals.

Sarah Jane Webb: They actually are using the–?

Lara Swan: They use our flour, yeah.

Robert Swan: Since day one, they've used our flour in their pizza.

Lara Swan: I love him, he's been a great partner.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's great.

Lara Swan: He's been a great friend. He's great. Again, like, walks the walk, and like very proud of his mission and–

Sarah Jane Webb: Very focused.

Lara Swan: –very focused.

Robert Swan: It's not 100% it's like; probably 25% of their flour that they use in their –

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah.

Robert Swan: I don't know exactly. It's not the majority, but they do use it in their pizza dough.

Lara Swan: But he reached out to us, and he was, like, it was – 'cause he was so educated. He was not ignorant at all when it came to – like, he had done his homework.

0:22:00

He's very, very driven, and almost has this like compulsion to produce this business that's all local stuff. It's very cool.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, it's very cool.

Robert Swan: They buy bagels from us, and they put 'em in their freezers and stuff, and sell them in their stores.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, I've seen it in there.

Robert Swan: Same with the flour.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's kind of nice.

Rosie Moosnick: What about a larger community in Lexington and Kentucky was interested in this?

Lara Swan: So when we first opened our second location, we had done a lot of the legwork to share the story. It's really hard to get people to the point where they understand why it's a better choice. That story's been a challenge to tell within the setting of a restaurant. You don't really have a captive audience in that regard.

0:22:58

People kind of just like want to order what they want, and like it and – you know.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's the end.

Lara Swan: And it's the same sort of thing with local like hospitality folks. Like they're all working within a budget, and they're all working within a timeframe, and they're all working within their own parameters. And, like, here we come [laughter]. But when we had opened our

second one, which is where the mill is housed, we gave out so many samples. We had people come touring. We did a lot of stuff, and it was amazing. It was amazing. I would be getting texts from chefs that we gave flour to like just gushing about how it's bringing back memories from them, and the smell and the flavor, and then this and then that. It was like they were – they had experienced the same thing that we had when we discovered what fresh flour is, what it can do. And then COVID hit.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: A year in [whistles].

0:24:00

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, it was a year?

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Robert Swan: Not even, huh?

Lara Swan: And we were doing this. We had part...we were working with Elmwood to provide organic fresh flour baked goods to Montessori schools they were working with.

Robert Swan: They'd started a program that –

Lara Swan: They had started a program.

Sarah Jane Webb: Elmwood started this program? Okay.

Lara Swan: Elmwood and Jonathan – I can't remember his last name.

Robert Swan: Yeah, that was a –

Lara Swan: But he was working with them because they have organic produce and protein. So like we were all doing this really cool stuff, and all the chefs around town were really like mesmerized by the flavors that this flour can – because what happens when you fresh mill flour is the temperature that these millstones stay at, and then the speed at which they mill, and the fact that they're stone produce a completely different final product than a roller mill flour.

0:25:01

Robert Swan: So then also we sift our flour, but we don't sift it anywhere near– we don't sift out as much, and we don't sift as finely as commercial mills do. So the product, even sifted, has more nutrients and um –

Lara Swan: Fat and flavor.

Robert Swan: –flavors in it; not just flavor, but it's just, you know, they remove– the reason commercial flour is the way it is is that they bleach everything. They bromate everything. They remove all the nutrients and all the things that are actually good for you, like wheat bran and wheat germ, and then they replace some of it back with commercial vitamins. That's why you see like vitamin A and D added back, because they took it all out. They killed it, and then took it all out. And so we don't do any of that stuff, so our flour has a lot more nutrients.

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It has a lot more flavor. It holds more water. It does all this stuff that the commercial flour doesn't do anymore. And we don't add anything back in anymore. We don't mess with it at all. We don't irradiate it. We don't bromate it. We don't [laughter] you know – have to add any nutrients back in because they're all still in there with the flour.

Sarah Jane Webb: And, correct me if I'm wrong, isn't that what allows most human bodies to actually digest it easier, because it's more whole?

Robert Swan: Yep, it's why people are having so many problems with gluten these days, because we take all that stuff out of the flour.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's what I thought.

Lara Swan: Yeah, the component part– so the wheatberry is composed of three parts, and our milling and sifting process maintains the integrity of the grain. So that's what we're using. What happens in a commercial process is just they beat it within an inch of its life, kill it, and then, like Robert said, think that adding back these nutrients according to some bullshit FDA thing that happened 60 years ago or whenever it was, they think that replaces the original integrity of the grain.

0:27:10

And it absolutely does not [laughter], under no circumstances. So all it does, frankly, is allow the product to sit on a grocery store shelf indefinitely. It is an agricultural product. It would be like expecting tomatoes to sit on a grocery store shelf indefinitely.

Robert Swan: Well, they can if they can them and boil them.

Lara Swan: Yeah, right.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter] Remove this–

Robert Swan: Remove this–

Sarah Jane Webb: –and add that [laughter].

Robert Swan: –take that out, and add a little bit of this back, put some acid in it.

Lara Swan: Stone-milled wheat, fresh flour wheat has a shelf life. That's why you can't just stick it in your pantry, and call on it whenever you need it, five years later.

Sarah Jane Webb: Does anything happen if you freeze it?

Lara Swan: That's actually the preferred way to store it. It stretches the life of it.

0:28:00

Sarah Jane Webb: So how long typically does it sit on the shelf and then in the freezer?

Robert Swan: Bagels have a very short shelf life. You can make a bread that'll last longer.

Lara Swan: Are we talking about bagels?

Robert Swan: Are we talking about bagels specific...?

Sarah Jane Webb: I was specifically talking about flour. Like, if–

Robert Swan: Oh, the flour shelf life?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah.

Robert Swan: Flour, it–

Lara Swan: Fresh flour or commercial flour?

Sarah Jane Webb: No, your flour.

Robert Swan: About nine months to a year.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh wow.

Robert Swan: Yeah. You can sit it in a bag. And I've got some in there that we sit on. It doesn't go bad quickly. But also, you know, flour is– I think, you know, I often wonder why they– you know, you try to figure out why they do that stuff to it. And then you're like, I guess they just can make flour and just stick it in a warehouse for a couple of years and not worry about it.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's why it's done, right?

Robert Swan: I would assume that like–

Sarah Jane Webb: The longevity of the– yeah.

0:28:58

Robert Swan: Plus, I also think flour, that there's some level of– they want it all to look the same. They want it to be white. They don't want it to be brown or gray or red or any of those colors. Everybody thinks flour should be bright white. And then when you make your bread, it should be bright white.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: No, it should not. That's not good for anybody. But people got used to that, and now that's just what 90% of the population–

Rosie Moosnick: The expectation.

Lara Swan: They do. When we first switched over [laughter], we were genuinely underprepared for this. I felt very unprepared for this. Like, people, some people shredded us, absolutely shredded us for–

Sarah Jane Webb: You mean online?

Lara Swan: Yeah, for making the change. And they would say, "The bagels taste like wheat now." [Laughter]

Robert Swan: Yeah, that is a funny one, yeah. Bread tastes like–

Lara Swan: God forbid. "They're brown. They make 'em with some like weird brown thing now. The bagels are brown."

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: Like, oh my God. I was not expecting this. There was some tap dancing we had to do there.

0:29:59

But they just– people's understanding–

Robert Swan: But we stuck with it.

Lara Swan: –of this ingredient, much like ours was before we really dug in– and we're in the industry. You know what I mean? It's been an interesting process sharing why we did what we did with people.

Rosie Moosnick: Are you all an anomaly in the bagel world?

Lara Swan: Aside from our friends in New England, the One Mighty Mill folks, I don't know anyone else making their own flour, and making bagels with it. There's a couple of people in– there is actually, no, there's one bagel shop in California– Petaluma, I think.

Robert Swan: We don't know, yeah. People go back and forth.

Lara Swan: And then we've had a few people, who were curious about maybe doing it themselves, come and check out our operations.

Sarah Jane Webb: Interesting.

Lara Swan: But yeah [laughter].

0:30:59

Sarah Jane Webb: So with that same drive and focus and dedication to sourcing the best quality, where do you see that in other parts of your business, other ingredients that you use?

Robert Swan: Yeah, I think that we don't use– so we make all of our own sauces and dressings. And anything that we're gonna do like that, we're gonna do that from scratch, or if we can find a product that we know is the right quality or has the right flavor. But all of our meats and cheeses, we only use Boar's Head clean level stuff, so we know we're not putting any– we're not buying anything that's filled with potassiums and nitrates and all that stuff. And then the eggs, all the eggs that we– most of the eggs that we buy, we're buying from a local– it's local to our vendor, but it's not necessarily local.

0:32:01

So it's probably within a few hundred miles. So we kind of just keep it all–

Lara Swan: That part of it's not ideal. We're constantly trying to figure out– it's a little bit of a blessing and a curse in terms of the volume that we do. We are super busy, so in order to keep the–

Robert Swan: it's hard to find someone that can give us the amount of eggs that we need.

Lara Swan: Yes, I've reached out several times too, and a lot of 'em just won't even call me back.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: They're like, "Too many." [Laughter]

Lara Swan: They know, yeah. And also we're trying to maintain a certain price point, especially now when people are, I've found, really hyper-aware about what they're paying for post-COVID, pre-recession, like, whatever this weirdness is. We can't be charging \$25 for a sandwich [laughter].

0:33:00

Robert Swan: Yeah, and it was a little static so we can't–

Rosie Moosnick: [Sneezes] Excuse me.

Robert Swan: We have to be able to source romaine lettuce all year long, or plum tomatoes all year long. So you can't always buy local, and you can't always get everything all the time. But we try.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: We do try. It's challenging.

Sarah Jane Webb: It seems like that's a hardship that many restaurants or companies in general face is that the quantity that they need just can't be met by the local agriculture.

Lara Swan: No.

Robert Swan: No. I mean, you can start a small restaurant, and deal with only local stuff, and make only local food, but then your menu's gonna change all year, which is understandable.

That's not really something we can do.

0:34:01

Lara Swan: 'Cause those are the challenges that we face in this landscape where people want what they want all year round. You can't get strawberries in February unless you freeze them or–

Robert Swan: Or buy 'em from Mexico [laughter].

Lara Swan: Yeah, or buy them from halfway across the world. So we have to pick our battles, and this is one of them, one of the ones that we feel like we can tell a story around, and provide value around in exchange for their money.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: In fact, with that, the bread is, you know, you can grow wheat. And our farmer that we partnered with, they grow 300 acres of wheat for us, and they put it in a grain mill

[laughter], it sits–

Lara Swan: Dry it–

Robert Swan: –and they dry it, and then they ship us grain.

Lara Swan: –the whole process–

0:34:57

Robert Swan: Every 10 days, we get 22,000 pounds of grain, and we mill it, and make flour out of it. But that's at least– we don't have anybody in between. At least we know who's growing it, and where it was grown, and the grain that was grown.

Lara Swan: And what they did to it before it arrived at our doorstep.

Robert Swan: They didn't do anything. They grew it, they harvested it, and they put it in a grain elevator. That's it. And then they–

Rosie Moosnick: How did you choose those? They're in Illinois? Is that–?

Robert Swan: We have one partner in Illinois and one in Minnesota.

Rosie Moosnick: How did you choose those grain farmers?

Robert Swan: I mean–

Lara Swan: Well we were looking–

Robert Swan: –there aren't a lot [laughter].

Lara Swan: –in this certain radius, and–

Robert Swan: But there also aren't a lot of people that can grow organic grain at that amount and that type of grain. So that basically whittled it down to–

Rosie Moosnick: So you're limited?

Lara Swan: Yeah–

Robert Swan: –not just a few.

Lara Swan: –we were.

Robert Swan: And they were very happy to work with us. They were like, "Yeah, we'll do that for you. What do you want us to grow? Let's go."

Lara Swan: They were, but there were several farmers who heard the word "organic" and were just pissed.

Sarah Jane Webb: No way.

0:35:59

Lara Swan: Yeah, that's a dirty word for a lot of farmers, because it means [laughter] something different to them in terms of their own management level.

Robert Swan: But when we found– we did, we found an organic farmer that had been there for generations, and that's what they do, and they grow different things. They grow soybeans and rye and wheat and a lot of different stuff, and they only do organic. They'll only do organic. It's like, great–

Lara Swan: And that was really important to us.

Robert Swan: –you are the people we want to be–

Lara Swan: And she also said that all of her neighboring farmers are also organic, which I guess they huddle together because, technically speaking, if you have a neighbor who's using pesticides in it, it wafts into –

Robert Swan: Yeah, Monsanto. Monsanto will come after you –

Lara Swan: And then you're no longer organic –

Lara Swan: Yeah, so – All that was important, if they not only are organic but they have been organic for generations, and that makes a huge difference in terms of the quality of the soil and in terms of your ingredients.

0:37:03

Sarah Jane Webb: Could you share, both of you, if any, stories that kind of built this drive and focus that seems like it leads you from childhood?

Lara Swan: Yeah. I was an environmental science major, and I also majored in philosophy [laughter].

Sarah Jane Webb: Sweet.

Lara Swan: So I feel like I've always had a very strong pull to advocate for the environment. And then we had kids. And we live in a society where information, you're being bombarded with it 24/7.

0:37:59

And so I just feel like that was the perfect storm of like, yeah, we started this restaurant, and maybe there was other things I could have done to make more of an impact in terms of my belief system. But we had a restaurant, we have a restaurant, and we can do something about it now. And the things that we're doing are linked to bigger picture things like revitalizing food systems where you live. We have a mill, and we've taught people how to use it. So whether they stay with us or go somewhere else, they now know how to run a mill. Those skills don't exist anymore, and who knows if that's something anyone's gonna give a shit about ever. But [laughter] I feel like that sort of stuff is retelling important stories that connect you to your food–

Sarah Jane Webb: Right, it stays with you.

0:38:57

Lara Swan: –and connect you to the people that you work with to create this food. I feel like that's all really important, and we're so detached now from where all of our food comes from, and how it's made even. So, I mean, I look at it as a way to be an environmentalist.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's cool. How about you?

Robert Swan: Tell me the question again just 'cause–

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: Is there at any point, the younger version of you, maybe even back through childhood, was there any like memories or something that was very impactful that has happened to you that helped with this drive, with this like relentless need for high quality? Where did that come from?

Robert Swan: I don't know. I couldn't say that it's anywhere specific.

0:39:57

Going through culinary arts when I was younger, it was just one day, you were like, oh, wait a minute, we want to eat food that tastes good. And I always wanted to eat food that tastes good. And I always was aware of where the food came from and how it was made, because I went through culinary arts in high school, and it was just like, early on, it was like, oh yeah, I'm not gonna eat fast food ever again. Sorry. It's just not made that well. And I think that just I always was aware of how food was made, and who was making it, and what they were doing.

Lara Swan: But why did you pick culinary arts in the first place?

Robert Swan: I don't know. I mean, I think I liked cooking with my mom, and then my friends and my brothers would cook. I would cook with them, and would be– I was just aware of it really young.

Lara Swan: Do you think the fact that you and your family didn't have a lot, you had some things you were pulled towards?

0:41:02

Robert Swan: Yeah, I don't know how that worked. I wasn't wealthy at all, and making something outta nothing. But also I became aware, you know, where we're just not gonna waste anything. Let's not waste anything. Let's be efficient. Let's–

Lara Swan: Robert is [laughter]– he's someone who really hates to waste things–

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, me too.

Lara Swan: –and we're not just talking about food. He's got stuff in his wood shop in the basement where, like, he's been sitting on it for a decade. But then he'll use it like, "I got just the thing."

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: And he'll disappear into the basement.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Yeah, I got the thing down there.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: I've been sitting on this, waiting.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: That's cute.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: He'll disappear into the basement, come back up, fix the thing, then that's it.

Sarah Jane Webb: Carry on.

Lara Swan: Carry on.

Sarah Jane Webb: I love that.

Lara Swan: Yeah, I do too.

Sarah Jane Webb: Who taught you that?

Lara Swan: It's important.

0:41:59

Robert Swan: Nobody. It just is something I didn't– nobody– I figured it out myself.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: What was food like in your home growing up?

Robert Swan: I mean we didn't – We were, we uhh – You know, we were on welfare for a while. So uhh you know – But we also had a milkman for a while, like you know, just back then, we were making anything outta anything. We didn't eat, you know, bologna and cheese sandwiches when we were a kid, peanut butter and jelly...

Lara Swan: Government cheese?

Robert Swan: Government cheese was the best–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: –to this day, the best cheese.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Those blocks of American cheese–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: –that you used to get, that's literally like the cheese we put on our bagels now because I want it to be very specific. And it's not government cheese obviously, but it's–

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: We go on the record.

Lara Swan: We go–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: It's not.

0:42:58

It's white, it's sharp white American cheese, which is what I grew up on. And I think that that flavor profile with eggs and bacon and sausage its key. Very specific about what cheese we use.

Lara Swan: And you don't think that that [laughter], your love of that government cheese had anything to do with the cheese that you chose for–

Robert Swan: Yeah, it absolutely does. It absolutely does.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: And I'm not gonna say that it's not.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: But, you know, being more aware–

Lara Swan: But it works.

Robert Swan: –of where food comes from, and how you source it, and the right way to eat it, and not waste it, and all those things, it's made me a very efficient restaurateur. Like, I don't waste food. I'm very aware of like, oh, we're gonna make sure that we source it the right way and like you know just all those things–

Lara Swan: Prep it the right way.

Robert Swan: Yeah that's what I was saying before–

Lara Swan: That's what I'm saying is important about how you have a very efficient yes, systems and operations.

Robert Swan: Yeah. [Laughter] We came with some new accountants recently.

0:43:58

And they were like, "You guys run your restaurant really well. All your numbers are right where they're supposed to be. Labor is this, and your food cost is this, and this." It's like, yeah, because it's a restaurant. If you don't do that, you won't survive.

Rosie Moosnick: What were food traditions in your home?

Lara Swan: Oh, food is love. [Laughter] It's always present. It's the excuse to get together. And if you get together, there's always food. I feel like I had a weird experience with it though because my parents were immigrants. And when I was younger, I was in schools in Skokie, in Morton Grove and wherever, and I would take za'atar [laughter], like za'atar, sorry, however it's pronounced now. I would take these sandwiches with like hummus and laban and pita bread, and I would get relentlessly made fun of.

0:45:01

So these are my experiences. [Laughter] So like, I, when I was younger, I tried to hide it. I tried to hide that stuff in front of people who weren't family. But now I'm like, I'm very proud of it. And I realize that the hospitable way in which we run our businesses has its home in how I was raised. Try to make everybody that walks in that door feel like it's a warm and welcoming place, and there's no judgment at all, and you can order and eat whatever you want, and we're gonna treat everybody the same. And hopefully it's like common ground, you know, which has been challenging 'cause some people are a-holes.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: What do you mean?

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: What are those challenges?

0:46:01

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: There's just a lot of people who don't feel the way that you do when it comes to community.

Rosie Moosnick: [Sneezes] Excuse me.

Lara Swan: No problem. There were a lot of people, for example, through COVID who didn't want to wear a mask. And that was when we didn't know anything about it, and they were like, "Just put a mask on." A lot of people didn't want to. We provided the masks, and we provided distancing, all of that shit. We don't need to like [laughter] relive it.

Sarah Jane Webb: Rehash it.

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: It's kind of trauma.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Yeah, plus like everyone has their story, you know? We all went through it together. But I think that's where, that's where the care and the thoughtfulness and all of that stuff comes when we're coming up with the customer experience. It's important.

0:47:00

So what brings people back? People remember how you treat them.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, for sure.

Rosie Moosnick: Who are your typical– I've been there on a Sunday, and it's a lot of UK students or when UK – Who are your typical customers?

Robert Swan: Any smart restaurant restaurateur would say we want everybody as customers, 'cause we really do. So the students come in, and there's a mix of students, and then the students leave, or earlier on a Sunday, before 10 a.m., you don't have students.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: It's all families, and you get certain people at certain times, and certain people at other times. We want everybody to be our customers. You want the food to be available for everybody. So you know, so you get families earlier in the day, and students later, and that's just the way it is.

0:48:00

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: And in the summer, there's way less people around in general because the students have left. And that's just that location. Our other location, there's no students at all. It's all just whoever's in the neighborhood.

Sarah Jane Webb: Is there a lot of families out that way?

Lara Swan: Oh yeah.

Robert Swan: Oh yeah.

Lara Swan: It's a totally different– they're 10 minutes apart, not even, but it may as well be another planet in terms of like how the business runs, the customers, I mean.

Sarah Jane Webb: Is that a challenge, you know, everything from marketing to like– how do–

Lara Swan: [Laughter] Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: How do you do that?

Lara Swan: Yeah, it's a huge challenge, 'cause what works at one, I mean, it's the exact same menu. It's the exact same business, for all intents and purposes. And you have to essentially operate in different ways, because what works at one definitely does not work at the other.

0:49:00

I don't know. It's super weird. We're four years in, and we're still trying to figure it out. But also–

Rosie Moosnick: Where is the other location? I don't know if you ever said that.

Lara Swan: Boston Road and Man O War. It's different. It's just a different neighborhood.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, yeah [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: Completely different, I mean, yeah.

Lara Swan: Totally and completely different. But it doesn't look like it would be, but it is, it's totally different.

Sarah Jane Webb: How did you choose to move forward with that location on Boston Road?

Lara Swan: That was when we were deciding to mill our own grain.

Sarah Jane Webb: So you needed something big enough?

Lara Swan: So we needed a bigger–

Robert Swan: More space.

Lara Swan: We needed a bigger footprint, and we couldn't, you know, the model doesn't work paying over a certain price per square foot, and the rent is cheaper out there. So that's what drove

us to that area. We needed something with parking, needed something not too far from the other shop, you know, all these things.

0:50:00

We really liked that both shops are sort of equally distant from our house [laughter].

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, that's nice.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: I don't know if that had anything to do with it–

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: That makes it a lot easier–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: We wanted more space, and we wanted to be able to afford it. The second location we've turned into like a commissary, so we create all the products there, and now we ship them to the other store. And then we were hoping to open a third location, and continue to do the same thing. We did it, we did that for a very short period of time.

Sarah Jane Webb: What hardships and/or challenges and successes have you had raising a family while building this business?

Robert Swan: I mean, I would say the success has afforded us the ability to have, you know, have the ability to raise family, and not be too financially stressed out or pushed.

0:51:05

I think COVID took all that away for a little while, but we've since brought it all back. I think that, you know, the business has come back well– at one location; maybe not the other.

[Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: It's in process.

Robert Swan: Yeah, it's in process. So that's been an advantage I think there. But people know who we are in town, necessarily, right?

Lara Swan: Yeah. My challenges are obviously different. I had a lot of mom guilt. I look back on it now, and it's just like [sighs]. It's a pressure cooker, restaurant operations, especially when it's a new restaurant. It's not easy. It is not for the faint of heart. You can't be laid back. Like–

0:51:58

It puts a strain on our relationship, our relationship with our kids. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the business, it had to come first a lot, and then we would have to divide and conquer a lot. And so that stuff I have a lot of guilt over. But I feel like when I catch a glimpse into like my sisters' lives, for example, or just other people's lives, where they have a nine to five job, or an eight to five job, or an eight to eight job, or whatever it is that necessarily pulls them away from their kids for a good chunk of the week, we didn't have that.

Robert Swan: Well, we didn't do too bad. We did like everybody else did.

Lara Swan: Yeah. Like, it wasn't–

Robert Swan: You struggle and you manage–

Lara Swan: Right.

Robert Swan: –and you struggle and you manage, and you make time for your family.

Lara Swan: But at a certain point, it tipped, and we got good help, and the teams at each location are very self-sufficient now.

0:53:01

And we have a lot of time on our hands to start planning for something else.

Sarah Jane Webb: Nice

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: But our kids are 13 and 10, so there was a long stretch there where it was tag team and– I don't know. I'm a mom, so I have a lot of mom guilt. I have a lot of mom guilt. And also I think that being pregnant, and raising newborns, and little ones like two under five for the first several years of the business, you just– that's why I have a hard time remembering it, frankly. Like, it's the hormones, and the no sleep, and the stress of making sure we're making enough cash, and making sure the employees are treated well, making sure this, making sure that, etc., etc., etc., never mind like extended family issues. [Laughter] There's a lot. That's what this gray hair is, girl.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: You see this right?

0:54:00

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: You see the streaks coming off my head? That's what that is.

Rosie Moosnick: It's not very gray.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Yes, it is.

[laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: So how long in– because we've talked to multiple bakers, and as someone who does not at all come from the food world, I've been amazed at how long it took people to come to a point of feeling [laughter] a little bit relaxed–

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: –or financially relaxed and things.

Lara Swan: Oh yeah.

Robert Swan: I mean, you get financially relaxed, like, before we added the second location, we were kind of like, hey, everything's– this is– we were five, six years in, and we were like, this is a business, and everybody's like–

Lara Swan: There's a rhythm.

Robert Swan: : –"You guys should open another one. They should open another one. You guys should open another one." Where should we open another one?

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: But then you do that and, then all of a sudden, you're like [mimics explosion].

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: You don't have any money. You're using credit cards to pay the bills. Everything's stressed out.

[Laughter]

0:55:00

Sarah Jane Webb: You're like, "Why?"

Robert Swan: And you start all over again.

Sarah Jane Webb: "Why did we listen to anyone?"

Lara Swan: Yeah [laughter].

Robert Swan: And we did that, and then we get the second one open, and everything was going great. We're nine months in, and it's March 2021, and COVID.

Lara Swan: 2020.

Robert Swan: 2020, whenever the hell that was, yeah.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I'm glad you can forget 2020.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: And then it was COVID, and it was like everything's in the shitter again.

Rosie Moosnick: Were you just like—?

Robert Swan: We closed our main restaurant—

Lara Swan: But we were—

Robert Swan: –for six months because we just couldn't. I couldn't find staff. I couldn't manage it.

Lara Swan: We were eight, nine months into a new restaurant, and restaurants are not a cash reserve business [laughter]. So the shit that we made yesterday is what's in our bank account. You know what I'm saying?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, right [laughter].

Lara Swan: So that was my– I would say that that was our rock bottom moment in terms of the pain involved in like financial insecurity as a restaurant as a restaurateur.

0:56:01

That was really fucking hard. I just remember sitting right where you are, and fucking crying to the Amex guy like [laughter], and he's like, "Are you crying?" I'm like, "Fuck yeah I'm crying."

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: "What do you think is happening over here?"

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: "I can't pay this bill."

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: It was horrible. And then the two kids– with the kids is that I really feel like having children– if it was just us, it would so different. But you feel so much responsibility to your children, and providing a life, and giving them a future, and all of this stuff.

Robert Swan: And now on top of being a restaurateur, we had to teach ki... we had to teach–

Lara Swan: Homeschool.

Robert Swan: Homeschooling is like–

Lara Swan: It's like good god–

Robert Swan: It's like on top of everything...

Lara Swan: And then we also ran a relief kitchen. But it was still better to do that than nothing. I mean, in the moment, hindsight is 20/20 [laughter], but in the moment, it was like, okay, mobilize.

Sarah Jane Webb: You have to do something.

Lara Swan: Yeah, you just don't think about it.

0:57:00

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: Which is what everyone was doing, school lunch contracts and all this stuff just to keep the doors open.

Robert Swan: We even hustled worse. We did more sales during COVID at this new location because we were running a relief kitchen, and feeding–

Rosie Moosnick: What do you mean? I don't know.

Robert Swan: We did, we basically served– we did the LEE Initiative, and served meals to people who didn't– who didn't, who were out of work in restaurants, and we served a couple, 2–300 meals every single day to people for free.

Lara Swan: Yeah, it was Maker's Mark funded.

Robert Swan: Maker's Mark funded LEE Initiative.

Sarah Jane Webb: I was gonna ask how it was funded.

Lara Swan: So what happened was Maker's Mark provided the funding through the LEE Initiative, and we were able to hire out-of-work restaurant workers to prepare the meals and to— at the time, we were using a lot of donated stuff because it was all going to expire and go bad. So they were—

Robert Swan: Yeah, a little bit of that.

0:58:00

Lara Swan: We set up our kitchen to bring in out-of-work folks, and so they got paid. And then we bought ingredients with that Maker's Mark cash, and we were able to just do something and keep people fed. And it wasn't just food; it was also household items, which was the big— I feel like that was almost more important at the time than anything else: diapers, formula, cleaning supplies. People were going crazy about the cleaning supplies.

Robert Swan: Yeah, we had it all like piled up in the restaurant to give out every night.

Lara Swan: The sales that we did at the time, we got contracts to do school lunches. And also we were still operational, so we were running the restaurant during the day, DoorDash and—

Robert Swan: DoorDash.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: [Sighs] Just DoorDash.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Third-party deliveries, and then like handing people their food through the doorway with masks on and all of this.

0:58:57

And then we would do school lunches, during, back of the house during the day. And then also there would be people prepping the relief meals during the day. And that's what we did at night.

Robert Swan: We closed the other restaurant for four months.

Lara Swan: Yeah, that was a disaster.

Robert Swan: That was all at the same time.

Lara Swan: Yeah, so it was a lot.

Rosie Moosnick: This sounds insane.

Robert Swan: Yeah, it was.

Lara Swan: Yeah, it was insane. It was insane.

Rosie Moosnick: Was it gratifying?

Robert Swan: I mean, we survived it, so that's gra...in hindsight, yeah, we did.

Lara Swan: I would say that I feel very proud of what we did. But I don't wanna ever do it again, never ever, ever.

Robert Swan: Yeah, it was pretty traumatic.

Lara Swan: I have a lot of PTSD from that time, like a lot. So I'm happy that we were able to help people, and I'm happy we were able to like save so much food. And I'm happy that people

were getting paychecks at the time. But I just remember like physically my body going through like a breakdown that I think I still, I don't know, I still haven't recovered from it [laughter].

1:00:04

I'm just plugging along, just trying to figure it out, you know, trying to get the space to do that. And I feel like thankfully we've had, over the past year, we've had some space to recenter and refocus on our family, and our own health, and our relationship, and it's been great. So [knocks on table] thankfully–

Rosie Moosnick: Did you have your sisters here at the time?

Lara Swan: No, I didn't. I had one sister here actually, but she and I have a strained relationship, I will say. And so that provided more of a stressor than anything.

Sarah Jane Webb: What do you– What lessons do you think your kids are learning from watching your work ethic?

1:01:04

What do you think they're learning from you right now?

Lara Swan: Well, I'll tell you, they talk about their dad to me.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh yeah?

Lara Swan: Yeah, and they'll just– they think he's a badass.

Robert Swan: Oh, right.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh.

Lara Swan: They do.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's sweet.

Lara Swan: Tad said the other day, he's like, well– I don't remember what he said. But he was talking to me, and he was like, "Maybe it's my paramedic, chef, helicopter pilot dad"–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: That made him do something?

Lara Swan: Or that could do something. I don't remember. 'Cause in a previous life, Robert was also a paramedic so, you know that's what they–

Rosie Moosnick: Oh, I can see that.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: You can see that?

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah.

Lara Swan: Yeah, he's the person you wanna have around in a crisis. Doesn't do so good when things are calm. He looks for problems.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: I fix things when things are broken.

1:02:00

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: He needs projects. He needs projects. Let's put it that way. I don't know. I hope that they're learning to keep going. I hope that they're learning–

Robert Swan: They're little food wizards right now–

Lara Swan: Oh yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: Really?

Lara Swan: They're bougie as hell, yes.

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: That's actually an issue [laughter].

Sarah Jane Webb: Give an example, like, how so?

Lara Swan: Well, they don't eat fast food; they won't, no. "Let's try this place. Let's go here."

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Lara Swan: "Can I have some wagyu beef?"

Robert Swan: They'll eat sushi with us and–

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: –frog legs. They'll eat anything.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, that's cool.

Robert Swan: But that's how we eat. We don't–

Lara Swan: "Mom, for my birthday, I want this A5 wagyu from this restaurant in Boston.

That's what I want." "Okay. It's not happening, kid."

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: It did happen.

Lara Swan: I know.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: But I hope that they learn– I hope they learn to persevere. That is the thing that I want them to take away.

1:02:58

Because happiness is a byproduct of the work that you put into your life and into the lives around you. It is not something that you just sit back and wait for. It's a byproduct. So I hope that they get that.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's sweet.

Rosie Moosnick: Where did you two meet? I know I'm jumping back.

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: Oh yeah, that's–

Rosie Moosnick: How did you all meet?

Robert Swan: That's a fun one.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: I love this story so much.

Robert Swan: Do you?

Lara Swan: I need to go to the bathroom.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Well, go to the bathroom.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: You tell the story, Robert.

Rosie Moosnick: Okay. We'll get two versions.

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: No, it's the same version. It's just she's a little bit embarrassed, I think. So we were both living in Boston at the time, and–

Sarah Jane Webb: How old are you at this point?

Robert Swan: This was 18, 19 years ago, 20. So this is 2002, yeah, 2002, right after September 11, yeah, 2002.

1:04:01

So 2002, we are both living in Boston, and we both were taking a martial arts class.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh, interesting.

Robert Swan: So essentially we met at– we were both at the same dojo.

Sarah Jane Webb: Oh yeah?

Robert Swan: Yeah, and that's how we met. I was friends with her sister's boyfriend at the time.

Sarah Jane Webb: Mmhm, okay.

Robert Swan: And so that's how we kind of met each other. They got married, her sister and her boyfriend, and then we got married too. We got married first. I can't remember.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah? Aww. Umm... What do you like to do for fun?

Robert Swan: I like to build stuff. I do like carpentry, like furniture building kind of stuff, yeah, hobby-wise.

Sarah Jane Webb: You built this, right?

Robert Swan: Yes, the chairs and the table, yeah. Yeah, I built–

Rosie Moosnick: It's gorgeous.

1:04:59

Robert Swan: And all the counters and everything, everything behind you, the counters in the kitchen. This was four rooms when we moved in here, so we tore the walls out. That's the kind of stuff–

Rosie Moosnick: It's gorgeous.

Robert Swan: Yeah, it came out good, it did, yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: It's really beautiful.

Lara Swan: Did you tell the story?

Robert Swan: I didn't go into–

Rosie Moosnick: He didn't give much detail.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: I need you.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: He's just like, "Yeah"–

Robert Swan: I told them we met at a martial arts–

Rosie Moosnick: –"martial arts class."

Robert Swan: So the dojo, yeah.

[Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Okay. So offer your version.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: My sister dragged me to this class, okay. She wanted me to take it so–

Robert Swan: 'Cause that's where everybody meets their future husbands.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Right, whatever. That's not why I took it. But I went to this martial arts class [laughter] with my sister, who was doing it at the time, and we met one another. [Laughter] I just remember not liking him that much 'cause he was kind of standoffish. But he had a girlfriend in the class, so–

Rosie Moosnick: Oh yeah, no, he didn't include that.

1:06:00

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Well, I mean, at the time, it wasn't that minute that we met, you know?

Lara Swan: Yeah. So then he was buddies with my sister's now husband, and then she would drag me to come along whenever they all hung out. And then we just kind of like developed– We hung out a few times, and then he's the only person I wanted to hang out with.

Sarah Jane Webb: Aw, that's sweet.

Lara Swan: That's it.

Sarah Jane Webb: I asked Robert what he likes to do for fun. What do you like to do for fun?

Lara Swan: Fun?

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah. Do you know that word?

Lara Swan: Mm-mm.

Sarah Jane Webb: Yeah, it's real cool.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: It's real cool?

Sarah Jane Webb: I recommend it.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: Yeah, I genuinely– I'm drawing a blank. I love hanging out with my kids. I love going on dates with this goober.

But also, my sisters don't live here, and they're my friends.

1:07:02

They're my very good friends, so whenever we can, we try and plan time where it's just like us. Like, we go away. No kids. No husbands. We try and do that a couple times a year, and I would say that that is probably the most fun that I have.

Sarah Jane Webb: The most fun, yeah.

Lara Swan: 'Cause it's just us, and like we all know each other, and there's not a lot of work that goes into it. You know what I mean?

Sarah Jane Webb: Right, it's easy.

Lara Swan: Yeah. And I don't take care of anyone else while I'm there.

Sarah Jane Webb: No responsibility.

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: What do you do for dates?

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: We–

Sarah Jane Webb: Do you go out to eat?

Robert Swan: Yeah, we go out to eat.

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: We're the town restaurant snobs, and we go round to every restaurant, and judge.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: We've been to a few restaurants. We've been to all the restaurants. But what we end up doing is just rolling up, and sitting at the bar, and having a meal, and just talking the whole time.

Sarah Jane Webb: That's good.

1:07:58

Lara Swan: That's it, just us, and no one else, chatting about what other trouble we can get ourselves into in the future–

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Lara Swan: –what to do next, where to go next, who to be next?

Rosie Moosnick: What are you all thinking?

Lara Swan: We've had some interesting–

Robert Swan: We've been talking about doing a pizza concept–

Lara Swan: –ideas.

Robert Swan: –at night–

Lara Swan: Yeah.

Robert Swan: –in the bagel shop.

Lara Swan: But then there's also–

Robert Swan: We've working on that.

Lara Swan: –the potential to move on entirely, and maybe start something new somewhere else. So it's an interesting–

Sarah Jane Webb: Food-focused or completely different?

Robert Swan: I don't know.

Lara Swan: I don't know. I don't know.

Robert Swan: We haven't gone that far down that road.

Lara Swan: I don't know. It's just an interesting time.

Rosie Moosnick: I was curious– I'm a native Kentuckian, but my mother is from Chicago, and my father was born in Poughkeepsie but grew up in Versailles as a Jewish Kentuckian– how is it for you all coming to Kentucky from Dorchester and–

1:09:08

Lara Swan: Skokie [laughter].

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah.

Lara Swan: I would say that it was a little bit of like culture shock in the beginning. Like I said, I'm a city kid, so I really loved the ability to roll out of bed, and walk somewhere, and have a coffee, go to a museum, these sorts of things. And it was really weird to have to drive everywhere at first [laughter] right? So driving everywhere, just generally the slower pace that folks keep here versus a bigger city.

1:09:55

But then we had a couple kids and it was– it had become something that we didn't really wanna let go of 'cause it makes life here with kids really easy. It's really easy to manage. And also, I really appreciate the perspective that I've gotten living here just as a person from a bigger city. I don't like the– what's that word? I don't like– what is the word? The word–

Sarah Jane Webb: Describe it.

Lara Swan: –when you have a prejudice towards someone. I don't like–

Sarah Jane Webb: Like a stereotype?

Lara Swan: Yeah, I don't like the– yes, thank you. It's not a hard word. I'm a little fried.

Sarah Jane Webb: I've got your back.

[Laughter]

Lara Swan: I don't like the stereotype, the Southern stereotypes that Northerners have, so that, and, you know, guilty.

1:10:59

I had the same stereotypes when I lived in the cities. And then I lived here, and I think it's really offensive. And that's led to some interesting conversations with my friends and family that still live in the bigger cities. So that's kind of cool. I really appreciate that perspective. And while I don't necessarily agree with the state politics, I have a new-found appreciation for folks coexisting, because when you live in a bigger city, you tend to sort of just be surrounded by people who think like you. And I think people do that here too, obviously, but we have a unique perspective with the restaurant. And I feel like we have a unique position there to sort of make sure that everyone feels welcome and comfortable.

1:12:00

So I would say that the pace, and dispelling the stereotype is the most important things that I've taken.

Rosie Moosnick: What about you, Robert?

Robert Swan: The question again?

[Laughter]

Robert Swan: Sorry, I get lost in the answer.

Rosie Moosnick: Just how was it for you moving here? I guess you moved from Boston?

Robert Swan: Yeah.

Rosie Moosnick: Or did you move from Chicago when you came here?

Robert Swan: Yeah. Well, we moved to Chicago from Boston, just kind of trying to find another place to live. I honestly like, you know, the same. Like, you miss the culture a little bit, but then it's like, you know, I can visit Boston, it'll be fine.

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: You know? I like the slower pace. I like the warmer weather. I like no traffic. I like the fact that we can afford a better life here than necessarily what we would there.

1:12:59

So those things are really attractive to me at this point in my life. I'm not going to museums and riding the train. I got kids, and a restaurant to run, and a house to fix.

Lara Swan: [Laughter] Endlessly.

Robert Swan: Endlessly.

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Robert Swan: So I guess that's the big– for me, it's like I just– I like it. It's easy. We got a pool and a backyard and a dog.

Sarah Jane Webb: You got a dog?

Robert Swan: It's all there, yeah.

Lara Swan: [Laughter]

Sarah Jane Webb: I didn't know you had a dog.

Lara Swan: No, we have a dog.

Robert Swan: Yeah, we got a dog. He's sitting outside.

Lara Swan: Do you wanna meet him? We kept him outside 'cause this needed to be quiet.

Rosie Moosnick: Oh yeah.

Sarah Jane Webb: [Laughter]

Rosie Moosnick: Is there anything else you wanna ask or add, if you feel like we haven't covered?

Lara Swan: No, I think this was great.

Sarah Jane Webb: Thank you.

Lara Swan: Thank you.

Robert Swan: All right, thanks.

Rosie Moosnick: Yeah, thanks for doing this.

Lara Swan: Of course.

Rosie Moosnick: Thirty seconds, I'm supposed to let it run.

[unrelated conversation]

[End]