



Carla Briggs

Viola's Heritage Breads - New Orleans, LA

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Phillip Norman Reid: Today is April the 3rd, 2022. We're here at Together New Orleans' office in New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm Phillip Norman and I'm with Chef Briggs. Chef Briggs, could you introduce yourself for the recording?

Carla Briggs: Yes. My name is Carla Briggs. I am from New Orleans. I am a baker and the owner of Viola Heritage Breads.

Phillip Norman Reid: Perfect. All right. Well, thank you so much, Chef Briggs, for doing this. Really appreciate it. And to start off could you just tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your upbringing was like?

Carla Briggs: Yes. I grew up in New Orleans. We lived in Uptown New Orleans so where the old St. Thomas Housing Development was. And I lived in Mid-City and in the Marigny, so a couple of different places around the city, couple of different major neighborhoods, but just grew up with family, Mom and Dad, two sisters, and a brother.

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And so my dad's a minister and was a bus driver in the city and my mom was a bus driver. So just a normal New Orleans bringing up. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. That's interesting. My dad is a pastor, as well.

Carla Briggs: Okay.

Phillip Norman Reid: So what was it like growing up as a preacher's kid? [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: Right. [Laughter] We can go deep into that story. No, I think a dad that's bi-vocational was different than just a full-time minister. But he just taught about God at home

and also just how to live that out with others. And so he read a lot of books, so we had a lot of books, and made sure we learned and were fully educated in the Word but also just anything we ever needed for school he was always about that.

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It was a unique upbringing. We spent a lot of time at church. But also where I learned to cook for large groups of people was at church. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, okay.

Carla Briggs: So he was the vacation bible school leader and so we would make dinner and made sure kids had dinner. And so I learned how to cook big pots of red beans early in life or make sandwiches or make spaghetti for like a hundred people probably by I was twelve.

[Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. Right, you started early.

Carla Briggs: Started real early, serving and caring for people early.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure. Sure. Very cool. Well, tell me more-- I'm not from New Orleans so what is a typical New Orleans upbringing like? What were some of the characteristic features of that?

Carla Briggs: I think growing up in New Orleans you have full access to food, so food is always about how we celebrate, how we communicate.

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Even when someone's died there's food. A big part is living in community and sharing and enjoying life over food, and so we'd have barbecues or crawfish boils or that type of thing in

community, or we'll have meals at church. And so a big part of who we are is just celebrating around food. At school we brought king cake-- it's always somewhere about food. [Laughter] But yeah, that's one big aspect. But just loving our city and culture, so doing Mardi Gras, learning about Jazz Fest, or learning about music in the city and jazz. And just being very family oriented or community oriented is what I feel like a typical New Orleans upbringing would be.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So what were some of your favorite foods or festivals or celebrations as a kid?

Carla Briggs: Definitely king cake season and Mardi Gras is one of my favorite. One, because king cake season is around my birthday and so my birthday cake was always a king cake. So I grew up eating king cake and loving that. But then, Thanksgiving because you got to be around family and all kind of different foods. And then, when crawfish season came around, having a good crawfish boil and just being able to be outside and eat crawfish or just getting a bag and going and sit by the river and eating crawfish with the family on Friday was just good times.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Very cool. Say a little bit more about how-- we have New Orleans at large but to zoom in a little bit like the particular neighborhoods you grew up in, what was special about them or distinctive about them if anything comes to mind?

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Carla Briggs: I would say living in the St. Thomas Housing Development and going to visit my grandmother was just a big part of being in a small community but seeing the community be a part of everything. And so my grandmother knew everyone in the neighborhood, everyone knew her, so kids would stop by her house and come get a meal. Or people knew she was cooking

something on Monday, or they would come get a plate of red beans. So it was just like a very community feel. Or if there was a party in the neighborhood people would bring her food. It was a very tight-knit community living there. And then, Mid-City was a little different. We didn't have a lot of family and friends that lived there but our neighbors were still very tight.

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And so we had some Latin neighbors downstairs so I learned how to do-- love for tacos and Mexican food and that type of thing. So just being in a culturally diverse neighborhood in Mid-City and in the Marigny kind of introduced us to different people living in the community. Our landlord and neighbor was a musician so we got to experience what that life looked like or see that from our neighbor. It's just that every neighborhood had a different makeup and that's the joy of New Orleans that each neighborhood has a different makeup, a different diversity of people.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. That's cool. That's the sense I've got is that it's like communities within communities.

Carla Briggs: Um-hm.

Phillip Norman Reid: So very distinctive neighborhoods which I like, definitely, so very cool.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: It sounds like food is very connected to community for you growing up.

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Is that what got you interested in working in the food industry, wanting to learn that set of skills because it helped build community, or where did the interest for food come in terms of professionally?

Carla Briggs: Right. I never have reflected on it that way, but I think it was a true introduction of how we communicate well, and so when people enjoy your food it's a easy way to communicate. So I've always enjoyed a passion of serving people what I've made and that just kind of stemmed from being able to serve at church or making something at home for the family and setting the table. But just like respond to—if I share this with you, something I love, you respond in a good way.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: But I just loved how my grandmother and aunts prepared food and watched them prepare simple things and create stuff for family and be, like, oh, wow, I want to do that.

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But it never was a profession for them, it was just like a daily activity. So I thought that was awesome. So just having that experience, and it's New Orleans and everything tastes good.

[Laughter] It's hard to find stuff that does not taste well.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Yeah.

Carla Briggs: And so I'm, like, oh, yeah. We have the best food here. Why not go somewhere and explore how to do that better.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: But picking a school and profession kind of stemmed from-- I love science and math and I wanted something practical 'cause I also wanted to do something hands-on and practical, and culinary school offered-- and baking there's a science, so like chemical reactions and stuff like that when you're in baking, and I just thought it would be a good mesh for me. I love cooking, this side of it, I can add science and do some food science study.

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So in picking a school it was, like, how do I take the things that I love and have a practical way of exploring and learning them? That's how I picked culinary. [Laughter] And picked baking in particular.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: So just loving what I saw in the women and family members and people who cooked and being, like, yeah! And I watched Emeril at that point, there was like a cooking TV show that was Johnson & Wales he was working with. There was some show about the school that I went to about different chefs coming up. And Emeril had went there and I was, like, I want to be like Emeril so . . . [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. There you go. Level up a little bit.

Carla Briggs: Right! [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Exactly. Right. Where can we take this?

Carla Briggs: It was, like, how do I do this? And so they had an application and I filled it out.

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And I met a local chef-- and I guess also my mom fed this dream of cooking for me. So she would take me to-- I think it was called A Taste of New Orleans, and it was different chefs would have an event at a hotel. You would go around to the chefs. So I remember going and getting this huge poster signed by Emeril and Chef Paul Prudhomme and all these amazing New Orleans chefs. And I had it on my wall from eighth grade to whatever. I just wanted to be like these major chefs that were in the city. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's wonderful. Sort of helped put the idea in your head, she sowed the seeds.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool.

Carla Briggs: 'Cause we used to have Sunday dinners after church and so I would set the table. And I cooked my first meal in a microwave when microwaves were like mini little ovens on the counter. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: I remember cooking mac and cheese from some leftover noodles and some cheese and baked chicken in the microwave and served it to my family one day.

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And I was probably, like, eight or nine or something.

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: So I just loved it and I loved, just, you know Mom would have all of the dishes and stuff. And so she just really encouraged it. My dad, too, 'cause he always is, like, "You forget

about me in your stories." [Laughter] But they just loved to have people over and entertain so I just got to show off that way.

Phillip Norman Reid: And that made it special. You made your own cooking show.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. Was there anything else you wanted to say just in terms of family, just values these people gave you that you grew up with and looked up to or impressions they left on you? Anything along that line?

Carla Briggs: I mean, yeah, the value of community and of giving your best to people.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

Carla Briggs: It's definitely something like you just give your all and doing stuff with excellence. Don't just half do it, just show up and do it with excellence, so, definitely are values that I've learned from them. And then, I can do anything, right? Just put your mind to it and work hard, you can get it done. So those would be the major values from family.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure. Yeah. If you're gonna cook you're gonna be Emeril. Yeah.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: No middle ground. Yeah.

Carla Briggs: This is why I have some of the issues of, like, I have to be on top. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That can be tough, but good encouragement, at least.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, in just thinking about growing up, I guess take us to, like, when you're going away to school, but any other formative experiences in your life, formative places in your life that kind of helped shape your past?

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Carla Briggs: Like I said, I learned from just looking at the women and family members who contributed to food both-- just at home but in restaurants. So I had family members that worked at hotels or had these amazing gifts, but I never saw chefs. I saw great cooks and that type of thing. And they were still struggling financially and that type of thing, but they were great at what they did.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And so a big formative part of life is seeing people struggle even though they have these amazing gifts and just trying to figure out why is that. If I go into the industry and see people who are as successful as Emeril who has four or five restaurants, what are these differences that I see?

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

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Carla Briggs: I don't know. Any other major food influences or experiences? Culinary school was different. As much as I worked hard and felt like I wanted to be like Emeril there are very distinguishing differences in our background. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: One, he is not from New Orleans, he has worked in New Orleans, and so his heritage is completely different and rooted differently than mine. And so there are some barriers to education that I experienced at culinary school that I was not expecting. Though I went to Charleston first and then to Providence, Rhode Island, the playing field isn't equal in a lot of ways.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Right.

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Carla Briggs: So I just think that was formative, the experience of being-- loving what I did and wanting to learn to love what I was loving to do, there were just barriers of that there isn't success, always, in the industry.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. How did that show up for you personally, just realizing that the playing field wasn't equal, like you said, both in your journey but then also seeing your family members, like you said, who aren't compensated even though they were really talented cooks and chefs?

Carla Briggs: Yeah. So one major incident senior year-- major formative was Katrina happened. But in the year before Katrina, my grandmother, who I watched and loved and loved all her recipes, she actually died in March before Katrina. And so just losing her as someone who was very influential into my cooking life was just extremely hard, 'cause that's who I called for recipe advice.

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Or how to do you fix this? How do you do this? And she battled cancer and then lost. And then it was, like, okay, well, she's not here. Because of that experience I had to come back home to New Orleans for the funeral but miss a very important breads class, which is very interesting since I own a bread bakery, but bread, it's very [inaudible 0:16:32] and extremely hard. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: But she passed away. The breads class that I was in, the way it was set up was that you would get all the demos at the beginning of the semester, which was two or three days, and then you recreated those recipes for the rest of the semester. So you get this full, intense training and then you kind of work the whole semester to replicate what was done in those couple of days with your team.

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Well, I left and had to go home for the funeral, missed a majority of those presentations, came back and just struggled to catch up.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: Which then, as I was struggling to catch up, my chef was, like, "You're black, you're a woman, you're from the South. Why would you be successful?" "Why do you think you're gonna be successful?" So basically just giving me discouragement that I should basically quit and not pursue this dream. And that's something that's stuck with me for a long time of just, like, none of this was based on my skillset, this was based on all things that don't tell me if I can bake bread. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And I'm also grieving, as a young adult, someone who was very influential to my culinary career and you are not offering support, you're just offering your opinion of why what I'm doing won't work, and not that there's some other barrier that's happening.

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And so that was eye-opening. So I just spent the rest of the semester basically just trying to pass so I wouldn't fail. [Laughter] But uncomfortable situation, and it just didn't make sense to me of why you would say that. But that's the reality of the industry, that, crazily, it's a male-dominated industry and people who look like me or come from where I come from typically don't make it or are successful. And from his viewpoint that was true, so he felt that was a okay statement to make. So I think I make it now my mission to make that an untruthful statement, which it already was, but just to prove this is not-- this shouldn't be.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

Carla Briggs: So that's one major impact of how this industry-- though classically trained, no other problems with producing or doing, there are people's opinions and views that just keep you from being successful and you gotta figure out how to work through people not believing [inaudible 0:19:30].

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Prove them wrong.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: What was the school that you were attending when that happened?

Carla Briggs: Johnson & Wales University.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. And where is that located again?

Carla Briggs: Providence, Rhode Island. They also have a campus in North Carolina now. Before it was in Charleston, South Carolina, but then they moved the campus in Miami. So there's a couple of campuses around the country.

Phillip Norman Reid: Gotcha.

Carla Briggs: And in Sweden, I think. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. In Sweden.

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Carla Briggs: It's a hospitality school so where hospitality shows up is where they kind of go.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. I think they have one in Denver now, too.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. So there's one in Denver.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: I had options. I went to South Carolina and then to Providence.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. Gotcha. And why did you end up with that school in particular?

Carla Briggs: It was a culinary program so when I was selecting schools this was an option to pursue culinary and it just seemed like the perfect fit for what I was looking at in schools. So it just happened to be in South Carolina, which was the closest to New Orleans. Still twelve hours, though.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Pretty far away but still in the South, barely.

Carla Briggs: Right! [Laughter] Barely.

Phillip Norman Reid: The opposite side of the South, yeah.

Carla Briggs: Right. And then, you could choose to do the four-year program, you could choose to go into hospitality management or some other kind of management style, or you could go four years for pastry.

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But the four-year pastry was in Providence, so I transferred from Charleston to do four years in Providence.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Okay. Anything more you want to say about that experience, the pastry track?

Carla Briggs: It was cold. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. [Laughter] That's it, yeah.

Carla Briggs: I am a Southern girl true to the heart and everyone asked me, "Well, how is Providence?" "Cold."

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Let's get the degree and get out.

Carla Briggs: I am the girl that called in the first day it snowed and was, like, "Do we go to work?"

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: Because in New Orleans we shut down. And they're, like, "What? No, you're gonna work in the blizzard."

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. We have snowplows for this, right.

Carla Briggs: We don't have that, so we're not equipped.

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So no, Providence was-- as we talked about neighborhoods earlier, our neighborhoods are diverse, but they're mixed. You can go on one block and see a different race or ethnicity or family. It's mixed. Whereas what I found in Providence and even Charleston, there's diversity but there's pockets of people that stay in their own communities. So there's Little Italy or Little China or little something, like that. And though they are different people they don't really mingle where they live, or at least that's what I noticed when I was up there. And I was, like, that's a little different.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. From what you knew growing up.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: And just in terms of the schooling itself, you had that really negative experience with an instructor. Was there more of that? Were there positive mentorship experiences? What was that like?

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Carla Briggs: I think what I loved about the school is it gave me the understanding of the why behind what I do and why I love how to make something well. And having this exposure and experience of the best ingredients, of the best equipment, and being able to produce and learn these techniques from all over, so learning cakes and learning French pastries and learning all of these things that gave me a deeper knowledge of different things. I really feel like I was prepared

to do anything, so if people ask me, "Can you make this?" I'm, like, "Yeah." [Laughter] I've been given a majority of the tools so there's very few things I'm, like, no, I can't make. And I think that's a big part of the formative education that I got from there, and experience. And I loved getting my hands dirty and making stuff.

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And there were great professors and chefs that did pour in or help me become the chef I am today. So I wouldn't say it was all a negative experience. I think it's also a very competitive environment.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. A little bit cutthroat it sounds like.

Carla Briggs: [Laughter] Unfortunately. And I don't approach things in that competitive light, especially with baking or cooking. I'm just, like, I just love it. So if I can learn how to do it and do it well, great, but I don't think I need to compete with you to have the status or name about it.

Phillip Norman Reid: And you think that has to do with, like, when you were growing up cooking and baking was community, it was the opposite of competition.

Carla Briggs: Right.

Phillip Norman Reid: So that had to be different.

Carla Briggs: Yeah, it's a very different thing. And so it's like I don't feel like I had to show up for it. This was an expression of who I am. This was just who I am, not, oh, I need to prove who I am.

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Who I am is if I can give this to you, this is who I am. But yeah, that was a different experience 'cause I'm not competitive in that way.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: I just like this. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Get some skills to get better, right.

Carla Briggs: Can you teach me how to do this better? Can I learn this? And it's a little different living in the North than the South. It's a different world. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure. But you left with the skills that you wanted.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. I think my intention and what I-- I gained a whole lot of knowledge, a lot of experience. Got to work for some hotels and made some connections and friends for life that are great. It's also very interesting, most of the friends that I've made who are black also are not fully in the industry at this point.

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Some bake, some do side things, but it's been extremely hard for them to find success in the industry. So that's also something that's been eye opening that it's just hard to be successful and make a living this way even though some of our counterparts are big chefs and own restaurants and all this other stuff. So there are some barriers and differences that exist.

Phillip Norman Reid: Um-hm. Yeah, that's persisted.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Well talk about, just to kind of wrap up the personal history, the first years out of culinary school where did you end up, what were you doing then?

Carla Briggs: So the dream world was that I was going to the West Coast and was going to go work in Berkeley and Chez Panisse, which is Alice Waters' restaurant who makes bread. And I was going to go that way. Katrina happened senior year. I was in Providence. I left New Orleans—
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I came home for the summer but went back maybe two weeks before Katrina happened, and I was actually scheduled to leave the day before Katrina but went back to work early and then watched it on TV. And so I was there, couldn't get in contact with family for a long time, so I was in Providence just kind of disconnected from everything that was happening here. Extremely hard time. But then I had to take a semester off, came back to New Orleans, and kind of just helped family and just found a job. And then finished my-- we had to do an externship and I got hired at Emeril's. And so I came back, worked at Whole Foods for a little while, waited for the externship which was Emeril's.

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Worked at Emeril's as a bread baker. [Laughter] So my first real industry job, internship, also was a bread baker. And so that was my first job coming back. But Emeril's was one of the only fine-dining restaurants open post Katrina.

Phillip Norman Reid: In kind of the immediate aftermath?

Carla Briggs: Um-hm. And so when I got back, I was working at Whole Foods and Emeril's and those parts of town had some stuff going on, but my block still didn't have lights and we still

were under curfew for a little while. So still the city was totally still and rubble. It just was not-- but I got to go and work at those two places. Emeril's was good bread baking experience.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

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Carla Briggs: So I made bread for service each night. But it was just very interesting that the rest of the city had no money and then people had money to buy.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Yeah.

Carla Briggs: So that dynamic was just kind of weird.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, unsettling.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: What a stark experience to have your work life over here, this fancy restaurant all of a sudden back up and running like it was yesterday, but where you're living is not, and you work at the same place, so it really shows up.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Like a microcosm of the inequities of that whole disaster. 'Cause what did recovery look like for your family?

Carla Briggs: So we lived Uptown. My mom and grandmother lived Uptown, and so I didn't know if it used to flood before Katrina, that neighborhood would flood anyway, but it didn't have any major damage.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's good.

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Carla Briggs: So there wasn't any major recovery. The house was fine. They lived with my sister in DeRidder at that point and then came back to the city so there was no major structural damage, it's just nothing else was around there in the city.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: My dad, I think he lost his house, they had some damage, but he lost where he was renting, and they had to clean that out. And then my aunt lost her house. She was in the Ninth Ward. And so different family members were dealing with different aspects of having to be uprooted and move somewhere else and rebuilding completely. But that part of Uptown didn't have as much flooding. It was just the streetlights were out, most businesses were closed.

Phillip Norman Reid: Not a lot of resources available, yeah.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. But Whole Foods were open. [Laughter]

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Phillip Norman Reid: Imagine that. [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: And the lucky people who came in and were upset with things that were not available and I'd be, like, but I don't have anything in life right now!

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Right. Oh, my goodness. Yeah. The Whole Foods is open. Even without structural damage I'm sure the emotions during that time of just getting through that and people shifting around, yeah, I'm sure that's a lot to take in.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. 'Cause people weren't there. Family members and people weren't in the city anymore, or friends weren't in the city, and so it was-- Katrina rocked our worlds for a very long time.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: But that definitely was a different dynamic of working in fine dining or with people who have when you were just trying to barely survive, which is the world we live in. Some people are surviving and thriving, and some people are just barely making it.

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And so sometimes you get to see that with storms, but it's our world.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Just kind of shines a light on what's already there, or kind of put the microscope on it. Sure.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So if there's anything we missed in this timeline feel free to fill in, but my next question was just going to be how did you get into the business you're in now with Viola's Heritage Breads?

Carla Briggs: I was at Emeril's for almost a year and developed carpal tunnel, so one of the things this industry does not teach you even in education or experience is wear and tear on your body, and so because I was doing a repetitive motion with making bread and rolling bread every day my carpal tunnel flared up.

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I was scheduled to have surgery, but my doctor was, like, "If you just stop doing it it'll go away."

[Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And I took him up because it was so much pain it was, like, well, maybe I should stop 'cause this isn't working. I don't want to have to have surgery and keep getting cut because this is gonna continue to happen. So went through that process, stopped working, and went into the classroom, became a teaching assistant, which was weird. But yes, I left cooking just to heal my hand, went and became a teaching assistant and learned another passion I have is for education and teaching kids about cooking. So worked with kindergartners and first graders and did some kind of snack programs with them with the Edible Schoolyard.

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Phillip Norman Reid: What's the Edible Schoolyard?

Carla Briggs: That's a program that works with some local schools here, Samuel Green-- first line of schools is the charter school. And they have these gardens that are attached to their school, and they have a teaching kitchen and that type of thing and so they create these experiences through food to teach kids. And so when I was there, I helped start one of their programs of teaching your ABCs to kindergartners through food. So we made rice pudding when we were learning the letter R. I did a stir-fry demonstration when we were learning S. So just teaching alphabet through the foods that we were eating. Or we rewrote the book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to *The Very Hungry Kindergarten* to just kind of collect their experience and teach.

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And so it was a fun experience of just doing that. For almost two years I worked with them in the classroom. And then just went-- and out of the classroom and cooking and just working with mission teams, so cooking for mission teams that came down. I would jump into cooking for them, for teams that came down.

Phillip Norman Reid: This is mission like church related?

Carla Briggs: Um-hm.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, gotcha.

Carla Briggs: So teams that came down just to rebuild. And so our church would just have people and I would cook for them.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. Cool.

Carla Briggs: And then kept doing classroom stuff and went and worked at the Ritz-Carlton. So I dabbled in education and food for a long time and couldn't find home 'cause every place didn't feed both, so, didn't feed my love for education and didn't feed my love for cooking. And so tried to figure that out.

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Worked at the Ritz-Carlton for a little while, got injured there. Tore a disk in my back and was out of work for two years.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, no. Wow.

Carla Briggs: And it was just, like, I don't know what I'm gonna do. But through that process I learned that education and food, on paper, and doing these career path tests, was that these two things are always in the same--

Phillip Norman Reid: Kind of go hand in hand.

Carla Briggs: --go in hand for me. And so went through that experience. I don't know how I got back in the classroom, but I think I was working at a coffee shop and was, like, I'm gonna become a teacher. [Laughter] So became a full-time classroom teacher, got my master's in teaching in special education.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow.

Carla Briggs: And through that process as I was helping my students, I realized that I could use food to help them and wrote a curriculum to teach them reading through playing with food and [inaudible 0:37:04].

0:37:05

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, cool.

Carla Briggs: And so that's the other side of this is, like, Eat Your Words is the name of the company.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, I love it!

Carla Briggs: [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: I love that.

Carla Briggs: So I do that, and so have been working on that with different organizations and schools, and so that's one part of the business. But still, like, okay, what else to do? Worked in a couple of schools doing special education. Got really sick and then wound up getting fired in 2018, so right before COVID. And was just trying to figure out what I was gonna do after being sick. And loved education, loved doing these things, but had this huge life event and got sick.

And COVID happened as I was just rebuilding and trying to figure out what I was gonna do next and mapping out this next ten, twenty years of life.

0:38:07

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: And COVID happened. I was baking bread for Mardi Gras that year and just bringing it to a friend's house just to celebrate. And they were, like, "Oh, they loved the bread." And then, after Mardi Gras, COVID shut down the world and there was no bread on the shelf, and we started supplying bread to everybody in the community. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Where were you living? What was the initial community you were serving?

Carla Briggs: Oh, I was still at my mom's, so, in Uptown New Orleans.

Phillip Norman Reid: Cool.

Carla Briggs: So still bake out of her house. [Laughter] I'm her full-time caregiver and so it started in her kitchen and so it will continue in her kitchen until a find another kitchen.
[Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, right. But that's fitting 'cause that's where you developed the love for it.

0:39:02

Carla Briggs: Yeah. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So that makes sense for it to start there.

Carla Briggs: So yeah, that's how Viola started, and just bread. And just realizing that there are no other-- there's some that's developed in the past two years but there was no bread company by black bakers at all. And so just creating this opportunity to recognize that black people bake bread, and we should have a company. Also looking at the shelves, how they were empty, and all these major bread companies, grocery stores were benefiting but yet we missed that opportunity 'cause we don't have any bread on the shelf. And so when everyone else was still making money and surviving in the grocery and the food world, most black owned businesses or companies weren't surviving.

0:40:01

Phillip Norman Reid: Um-hm. Right. Which is making me think I can see how you found the connection to the People's Bakery, which we'll talk a little bit about. But it is that model of kind of like how do we bring this home to being a local economy of black bakers making bread for this community and that kind of thing.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So yeah, let's get into that. Tell me about how you found out about the People's Bakery initially.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. So in this journey of building Viola's and recognizing that there are black and brown chefs that don't get recognition in this industry and so it's always been a part of building this understanding of heritage of who has contributed to food in any way and just researching what that looked like. And so heritage is a big part of one, the name, but also just building a heritage but also just kind of recognizing and honoring the ones that's come before us and building a legacy.

0:41:05

And it's just been in this research part. And so last year I did a lot of research on-- I'm gonna blank on this name now, but if you think about George Washington Carver, who did a lot of cultivating of peanuts but also sweet potatoes. And so the modern way we use sweet potatoes is a big part of the science and research that he did a long time ago. And then there was this-- I can't think of his name now but he created a bread machine in the 1800s or 1900s where he helped manufacture bread, but no one really knows about his story.

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Or another African American man who modernized the way we get sugar or do sugarcane or process sugar and took it to be granulated sugar. And he has these patents and all of these things, but these main ingredients in the bread that I use all have these major contributions from African Americans who most people wouldn't know the history of.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And so I've just kind of done my own research in that way of just finding out people that way. And then listening to the Uncle Nearest story, which is the Jack Daniels story as well, and how Jack Daniels was trained by an African American man in the bourbon and whiskey that he produced, and his processing is what actually made Jack Daniels this famous brand.

Phillip Norman Reid: Hmm, okay.

0:43:01

Carla Briggs: But within the last ten years someone has picked up Uncle Nearest and his processing and now he's getting the money and recognition, his family is now being honored and recognized for what he did to make Jack Daniels what it is.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. What's his name?

Carla Briggs: Uncle Nearest.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, okay. Gotcha.

Carla Briggs: It's either whiskey or bourbon, I can't remember at this moment. And so just those kind of research projects. And I was just trying to research and find black bakeries and history in New Orleans about black bakeries. And I honestly was just thinking I would find some cake baker or some just basic baker, but the People's Bakery was a bakery that started in 1865 that was a bread manufacturing bakery in the French Quarter.

0:44:01

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And it happened right during reconstruction where we as a country were actually trying to figure out how to do this race relations and rebuild and build together. And it was just amazing history to know, one, there were black bakers, but there was also, before that time, you could see slaves that were runaway bakers, and they would have ads in the paper for them. And so this research kind of showed that black bakers were a big part of New Orleans, and we had all these manufacturing places but for whatever reason that changed. And so it's been a big part of just recognizing the heritage that for me it's just exciting to know that people who look like me actually contribute to bread. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Yeah.

0:45:00

Carla Briggs: This isn't new. This isn't unusual to be a bread baker, even though sometimes I feel like I'm alone in this bread baking thing. But we actually did make bread, and so it's been cool history to dive into and learn more about.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And learned that it's a big part of the city's heritage, although unknown, that in the French Quarter there was this black bakery.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, and really just like this transformative economic vision of we're gonna do all this ourselves and own the manufacturing facilities and totally control that. Right.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. They used modern practice of crowd funding, and so really partnering with the people that were in the community to make the bread but also benefit from the profits. So they did a profit-sharing model that would help make sure people were getting paid well, and then would be able to build wealth for their families and kind of change the economic status of not only them as businessmen but also as a community.

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And kind of filter money back into the people that were doing the work. And they were also supplying essential goods, which is bread, daily, to people. So having this quality product to make sure people were getting what they needed but also making money off of it. And so it was just like a revolutionary model of how to do business well and then support the community. And it was in the French Quarter, which is also amazing. It was, like, a block off of Bourbon which is,

today, Iberville, but before it had another name, but prime real estate. So if it was still here today, imagine the money that would be made from that and the wealth that would be made just to kind of filter back into the community.

0:47:03

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: But yeah, it's an amazing find to know that this story exists, and it's been very researched heavy and some good information about it. So, figuring out how to tell that story a little more but definitely the People's Bakery is Viola's history, too. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, absolutely. No, how cool to make that connection. And I was going to ask you about the name, and you got into it, where the name came from. And before I ask you another question about the name, I know you visited the site of the People's Bakery, where it used to be, so what was it like as one of the fruits of this historical research process that I know was very intense, what was it like to actually go stand and be, like, oh, this is where it was? How did that feel?

Carla Briggs: It felt great minus the rain that day.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, okay. [Laughter]

0:47:59

Carla Briggs: And I'll be back to see it. But I think, one, this was just history that I just happened upon, and so it's been a very exciting part that, like, wow, this is real! And this is this research project of putting together all of these little pieces of information. And so going to different libraries and reading about it or going to the Historic New Orleans Collection or to the

Amistad Center and just kind of collecting this information was just, like, oh, wow! Pieces are coming together, and I can see this in documentation how this worked. And just having this appreciation for history. And then, when we found the location, I was with a friend, 'cause I'm dragging people along for this process. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: And the rain wasn't even an issue 'cause we just were, like, we're gonna go on. We went to see it.

0:49:02

And it was just amazing that the possibility that this was what it was was just exciting, that even the rain didn't stop us. 'Cause it was real New Orleans rain, it wasn't drizzle. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, right.

Carla Briggs: It was pouring that day. We were soaking. But it was just a happy moment. This is history. We get to be a part of this. We get to see and imagine what it was like and what it could be if this was a part of our story, and if people knew that this existed. So it was just encouraging to just be able to know this story, put the pieces together, and then just get excited about sharing it with people, which I share it with people now. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Absolutely. And I'm so grateful to be one of those people. I was excited to talk about it today and I'm excited to hear where your research goes and how this story develops for sure.

Carla Briggs: Um-hm.

0:50:00

Phillip Norman Reid: Something I wanted to ask around all this is where do you get the perspective of heritage or being a baker and a business owner and it's not just me and my baking and my business but this sense of a bigger picture, needing to feel this and understand your connection to who came before and history? Have you always had that vision or where'd you get that value to think that way?

Carla Briggs: I think the value is definitely of something growing up of understanding where you come from. And if that's just in church and learning that we're part of a bigger picture. I think also growing up in New Orleans, it's such a old city where you get to explore, and you can see history. I think that's just why I've always loved history and I've always loved teaching Louisiana history, because you can go and see it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: So we can go to these museums, or I can go to the river and see where boats docked or see pictures.

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And it just always has fascinated me about what people have done before. But I think in business I've always-- I don't have examples of people in my family who are business owners. There are professionals, there are people who have graduated, there are people who have done-- but business owners, there aren't many that I've known. And so the history part of understanding business and the heritage of the people in business is like-- there are other people that I know that own a business, but I've just been, like, okay, well, how did they get there? And so for me finding the People's Bakery is just this encouragement that black people own businesses and can own big businesses.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: It's not by yourself. And so you can do this to build and change the community. 'Cause I just see the impact on other businesses is by volume and how they've impacted other people.

0:52:06

But then, the heritage part is, like, you can't do this alone. And there are good examples of people who have done this. And so it's in finding those people and the hard part is that you can't find a ton of people, or the history isn't easily for you to see that there are black people that have successfully done this. But we just have to do more research. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. You're digging up what you can.

Carla Briggs: We gotta dig a little harder and find those things.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And I just think for me business has to be more than just me making money. So this is that social entrepreneurship part of historically-- I've gone to school and learned professionally how to do this like any other person would do, but I still don't find the same success that others have found.

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So I can't just make it about me because I also have to change the industry to make sure that other people can also find success because I can't do it by myself. So how do we make sure we include other people in—but, historically, I know there's other people who have made other people

rich. So Emeril is a great chef 'cause he has great staff men and great sous-chefs and most of them are black, who support his menu.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, and working in the kitchen.

Carla Briggs: Right. So how do we make sure their legacy is told not just on the tails of him because they're great chefs, too.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Yeah.

Carla Briggs: And so that's just been the heritage of, like, I've seen it . . . [airplane noise] I hear it. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Arranged a little flyover, yeah.

0:54:01

Carla Briggs: But just that their history is attached to Emeril's but also why not? How do we unpack this story to make sure everyone can be successful?

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Absolutely. I'll let you get some water. I appreciate you sharing all that.

Carla Briggs: [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: I know there's a lot to tell, so I appreciate it. [Laughter] And I'd just be curious to get into the nitty gritty of being a baker, being a cottage baker. So I mean these cottage baking laws, that was new to me. I know it's kind of a thing in the South, but what is the cottage baking laws that allow you to bake out of your home and what is it like to be that kind of baker versus owning a bakery and working in a bakery?

Carla Briggs: Yeah. So cottage food, I don't know if it's just a southern thing. I think it's more recent.

0:55:00

It's not probably over twenty or thirty years old, but it's a more recent thing. But cottage food allows you to bake certain items. So you can't use meats and all these other processes where things are more dangerous. So these are low danger foods. I can't think of the name, but these are foods that can be produced in the home without-- basically don't make you have to have the food inspection in a sense.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: I think they can still inspect you, but you don't have to have the health inspector come in and fully have three-compartment sinks and things. So the hard thing about being a baker if you don't have a established kitchen is not having an established kitchen, a good kitchen. And so kitchens cost so much money.

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It's an investment into building out this facility, so having the three-compartment sink and drainage and grease traps and all these major components could cost you from twenty to thirty thousand dollars.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: And so cottage food allows you to bake up to and make up to like twenty-five thousand dollars a year but in your home. So it just allows people who want to bake to be legal, to be protected, but you're not making or grossing, like, million-dollar sales in your home but at

least you have some protection of the law that allows you to bake. And you can deliver it to markets or sell directly to people, or you can sell to local people who have pastries from different places.

0:57:00

So it just allows you to do this and test it. So a good business practice is testing the market and figuring out if this is a viable product, and the hope is that if you can make twenty-five thousand dollars of it, either you kind of stay there in that production or you try to grow and go somewhere else, at least, has been the goal. But the difference is I've gone to other kitchens and produced. It's just really expensive. If you rent a space or you try to build a space, the overhead projection, which I've found is-- baking at home is-- you save on that cost of having a facility. It's hard either way but at least you save on the initial put-out of that cost. And so you can start to stabilize and make sure you have all your stuff together and practice some recipes and test recipes to make sure they work as a cottage food law and be protected.

0:58:07

Phillip Norman Reid: Gotcha. Okay.

Carla Briggs: But still make money. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So yeah, share a little bit about when you're formalizing this business, you're getting into producing more bread, making this a thing. And then, when did king cakes come in?

Carla Briggs: Yeah. So like I said, we started baking, a friend and I, started just kind of responding to the need for people who didn't have bread for the beginning of COVID. And so I

guess, like, April we just started baking and people ordered bread online and delivered it.

[Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: What were you offering initially? What were your options?

Carla Briggs: Oh, the offerings originally-- so sweet potato rosemary bread, which is our staple.

0:59:02

It's called "Rooted." And then brioche, like a white brioche, a honey wholewheat brioche.

"Collaboration", which is a seeded bread, but it was our plant-based option, so no dairy, butter, or eggs in it. And cornbread. I was, like, what is the name?

Phillip Norman Reid: There's another one, yeah.

Carla Briggs: There's another one in there. So those are the initial-- we were really trying to have a healthy option for bread and so "Icon" is a wheat that is an ancient grain and so we had an Icon whole wheat bread to use that grain. That was all of them. [Laughter]

1:00:02

Phillip Norman Reid: Gotcha. And was it hard to keep up with the demand when you started doing this, figuring out how to make enough every week?

Carla Briggs: It was definitely a learning curve.

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: Getting the right size, buying the right pans. So, COVID, supply chains started changing so getting the right flour because we were doing a healthier option, so unbleached

flour, so really making sure we were paying attention to ingredients. So getting unbleached flour was important and finding that. Spent a lot of time at Whole Foods and Fresh Market. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: The good ol' days. Yeah, yeah, it was definitely a learning curve of just trying to navigate so many different parameters.

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But the cool part was that we delivered bread to people who couldn't get out and so there were elderly people who just had saw, or we would get people cover us in articles or on TV. But people would order, and it would be elderly who couldn't get out. And so having this ability to drop off bread to people and it be safe, but they enjoy it. So I spent most of my days talking to really nice old ladies who were, like, "I love their bread!" I felt bad when we stopped producing some of them-- oh, we had a white potato bread--'cause this lady would order all the time and I was, like, "You're the only person that orders this bread."

Phillip Norman Reid: That buys that? Right.

Carla Briggs: [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Did not make sense, yeah.

Carla Briggs: This does not make sense. I love you enough to keep making it but I'm just, like, this is not a good business model. But I do love you enough to-- it felt good.

1:02:02

People didn't have people to communicate with and we were delivering bread every week to them, so it just was a good feeling to have people know who their baker was, know that they

were enjoying the bread and getting automatic feedback. That was the best part. It was meeting needs and not just-- I think I've always tried to be in business to make money, 'cause that's what you're supposed to be in business to do, and it's always a struggle 'cause I'm, like, that's not a good motivator.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

Carla Briggs: But this was actually meeting needs for people.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And the relationships formed.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, that's cool. Sounds like it was really like a silver lining in the pandemic for a lot of people, which is cool.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: And then when did you enter the king cake game? When did that come along?

Carla Briggs: So we make bread and bread is very similar to king cake.

1:03:01

So there was just the process of figuring out what king cake would we make. So there was this very intense process of eating-- not as intense as Matt Haines, as I was in the book, *The Big King Cake Book*, he ate, like, seventy-six king cakes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: Well, we narrowed it down to, like, five different places. We drove to Mississippi and tried this king cake and just really were trying to figure out what the options were.

Researched this old bakery, McKenzie's, and tried to figure out their recipe. And a bunch of test kitchen and king cake making parties and having people eat king cake, to all come down to use the same recipe we use for our sweet potato rosemary. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

Carla Briggs: It was, like, okay, we did all this research. And then I made one with the potato recipe and that was it.

1:04:02

I was, like, oh, this is the king cake. So that was the process of getting to our sweet potato king cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. So you have the sweet potato king cake, and is that your main one? You have a couple of other ones you do?

Carla Briggs: So the dough is actually made with sweet potatoes and so inside the dough it's a sweet potato where traditionally it's just like a breaded or brioche kind of dough, but this one has sweet potatoes in the dough. 'Cause some people confuse it because there is sweet potato king cake where people make sweet potato pie and put it into the sweet potato king cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, right. Like a filling, yeah.

Carla Briggs: The filling. This is not that. The dough is just made from Louisiana sweet potatoes. And so the first year I learned to be simple 'cause I didn't know what I was getting myself into because king cake production is a whole beast of its own.

1:05:05

So the first year I just did sweet potato king cake, so just one kind, two sizes, order what you can. And sold over five hundred.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. Okay. Good.

Carla Briggs: A couple of people recognized us. I got to go on Good Morning America 'cause we didn't have Mardi Gras that year.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Okay.

Carla Briggs: So I was on Good Morning America Mardi Gras day.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow.

Carla Briggs: And got a bunch of orders and shipped king cake out across the country during the winter storm which then lost most of those. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, no! Oh, my goodness. That's some bad luck, [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: Thank you. Talk about lessons learned. [Laughter] So that was the first year. It was exciting. I bumped out a hundred and sixty orders to ship out.

1:06:04

I had recruited so many people. We had filled this bakery. We were running out and package-- I didn't sleep that week.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow.

Carla Briggs: Just completely—shipped it out, worst winter storm, FedEx headquarters in Memphis, my new favorite place-- every time I go to Memphis, I'm, like, I need to find where FedEx is.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: But FedEx shut down and the way the guy explains it is, like, eight million packages comes into the Memphis location and they're supposed to go out. So about a hundred planes leaves that location a day. The day that we shipped out the king cakes only ten planes left out of a hundred planes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow!

Carla Briggs: So for weeks king cakes started showing up at people-- like, weeks after because it was just that backlogged.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

1:06:59

Carla Briggs: And then the unfortunate part about that is during winter storms it is considered a natural disaster; they remove all guarantees. So I lost all the money. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, my God. That's terrible.

Carla Briggs: So about 60 percent of my cakes were lost in the winter storm.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow.

Carla Briggs: So I was not coming back and making cakes ever again, because I took a major loss because people-- to save face with customers I just issued refunds. But someone had to eat

the cost and it was me. It was a great opportunity. I was excited and then the realities of business is that stuff happens.

Phillip Norman Reid: That was like a nightmare scenario for a small business. Oh, my God. So why did you do it again?

1:08:01

Carla Briggs: [Laughter] Because I like to be tortured.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, yeah. [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: No. People really enjoyed it. The biggest compliment you can get from king cakes is when people say, "I'm gonna order one every year."

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: "Oh, this is gonna be my family's tradition." Or, "I have to get something." So once you start kind of being a part of people's plans for families it's hard to be, like, nah, I'm not making any 'cause I had this really horrible experience. I think the other side was how to take it as a learning place that, one, I have to communicate up front, if your king cake get lost in the mail it is not my responsibility.

Phillip Norman Reid: Things happen, yeah.

Carla Briggs: These things happen. Praise the Lord, this year there was only maybe two cases of it being lost.

1:09:03

And with that person I'm offering, when the season starts over, you'll get the first king cake. 'Cause it's unfortunate but I also cannot control the post office, FedEx, or any other delivery system. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Shipping food is tricky, yeah.

Carla Briggs: It is. You only have a two-day window. I try to put little packets in there to preserve it a little longer if it gets stuck, but it's a risk you take 'cause you also don't have to order from me.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: So I just put those parameters in place, was intentional about the relationships I was going to build this season, and I just have to try again.

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It was a horrible experience, it did set me back in making me wonder if I wanted to continue to do this, but the problem wasn't me, it just was a very unfortunate situation. And then I just spent time researching how to control it if this happens. So if I was to lose this, I pick what days I ship so it gave a better shipping ability. So I don't ship on weekends so it doesn't get lost. It just created better parameters around that.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure.

Carla Briggs: And then, communicate, "I cannot incur the cost." [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. You run the risk, right.

Carla Briggs: You run the risk. I appreciate it, but yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So this year was better? This year went pretty well?

Carla Briggs: With shipping. Definitely it was better with shipping.

Phillip Norman Reid: With shipping, okay.

Carla Briggs: I partnered with some other organizations and did more of a drop off and they purchased it from like wholesale and so they purchased it from a coffee shop or from this pickup location.

1:11:03

So it was a little different this year, but it was a good season. It was a busy season. Because of Hurricane Ida last year a lot of places weren't available, so I would've went back into a commercial kitchen. I do love producing in a commercial kitchen but because stuff was unavailable or way too expensive, I just produced under cottage food law at home. And so it cut how much I could produce but it saved me money and I didn't lose major amounts of money, which is a key of business.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. Always ideal.

Carla Briggs: I was, like, I don't think this is a good business goal, but it is a good business goal.

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter]

Carla Briggs: I'm, like, the bare minimum. I just don't want to lose money. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely, yeah. No, I mean that's where you start, right.

Carla Briggs: One day I'll be, like, I want to make this much on this, but at this point I just don't want to lose.

1:12:02

That was my initial season, don't lose.

Phillip Norman Reid: Just figure out how to get it to work. So you mentioned that it's like-- and I've heard a lot of bakers say this-- the king cake season is like having a different business, it's a whole different animal. Say something about that. When we talked last you were, like-- you were saying something to the effect of maybe the demographic or the temperament of the people who you sell bread to versus king cake differs. So what makes it a different animal?

Carla Briggs: So I think there's a lot of things that goes into making king cake a different animal. Now post COVID I think last year a major part of king cake season's success was it was a different Mardi Gras. And so people, especially in the New Orleans area, celebrated with the only thing that was consistent, which was king cakes.

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And since we couldn't go to a parade, well, let's dive into king cakes. And so bakers just kind of came up with so many different options and varieties. Which growing up we had, like, McKenzie and maybe a couple other places, but there's more options out there. You can get different flavors and that kind of thing. So it becomes this different, one, creative place. And so you get this traditional item in its time but there also is this creative aspect. And so it becomes this different business because now you are just constantly committed to making this one item for so many people because it isn't the same customers. There are people who bought king cake from me that

have never even knew I made bread or anything. And so I'm still learning who the king cake customer is, if there's a target customer for king cake.

1:14:00

I have to dive into the data if I can. But people buy it for office, people buy it for school, people buy it for king cake tasting parties. Their reasoning for purchasing it is always different. Or they buy it to ship to their friends and family out of town 'cause they haven't had one. Or they just want to try this new flavor. You know, bread is, like, I just want to make a sandwich for work.

[Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. The stores are out of bread, and I need bread. Yeah, a different market.

Carla Briggs: Right. It's like a mom, I'm making school lunch this week, I need to buy bread.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: Whereas this is, like, I don't even know why you're buying this. Or I just need king cake for the day 'cause I'm just going to eat this small miniature one for myself. And so that's kind of the dynamic, but also people eat a large amount of king cake, too.

1:15:00

'Cause there's a customer that ordered almost three every week, and I was just like, I appreciate the business but also where are you putting all of this king cake? What are you doing with this? That's just a lot. Or people would order at, like, three o'clock in the morning. Or I had a call at, like, ten, and was, like, "Do you have king cake?" I am not actually supposed to be answering the phone. It is ten o'clock at night. No, I do not have king cake. [Laughter] So I think people get

excited and then people-- we're a black bakery and so we got a lot of customers who are just supporting because it was February and Black History Month so paying attention about the purchases that they were making from black businesses.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: So we became a big hit for that. So there's so many reasons why king cake . . .

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. IT creates this demand that it's sometimes hard to stay on top of.

Carla Briggs: Right.

1:16:03

And so I look at other bakeries and they say they make, like, a thousand cakes a day, and I'm, like, I am not there. I was not there. But it's quite possible to do it if you have the manpower and the facility, you will sell it.

Phillip Norman Reid: The demand is there. Right. It is a craze. "Craze" is the word. The more I hear about this, it's, like, ten o'clock at night, yeah, three a week. People lose their minds.

[Laughter]

Carla Briggs: They lose their mind. Or even the critiques that you get, like, people just buy it to post that they had it and say that it was good or bad. I don't know. It's just . . . [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Have you had some harsh criticism?

Carla Briggs: I've only had one.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. That's good.

1:16:58

Carla Briggs: And this was a lesson that I learned because, one, there's a misconception-- this is where I also explain why we are the sweet potato king cake, not like sweet potato pie cake. And I also made a sweet potato pie king cake just so people could taste what sweet potato pie tastes like in the king cake. But one thing was, like, oh, there wasn't enough sweet potato in it. But it's actually the dough. So the critique was really a praise in the sense of-- I take it as just it's so complicated you couldn't understand what you were actually eating. So I'm gonna go with that.

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter] Sure.

Carla Briggs: Like, this is a compliment because the way you described totally is not-- you expected something else that it was not, and so your critique on it is based on your expectation, not what you actually got. And the second part of that was I dropped it off at a location that sold it the next day and so it wasn't fresh. And so the experience is different if someone sells a two-day old king cake compared to a fresh king cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure. Right.

1:18:02

Carla Briggs: So managing that is a whole 'nother ball game. But that was the first time I've ever not-- from me you would get it fresh 'cause I'm kind of producing it that way.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So another learning experience.

Carla Briggs: Another learning experience. Nothing but this whole experience is learning.

[Laughter] So I don't take it personal.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah.

Carla Briggs: It's hard not to, I will be honest.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's key for any creative person for sure.

Carla Briggs: I'm, like, a critique!? Someone doesn't like what I made? But it was totally fine. It opened my eyes to that fact, what can I learn from this? You fully don't understand what I make so there's some miscommunication on that. But what also happened where this experience wasn't the greatest for you. And then, also I didn't have to respond to the critique.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, so that's no big deal.

Carla Briggs: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. There you go.

1:19:01

Well, on the positive side, you care a lot about family and heritage and tradition.

Carla Briggs: Um-hm.

Phillip Norman Reid: So what has it been like-- you said what kind of brought you back into it was going, like, oh, now I'm a part of people's family tradition. I can't give up on that.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. I can't ditch 'em. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: But what is it like? That's obviously the nice part to be a part of people's family tradition at Mardi Gras.

Carla Briggs: So on the two sides of the family part is, one, I dragged my family into this because I am very small, which is me most days if it's not king cake season. And so teaching my nephews-- they are the potato peelers. All the little trinkets that we put on the cake, my one nephew is in charge of that. Or he will zest the lemons and the limes. And so their roles and

really trying to teach them this aspect of business and about building something together as a family and how each of us have a role to play is a big part of that family part.

Phillip Norman Reid: Cool.

Carla Briggs: So my family is fully invested in every king cake that you eat whether they want to be or not. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: [Laughter]

1:20:00

Carla Briggs: My mom is the delivery driver if it comes to it. She's a boxer. My sister is customer service. So we're gonna do this as a family regardless of if you want to or not, but it happens. And then, the other side is having people try it and people bring it to their family events has also been cool to see. Or get people to take pictures of their kids enjoying it, or being a part of the company king cake tasting party has just been-- it feels good that people are enjoying it. Even today we met someone who had it and was, like, they love it. It's like, oh, yeah. I didn't even meet you. I didn't even know you had that one. But it's good to know that you still are, like, this is the best king cake I ever had. So it's a good feeling.

Phillip Norman Reid: And to become a part of what is such a big legacy for the city you grew up in to have your king cake included in the pantheon of king cakes, right?

1:21:04

Carla Briggs: Yeah. I haven't had the stand around a corner away from my king cake season yet, but I have gone where I'm dropping off and before I can even drop off people are grabbing. [Laughter] I introduced a savory one, and it was the seafood boil one, and people loved it. I just

couldn't figure out to do it without feeling like I was going to be overwhelmed. So it's gonna come back.

Phillip Norman Reid: What all goes into seafood boil king cake?

Carla Briggs: So the other bread that we make now that was not on the original menu is the "Louisiana Seafood Boil," so it's a white potato bread that has notes of the trinity, so celery, onion, and some garlic and bell pepper. And then it is stuffed with crawfish mixture.

1:22:01

It was crawfish boudin but we want to take the boudin out so things could be fully seafood, and then topped with barbecued shrimp and some sausage sprinkles and some smoked gouda.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. That sounds delicious.

Carla Briggs: And then, that is the seafood boil king cake. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. You let me know when it's back 'cause I'll be placing an order.

Carla Briggs: I will. People were excited about that one and it was really good but in the middle of the season-- like I said, the first season I didn't do any flavors. Second season I did a flavor each week. And that week I sold that one I sold out and it was work. [Laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. That sounds super labor intensive. I feel like with the savory ones-- 'cause then you have to cook food to put inside.

Carla Briggs: Yeah. And then that also creates the issue of the cottage food law and not breaking that law because it becomes seafood. And making sure people aren't sick.

1:23:03

So it has to be fully cooked and frozen and then given and then stay cool, so it protects from food—

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Carla Briggs: So it added a bunch of other steps and so I'm just like, I'll bring it back, but I just want to make sure it's safe.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. For sure. Great. Awesome. I guess the last thing I'll ask, and then just if there's anything else you want to add feel free, but are there any other favorite moments, memories as a king cake baker, as a baker in general, as you're on this journey of growing your business, that you want to share?

Carla Briggs: Yeah. I think the memory of what got me into king cakes, like I said, was king cake was my birthday cake. And so growing up going to McKenzie's, which was the bakery here that everyone went to, and just kind of walking in and getting to pick this very simple but delicious cake has always been a memory that I've cherished of just being able to go into this bakery and celebrate my birthday with a king cake or just celebrate with sweets.

1:24:12

It's something that I want to recreate eventually is this bakery experience, but also just being a part of people's history and their celebrations. So if that's with cakes or with king cakes it's just a big part of why I love doing what I do. But also just recognizing that no black people owned that bakery that I walked into. So how do I build something that's sustainable that can be a part of this tradition of just creating good stuff that people can enjoy for years and years to come? And so just trying to create that experience. Yeah, that's the only major thing.

Phillip Norman Reid: I lied. I was gonna ask you one more question, but that was it, like, what is your goal?

Carla Briggs: Oh. [Laughter]

1:25:04

Phillip Norman Reid: What's your goal for your business? It sounds like to kind of get that brick-and-mortar bakery in.

Carla Briggs: Yeah, manufacture. I think mom and pop baking is cool but there's a need for a larger scale to get, in my opinion, of just-- I want to learn the science and ability to mass produce something of quality and get it to more people than normal. And then doing individual cake sales or individual sales to people. And I just want to see what that looks like and how does that change, 'cause I think that's where you can build more of a heritage or a legacy through food in higher volume, or these life changing resources come from a little more volume.

1:26:01

And so finding a home to do that here. If it's New Orleans I would love that, but just fighting the barriers that truly exist is what I want to do. I want to tell the story of People's Bakery so other future bakers or people who want to know more about this story know that there's people who have come before them to really see that, turn that into a book or a story. But just really celebrate people who have done a lot in this industry. We eat in New Orleans but the only people who are surviving from what we consume are not the people who work hard every day doing it. And so how do we make sure people are making livable wages?

1:26:58

It's one thing to want to be a millionaire or anything like that but I want people to survive and make enough and be paid what they're worth. And so how do we create through shared profits or whatever it is, create this system that allows people to thrive and do what they love and learn more about it, but also thrive and live and not just barely survive in this city when it comes to food and hospitality.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's an amazing vision and I wish you the best with all of it and thank you so much for sharing your story. I really appreciate it.

Carla Briggs: Thank you. That's great.

Phillip Norman Reid: Now we're going to have thirty min- . . . seconds of silence, not thirty minutes, for our friend the recorder here. [Laughter]

1:28:13

[End]