



Faith deLeon Alston

Elegant Treats Bakery

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Lowcountry

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Stephanie Burt: This is Stephanie Burt. It is June 11, 2023, and I'm recording an oral history interview with Faith of Elegant Treats Bakery in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. So, will you give us your full name, Faith?

Faith Alston: My name is Faith deLeon Alston. I am born and raised in South Carolina. Most of my family members are from Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, but we moved to Huger, South Carolina when my mom got married.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, and how old are you?

Faith Alston: I will be 36 next month.

Stephanie Burt: Thirty-six.

Faith Alston: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: And how long have you been the owner of Elegant Treats Bakery?

Faith Alston: Elegant Treats Bakery, I like to say officially seven years. Seven years was when I got my LLC and all my documentation, but I have been the owner of Elegant Treats for over a decade.

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Stephanie Burt: Now, let's dive back and get into when you started baking.

Faith Alston: Okay.

Stephanie Burt: When did you first start baking?

Faith Alston: I really did not start baking until probably my early 20s. I've always been kind of interested in doing something with food, but I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. The interest came from my mom and my grandmother. They were my biggest influencers in just food in general. A lot of people don't know, but I can bake and cook. Like, so I can do both sides, but baking is where my passion is. But my grandmother—just getting off the bus in elementary school, smelling the food as soon as you're getting off the bus, my brother and I are running down the road just to, you know, just to get early dinner—Just those memories of her touching us that way, and that's initially what I wanted to do within my business is be able to take people back to those moments, to their childhoods where it was either their grandmother or their guardian or, you know, whoever just in the kitchen baking.

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So, that's what I like to do within my business, is take people back to those memories and those moments where it seemed like nothing else mattered except just for the good food that we're about to have and amazing people that we're going to be around.

Stephanie Burt: I love that. And was this in Huger?

Faith Alston: No, so this was actually in Mount Pleasant.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, with your grandma.

Faith Alston: Yeah.

Stephanie Burt: And then you've been in Moncks Corner how long?

Faith Alston: Moncks Corner for about a little over three years.

Stephanie Burt: Okay.

Faith Alston: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. So, this is a very regional thing, right?

Faith Alston: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: So, we're gonna—before we dive into the idea of chewies, we're gonna—I'd love for you to talk about what treats, generally, your company offers.

Faith Alston: Wooh, okay, how much time do we have? [both laugh]

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So, I am primarily known for my Charleston chewies. I myself have about 66 different flavors that I just kind of introduce throughout the year. As far as other desserts, I like to use chewies in many different ways. So, I have something called a cheesecake chewie. It's a traditional chewie at the bottom, non-baked cheesecake on top, and then those are garnished in many different ways. So, I use the Biscoff cookie butter; I'm not sure if you know what that is.

Stephanie Burt: I do. Yes, I do.

Faith Alston: Yeah, so I—that's one of my favorite ingredients. We do the Biscoff cookie butter. There's a strawberry crunch. There's a pecan praline—so, all of those different

flavors. I also make brownies, cinnamon rolls, muffins, cheesecakes, pineapple upside down cakes. Regular pound cakes: you got your 7UP pound cake, your lemon pound cake.

Stephanie Burt: 7UP pound cake is my personal pound cake.

Faith Alston: The list goes on and on and on [laughs] of different desserts.

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Stephanie Burt: Okay. And do you—where do you make your desserts?

Faith Alston: So, I just had a bakery up here in Moncks Corner, so I had an actual storefront. I was baking everything there. I just recently closed that down, so I'm in a commercial space now, baking all my treats, and then this is my pickup location that we are in right now.

Stephanie Burt: So, you do pickup location here. Do you sell at any markets?

Faith Alston: Yes. So, I'm going to start in the Moncks Corner market. I've also signed up and have been invited to do a lot of festivals and stuff, so you'll definitely see me around the Charleston, the Saint Stephens—yeah, I'll definitely be around.

Stephanie Burt: Great. Okay, let's get into chewies.

Faith Alston: Okay.

Stephanie Burt: Sixty-six flavors, I think that's really where we want to focus. First, we want to know about your traditional chewie thing, so who taught you to make chewies?

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Faith Alston: Chewies, I actually taught myself how to make chewies. That was one of those things that I saw that was really taking off in the area, and at that particular time, there was nobody else that could make a good one, if that makes sense. So, I was like, “I’m going to fill that need.” It’s a dessert that everybody makes, but you have to have those, like, really good quality ingredients to actually make, like, a really, really good one. And that’s really where I focused my attention on, was buying those ingredients that really would make that particular dessert just to the next level.

Stephanie Burt: How did you know it was blowing up? I mean, what did you hear about it? What did you see about it?

Faith Alston: It was just something that literally was everywhere. Every Sunday, “back in the day,” I like to say, when my grandmother was living, we would do, like, Sunday dinners in her house.

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And that was one of those desserts that everybody was like, “Okay, well, who’s bringing that?” But granted, you know, at that time, I was, like, seven or eight. So, I’m not really thinking about chewies, so it’s like one of those memory things. It’s like, “Okay, this was something that was popular then.” You know, “Let me dive into it now.” But it was a dessert that was just kind of really around, and a lot of people made them. But just for me and my palate, it wasn’t really kind of what I was going for. So, it was just something I just wanted to dive in and definitely change how it was prepared for my area, with coming up with the 66 different flavors. And like I said, everybody—there are a lot of people that do them here, but not a lot of people have those

different flavor combinations that Elegant Treats offers.

Stephanie Burt: And this was a home cooking dessert.

Faith Alston: Oh yeah.

Stephanie Burt: And so now we're starting to see it commercially. So, can you explain how your traditional chewie is different? What did you do differently besides purchasing really good ingredients?

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Faith Alston: Right, so outside of that, I make my own vanilla. That's something that's done differently. Nothing against, you know, like the McCormick's or the other ones, but it's just a little extra added love when you actually buy the vanilla beans, and you buy, like, that really good-grade alcohol, and you let it sit for months and months at a time, and then you just take—you open that jar and you pour it in. It's just like that extra added love. So, that's definitely one of the main things that I've done was just make my own vanilla, and I use my own vanilla extracts in all of my desserts.

Stephanie Burt: Great. Can you list the ingredients in your traditional chewie?

Faith Alston: Yeah. You have your flour; you can either use self-rising or all-purpose. You have butter, brown sugar, and powdered sugar to top it off, and then you also have eggs.

Stephanie Burt: And do you—what kind of pan do you cook your chewies in?

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Faith Alston: It just depends; you can either use just like a regular... It depends on how many that you need, but you can go as small as a—I believe it's the eight-by-eight size pan, or you can go up to a eleven-by-sixteen (I think it is), so it just depends on how many people or how many pieces that you need.

Stephanie Burt: So, do you usually—like, if you're just making them for sale, do you usually do the eleven-by-sixteen?

Faith Alston: No—well, it depends. If I'm doing, like, an event—I just had an event this past Saturday, so I did do an eleven-by-sixteen for that one. Yeah, so it just depends on what I'm doing it for. Yes.

Stephanie Burt: And then, how big do you cut yours? I know everybody's a little different.

Faith Alston: For me, I want to say probably about, like, half-dollar sizes, but more of like a square.

Stephanie Burt: So, like, inch-by-inch?

Faith Alston: Yeah, maybe like inch-and-a-half, inch-and-a-half, yeah.

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. Okay, and what kind of nuts do you use?

Faith Alston: I either used pecans, walnuts, or almonds.

Stephanie Burt: Okay.

Faith Alston: But down in the South, pecan is the more traditional. I'm not a huge pecan fan. My grandmother had a pecan tree in her yard, and we ate pecans until we could not eat

pecans anymore. [laughs]

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So, I'm particularly not a pecan fan, but you know, in the South everybody loves pecan, so it's obviously one of the flavors that I offer.

Stephanie Burt:       And do you chop your nuts or put them whole in?

Faith Alston:        I actually crush them with my hands. I don't know, it's something about just crushing them instead of using the knife, you get those extra, like, nut oils in there which also adds to the flavor. So, for the most part, I have a glove and I'm just, like, crushing them with my hands. So, you sometimes you get whole pieces; most of the time you get like crushed up pieces from my hand.

Stephanie Burt:       Okay. All right, let's talk about the flavors. Before we get into the specific flavors, I want to know—you make the chewie base, and then you put the different flavor on top? Or, do you mix it in?

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Faith Alston:        So, the 66 different flavors that I have, those are kind of folded into the base of what the chewie is. So, once you add in the flour, the sugars, and the egg, it comes out kind of like a cookie dough, then you fold in those extra flavors. So, let's say I'm doing my... Let's say I'm doing my pecan and praline one. Those are similar to the regular pecan one, but pralines are like a little extra added, like, candy-coated on the outside of the nuts, so you would fold those in at that last step. So, it just depends on which flavor I'm doing.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, let's do the top 10 most popular flavors.

Faith Alston: Ooh, okay! Top 10: We have traditional—my traditional does not have any nuts in it, so my traditional is just plain with the powdered sugar. So, we have traditional, we have snickerdoodle, we have pecan, cookies and cream which has Oreos in the inside, almond praline, pecan praline, orange cranberry, lemon, red velvet, and... Hmm... coconut—toasted coconut.

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Stephanie Burt: Okay, so orange cranberry, are they dried or fresh?

Faith Alston: Those are dried.

Stephanie Burt: Dried for orange and cranberry.

Faith Alston: I've tried fresh. Fresh makes it a little wetter, so it changes the consistency of the chewie. With any flavors that I have, you are still going to get that amazing, nice crunchy-on-the-top but soft-through-the-middle. If I make or come up with any other flavor and I try to use fresh ingredients, and it turns it more to like a chewie bread, meaning you get the chewie taste but it comes out more of like a cake, I go back to the drawing board. Because what I don't want to lose is that chewie texture and consistency for any of the flavors that I have.

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Stephanie Burt: I've seen red velvet in a few places, including from you, and I am fascinated because I haven't eaten it. How do you get red velvet flavor and ingredients in the

chewie? Can you walk us through that?

Faith Alston: So, for me, my red velvet chewie is more so of like a little bit of cocoa powder, you have a little bit of that tartness from the buttermilk, and then the red food coloring, and then also the pecans. So, it's more so the ingredients from the red velvet as more so of it being a traditional, like, red velvet kind of like cakey dessert.

Stephanie Burt: And does that swirl in, or layer on top?

Faith Alston: No, the whole thing is red. So, you have a full red chewie bar; it tastes just like a chewie. You have that little bit of hint of chocolate from the cocoa powder, those pecans going through there, so it's just like a flavor-burst combination in your mouth.

Stephanie Burt: Um, okay!

Faith Alston: [laughs] You look very intrigued. [laughs]

Stephanie Burt: I am very intrigued.

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So, chewies seem to have built you—like, inspired you creatively because coming up with 66. What do you love about the medium of chewies as a creative baker?

Faith Alston: They're very easy to manipulate. If you have that flavor palate, and you know, like, the different combinations that work well with each other, they're very easy to manipulate as long as you have that base recipe. That's like really the main thing that I love about them, on top of the fact that in the South, the majority—if you're from the South, 75% of people

know what they are, so when you come up with the—

Stephanie Burt: Well, no... [both laugh]

Faith Alston: If you're *from* the South, then I feel like the people that are *from* the South know what a chewie are.

Stephanie Burt: No.

Faith Alston: Really?

Stephanie Burt: No, it's a very, very local thing, but I love that you feel that it's so ubiquitous.

Faith Alston: Right.

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Stephanie Burt: That it's around. But yes, it is very specific thing.

Faith Alston: I have to fix that. [laughs]

Stephanie Burt: That is why you're fixing that, right?

Faith Alston: Yeah. So, yeah, it's easy to manipulate as long as you have a really good core recipe, and you have a good handle on different pairings of ingredients. So, like, my orange cranberry, that's one that I normally bring out during the holidays. That one is pretty much the same base recipe as the traditional one, but you have orange zest that's folded in there. You also have the dried cranberries, and then on top I do a nice streusel that gets baked into the chewie as

well. So, you have that nice crunchiness of the streusel in certain places, and then you get that burst of cranberry, and you get that kind of sweet tartness from the orange. It's heavenly.

Stephanie Burt: So, if you taught yourself to make chewies, okay, first, who made the best chewies that you've had before you started making them yourself?

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Faith Alston: Um, I would have to say my good friend at the time. Her name is Amanda Lawrence. [sp] Her mom is Sarah Lawrence. [sp] And I remember her chewies being up there.

Stephanie Burt: And that was in Huger?

Faith Alston: No, this was actually still in Mount Pleasant.

Stephanie Burt: Okay.

Faith Alston: Yeah.

Stephanie Burt: Am I saying that right? “Yoo-gee”?

Faith Alston: Yeah, it's “yoo-gee.”

Stephanie Burt: Okay. So, Sarah Lawrence [sp] made some chewies that were up there.

Faith Alston: Yeah, they were very...

Stephanie Burt: And what did you love about hers specifically?

Faith Alston: They just tasted like nobody else's that I had had. Granted, now, this was

when I was in, like, high school, so this was not too long ago, you know, just yesterday. [both laugh] Just yesterday.

Stephanie Burt: We're not gonna—I'm not gonna—this is not my interview, so I'm gonna allow that. [both laugh]

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Faith Alston: So, I don't know; it was just the ones that I had had, you could just tell—I feel like my palate is different from everybody just because, like, I wanted to be a chef and I didn't really know it. So, even then it was just, you know, tasting other people's, it was just like something isn't right. Something isn't right. But then it was something about hers that I was like, “Oh my goodness! Like, this is really, really good!” Yeah.

Stephanie Burt: Cool. All right, what references did you use to develop your own chewie recipe?

Faith Alston: Oh, definitely online. Google is a amazing place to find kind of anything. Google, YouTube, you just kind of put in, okay, what you're looking for. You're gonna find thousands of recipes. So, I looked at those, just kinda got a base idea, and then came up with my own recipe based off of some of those other things.

Stephanie Burt: Variations, yeah. When did you know that you had hit it?

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Faith Alston: Ooh... So, social media is kind of like a really big thing. It has been for a

little while now, but I knew that I was doing and fulfilling my purpose when I started being one of those pastry chefs that were tagged amongst some of the top tier, for what I consider to be top tier chefs. When people would be like, “Oh, you know, I’m looking for chewies for an event,” it would be like the first 15 or 20 people, “Elegant Treats, Elegant Treats! Faith Alston, Faith Alston!” And then I was like, “Wooh, okay!” Like, you know, “I’ve made it,” you know, air quotes. “I’ve made it” for, you know, I guess my city and my town or whatever, so that’s always a really good feeling, yeah.

Stephanie Burt:       What kind of events do people typically in your community look for chewies to use as part of the celebration?

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Faith Alston:        Oh, really all of them: birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, divorce parties, graduation. So, I mean, there’s never a wrong occasion to want some chewies. Even if you just, you know, want to cheat on your diet. “Hey, I need some chewies. I did good the last two weeks. I need a treat.” So, I mean, there’s never not a time to want or have a chewie. Yeah.

Stephanie Burt:       I know that you’re building a business around these chewies, so I bet you’ve thought about this. Do you know anything about the history of chewies? And have you ever thought about where they came from in your community?

Faith Alston:        I have, and to be honest, I don’t know, like, the full, full history of chewie. I do know it’s been a staple dessert in South Carolina and in the South for a very, very long time. But to 100% say I know right now, like to pinpoint... [laughs]

Stephanie Burt: No, there's not a wrong answer.

Faith Alston: Right.

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Stephanie Burt: There's not a wrong or right answer. I think oral history is really important, so, you know, what kind of comes to mind when you think of why chewies—besides just being here a long time—why they became an important dessert for the Gullah Geechee community?

Faith Alston: Right. I feel like that... I feel that chewies were or have been important to the Gullah Geechee community is because, one, they don't take a lot of ingredients. The ingredients that you need, they aren't super expensive. Well, I'm sure *then* they weren't probably super expensive. Now...

Stephanie Burt: They were pantry ingredients.

Faith Alston: Right, so it wasn't a whole lot of things that you needed to make it, and everybody really could—I could say for their experience of knowing how to make them—could make them very well. So, it's just one dessert that people just kind of looked forward to. It was like that special treat if you couldn't get—you know, like a 7UP cake which took maybe like seven or eight eggs—for chewies, depending on the size, you only need like two eggs as opposed to like seven or eight.

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So, I would definitely say it's something that, ingredients-wise, cost was low, and it was just something that everybody was doing.

Stephanie Burt: And pay off was high, and flavor, right?

Faith Alston: Yeah, definitely.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. So, what other things do I need to know about your business or your particular kind of chewie?

Faith Alston: My business is just uniquely its own. I feel like I put a lot of love in my treats, as a lot of people say that they do. I'm also a very spiritual person, so I feel like people get touched in a different way—as weird as that may sound—through my treats and through everything. I pray over everything that I send out. I pray that it fulfills people in different ways. I pray that it brings families and, you know, just communities and stuff together depending on the events that I'm doing.

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So, I'm not going to say I'm weird; I'm just going to say I'm just uniquely different in general, just in that aspect of it, of everything that I'm doing. As far as my desserts goes, I am just a vessel, just here, blessed with the talent that I thank God for all the time. My mom has passed and my grandmother has passed, so whenever I'm in the kitchen and I'm thinking of something crazy, I always go, “Okay,” you know, “guide my hands. Let me put the right amount,” because when I'm coming up with the recipe, I don't really measure. It's just kind of like a couple shakes here, a couple shakes there. So, I'm just like, “Okay, guide my hands. Let me do, you know, how

y'all want it to come out.” And a lot of the—95% of the time, my recipes come out perfect the first time. So, I'm blessed in that aspect of, you know, being able to remember it, going back and write it down.

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. Intuitive baker.

Faith Alston: Yeah, yeah.

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Stephanie Burt: And are you the kind of person—and both places are very valid, so—are you the kind of person that wants to create and maintain tradition? Or are you wanting to innovate?

Faith Alston: I like both. I definitely like to innovate because you don't want to get stuck with one thing when you can definitely kind of change things around and kind of recreate different traditions, but I do feel that traditions are important because you never want to forget where you come from. So, within my business, like, I will never stop doing the traditional and the pecan chewies, because those are the two staple chewies that I started with. Those are the OGs of the group of, you know, all these other 66 that I do have. But it is fun to kind of create and be innovative and come up with different things. There's nobody else doing a streuseled orange cranberry chewie; that's something that I came up with.

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If anybody says that they've done it before, they haven't; it's something I came up with. So, it's fun in that aspect to be able to create those different things and kind of put your trademark on

something that's been here for so long, even well before I was born, to be like, “Okay, well that girl, Faith Alston, she got this kind of chewie, and I've never had it,” so that's kind of nice to have.

Stephanie Burt: That's cool.

Faith Alston: Yeah.

Stephanie Burt: Will you once more state your full name, and the name of your business, and the location of it for me?

Faith Alston: Yes. Faith deLeon Alston.

Stephanie Burt: Can you spell that?

Faith Alston: Faith? Or just deLeon?

Stephanie Burt: DeLeon.

Faith Alston: Oh, deLeon is d-e-capital-L-e-o-n, and Alston is A-l-s-t-o-n. The name of my bakery is Elegant Treats Bakery, and I am located at 227 1st Street, suite 203, in Moncks Corner, SC 29461.

Stephanie Burt: Great. I'm going to record a few seconds of silence for the room, and I think we're good.

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[End]