



**Kirby Jones**

**La Vie En Rose Café - New Orleans, LA**

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Interviewer: Phillip Norman Reid

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Phillip Norman Reid: ...En Rose Café in New Orleans. I'm Phillip Norman, and I am speaking with Kirby Jones. Ms. Jones, could you introduce yourself for the recording?

Kirby Jones: Hi, my name is Kirby Jones, and I'm the owner of La Vie En Rose Café.

Phillip Norman Reid: Perfect. Perfect. All right. Well, thank you so much for doing this again.

And, just to get us started, could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your upbringing was like?

Kirby Jones: Sure. So, I grew up in New Orleans, specifically the Downtown Gentilly Seventh Ward area. My family has been here for over 300 years. I have family ties dating back before the area was even called New Orleans, so a lot of history and heritage here.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely, yeah. And how did you learn about that history? What do you know of the history of your family?

Kirby Jones: Just doing a lot of research online, and using things that my grandmother and other relatives had told us, and we've kind of used that information to dig a little bit more into our history.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. So, that's really important to y'all to kind of understand where you come from, and the history of the place that your family's been in for so long?

Kirby Jones: Yes, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. The Gentilly area of New Orleans, I'm not super familiar with it.

What was it like growing up there?

Kirby Jones: It's very much like a neighborhood type of subdivision kind of area, or suburb, I should say, area. A lot of homes, a lot of family homes, so it was great. We'd hang out after school, and ride bikes, roller skating, walk the dog, all those normal neighborhood things that you would do, so that was really nice. And then visiting my grandmother's house or going to my aunt's, uncle's houses, it's just always really nice to venture out to different parts of the city.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, you kind of have family all around?

Kirby Jones: Spread out, yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Got you. Very cool. And what did you like to do as a kid? What'd you do for fun?

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Kirby Jones: I loved to be outside, playing outside, and I played a lot of sports in high school too, so I was a very active youth. I loved to swim and just stay really active, so a lot of outside time, and going to the mall with older cousins, and just having a really good time. I'm grateful that I grew up in the pre-technology age.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. You had to figure out how to entertain yourself? [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah, definitely much so. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Very cool. With having all that family around, whether your immediate family or extended family, what do you feel like are the influences or the values you kind of got from the people who raised you?

Kirby Jones: We are such a tight-knit family. My mom is one of six--

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, wow. Okay.

Kirby Jones: --with four sisters and one brother, so a lot of females in the family, so a lot of cooking. It was like huge.

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All of our events, whether it's somebody's birthday or first communion or whatever is going on, is always centered around what's gonna be on the food menu after we celebrate.

Phillip Norman Reid: Sure, absolutely. And what kind of things would be served at some of those events?

Kirby Jones: Definitely like gumbo would be there, for sure, and depending on the time of year, maybe red beans, a stuffed crab, oyster patties, just all kind of different Creole foods. Lots of seafood filled menu items, crawfish pasta, just lots of things that you'd find in a lot of restaurants here but they definitely don't taste the same. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: That's what everyone says about Louisiana is the best food is home-cooked food. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, that's awesome. I asked about types of food just because I know it's sort of New Orleans Creole heritage is just a big part of the influence for you and for your business and what you do.

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So, just speak a little bit more about that. What does that heritage mean to you, and if any other just influences, traditions come to mind?

Kirby Jones: Sure. Definitely lots of seafood, like I said, filled in a lot of the dishes. So, it's funny. We have a couple relatives that are allergic to seafood, and they kind of just have to fend for themselves [laughter] because seafood is so much a part of our daily menu. And definitely like mirliton, that's always often used. Definitely always have the holy trinity seasoning mix, which is onions, bell peppers, celery, lots of garlic, so a lot of butter [laughter], and lemons. I feel like if you kind of have all those kind of bases, you pretty much have all the starting points to make whatever kind of dish.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Right, take that in a lot of directions? You said mirliton? What is that?

Kirby Jones: Mirliton, I think it's called a chayote in Spanish. How do describe a mirliton? It's kind of very similar to a bell pepper, maybe, at least as far as how we eat it. We'll have like a stuffed bell pepper. Have you ever heard of that before?

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, for sure.

Kirby Jones: So, a mirliton, my aunt will make like the same stuffing, and she'll have mirliton and the bell pepper. So, it's kind of that type of outside shell, and then it's like a soft kind of like a peppery-- not peppery but like a squash texture on the inside almost. So, it's really nice, something seasonal too that we like to have. My aunt will normally do that.

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One of my aunts is the main cook for all of the holiday events like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and stuff, so she'll have a variety of mirlitons and stuffed bell peppers for every holidays, for major holidays.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And what's her name?

Kirby Jones: Shelita.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, she was a big culinary influence, it sounds like, in the family.

Kirby Jones: Definitely for our time now, and she was taught by one of our older cousins, and she passed, so it's always like a thing of things getting passed down and shared with certain family members. And then they're like the gatekeeper of that recipe or whatever, and then they

try to share it. It's always interesting because they're always different iterations as well of how the recipe is done, and one person might do something a little different, so it's cool.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. I love that. You have like the food person or food people in each generation, and they kind of keep it alive but reinterpret it.

Kirby Jones: Exactly.

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Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Just generally speaking, I know food's such a big part of culture, but growing up, what did it mean to you to be New Orleans Creole? How'd you learn what that meant, and how did you come to identify with that?

Kirby Jones: Honestly, it's something that has come about more as I've gotten older. It's just because it's just a part of my life, so it's not like a special highlighted thing, so I probably wouldn't even really recognize as a child that we were doing specific New Orleans type of traditions. I don't really have anyone in our family that's like masking Indians and all those kinds of things. But we'd always participate in like Mardi Gras and whatever type of local events that are going on, a lot of festivals. And church was also a big part of it, a lot of the events around church as well, and just staying in the neighborhood too.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, yeah, that connection to a particular place.

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Kirby Jones: Mm-hmm.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's interesting. Yeah, I know that's, a lot of the time, how it goes is we kind of learn to specify our identity as we grow older.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: And you do that research, like you said, and that kind of thing, so it's interesting, definitely. It's like, "Oh, that's why I was doing that, growing up." [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yes, exactly.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And just still on family history, I've read kind of the info you have on your website, and you talk about your grandmother, who I think you mentioned earlier, who lived across from sugarcane fields in Lutcher. So, just talk about her influence.

Kirby Jones: Sure. My grandmother, this is my dad's mom actually. She and my dad's family is from Lutcher, Louisiana, which is like a smaller town right outside of LaPlace and Baton Rouge, in between those two. And there's lots of sugarcane fields out there, it's like a really big industry there, and plants. And my grandmother, she loved her coffee. And every time I would visit, it's always a little, small drop of coffee, lots of milk, lots of sugar, and then we'd dip a little bread into it.

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And that would be like our thing we'd do in passing of a quick, simple little breakfast. It's definitely where I got a taste for coffee at such a young age.

Phillip Norman Reid: Being introduced pretty early? [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: That's great. And what other kind of things would you do when you went over to her place?

Kirby Jones: Playing outside again, hanging out in the neighborhood, hanging out with older cousins and things, so it was always nice to go out because it was a different area and it looks different. A lot more space out there, a lot of green with the sugarcane, and it's always interesting to see the different stages of that 'cause they grow like at a specific time of the year, and they change colors, and then they get chopped all the way down, and you don't see anything over there. So, it's nice.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, that's cool. I've heard that from a lot of folks who grew up in Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

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It's like you get your city life but then you always have family in the country that you go see like on the weekends and stuff.

Kirby Jones: Yeah. On the outskirts.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yes, you kind of get a taste of both, like, rural and urban, which is cool.

Kirby Jones: Yeah, definitely.

Phillip Norman Reid: Then, obviously, eating food growing up, at what point were you becoming interested in cooking or baking and sort of learning the recipes and that kind of stuff?

Kirby Jones: Definitely just being older and wanting certain things, and like, “I bet I can make that.” I just was very adventurous, and paid a lot of attention as well as to what was in certain things, and just reaching out to my family as well, asking them, “Oh, what do you think? I’m trying to make this. What should I do here?” And they’ll tell me what specific products to get, it's always like certain brands and a certain cut, and all this kind of stuff.

Phillip Norman Reid: Just kind of learning out of necessity as you wanted to cook for yourself.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. So, you had that interest. Was that always, “This is what I want to do professionally” or at what point did you kind of go in that direction?

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Kirby Jones: No, professionally, I always thought it was really cool to own your own business. And prior to this, I worked as a hairstylist. I was a licensed barber, specializing, still, in women’s hair. But I also worked in coffee shops, and I’ve always loved the atmosphere of a coffee shop. And I wasn’t passionate about doing hair. And, I don’t know, I was just really good at being at

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coffee shops and being a barista. And I always thought it was fun to make the special drinks, or there were always like a couple of customers that had a very specific order of how they wanted their drink served, and they would make up their own kind of drink, and I just thought it was so fun and neat. And I thought it'd be great to introduce that myself, and have my own take of certain ways that I like to make coffee and different drinks.

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So, that's kind of how the café had been birthed. I started out as a pop-up. We have a couple of little light food options to go with the coffee, and then the food options really started taking off, so it just turned into like catering, which was really nice. And being in control of the menu, and giving that New Orleans experience the way that I grew up with, was always really, really great.

Phillip Norman Reid: I'll ask you a little bit more about the business. But, first, I'm just curious, growing up, thinking it's cool to own your own business, were there certain people you were looking up to who were business owners that kind of put that idea in your head?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, there were definitely a few local-- I have a family member that owns a produce stand in Gretna. And then there's also a family friend who currently has a spice and food bar in the French Market.

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And, so, I spent some time there working with them as well, and I just thought it was so nice. He had kids and he would have his sons come and work on the weekends and when they weren't at school, or even had them-- that was their full-time job at one point, and then now they operate it. So, I just always thought it was so cool. And his dad actually passed that business down to him. So, I just thought it was so nice to see that one generation started something, and how it just continued on within the family to create that generational wealth.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's awesome. Just in terms of influences in general, is there anyone else you would want to name who was just kind of formative to the person you've become?

Kirby Jones: I would definitely say my family, for sure. The women in my family have been so influential in every aspect. We are so close. And one of my aunts, she started her own catering company as well.

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So, food has just definitely been a big part of us. We love to throw parties and have functions as well. So, that spirit has just always been within me, to host. So, owning this café, for me, is like a form of hosting on a daily basis. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's awesome, welcoming people in.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's awesome. And when did you start going to coffee shops and being like, "Oh, I like this atmosphere"?

Kirby Jones: Definitely like 14, 15 years old. I went to Xavier Prep, which is on Magazine Street, and there are a ton of coffee shops on Magazine Street. My first coffee shop job was a couple blocks down the way from the high school I went to. So, just feeling like everyone in coffee shops were on their computers, just looking so busy and grown--

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: --and like they just had their life together, and I just thought it was so interesting. But I also thought it was cool how you could be sitting at a coffee shop by yourself for hours, and then you might meet someone there, and you start talking, and you build a connection.

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Coffee shops are like a safe space for people to mingle in a safe kind of way instead of going to a bar or something like that. So, I've always thought that was cool too.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, a little more laid-back.

Kirby Jones: Mm-hmm.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, it sounds like community is a big kind of through line for you just in terms of from family, and then other opportunities kind of connect--

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Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: --with coffee shops. Cool. Just what you said reminds me it's so funny to see like preteens, teenagers in coffee shops because, like you said, it's like, "Oh, this is how to be a grown-up." [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: They want to feel that way. That's awesome.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: I know that was the same for me. Awesome. You brushed kind of on your professional trajectory. Xavier Prep was your high school?

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, you graduated from there, and then what happens next?

Kirby Jones: Next, I went to Tulane for a little while. I went there for about a year.

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And I was really just kind of confused about what I wanted to do professionally in school, so I took a little break, and then that's when I started my career as being a hairstylist. I apprenticed under a licensed hairstylist for a couple of years, and learned the business, and learned how to be an entrepreneur because that within itself is also being your own boss, and learning how to work

a schedule, and all these types of things. So, it was very influential into what I do now as well.

But, like I said, I just really wasn't super passionate about it. Being at coffee shops, and enjoying that environment just really inspired me to branch out into my own. I also had a trip out to Los Angeles one year. I just treated myself for my birthday, and I went out there alone.

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And I went to a couple different coffee shops. And there was this one particular coffee shop on Melrose called Carrera Café, and I thought it was so cool and super cute. It was kind of small and quaint. But they had all these really cute food items, and then they had this machine that was printing images on top of the froth hot latte drinks. And I was just like, oh, my god, this is like next level.

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: And I'm like, they need this in New Orleans. We need something like this here.

And then on the Santa Monica Pier, there were a lot of these like bike cafés. They were like full-on carts that had like a hand sink and everything, and they were selling coffee right on the pier. And I just thought, ooh, this would be so great in New Orleans. I could imagine it at Armstrong Park or in the French Quarter to just stop by the little bike cafe and get a coffee, I often said the, like, luxury coffee stop compared to like Lucky Dog [laughter] but way more fancy and cute and an authentic New Orleans experience.

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So, that trip definitely heavily inspired me as well [child talking] to want to create a business under that model.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Very cool. And, for the recording, we have Ms. Jones' daughter,

Lily Rose here with us too. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: [laughter] Yes, she's giving her own little two cents.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yes, we appreciate it.

Kirby Jones: Very much a part of the business, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, yeah, figuring out how to balance family and work. We can talk some more about that, for sure. Let's see. So, you took the trip to LA, and then did the pop-up come shortly after that?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, literally like about a month later, it's almost like that was the answer that I needed to stop doing hair, and move forward with creating something for myself that I felt passionate about. So, it was a really, really influential trip.

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And the pop-up started quickly right after that, and it just kind of took off. I don't think I'd be still doing this now if it didn't have such a positive effect on my life at the time.

Phillip Norman Reid: What did that look like logistically? How do you get a pop-up off the ground? [laughter]

Kirby Jones: So, there is a business accelerator program here run by a local nonprofit called Propeller. Once I knew that I wanted to start this business, and I wanted to start doing pop-ups and things, I reached out to them. And they were just opening up a new section of their nonprofit with the program, and so I applied. I was selected out of a number of businesses to participate in the program. It was a year-long program. So, I started doing pop-ups there, which quickly took off because not only were they a nonprofit, they were also a co-working space for businesses.

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So, anyone who had a business but not like a storefront, they could rent space there, office space there, host meetings and all these things. So, it just introduced me to a lot of different people, which then opened up the door to do pop-ups at other venues that these people were working at or doing certain things with. And they would invite me to do food catering with meetings and all kind of stuff. So, it really just kicked off from there, and then I just kind of expanded throughout the city once I realized that people really like the products that I had to offer, because that was another big thing of trying to create menus, and seeing what would work, what wouldn't work, and a lot of trial and error, but a big learning experience. And I still have customers— I started doing that in 2017, and I still have customers that come by, and are super supportive and very happy to see that I've lasted all these years, and have grown into now my own space.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. That's awesome they've followed you to the brick and mortar.

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Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, what year was that that you started doing pop-ups?

Kirby Jones: 2017.

Phillip Norman Reid: 2017? Okay, right, so it's been a while.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. What a cool organization. What was it called again?

Kirby Jones: Propeller.

Phillip Norman Reid: Propeller? Okay. That's awesome, yeah, and the connections, like you spoke of, that's just—

Kirby Jones: Yeah, and even now, they're still such a great resource. They still check on me. It's just great because I feel like there's a lot of support out there for small businesses, but then it kind of falls off when they're onto the next, because resources are small. But Propeller has found a way to still continue to support all of the businesses that they've worked with in the past.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's amazing.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Are there a couple folks from the organization itself or just who you met kind of networking during that time that you'd want to name?

Kirby Jones: There is **Trace Allen**. He was over the big program that I participated in, and he has just been a constant force of support, and letting me know about different opportunities that might be beneficial.

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Or if I needed to call him for a listening ear, he would always answer, and almost like a mentor but a support, like, very supportive. So, he was super great. But the whole staff there is amazing. Andrea Chen is over at Propeller, and she has been able to maintain operating a huge nonprofit and still creating that personal relationship with the different business ventures.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's impressive to do, for sure.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: It can get impersonal really quickly, so it's awesome when people keep that from happening.

Kirby Jones: Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, very cool. I'm excited to hear about Propeller. So, what was like the menu the first day you had a pop-up? Do you remember?

Kirby Jones: Our first menu item was [child talking] [laughter] shrimp and grits with cold-brew coffee, and then I had a number of different types of drip coffee available as well.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Okay, cool.

Kirby Jones: The coffee shop that I used to work at turned into a roastery as well. So, it was really, really cool at the time when I first started doing pop-ups, they were just getting their roastery program out there, and offering it to other businesses to utilize. So, it was like a full 360 moment of I started working with these people, and now I have their product. I'm utilizing their product with mine, and creating my own business. And even still to this day, they're my only coffee provider.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, wow, that's very cool. They stuck with you too.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Awesome.

Kirby Jones: And they've just grown as well, so it's just really nice to see everybody has started from somewhere, and it's just constantly elevating every year.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. During that early period, what was the most exciting thing and what was the most challenging thing about starting?

Kirby Jones: The most exciting thing was being creative and doing the marketing for it, picking out the menu.

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I also was very into the aesthetics of my pop-up, so I always had like a really pretty set-up with the tablecloth. I had this lemon tablecloth that I'm like, if you see this lemon tablecloth, you know that I'm around [laughter], and it became very much a part of the pop-up, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: And did you always kind of have like an eye for detail growing up, or did someone kind of give that to you?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, in my family as well, everything has to look a certain way to be dressed up at church, and all those things. So, aesthetics has always been very important, especially my grandmother with having five girls.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, sure.

Kirby Jones: [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter] It's not just the food but how you present it, right--

Kirby Jones: Exactly.

Phillip Norman Reid: --the whole experience. That's cool.

Kirby Jones: [Child crying] I'm just gonna grab her water.

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[unrelated conversation]

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Phillip Norman Reid: I guess we could just talk about the name, La Vie En Rose. Where does that come from?

Kirby Jones: Sure. So, it's a famous Louis Armstrong song. But, honestly, I heard the saying first, and I thought it was so beautiful. And then I learned that Louis Armstrong had a song called "La Vie En Rose", which is a rendition from a famous French singer. It's a famous French saying, "to see life through rosy shades", which was very much present in my life at the time. I was frustrated with my career, and so seeing life through rosy shades just felt like the saying of where I was at at the time. And I heard this song, and I'm like, oh, this is perfect for the café. It kind of just all came about at the same time.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. And the signature ingredient kind of at your store now is sort of inspired by that as well, right?

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, tell us a little bit. When did you come up with that?

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Kirby Jones: That actually came up about two years after I was doing pop-ups. So, it wasn't one of our first menu items, but it's like our most popular now, which is so crazy to me because it just

kind of came out of nowhere, essentially. It wasn't like a plan, even though it's a play on the business name. It kind of happened by accident one day in the kitchen. I was kind of fooling around, and I dropped some rose petals into this buttery syrup that I was making [laughter] for a dish. And it was amazing, and I was like, oh, my god, this tastes so great in coffee. And it just birthed this drink that has really just kind of picked up, and went on. And, honestly, I know rose-flavored drinks are popular in coffee shops, but I had never heard of it or had that before. So, it was just interesting too like how certain things can come to someone, even though it's kind of out in the world already, other places.

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But, for me, it was like a completely new experience. I would've never thought to do that.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, and like a happy accident.

Kirby Jones: Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Because that's not what I would've guessed. I would've guessed it came together all at once, like you've got the signature ingredient that's going to fit with the name, like, all that stuff.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. So, other places that use-- so, what we're talking about is basically like cane syrup infused with rose petals, right?

Kirby Jones: Mm-hmm.

Phillip Norman Reid: And, so, is that, like, if I get a rose-flavored drink somewhere else, is it also like a simple syrup with rose petals infused?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, I think most people are making rose water, and they add that to the coffee, and then there's some sugar that they add to it after that as well. Ours is a different process though. So, I've not had-- I've gone to a couple of coffee shops here in New Orleans, and have had it now, and it definitely doesn't taste the same. They're great but ours just has a little bit more of a unique flavor to it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. Yeah, I noticed that when I sampled it. It was like this is definitely different.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

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Phillip Norman Reid: The rose comes through stronger, I feel like, in that preparation. Well, very cool. We've talked about the business a little bit. Let's jump to-- so, you said you grew up celebrating Mardi Gras. So, what did that look like?

Kirby Jones: My grandmother moved to like an older citizens home that was on St. Charles Avenue actually on Lee Circle, and so we would go to her house really early in the morning, and catch the Zulu parade. [child crying] [Ms. Jones tends to her daughter]

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Kirby Jones: So, my grandmother lived on St. Charles right on top of Lee Circle. So, we'd go by her house really early in the morning, and we'd catch the Zulu parade, and then we'd stay for Rex and all the truck floats after that. And my whole entire family would come over, and there'd be so much food, and it was so great to have such a close spot with like easy access to it up and down, to and from the parade, as a kid. So, it was really, really nice. I loved being able to have that experience with Mardi Gras.

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We miss it because she doesn't live there anymore.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. You don't have that prime real estate anymore, yeah. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Then, I realized I kind of skipped a step. When did we go from pop-up to brick and mortar? Because you said you were in another location before this one, right?

Kirby Jones: Yes. We were previously in the Contemporary Arts Center. So, prior to that, we were in a steady pop-up location at Martin Wine Cellar, which is like another New Orleans traditional spot that's been like a generational, passed-down business. [child crying]

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Phillip Norman Reid: We can take a little break, too, if you need.

Kirby Jones: Okay. I think she really wants to breastfeed. [unrelated conversation. Ms. Jones tends to her daughter]

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Phillip Norman Reid: So, I'd asked you about the last location of the business.

Kirby Jones: So, we were operating at Martin Wine Cellar, which is a local wine and cheese and deli place. We were doing pop-ups there on a weekly basis on Sundays and Saturdays, a part of their brunch. And I was approached by Carla Williams, who is the owner of Material Life, which is a lifestyle type of brand. She had all different types of clothing pieces and things. And she was partnering with Mickalene Thomas, which is like a very famous, notable artist, who had an exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center. And they wanted to create this black female space, shopping and coffee retail experience on the first floor. So, we partnered with that space, and opened November 2018, which literally was about five months before COVID.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, right.

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Kirby Jones: So, we had a rough little go. It was great prior to COVID, and then COVID came. And because it was inside of the arts museum, we were forced to shut down because the museum could not open either. So, we weren't able to operate in that like to-go only type of space, as most food businesses were. So, that definitely threw a monkey wrench [laughter] in our plans. But we reopened there in September of 2020, so this was still prior to like vaccines, and people were still really scared to kind of venture out. So, it wasn't that great for us there, so we closed March of 2021. And then we tried reopening, but it just wasn't a good fit. So, we took a little break, found that this space was becoming available, and we just went after it. [laughter]

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We got a real estate agent, and just really tried to get the space together in time. I was hoping to be open before Carnival season of 2022, but it just took a little time. But we're here now, and I'm just super excited to have this space.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. My brother's transferring a food truck to a brick and mortar, so I know that process. It always takes longer than you anticipate [laughter], for sure.

Kirby Jones: Yeah, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: And I can tell you put a lot of thought into aesthetics, of course, and everything.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, it's like you need time to get things right, for sure.

Kirby Jones: Definitely.

Phillip Norman Reid: What did it feel like when it finally opened?

Kirby Jones: Like a breath of fresh air--

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: --just because I feel like we've been having such a tough little time, and our timing has been off with the pandemic and everything, and having a new baby at the same time. So, it just was a lot that I was juggling.

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And, even now, I'm still very much in the space of like trying to pick things up, and figure out what we need to do to move forward, and really enjoy being in the space.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, getting comfortable?

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, absolutely. Great. Well, congratulations. That's a huge thing to pull off [laughter]--

Kirby Jones: Thank you.

Phillip Norman Reid: --during a pandemic [laughter], for sure. That's impressive.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's definitely, I'm sure there will be more good news to come. Let's see. So, we'll jump back. You talked about celebrating Mardi Gras with your grandmother and family. When was the first time that you had King Cake, and what do you remember about it?

Kirby Jones: Really, I can't remember when the first time was because it's so much present, you know, before I can even remember anything, I had King Cake. But my favorite for sure was McKenzie's, which they don't exist anymore. But it was like the best, the best, the best. It was all I grew up on, it's the only King Cake that we'd get.

Phillip Norman Reid: When did they close down?

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Kirby Jones: I feel like probably Katrina shut them down. I don't remember specifically though because I was like 14 when Hurricane Katrina came. But I'm pretty sure they didn't come back then. They are still operating in that space, and I think someone does McKenzie style King Cake, but it's not like the old-school.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, what you remember?

Kirby Jones: Mm-hmm.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Got you, yeah, because I've heard about them a lot. So, yeah, it's a big part of the story, for sure.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: And then at what point, when you were doing pop-ups, would you make a King Cake or a Queen Cake that you have?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, the cakes came while we spent time at the Contemporary Arts Center. So, right before COVID, that last Mardi Gras, I was at the café, and I was fully in love with the rose cane syrup that we made. And it was really picking up there as well where people, that was like, starting to be the number one drink, and I thought, what more can I do with this syrup?

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And King Cakes came to mind. I'm like, this is probably something that would be really, really good in a King Cake. So, I just tried it out, and it was amazing. And then I thought, ooh, if I'm going to do a rose, I got to do a savory one, and, of course, crawfish was the first thing that came to mind. I love the crawfish bread at Jazz Fest, and I'm just a crawfish lover. So, any kind of way a crawfish is involved, I'm down with it.

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: So, I played around with that as well, and it just was like a no-brainer. It just came to life, and took a couple of pictures. They looked aesthetically pleasing as well, and promoted on our social media, and they just kind of took off from there.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, and so you got the Rose Queen Cake, and then it's the Don Creole Crawfish King Cake.

Kirby Jones: Crawfish King Cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: Got you. Cool. I mean, kind of the R&D process, was one harder to figure out than the other, or did they come together pretty easily?

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Kirby Jones: No, they came together really easily.

Phillip Norman Reid: Nice.

Kirby Jones: It's all that same base as far as getting that dough together, and then just putting in your filling. So, it's just really a fun experience to get to play around there. A couple of trial and error things of certain cheeses to use, and how thick to make the crawfish in like the little buttery sauce that was with that. I tried a couple of different iterations, a cream cheese add-in, a crawfish King Cake, even in the Rose Queen Cake. I've done that as well. So, it's been fun to kind of play around with it.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Could you just describe what's in each of them?

Kirby Jones: Sure. So, the Rose Queen Cake is a puff pastry style. Both of the King Cakes are puff pastry style King Cakes. The Rose Queen Cake is filled with our rose cane syrup as well as

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cinnamon. I love to use brown cane sugar as well, and add that, and it makes like a toffee kind of texture once it's cooked in the oven.

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It's just so nice and lovely. And then we have a buttercream icing that we put on top, filled with the rose syrup as well. And then we dress it up with rose petals, and we have a purple, green, and gold-ish sprinkling color. It's kind of a little different. I wanted to separate because I didn't want anyone to expect a traditional King Cake, so I call it a Rose Queen Cake for that matter just so, that way, there aren't any disappointed customers--

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: --that were looking for that traditional old-school New Orleans style King Cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. That's interesting. And it's been an interesting thing to talk to bakers about is like, yeah, what makes a King Cake a King Cake versus like, right, when you're trying to kind of innovate and do your own thing.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: So, what did you feel like were the baseline things like I have to stick to versus, like, where do I have room to put my own flair?

Kirby Jones: Definitely have to stick to having some sort of icing, just because I love icing.

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Most King Cakes don't— I mean, not all King Cakes have icing. But I definitely felt like that was a must. And then even for the Don Creole, it's a Crawfish King Cake, but I'm like it's got to have some sort of crumbly, sprinkle-looking topping, so I made sure to play around with that.

And we used grated parmesan cheese on top, so it kind of gives that sugar effect without being sweet, so that way we have that savory cake as well. So, that and the sprinkles, those are the two most important things. For the Don Creole, we garnish with the parmesan, and then we have thyme leaves that we put on top to kind of create like a crown. Now, the Don Creole is actually named after Arthur Humphrey, who is the Spice Emporium owner in the French Market that I spoke of a little bit earlier that inspired me.

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He just was such a force, and he loves his business. And it's in the French Market, so there are a lot of tourists. I just loved his spirit down there, and watching him talk with the customers, and he had all different kinds of seasonings and spices, and he even made his own brand. At the time, there was like Slap Ya Mama was becoming like a big brand, and he'd always-- as people were walking by, if they're not stopping by to see what he had to offer, he'd yell out, "Yeah, I got the kind to make the baby stop cryin!"

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: And people would just kind of turn, like, “What’s he talking about?”

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: And then they’d see he had all these different spices and hot sauces and things, and

I just thought it was so cool. And he’s literally the essence of a Creole man, in my opinion.

Everything about him from the way that he talks, and he’d always call his cousins "**cowan**".

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His food menu as well was filled with all different types of New Orleans things they used to

make, like alligator sausage, crawfish sausage, shrimp sausage, all different types of things. And

it just was so inspiring. So, I actually named my King Cake after him because he’s the Don

Creole in my eyes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow. What an awesome way to honor his legacy.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: And you said he would call his cousins what? That’s not something I

know. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: He would call his cousins "cowan".

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. What’s that? What’s that mean?

Kirby Jones: Cousin. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. Right. Got you.

Kirby Jones: [laughter] Yeah, he'd see somebody walking down the French Market, and he's like, "Cowan, what's going on?"--

Phillip Norman Reid: [laughter]

Kirby Jones: --you know, type of thing.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, sounds like a larger-than-life personality.

Kirby Jones: Definitely.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. When you released the King Cake and the Queen Cake, what was some of the first feedback you got that was like exciting?

Kirby Jones: I think everyone just really-- it was a different taste, and then the Crawfish King Cake is not something that's too popular. I know there are a couple other people that have done Crawfish King Cakes as well.

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But I haven't been familiar with anyone doing it, so it was fun for me. I'm thinking of Jazz Fest, and how that crawfish bread is such a huge part of the menu out there. And, so, I was like, this would be great as a King Cake. I feel like it was like a comparison almost to the crawfish bread out there, and doing something different and new as well. So, it's really cool.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. I just checked out Jazz Fest, and I saw crawfish bread, and I was like I have no idea what that is [laughter] But it's the inspiration.

Kirby Jones: Yeah, it's really good. You got to get it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Okay. And is it just like a loaf? It's like a little piece a bread?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, well, not pizza bread. It's like a soft texture, and they have it cut in half, and then it's filled with like a bunch of cheese and crawfish tails and things on the inside.

Phillip Norman Reid: Got you. So, you just did that on a King Cake scale?

Kirby Jones: Mm-hmm.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Very cool.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Awesome. So, it sounds like you've grown your business a lot through social media.

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So, just like talk about that. What if there wasn't social media? [laughter] How would this work?

[laughter]

Kirby Jones: I was definitely out and doing these pop-ups, too, so I definitely was out in the world as well, trying to get the brand name out there and stuff. But social media has definitely

played a big impact of taking a really pretty picture, and doing the hashtags, and trying to entice people to come where I was doing pop-ups as well, and get them to try our food. And we have some unique things as well that we were doing at the time. So, I think it just kind of sparked the interest in people to want to give us a try. And then once they tried everything, they fell in love with us, and they just continue to be super supportive.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's just been interesting with kind of a lot of folks I've interviewed, it's like a lot of bakers nowadays, that's where they do business. We were trying to find your King Cake, friends and I, and we're like, "Oh, we gotta message her on Instagram [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's so interesting that that's where a lot of it kind of takes place.

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Kirby Jones: Yeah, especially now. There's so many different like-- it's amazing to see all how like social media has just created this platform of business structure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. It sounds like you're really taking advantage of that, and being able to get the aesthetic element that you like too, being able to incorporate that.

Kirby Jones: Yeah, it works well. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Very cool. What would you say are just some of the challenges of running a small business, developing these different recipes and ideas, or anything like that?

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Kirby Jones: I think, for me, my biggest challenge is trying to balance the work and home life, trying to know when it's time to stop, and when it's time to take care of myself. So, that's definitely something I'm going to have to juggle as well.

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And being by myself, I'm the owner by myself, so that also has a lot of weight and pressure on me to juggle and balance what's more important, and also knowing that if something goes wrong, it's my fault. [laughter] So, that definitely plays a part in our everyday challenges, and not to mention COVID. [laughter] COVID has just really, really made things 10 times more difficult than what I feel like if there was no COVID.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Like I said, super impressive to [laughter]--

Kirby Jones: Thank you.

Phillip Norman Reid: --get things off the ground under those circumstances. And what have been some of the biggest rewards of achieving this dream that you had when you were young of owning your own business?

Kirby Jones: Definitely my grandmother is so proud. I don't think she would've ever thought that her offspring would create a business like this.

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And my family's just super proud. And it's always fun when I get to do things like this, and they're like, "Oh, my god, I can't believe that's Kirby!" You know, I just kind of created all of this on my own without a lot of help, and it's all just kind of derived from my vision. So, that has been really rewarding to see how proud everyone is of me.

Phillip Norman Reid: Was there a moment when you kind of finished things up here that you got to show it to your family, and have a little opening?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, definitely. We were featured on CBS Sunday Morning. That was one of my biggest accomplishments in regards to the King Cakes. And just being on national TV was just something I would've never dreamed of. Even owning my own business, it's not something that happens every day.

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It's moments like that when I take a step back, and I'm like, oh, my god, because I'm in this every day, so it doesn't feel like-- every day, it doesn't feel like this is so special. I'm very proud and having to do what I do, but having those moments where someone else is recognizing my hard work and what I've put into it, and appreciating the creative side of crafting all these things really feels good.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Awesome. Well, then, since you have your daughter here with us, talk a little bit about just-- I know that's a balance, being a mom and running the business. But

talk a bit about kind of your relationship with her. She came along kind of just as you were getting all this going.

Kirby Jones: Yeah. She's a pandemic baby, as they say. I literally found out I was pregnant the same week of the city shutting down. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, wow.

Kirby Jones: So, it was a lot of emotions going on, and scary as well, and just even scared about what the coronavirus could do to kids.

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So, we spent a lot of time home when she was first born, and just kind of coming to the café, checking on things, and then going right back to our same little bubble just to keep everybody safe and healthy. But she's such a joy and a big blessing. And it's always cute when she's here and she's greeting the customers. And she makes it such a authentic experience I think when people come here, and they know this is a business but we're people too, and we have feelings, and we have family, and all of these things. So I think that kind of gets taken out of context when people visit places, or if you're going to a chain versus coming to a small business, we have a lot riding on this. So, I love having her here, and people getting to experience and know like I'm a real person, and I put a lot of pride and passion and love into every single product that we make, and everything that we do here.

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So, I think she kind of solidifies that as well.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally, yeah, you got a cohost with you. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, is there anything we missed or that you were expecting to talk about that you want to add?

Kirby Jones: No, I think we've pretty much covered the bases of everything. I think my main goal with the café is to just really provide like a safe space for people to kind of just hang out and also get to experience the city. I love New Orleans so much, and I love the culture here, and I just really wanted to create an environment that really gives what I think New Orleans deserves as far as its culture and traditions and food and how it's supposed to taste, and all these things. Like, that's big for me.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Any things you're experimenting with to add to the menu, or just thoughts for the future?

Kirby Jones: Definitely always adding to the menu.

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I love like featuring things from the farmers market, whatever's like fresh and current at the time. Every week, I'm always trying something new, and it's always fun to see like our regulars' reactions to whatever new food menu item we have. So, it's always fun. It's always something new here too. I don't take like six months to kind of work on this one new menu item, and then have this grand reveal. Like, we're going full throttle. If I'm thinking it, we're gonna try it, and it's gonna happen in the next couple of days. And I like to get people's real reaction. And then if I know it's something that everybody's really liking, then it's something that I take a little bit more seriously, and try to have it on a more consistent basis.

Phillip Norman Reid: Awesome, and you get it unveiled on Instagram. [laughter]

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, build some hype.

Kirby Jones: Well, sharing stories, and say, "Hey, come get this special this week." I think that makes it fun too. You can always come here expecting to try something new.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's another exciting thing about how social media's changed food. It's like, right, there's like that excitement of there's always something new, and you're going to know as soon as it drops.

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Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. A good way to build a customer base that way, too.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, there was one thing I skipped, and then I'll let you go. But just if you could talk a little bit about-- I know King Cake season can be crazy for bakers. Was it hard for you to keep up with orders this year or other years you've done it?

Kirby Jones: Yes. Well, this past Mardi Gras was our second season. But we were literally in the midst of like painting and redecorating and renovating the space, so it was super hard. Also, like, just working on the contract and the lease and things like that all during the midst of Carnival time, I felt like I was missing out on so much. I was trying my hardest still to participate, which, we got a couple of pick-up dates in. But I'm really excited for this next Carnival season. We're like in the heart of everything, so I think that we're going to have like a really, really huge Carnival next year.

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Phillip Norman Reid: Totally, yeah, because parade routes are a few streets over.

Kirby Jones: Yeah. And then they load the floats like literally the next block over.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, wow, okay.

Kirby Jones: So, it'll be a really good time for us.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Very cool. Do you get anyone to help you out when you're having to make all those King Cakes?

Kirby Jones: Yeah, I do. I get some part-time staff, 'cause we're stuffing and making-- even though this season, I didn't have a lot of pick-up dates, we still did 100 King Cakes, which is big for me because, like I said, King Cakes is like one of the newest additions to what we offer. So, to be able to reach that many people, and them wanting our product, it's definitely been great, and I definitely had to turn a lot of people down as well. So, I just can't wait until next year to really plan it out, and have a full plan on how we're gonna get our King Cakes out there.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. The ones you described, they're very intricate, so I'm sure very time-consuming [laughter]--

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Kirby Jones: Yeah, they are. They are.

Phillip Norman Reid: --to get out 100 of them.

Kirby Jones: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Crazy. Awesome. Well, if there's nothing else to add, thank you so much again for your time. Lily, thank you for loaning us your mom.

Kirby Jones: Yeah. [laughter]

Phillip Norman Reid: And we'll just go ahead and leave 30 seconds of silence on the end here, and it'll be all wrapped up.