



Chelsea Raby

Pickle & Ash

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Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

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Jessica Taylor: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing Chelsea Raby on May—

Chelsea Raby: 21.

Jessica Taylor: 21, 2022. [Laughter] And we're in Stuart—technically, right?—Virginia.

Chelsea Raby: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: And, ma'am, can you please tell us some of your earliest memories of baking?

Chelsea Raby: I don't have a lot of early memories of baking. I would say that baking is something that came to me a little bit later in life. I did grow up in a restaurant. My uncle opened a restaurant when I was probably five or six years old, so I spent my whole life around food and around cooking, but I didn't have any early memories of baking per se until a little bit later on.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. What kind of restaurant was it?

Chelsea Raby: It was more of a hometown diner-style restaurant. It's actually still open to this day. I don't think he'll ever retire.

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But yeah, it wasn't as much of a from-scratch as what we're doing.

Jessica Taylor: Where is it located?

Chelsea Raby: It's in Pennsylvania.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Is that where you're from?

Chelsea Raby: Yes. South Central Pennsylvania right on the Maryland-West Virginia line.

Jessica Taylor: Understood. So what brought you here?

Chelsea Raby: My other half brought me here. I left Pennsylvania in my mid-twenties, I would say, and I lived in various places kind of all along the Appalachian line. And then while I was in North Carolina I met him. We were interns at the Biltmore Estate and we met there, and he kind of moved to a different spot in North Carolina and I moved to Tennessee. And then we ended up back in North Carolina together and then we ended up here where he grew up.

A2: Hey, lunch was great. Thanks.

Chelsea Raby: Thank you. Thank you.

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter] What did you learn about tourism from Biltmore?

Chelsea Raby: Oh, gosh.

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The value of it, I guess. How much revenue it brings, how many people it brings, how much culture it spreads, how much people can learn from history, that area especially but the value of tourism is—I can't even put a monetary amount on that. And now that we live here that's something that is keeping this area alive for sure, and it's something that they're trying to grow exponentially. It brings revenue into the area. It helps to keep the history and the culture going of this area to the next generations. I think it's super vital.

Jessica Taylor: And what were your first impressions of the history and culture here when you moved here?

Chelsea Raby: When I moved here it was similar to where I grew up.

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I grew up a lot in orchards, apple orchards, and dairy farms and things like that. And there's a lot of that here so that was very similar. Preservation of food, self-sustaining, families, things that are just passed down from generation to generation. That was still so predominant here and I valued that a lot. I was kind of moved by it, for sure. The kindness of people. That is definitely a part of their culture. I don't think I've ever lived anywhere where people are as kind as they are here. Those were my first things I noticed for sure.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And getting back to when you started baking, was that here, was that in Pennsylvania or . . . ?

Chelsea Raby: I was living on a military base overseas and I was doing a lot of just general cooking.

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We lived in a camp with forty or fifty people and I was the only female actually. [Laughter] And so I was the one cooking 'cause none of the fellows wanted to cook. And I was doing it for them, and I really enjoyed it. It brought me happiness. And one day we were sitting around eating and one gentleman said, "Have you ever thought about doing this for a living?" I was, like, "No." I'd never really thought of it. I kind of had tried to run from it since I grew up in a restaurant, and

that was a construction business that I was with all these gentlemen. And so I left that, and I came back to the States and at that point I had a choice to make to kind of start my life over. And so I thought, well, I'm either going to start a new career—well, that's what I'm going to do. So I had thought about what he had said to me, and I decided to go back to school. And I just did a one-year program for baking and pastry. And then I just started back into restaurants again and went from there.

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And that's been, I'd say, about fifteen years ago, I guess.

Jessica Taylor: Wow. Where was the program in baking and pastry?

Chelsea Raby: In Pennsylvania.

Jessica Taylor: Pennsylvania. Okay. And what do you like most about baking specifically?

Chelsea Raby: Gosh. I'd say the happiness that it brings others. Obviously, it makes me happy to do it. I think that there's a huge connection between—which I think any craft you use your hands is a connection between yourself and what you're working with. So with baking it's food, flour, obviously, but all different kinds of foods. And so it brings me back and kind of roots me again, I think. And it makes me listen to myself and my instincts and how I feel about something. I know baking is a science but for me it's purely instinct and how I feel about it.

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But I think it's also a connection with others. I think about just how much everybody enjoys something baked, whether it's sweet or savory, if it's breads—I don't think I've met another human that doesn't like some form of baking. So that's really important to me, I think, is just being able to bring joy to other people that they can't necessarily do themselves or they don't want to do themselves. And I think about when the pandemic hit and there was a shortage of a lot of different things, but one of the biggest things was yeast, and it was because people were at home baking. And I was, like, wow, of all the things people could be doing, this is what they're choosing to do. And that spoke to me in volume. I was, like, wow, this is still something that's really important to people even though we're now in a culture where there's all these diets and allergies and all these things going on. That's still something that's so core to humans, I think.

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And that's pretty neat to me.

Jessica Taylor: Absolutely. Do you have a favorite recipe or process that you've developed?

Chelsea Raby: No. I enjoy the breads a lot so that's one aspect that I really enjoy, and I'd say the other would be custards, if it's ice cream or crème brûlées or puddings or things like that. That's just, like, a comfort food for me. But those are probably my favorite things to do.

Jessica Taylor: What are the breads that you bake here that people respond to?

Chelsea Raby: We do all the breads inhouse for all of our sandwiches, for dinner service, so with entrees they get bread. We do a hummus plate that has a focaccia, so we do probably one, two—we do all our hamburger buns. I'd say there's seven or eight different kinds of bread

that we do. And our menus change at least four times a year so there's always something different that we're doing. When we take the truck places, we make all the bread for that. So all different kinds of stuff.

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Jessica Taylor: Wow. And how does it vary seasonally?

Chelsea Raby: It depends on the menu items. So I do a basic pullman loaf which is your basic white bread, but right now we're doing a pullman that has pickling spice in it. So that actually started in the winter. We were doing a Rubeen sandwich and the corned beef has pickling spices, so we were, like, that's another way to bring out that spice in the sandwich. So I chose to put that in the bread. And now we're doing a lighter form of the Rubeen, so we carried that over. The hamburger buns stay on all year round. It really just depends on what kind of sandwiches we're doing or also what's feasible for me to do by myself. I do most of it by myself, so it just depends.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. You do most of it by yourself, but do you bring employees or family members or anyone else into the process, like, either in terms of thinking through what you're going to do or in terms of actually executing for the day?

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Chelsea Raby: I do have employees that will help if it comes down to that. A lot of them don't have the skill of starting it from the beginning and finishing it, so I definitely bring them in to help me roll out hamburger buns or forming the bread bowls like I was doing today, or scaling them out to the weight that they need to be. And definitely creative process. Mitch and I always

are talking with the staff, you know, “What’s your favorite thing to eat? What’s your favorite bread?” Or, “If we do this sandwich what do you think would go well with it?” Twenty minds are definitely better than one or two, so it’s always interesting to see what their thoughts are on that.

Jessica Taylor: Do you have an example of how that’s worked in the past for the dishes that you prepare here where bread is involved where the staff had something to say that was helpful?

Chelsea Raby: Hmm.

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I can’t think of one particular other than we had a hummus plate, and we were trying to decide if we were going to do flatbread or focaccia. And I had done focaccia for them already and they really enjoyed that so that the unanimous vote was, let’s go with focaccia rather than flatbread. So I guess that would be the one instance.

Jessica Taylor: How have other bakers or other restaurants institutionally influenced what you do?

Chelsea Raby: Oh, man. I think I’m always influenced by other bakers for sure. I’m super respectful of people doing wood-fired baking, I think is a whole ‘nother craft in itself. I follow a lot of them on Instagram, some of them that I’ve worked with in the past. There’s tons, there’s lots. That’s one thing that definitely keeps me going is just watching what others are doing.

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Yeah, keeps me inspired.

Jessica Taylor: Yeah. You mentioned you worked with people who do wood-fired baking?

Chelsea Raby: I haven't worked with them, but I'm inspired to, watching them through social media and reading. That's definitely another outlet for me to be inspired by others. But I haven't actually worked with anyone that's done it.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. Are there bakers in this area, Patrick County, Henry County, Martinsville that have influenced you or other restaurants that have influenced you?

Chelsea Raby: No. I haven't met a lot of other bakers yet here. I know of a couple, but they aren't baking in a commercial setting, or they are retired. Those are the only bakers that I've met, so I don't know a lot here yet. I've been here about six or seven years, so I'm surprised that I haven't met a lot. I know that there's not a lot of commercial settings that are doing breads from scratch in the area of Martinsville and Stuart.

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Floyd does have some more bakers up in that area. I actually just was given a flour—ironically, we've been talking about the local flours—it's Grateful Grains, I think is what it's called. It's right in Floyd, so I'm going to reach out to that gentleman about some of his flours. But I haven't met a lot of commercial bakers yet.

Jessica Taylor: Speaking of, how would you describe the food in Patrick County and Henry County? As you came here as a newcomer, what surprised you or stuck out to you that's unique to the area?

Chelsea Raby: I'm not familiar with a lot in Henry County, but I know here in Patrick County I was amazed at how many people were still having home cooked meals and the whole canning process, preservation, gardening, and using those in meals.

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That's not something that I grew up with in my home and so I had always wanted to be a part of that. And so moving back here, Mitch's parents, we lived right next door to them for a long time and they gardened, and we canned all summer. And we sat down, and we had meals together and it was from scratch. His mom is an amazing, amazing cook. And I couldn't believe how much of that was going on here still in a world where everyone is just too busy to sit down together and to cook. But they're still doing it here. The old ways are still alive for sure.

Jessica Taylor: So you also cook seasonally. Are there seasonal fruits or vegetables that you put into your baking, dessert or bread or otherwise?

Chelsea Raby: Oh, yeah. I'm using what we can. Today I used—we had some little baby fennel fronds that we actually grew on our property, and they cut the fennel section off to pickle it 'cause we do a lot of pickling and stuff.

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And we had all these fronds left and we were trying to figure out, besides pesto, what else are we gonna do with them? So I put that into some bread today. We had preserved some lemons from the winter, and I threw that into some bread today. Anything that we can get I'll find a way to use it. Obviously, pastries and desserts we're using berries and fruits all year long. But yeah, vegetables I'll put into bread. Whatever I can use I will.

Jessica Taylor: We're here because of the Strawberry Festival today and that also brought a lot of people to the restaurant today.

Chelsea Raby: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: How have you seen customers, and also when they come in seasonally, influence what you do?

Chelsea Raby: I think it's been inspiring to be able to spend some time in the dining room with our guests when they're here and how they're inspired by us doing some different things than what you might see in this area and being able to utilize things a little more in different ways.

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So if they have a garden, they may be growing the same things we are, but we're using them in a different way than what they are. And to see how happy they are with that is inspiring to me.

And that definitely keeps us going because we were really nervous about some of the things we wanted to do and how we would be perceived here, because with the old ways sometimes is an old mindset. And so we were a little nervous, but people have been amazing and awesome and open and accepting and encouraging, so we're just, like, keep going. We're gonna keep doing

this and we're gonna let our creative juices flow. And we like to grow different things, too, than what other people do. So maybe everybody likes their Mortgage Lifter tomatoes and their German Johnsons, and we may grow Mr. Stripeys and some different things, the pineapple tomatoes and stuff that people aren't familiar with.

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And that's exciting, too, 'cause they'll be in the dining room, and they'll be, like, "What is that?" And we're, like, "It's a tomato. It just looks a little bit different." And, like, "Oh, that's so cool! I would've never thought of that." So I think that's the most inspiring thing by what others have brought to me here.

Jessica Taylor: The idea that you're doing something with something that's familiar in a unique way, can you give me an example of a dish you were nervous about or that you got feedback on from customers in a positive way?

Chelsea Raby: Hmm. I know there were some desserts. I'm just trying to think of what they were. I think last summer we did a sweet corn crème brûlée that really took off. I had done it before in North Carolina, but we had a different audience then. And I knew that they would probably enjoy it but here I was, like, I'm not sure. But they really enjoyed it, so that was one.

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Mitch has done a lot of savory things that people have really loved, but dessert-wise I'd say that'd be the one that sticks out the most.

Jessica Taylor: Oh, that's awesome. You mentioned the history of canning and preservation and things like that in the area. What are you aware of as far as the history of food here and who talked to you about it? It sounds like you know things.

Chelsea Raby: Well, like I said, I didn't grow up doing it. Part of my family was actually Mennonite up until my grandfather, but I didn't know them. But I always had such a fascination with it. So I don't know if that's something that—in my mind, I'm, like, is that just in your blood of sorts? Like a physical memory that you don't have but you have. So I've always been connected to it. So once I left home and started living in different places along Appalachia obviously, I talked with lots of different people about canning and preservation and met so many different people.

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So I got a lot of different ideas and thoughts everywhere I went. But here Mitch's family, we lived right with them when we first moved here so they've been doing it their whole life. So we always had conversations about it. I did it with them for years. But then, just the more people I met here, everyone's doing it.

Jessica Taylor: What role do you see history playing in the food scene here broadly defined?

Chelsea Raby: It's the core of it. The history, it is "it." I think the fact that people here are so connected to their roots, and they so much want to keep that, I think that's going to keep the history alive.

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I think there's another generation of people here that is coming back to this area and wants to keep that going also. A lot of people left here and were, like, I'm going to live my life. I'm never coming back here. And I think there's a resurgence of young people coming back here and a part of that is that they want this place to move forward but they want it to also maintain that simple life, for lack of a better term. I know that's our logo, but people still believe in it so much, if that makes sense.

Jessica Taylor: Um-hm, absolutely. Absolutely. Can you walk me through a typical day on the days that you bake?

Chelsea Raby: Oh, man. Well, I don't just bake. Like I said, I'm one of the four owners so I have a lot of other responsibilities, too. But I'm usually here from anywhere between eight and nine in the morning till we close, so it's between nine and ten at night, I'd say.

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But it's just planning. So we usually have three desserts going at all times and all the breads. And then, I help with any preservation products that we're doing, like anything that we're pickling or whatever, I help with that, too. But I usually try the night before to start planning for the next day, but sometimes I don't do that. So I'll come in in the morning, I'll just take an inventory of everything, and then I really have to map out the day as far as times go because your bread needs a certain amount of time. And if you have three different breads you can't be doing them all at once, so you have to stagger them out, starting one, then waiting an hour to start another so that you have enough time to finish that before this one's ready. But then you have to plan that around service. I have to plan it around the ovens because we all share two ovens. So it's a lot

about strategy, planning, being organized. I'm that girl with the notebook with the seven pages of lists and notes and times.

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And I think a lot of bakers probably are. I'm that type personality. I don't know if bakers make the personality, or the personality makes the baker. I don't know which happens. But it's planning, my whole day is just planning. And then I just get started and the bread sometimes is done faster than other times because it's hotter in the kitchen that day or it's colder, so that plays a part into it. So as much as you do plan you also have to just be able to wing it and say, okay, this isn't gonna work. I gotta go with plan B.

Jessica Taylor: Getting to that process, how did you scale up from being a baker that was working—I guess maybe you were baking in North Carolina?

Chelsea Raby: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Scaling up from baking in North Carolina to in your own business, kind of planning everything?

Chelsea Raby: It was actually just very similar, so luckily since I wasn't baking much at home. Most of my experience is baking commercially.

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So that also is another point in that I have mad respect for home bakers because I often have a hard time baking at home because I'm used to a commercial kitchen, I'm used to commercial ovens. They're easier to use than an oven at home. So I have a lot of respect for people that bake

at home and take it to the farmers market, or they bake at home for their family or whatever they're doing. That takes more really than what I'm doing. I may be doing it on a larger scale, but I think I have the equipment that makes it easier for me to do it than they do. But for me, there wasn't much of a transition between working in other kitchens baking and then baking in my own kitchen, other than just trying to manage the other tasks of owning a business. There definitely is that, but that's the only change really for me.

Jessica Taylor: Okay.

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And you also do a lot of local sourcing beyond your farm, correct?

Chelsea Raby: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Can you talk about how you made those relationships and what that's like?

Chelsea Raby: We continue to make those relationships. We lived here for about four or five years, I guess—I'm losing track of time—but we lived here for a few years before we started this, so we definitely made a lot of connections before this happened. Our original plan was to have a farm brewery on our homestead but regulations and stuff like that, that wasn't gonna happen. So we were starting to make connections as soon as we got here. So just time, we were able to meet people. Then, once we got our doors open, we just started reaching out to other people and saying, look, if you know someone's that's doing this—what do you call it—I'm losing my words—outsourcing to other people for that.

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But then a lot of people started contacting us. Once the word got out that that's what we wanted to do, we were looking for this and that, people show up here regularly. And they're, like, "Oh, I just moved up here. I've got this farm, I've got this, I've got that." And we're, like, "That's amazing." We just met a young couple up in Meadows of Dan. They opened a little coffee shop up there. They now have a farm. They deliver freshly slaughtered chickens to us, broken down chickens. Once a week they're bringing us chicken. People show up and they say, "I've got six blueberry bushes in my front yard. You want my blueberries?" And we're, like, "Yes, we want your blueberries." So I think, as much as we're excited to be doing this, people are excited to be a part of it. And so they start to kind of find us a little bit also. Once we hire people, they know people. The six degrees of separation, it's amazing how many people you meet that you're, like, oh, I heard of that person, and I knew they were doing that, but I hadn't had time to reach out to them.

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But we get honey. Our coffee is roasted locally; it's not grown locally, obviously. Our market is full of locally made products, vegetables, meats. Our dairy comes from about an hour and a half, two hours down the road. I'm trying to think what else. Lots of various things.

Jessica Taylor: Yeah. You mentioned the staff also having those networks. Are they local?

Chelsea Raby: Most of them. But there are a lot of transplants and a lot of them are here and they've just bought property and they want to start their own farm and they're doing similar things to what we're doing where they have a love for it, and they don't have the room for it. So

they're, like, I want to work here so that I can be on the farm, and I can be in the restaurant. We have one gentleman that has his own homestead, but he works a couple days at the farm, and he works a couple days in the kitchen here.

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But a lot of them are just locals. I'd say it's sixty-forty locals to transplants.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And the local folks, are they also working here part time or is it a mix?

Chelsea Raby: Almost everybody is full-time that we have. I think we only have maybe two or three part-time people. Actually, we probably have about four and two of them are teenagers.

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, absolutely. And you had also mentioned earlier that you were interested in education as part of your mission here.

Chelsea Raby: Um-hm.

Jessica Taylor: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Chelsea Raby: So one thing that we definitely want to do—well, one thing we are doing, I think I spoke of it earlier, is kind of educating people of different things that you can do with the foods you already have. So that's one form of the education is just with our guests.

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Another is with our staff. We've hired people that have a lot of experience and we've hired people that have never cooked in a kitchen before. We also just started working with a program.

It works through a couple different agencies but it's kids that are on kind of a career exploration and they just will spend a couple weeks with us just shadowing but also participating to see if maybe this is something they want to do in the future. And from what their counselor had said, there's a lot of kids that are interested in food and beverage and hospitality. And this area desperately needs more people to be doing it. If they're going to rely on tourism, they need the help. So we wanted to be a part of that. We were, like, yes, let's show them all the things they can be doing and make a career of it and still live in their homeplace and be successful and happy. So we are participating in that. [To person in background] Hi! [Laughter]

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A3: I heard voices. I just [inaudible 0:28:03] come back here and see who was sitting out here. Oh, y'all are good.

Jessica Taylor: [Laughter]

Chelsea Raby: We had spoken with the high school about possibly doing an internship program with them briefly, but I think that's kind of got pushed by the wayside a little bit for now. But any way that we can reach out to people—we talked about having little classes here on baking or food preservation or anything like that. So any way that we can connect with others in the community, be it adults or children, we want to do.

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, absolutely. And what do you hope for the future of tourism in Patrick County?

Chelsea Raby: I hope it continues to thrive, but I hope that more of the local younger people will come back here.

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If they choose to go off for a while, I hope they come back here and participate in that and keep it going because I think it's essential for this area. I think it's one of the things that's going to keep Patrick County going, put it kinda on the map. Just an instance of that is *Blue Ridge Outdoors* magazine does a "best of" every year and a lot of places in Stuart were nominated this year. We were one of them, but there was a winery and some of our festivals and multiple different places in Patrick County. And we were, like, wow, that's incredible! We're being put on the map and being brought to everyone's attention, like, hey, we're down here, too! 'Cause a lot of times Floyd is recognized a lot but Patrick County and maybe even Henry County isn't noticed as much for the culture.

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So I hope that people continue to work for it and make it happen. I hope that this underground movement continues. I think there's a lot of potential and I see a lot of things happening. I just hope that it keeps momentum.

Jessica Taylor: Um-hm. And what do you hope for the future of your enterprise?

Chelsea Raby: I hope we keep going. [Laughter] We just celebrated our first year, like I said. We did really, really well. People were amazing. People came here and helped us, wanted to help us in any way they could for free. The people came out of the woodwork to help make this happen and that meant the world to us. And we just want to keep going. We want to keep participating in the community. Our first year was about just surviving and now we're entering

our second year and we're, like, okay, we're gonna thrive now. We've partnered with some festivals. We're gonna do those.

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Some events in town we're going to take part of. I'm trying to think of some of the things we've already done. But just keep connecting. We're not necessarily going to expand but just to keep reaching out and doing other events and growing in that way rather than growing in a physical sense. We want to grow in a communal sense. Hire more people to have happy jobs and careers. That's a huge part, is making this an enjoyable place to work for people, and you don't find that in restaurants a whole lot anymore. So we've definitely made that a big priority for us. So any way that we can be a part of making Patrick County a better place, that's what we want to do here. That's our goals, our future goals.

Jessica Taylor: And you mentioned the festivals. Are you talking about the Apple Dumpling Festival or are there different ones that you're . . . ?

Chelsea Raby: We are doing the Bushels & Barrels Festival, which is right down the road here.

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We are going to Rooster Walk the end of the month. We're taking part in a brunch for their VIPs there. We've done some of the Front Porch Festival. We fed some of their volunteers. That was all we could do last year. They do First Fridays at the farmers market in town so we're going to do one of those, take the food truck down there and reach out that way. They did the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit, so we set up food down there and we were a part of that, kind of bringing our

twist on Patrick County style food. So that was fun. We did that. We've partnered with the Young Professionals, and we do trivia. We host trivia here sometimes with them. Those are the only festivals right now. Next year we would like to be involved in the Food and Wine Festival. We've already missed this year but hopefully next year we can take part in that.

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The Strawberry Festival, we do want to be a part of those. We're trying to just take it one year at a time, but definitely those.

Jessica Taylor: And why do you think the festivals are so important?

Chelsea Raby: It's another way for us to bring what we do to other people. Right now we're operating on reservation only at dinner. So a lot of people are frustrated because they can't get a reservation or they want to come in and they just can't, or they're just, like, "I've been meaning to get down there and I just haven't." We went up to Meadows of Dan a couple weeks ago. It was Easter weekend, and they were going to have a Easter egg hunt and all these things and so we took the truck up there. And people were, like, oh, we're so excited you're up here. We never get to make it down the mountain and we've heard about your food and thank you for making the trip up here. So I think we're reaching more people that way and that's exciting. It's just exciting to get out and talk to people and see how happy you're making them.

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So yeah, that. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Awesome. Anything else you want on the record?

Chelsea Raby: I don't think so.

Jessica Taylor: Okay.

[End]