



Livia Alves

Mebane, NC

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Jessica Taylor: This is Jessica Taylor. It's June 12, 2022, and I am here in Mebane, North Carolina. And ma'am, can you please state your full name?

Livia Alves: Yeah. It's Livia Alves.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. And when and where were you born?

Livia Alves: So, I'm from Brazil and I was born October 1, 1987.

Jessica Taylor: Great. And how would you describe your occupation now?

Livia Alves: So right now, I work as a software quality assurance analyst, so it's a big shift.

[Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Yes, definitely. Can we talk about your earliest memories of baking?

Livia Alves: Yes. So it starts around my age of sixteen years old in Brazil. My younger sister and I, we decided to be vegetarian, and we are the only ones in my family, so we had to learn to cook for ourselves. [Laughter]

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Of course, my mom, she struggled to try. So yeah, that was the beginning. We started cooking for ourselves just because we had a different diet from our family. And then later I joined a specific religion and everybody else was also vegetarian. And my main service, 'cause I was a volunteer, was helping in the kitchen. So that's when I started to learn, because even before I was all right cooking, I would not consider anything professional. Even now I don't consider myself

professional, but at this point it's opened a lot of opportunities for me, so I moved to another town to start to work with a friend.

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She had a restaurant, a vegetarian Indian restaurant, so I started to learn more. And maybe one or two years later, I come back to my hometown. And also I was working in that field with restaurant or bar snacks. And eight years ago we moved to the United States, my husband and I, as a volunteer, so we are religious workers by that time, 2014. And we didn't have much time to have regular jobs because our main function was as a volunteer in this community in Stokes County, which is a neighbor to Patrick County.

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So I started to bake for my neighbors and friends and sooner they started to say, "Why don't you start to sell in the farmers market?" First I went to visit Stokes County Farmers Market, so I met other vendors there that also selling stuff in Patrick County, so they invited me. Because what I was doing was something maybe not [inaudible 0:03:34] anymore but by the time it was very different. Vegetarian and vegan was not so popular in the farmers markets. [Laughter] People would be surprised, and some people were, "wow, that's really nice, because it's not like something we find all the time." So my husband, down in Brazil he had also a business selling food, like, lunchbox. He would get orders.

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The food in Brazil is really different. For lunch we have rice and beans and something else. So he would put in a menu the day before and people would order with him, and I was helping him

because I had another job. So on my lunchtime I would join him and help him pack everything and he would go deliver. So for us it's a very familiar thing to do here and matches perfectly with our volunteer job because farmers market was once a week. So that's the beginning here. I don't know if you have a specific question. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: No, that's great. I have some follow-ups.

Livia Alves: Sure.

Jessica Taylor: Where in Brazil are you from?

Livia Alves: So we are from São Paulo, but a very country little town called Pindamonhangaba, but it's a very touristy place nowadays because of the beauty, the nature stuff.

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So my husband is also from there. My whole family, his whole family is there. So here is just myself, him, and we have now two children. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: What is the food like there in your part of São Paulo?

Livia Alves: Oh, yeah. People are not vegetarians, most of them are not, so it's very common, like, rice and beans and beef steak. That's how they say. And salads, a bunch of varieties of greens and vegetables. But we do have great vegan-vegetarian restaurants, which one of them in São Paulo, more in the capital, I went to join for two weeks more to learn the professional way.

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I also went to school to learn food manipulation. How do they say that in English?

Jessica Taylor: Sanitation?

Livia Alves: Sanitation, food sanitation and cleanliness, and went all about the standards for food business. So that was really great to implement. My husband, he has this business. So when we came here as a volunteer, part of our services was also cooking. They had outreach programs on the weekends so we would help cook. And because I could not work a full-time job that was the easiest thing that we could do and in a way that would not interfere with other things we had to do.

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So I started small and I had a daughter and then in 2018 she was about two years and a half. She was the only child in that community we were living so we decided to move to Hillsborough because of school and friends. And by that time I was pregnant with my second child, so I had to stop doing farmers markets. But people knew even when I was in Sandy Ridge, the small town we were living, they knew because everything I would share on social media. So they would say, “Oh, whatever, come here, please.” They would order sometimes for some vegan festivals. I have a friend that also was working here in the farmers market. She would invite me to do something or help her.

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And by the time I moved here, some people already knew that I was working with vegan and vegetarian food, and then I started to work just from my kitchen.

Jessica Taylor: So, when you first started out with your sister what type of food were you cooking that was vegetarian and baking that was vegetarian?

Livia Alves: We would do really simple, so it was rice and beans, salad, and mostly like potatoes, [Laughter] but some kind of curry and lots of greens, cooked greens like collard greens that are very popular in Brazil. I went through a phase that I was bored with my food so I had to learn from other people.

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And eventually she stopped being vegetarian. She's not anymore, but I continued. And my daughter, she was born with some allergies so that's why we started to mainly focus on vegan food because she has allergy from dairy, from other stuff, but mainly from dairy. So then I have to shift again and focus to learn the vegan recipes or do adaptations in the recipes that I'm already doing.

Jessica Taylor: So, baking specifically, how have you developed vegan and vegetarian baking recipes?

Livia Alves: Yeah. So I think the main challenge some people sometimes have is with eggs, how to replace eggs. So there is many ways.

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Nowadays it's easy, especially if you're in America. You go to the store, you can find stuff, but in Brazil it's more difficult to. So, I started baking a lot of bread of here, which I never had any problem just omitting the eggs. And the same thing for chocolate chip cookies, something I was selling a lot at the farmers market. Let's say the recipe had two eggs. I would just replace with two tablespoons of water, and it would be okay. There's some more specific, that I can either buy

egg replacement—nowadays we have it very easily—or soak the linseeds and then blend and that liquid you can use to also replace eggs in the recipe.

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Before vegan, I would replace a lot with yogurt or either apple cider vinegar. That also makes the dough more soft and light. Nowadays I do more cakes for birthdays, weddings, and cupcakes also for birthdays and weddings. I don't use the eggs; I just use almond milk or soymilk. It depends on the recipe. And everybody likes. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: How did you learn how to do that?

Livia Alves: First, moving here the recipes are so different from Brazil. Our breakfast is pretty simple. It's like bread and butter and coffee and milk, and here we have a lot of variety, like cinnamons rolls, donuts, waffles. It's not very common there in Brazil.

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So when I first moved here because I had just volunteered and I had to cook for everybody, they had these teacher books of recipes. I started to try and practice those recipes more in order to obtain the demand because that's what everybody eats. [Laughter] It's different so I had to learn from the recipes. I had two main books that were really good, great, and also from tips from local people. They've given me some tips, like from the chocolate chip cookies was my neighbor. She said, "Oh, this recipe from Nestle [Laughter] is really great. I just replace for water when they say eggs."

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And from the recipes for cakes, for example, I had to try many different ones until I got one that now is my main—I don't know how to say—the one that I go for all the time. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: You mentioned how other bakers might be affecting how you cook.

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: Are there particular ways that other bakers or restaurants are influencing the kind of dishes that you bake?

Livia Alves: Yeah. Before I moved here I had this friend. She was working at a farmers market, and she was doing really great. So she shared some of the recipes with me, especially like donuts and cheese bread, something that is like a Brazilian thing but somehow people got to know here, the local people got to know.

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So she shared with me how she was doing and eventually I changed a little bit. Samosas, that is an Indian dish because my religion is—we are Hare Krishna and it's based on some Indian knowledge, so they have their special diet which they use a lot of spice. What I do, I kind of change a little bit to be more easy for the western people, the taste. [Laughter] And I even have some Indian-born people as customers that they enjoy and they say, "Oh, that's really great." It's something different but they really love. I also did some if you want to try.

Jessica Taylor: I definitely do! [Laughter] So you said you make it a little easier for western folks.

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Can you be more specific about that?

Livia Alves: Yeah. For example, Brazil there is something called feijoada. It's not a baking dish but it's very popular and a lot of meat, and we changed some of the ingredients to become a vegan dish. For example, samosa, they use a lot of spice, I would say hot spice. I do like a little more mild so that it's agreeable for everybody to taste. I have others. It's also a baking dish but it's a [inaudible 0:15:43]. We call it kofta. It would be like a version of vegan meatballs. I also downsize on the spices, so it stays [Laughter] —at least for me and for everybody that orders—I think they always send me some compliments. [Laughter]

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Jessica Taylor: That's wonderful. How would you describe the local food that you ate in Patrick County and Stuart, places like that? How would you describe the food that was already there?

Livia Alves: So I got to try—I don't know if it's something like American—the boiled peanuts. We had something similar in Brazil and we thought it was just—you know, like, sometimes when you're home you would just come up with something. [Laughter] My husband and I, we used to do it. And I was surprised to see local people doing that. It was really good. And there was other friends, vendors selling baking goods as well and it's always nice to try different—especially for me because I don't have a culinary background for American food.

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So I was doing what I was learning but I never taste [Laughter] from local Americans to compare. I loved also how they had this apple festival, so I got to attend once, and I made apple

crisp. And everything that I was learning here and also from the locals because it's not something we usually do in Brazil. It's actually kind of fancy. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: How is your apple crisp different from the other ones that you've seen around?

Livia Alves: I would say eventually I did a gluten free one. I just replaced the flour for the gluten free all-purpose flour, and I would add berries.

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I have seen some people doing with and without berries. I just don't know which one is the traditional way. So I would blend blackberries or blueberries and, of course, the vegan whipped cream. So that would be a little bit different.

Jessica Taylor: What's in your vegan whipped cream?

Livia Alves: I got a store bought but it's like a coconut base you can also make, but it's coconut milk base. You have to keep frozen.

Jessica Taylor: Okay. That's great. So you mentioned boiled peanuts. Were there any other baked dishes that stuck out to you from Meadows of Dan or Stuart or anything like that?

Livia Alves: Yeah. Actually it was just me and another girl that she was selling those fancy breads, like, that you eat with coffee and cream.

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She had cinnamon rolls. That's what I remember more. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: So you worked with other bakers?

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: Can you describe that kind of relationship, how you developed those networks?

Livia Alves: Yeah. So, because she's also from Brazil so she was living here for maybe over twenty years, here in Hillsborough, and it was just her and her daughter and she was doing maybe two or three farmers markets every week. And then she would tell me to make me motivated, "Oh, you should start. That's what I do down here in that side." And we developed a friendship.

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And then sometimes she would have big festivals, that they have big vegan festivals, and she needed something to help her so I would drive here, as well, and spend the night and help her with donuts. So then I started to learn about the donuts. But later when I moved here, there is a lady, she has a really good vegan business, she does more or less what my husband used to do in Brazil. She posts whatever she's going to have in the week and people order maybe through Monday and then she cooks on Tuesday and delivers on Wednesday for the week, meals and dinners. So eventually she was needing somebody to help, so I went to help her maybe three or four times. And also I learned more how everything works in terms of business, because I would say I had to crash 'cause the language barrier was always something.

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Even though people would say, “Oh, you should go to farmers markets,” and do this and that, it’s always a little challenge when you’re from out. So they would send me motivation and inspire me in the way that they work.

Jessica Taylor: And what were your first impressions of the Stuart Farmers Market or just farmers markets in this area?

Livia Alves: I love it. I really miss the way that they do, and everybody was really friendly. I didn’t expect it at first because I’m from Brazil, [Laughter] but everybody was so friendly and so nice and I felt like part, a little community, family. It’s very sweet.

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I like the way that they do, that they’re small and everybody knows everybody, like close friends. Even though when I moved here some people would say, “Whenever, come here. I want to order something.” They’re really, really sweet. And here we do have nice, but they’re bigger so it loses a little bit of community aspect. And of course, we have people from everywhere, not just local people. There mostly people was just local. We eventually see them during the week, we go for shopping, we meet other vendors. And I had my daughter, I think she was one year old when I was doing farmers markets, so it was really sweet. Everybody was really, really nice and friendly all the time.

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Jessica Taylor: You mentioned that you worked at a restaurant, right?

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: And your husband also made food on a larger scale.

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: What was it like scaling up for the farmers market for you, especially working out of a home kitchen?

Livia Alves: I had to change a lot, I expect because for farmers market, I would say maybe Friday was my production day, so I would start to cook at night and have everything fresh for the next day. But specific things, like cookies, muffins, it was always more, like, sweet. And samosas was something that I started and then people liked it, so I continued doing because it was something different.

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But then when I moved from home people were sometimes, “Oh, can you also do this?” And I would do a little research. That’s how I started with the cakes. Somebody asked me, “Can you also do a cake?” And I was at the beginning a little insecure, but then I started to practice and people would like and I found the perfect recipe that always worked. And the aspect changed a little bit because now I mostly do birthday parties, where the people do caterings for weddings and birthdays or some event. And I would say I like it because then I prepare it myself and then I know that whatever I’m going to cook is going to sell.

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Farmers market’s a little tricky because sometimes you would cook a lot or bring too much and then it was a rainy day and not so much people would show up and then they would go back

home. But even though I would advertise, “I have farmers market today. This is what I have.” So here I change a little bit. I do more cakes and more savories for birthdays and events.

Jessica Taylor: You mentioned that feedback was important in figuring out perfect recipes.

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: Can you walk me through that process?

Livia Alves: Yeah. Because at the beginning I would do what they call here—I have a lot of Brazilian friends here, so they call it Brazilian cakes. I can tell the difference but for birthdays I would say here they do more in the fancy way.

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The cakes here sometimes would be equal to a wedding cake in Brazil, let’s say, in terms of frosting and the preparation. So in the beginning I had to try different recipes and some would turn out good after baking. Not the taste, but I would say the whole aesthetic. Before doing vegan I would use the yogurt and sometimes the dough would come out too heavy. And then after I started to try with apple cider vinegar and then later somebody kind of gave me a hint, “Oh, I just use lemon juice and baking soda instead of baking powder.” So then I learned that recipe that’s called Montreal cake. I don’t know. [Laughter]

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That’s how it came to me, Montreal cake, and it’s like a white cake. And if somebody asks me for a chocolate, it’s really easy to adapt and change and do any frosting and filling that you want.

So every time somebody asks me I always—“Oh, this one is the most asked cake.” And people— “Okay, let’s do that.” [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: So is there feedback that’s coming from customers at the farmers market that’s influencing—

Livia Alves: More at the temple that I was working as a volunteer. On Sundays they would have something they called Sunday Feast. The guests would have a free dinner. So sometimes I would make cake and then some neighbors would tell me, “Oh, you could do this and change this and that.”

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It was nice. I don’t feel—let’s say a better word. I’m very open for feedback, a very open person. You can say to me whatever, that I’m not going to be upset or mad or anything. So they would say, “Oh, here we do this and that.” And then I would write down or just on my mind and try the next time I was baking, which was very often in the temple. It was, like, every morning basically.

Jessica Taylor: Can you give me an example of, like, “Here we do this and not this?”

Livia Alves: Yeah. The first time I did donuts I had no idea because in my country it’s not something we do a lot. So I found this online recipe. It was like potato donuts, that would go a little potato on the—and it came out a little hard.

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Not hard but heavy. And then they said—this one was baked—“Maybe do the temperature a little less because it seems like it’s baking really fast,” and then, “The outside looks ready but

inside it's still a little heavy, not fluffy the way that should be." So then I started to do some notes. And then I had this neighbor friend that has a little book. Everything she would find online she would print and put there. She's, like, "I can look in my recipes." And at first I tried many, many, many recipes but with my friend here in Hillsborough that was—the explanation came out better, maybe because of the language.

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I don't know. And she also shared with me a little bit what she was doing different. She didn't have this recipe potato-based. She would have something with apple cider vinegar. And then I started to try this one. Eventually I lost the recipe [Laughter], and she moved out to Florida. So, oh, my God, I need to remember it. So I started to practice again, practice, practice, practice. And now I wrote down and I have everything right. [Laughter] That's one thing, and the other thing that I told you was the cookies. The recipe always was calling out for eggs and then somebody—"Oh, you can just put water instead of," so the dough would be not so hard.

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The way that I was doing it would end up with too much butter because I would not use the eggs. So then, "Put a little water, then. It's gonna be even for the recipe." So little hints, and I was always very open. I would not be upset if somebody corrected me because it was like everything was very new for us, and I wanted to learn the right way.

Jessica Taylor: The right way? [Laughter]

Livia Alves: Yeah. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Who were the folks that are giving you feedback at the outreach events?

Like, who are the guests?

Livia Alves: So we had local guests. Should I tell names?

Jessica Taylor: Yeah, that's fine.

Livia Alves: So we had these neighbors. She was part of our community. Her name was Gopi, she is a really good baker.

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For her family's breakfast she was always very opulent. So she started to share with me, and she was one of the first persons saying, "Oh, you should do farmers markets," and try to give me ideas what I could do. "Maybe you could do this and that." And then I would always first Google recipes and go to her and then she would help me with what I was not understanding or just to learn more about the local people, what they like. Because when I started farmers markets I think I went only once or twice as a customer just to see what they had, what they didn't have, because I also didn't want to create any competition with anybody that was already there.

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And we started in Stokes County, and they didn't have anyone selling any kind of foods, anything, so they were very grateful. 'Cause it's up in the Hanging Rock park so they have a lot of people coming and they didn't have anybody selling any food, so it was a really great experience. And I felt really happy because it was something that was a challenge for me and then I felt like a accomplishment just to be there. So, I had this friend, Gopi, and another

neighbor, Mamata, that she gave me the cookies recipe right with the water. And also the people from the temple because they would tell me— they would not tell me but direct me what to do in terms of cooking for people.

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Because I could cook whatever Brazilian people like; maybe they would not like so I want to do what people like or expected. So yeah, and they're really helpful.

Jessica Taylor: And when did you decide to go create a separate business?

Livia Alves: In here?

Jessica Taylor: Yeah.

Livia Alves: So we had our daughter, and we were volunteers, so we didn't have financial— something monthly. Then we had our daughter, so our needs changed because when you're single or alone or just a couple without a child it's really easy. We could do whatever and live as a volunteer. They would provide everything for us. But then eventually with the daughter we had to provide things for her, as well.

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So we had to have something monthly, something steady every month. Then my husband and I, we started just going to the farmers market, take her with us, and I would bake, and he would help a lot, set up our table at the farmers market, talking to people and get to know and getting close and become friend of people. And eventually here he had to have a regular job and then I was expecting a second child and I wanted to be able to help my family, provide something, so I

started—not start, just continue here, but I just had to change, instead of doing a farmers market to just doing a home business.

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Jessica Taylor: Can you walk me through your setup in your home kitchen, what you do in a day inside of the kitchen here?

Livia Alves: Yeah. So in the beginning we had a very small place. It was kind of like an apartment but—I don't know how to explain it. [Laughter] So we moved here last year and the first thing that we wanted to do was—it has to have a kitchen that we're able to work. Now it's easy because I get orders, so I get to know exactly and plan when I have to have my kitchen because this is also my family kitchen where I cook our meals. So I had to be careful planning so I have the full kitchen available in the way that everybody's happy in the family. [Laughter]

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So usually I have these—how they're called in English?

Jessica Taylor: Refrigerator?

Livia Alves: Not the refrigerator. The stock.

Jessica Taylor: The pantry?

Livia Alves: Yeah, pantry. I call it stock. So there is my main spices and big flours I keep there. And on the drawers here, I keep more for my family meals in small quantities. I never had to hire anybody. People sometimes would say, “Oh, you're crazy. You should hire somebody.”

But I like to work— if not my husband just myself because then I know my own pace and I can plan. I know what I can do.

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Like, last Saturday I had to make a hundred of the samosas for a dance recital, so I made it just by myself because it's like with practice eventually I figured out how long it takes to do, like, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred. So then I plan ahead of time and have everything ready, cook the filling also ahead of time. And in this way on the actual day I just have to worry about the pastry and fold the pastry.

Jessica Taylor: What is shopping for ingredients like? Where do they come from?

Livia Alves: So I buy more in the local grocery stores. Sometimes I have friends that—I don't cook a lot of vegetables, but I go to farmers markets for fresh vegetables, but it's not something that I get a lot.

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We have a mill—that's how they call it—that sells in big quantities flours, like spelt flour, all-purpose flour, that is nearby. And Weaver Street Market 'cause they sell—how do they say—

Jessica Taylor: Bulk?

Livia Alves: Yeah, from the bulk. And from Frontier sometimes I order spices in large quantity. And they have variety and organic which is sometimes easier to buy online than just go local and buy a small one.

Jessica Taylor: Which mill are you using?

Livia Alves: I can get the name, 'cause it just caught me off guard. [Laughter] [Lindley Mill in Graham, NC]

Jessica Taylor: No, that's great. That's fine. And you're making savory dishes and cakes at this point primarily, right?

Livia Alves: Yeah.

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Jessica Taylor: Can you walk me through some of the signature cakes that you have, some of the savory?

Livia Alves: Oh, yeah. So I do the vanilla cake with vegan buttercream frosting. I do the chocolate cake. Pretty much the dough I just change a little bit of the flour, replace for cocoa powder. And chocolate frosting. People do ask me a lot, like, lemon filling, so I do a vanilla cake with the lemon filling and vegan buttercream frosting. Same thing, I just change the fillings for raspberry, pineapple, and chocolate. I did do something that's similar with dulce de leche.

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We have a coconut condensed milk that I make the vegan caramel as a filling. These are the cakes that I do. I do a lot for birthdays so lots of sprinkles. And I did a unicorn cake. But basically the vanilla I just do adaptations. I put sprinkles in the dough, or change for the chocolate, or sort of put the drops of vanilla to taste like vanilla. Some people like lemon cake, so I just replace for the lemon oil instead of vanilla extract. So those are the cakes that I do most. For savories I do a lot of samosas.

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And something I would say is more like a dinner, the vegan meatballs, kofta, I also do a lot.

Jessica Taylor: You mentioned that your aesthetic has changed when it comes to cakes.

Livia Alves: Would you say again?

Jessica Taylor: Aesthetic, like the way that it's decorated.

Livia Alves: Oh, yes. I change it because before it was really simple. For example, I had the friend from New York. She came and she had her wedding here and they're a really simple couple. And she's from Brazil, and her favorite cake is a carrot cake, which is really different the way we do in Brazil. We blend the carrots, kind of make a carrot juice and put in the dough. The top is always with chocolate. So I made it for her, and she was, like, "Oh!" She loved it. And the local people and my community, they like it as well, but it was very different than the carrot cake we have here.

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So I had to learn about the frosting because I knew how to do the butter or whipped cream frosting, but for vegan ones it's really a trick I had to learn and try different recipes until I found one that is not super sweet. My first cakes I can say was really sweet, super sweet. [Laughter] I don't know if everybody liked it. But, yeah, I remember my daughter's birthday, as well, because I was trying, some people would like. But for me personally I would take notes, like, "Oh, too sweet," until I found a nice recipe.

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And I even tried before a different frosting that was cooked and then blended. It was really nice but a lot of work.

Jessica Taylor: And the frosting dictates what the cake looks like?

Livia Alves: Yeah. Because it has to set nice in the way that we can decorate. I started to buy new tools because before there was not a lot of demand for cakes, so I didn't have. So I started to buy all these decoration tools and watch YouTube videos to learn the techniques. Because I didn't have a way to go for school with the children, to go and learn, so I would watch YouTube videos and learn how to make a flower or how to make kind of a rose. And I was learning different techniques.

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Something I forgot to mention, one year ago I was ready to go back to work and then I was working in Walmart and in the Walmart Bakery. And even though I was not a baker, because they knew that I had this business they would ask me, "Oh, can you help decorate cupcakes or cakes?" So I also gained a lot of experience because Walmart, they have all these boards for practice, so I would practice. And even recorded myself practicing so when I was not there anymore I had this information. So I learned a little bit also. But right after that I got this new job. I still bake but I don't advertise as much how I was doing before just because I don't want to get a lot of orders or demands and not be able to and burn people.

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Jessica Taylor: How are customers finding you?

Livia Alves: Through Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook I have with my business name Prema Prasada and on Instagram I have something that I call @lalitacreations. Because Prema Prasada was my husband and I and when I moved here nobody knew Prema, so they knew my nickname, Lalita. “Oh, Lalita, let’s order, Lalita.” So eventually I opened an Instagram, @lalitacreations. And everything, not just bake, or everything that I cook I share, and then people get the hint, “Oh, she does that.” So whatever they need they would call me or text me, “Can you also do this for my birthday or wedding?”

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And they would hire me this way.

Jessica Taylor: Do you find that it’s a lot of folks from Brazilian communities or from your faith community?

Livia Alves: No, actually from out, yeah, my main customers now. Because people from my faith community, they also cook. Unless it’s something big, they would hire me for something, like a wedding. But even though through Facebook, because I had somebody that ordered something with me or just saw some publications and posts, a year ago somebody, “Oh, I need a cake for my husband, a last minute and it has to be vegan.” And somebody just tagged my name, and the lady called me, “Can you make?” And then I make, and then last year I think she ordered two or three cakes just because they really like it.

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And I never met her before, just through Facebook. And also at Walmart I have had some coworker there that’s wife, she had allergy from gluten, so he was, like, “Can you make a cake

for my wife?” And I made for the wife, and then later for his daughter’s birthday, “Can you make a unicorn cake?” [Laughter] And everything begins like that, like, “Can you also make . . .?” And then I like to challenge myself in the kitchen and impress. This year also somebody that I met through my daughter’s school, they wanted a cake with sunflowers, and I never made the sunflowers. “I can try. If you want I can try.”

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But I always let people be welcomed that—and I explained that I consider myself as a learner, not like a pro. And the people are, like, “Oh, yes.” And then I learned how to make the sunflower and made the sunflower cake. So how they say, word of mouth [Laughter], people will tell each other. And that lady that has a really great business in Hillsborough, she has a vegan catering business. She doesn’t do a lot of sweets, so one time she also started to advertise my baking goods with her stuff because she always had people requesting, “Oh, whenever you make a cake or cupcakes, or muffins let us know.” So I would sell to her because she would advertise and sell for her customers.

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Jessica Taylor: Independently of her, do you find that your customers have dietary restrictions or preferences?

Livia Alves: No. I feel like usually not everybody is vegetarian or vegan, but they do enjoy sometimes having something more healthy or they feel is more healthy. So yeah, not because they’re vegan or vegetarian but just because they know maybe it’s important to keep healthy and

try things more like homemade and handmade. Most of them are vegetarians but not vegan. And to be honest, it's not so different. [Laughter]

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Some people, they can't think about a cake without eggs, but everything you can adapt, and it still tastes, and plus healthy. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: I noticed for the cake flavors that they're foundational. Like, it's chocolate and vanilla and maybe some fruit in there.

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: Is that your preference or would you—you used to do things differently?

Livia Alves: Yeah, I used to do different, so in Brazil the cakes are very—we would say more like coffee cake styles. Sometimes just something on top but not with the filling. But here the fruit flavors is a big thing so the people started to ask, can you do a lemon cake or a raspberry? So I had to learn.

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I always like to research. I see the recipes and then I see the reviews and then I try. And it's a little tricky because then I try and then I like, so I feel, oh, maybe people will like. But I never tried from anybody else myself. So that's why I depended a lot from their feedback. And I had a customer, Andrea, in Stokes County and she was always giving me feedback. And she has also a problem with sugar so cakes for her were always sugar free or with a sugar replacement that she

was allowed to. Even cheesecake I made for her, and her husband would order just for her, as well. So they would give me feedback.

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And sometimes I'll tell what they tried from other people, "Oh, I ordered from this place," and that's how they do. Or they used this sugar replacement. You can always try.

Jessica Taylor: That's great. You also have two children.

Livia Alves: Yeah.

Jessica Taylor: And how are you scheduling all of this around their needs?

Livia Alves: So I rely a lot on the school days when there's school. Of course, now they're on vacation. And my husband, he has Fridays, Saturdays off. So nowadays, I mainly tell people that I'm more available on the weekends. So this way I know I have plenty of time to go shop and prepare if it's something big I need to do by myself. But last year when I was not working, I would rely a lot on the school days, and I would get orders and they would be at the school for five hours and that five hours is my production time.

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'Cause it's not like I produce and froze it or something or advertise. I do on demand. So if you order, then I do. But I do have a lot of people, like, "Whenever you do samosas let me know." And they like to add their order together. So yeah, sometimes I communicate to some people that I know they know for sure they like it, and they want, or they're waiting for the day I'm going to make something so I let them know. Last year I would tell also through the social media if I

knew I had some day free or off I would tell, “This Wednesday I’m gonna be making this, this, and that.”

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And people would order through Facebook and Instagram, and I would cook and then they would come pick it up at my house or I would deliver it at some place in Hillsborough.

[Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: So have you noticed what people like changing over time in the years here?

Livia Alves: Change over time?

Jessica Taylor: In the years that you’ve been doing this.

Livia Alves: I didn’t change much. I would say that I add some. Like the cake was something that I never thought to make, even at the farmers market because the way that you have to handle. And usually the vegan frostings, they melt really easily if you don’t keep in the fridge or someplace cold. So I would say that I started to add even the samosas for farmers market I would make a baked version because everything had to be baked there.

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Not much fried stuff. So here the people started to ask me for the fried version, so I would say that I had to change because of my customers’ needs. I would not do much cupcakes. I would do a lot of muffins, banana bread, and blueberry muffins. Here it was not super popular how it was there. And I sell more like cupcakes and chocolate, more very sweet kind of dessert things. Yeah,

this was the change, the cake introduction, the cake and cupcakes introduction, and the samosas that used to be baked.

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You can do them both ways but in the markets I would do the baked just because it's the norm there. Some other things that I would not say is baked, like some big dishes like baked potatoes or creamed, I do also for big events. Those are new because I like to bake. Because when you bake I feel that it's easy 'cause it's just one thing. [Laughter] You do everything and then you bake. But now let's say, "Oh, can you do a potato dish?" Then it's a lot more work. You have to peel the potatoes, cut the potatoes, boil the potatoes. [Laughter] It's a lot more work. But I do if I have a request. Yeah, I will do.

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But those new things that I was not doing in the farmers market.

Jessica Taylor: In terms of the actual process, like, when you're in the kitchen and you're doing your thing, what do you like best about the process of baking?

Livia Alves: Oh, I feel like cooking for me personally is like a therapy. It's my place and I'm more with me in paying attention. And I also feel like whatever intention you put on the food that goes to the person, as well, so I try to be not stressful. And that's one thing for me, I would not cook or accept an order if I feel that I'm pressured 'cause I feel like whatever feeling and intention you put on the food, that affects the whole process.

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And it goes for the person, so I like to be very peaceful and just focused on that moment, not thinking about, no, I have to do this fast. And I like to have plenty of time. I like a lot of time. And it's something that my family and my children, they already understand [Laughter] so they know the kitchen is my place and Mom is in the kitchen, so they know. [Laughter] Mom is producing, production. So yeah, that helps. For me I feel more centered. And I like to pay attention and always take notes, which I feel that I'm very different from my husband. He doesn't like to follow recipes and he also makes a lot of jokes how something I do and I like and people give me compliments, I like to write down.

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Actually, I start but I never finish just saving my recipes because eventually I want to have a book or something like that. 'Cause I have a lot of people, every time I post something on social media, they write me privately or on the thread, "Can you share with me the recipe?" So, I would like to have something all together in one place for a case like that. People are always asking. Yeah, that's something I forgot to mention. Maybe two or three years ago, I was also selling through Etsy vegan cheese that I learned and came out really, really good and people like it, so I sold some. But then with the pandemic everything had to change.

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That's why I also changed my field, my job because with food here when the pandemic started I felt like people, maybe they would be a little concerned about eating or having contact with other people, so the demand started to be a little low.

Then I kind of changed, but it seems like at the end I always end up in the kitchen doing something. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: And we talked a lot about a lot of your recipes. Do you have a particular recipe or process that you love?

Livia Alves: Yeah. I like samosas because it's a complete process. I have to make the filling and these pies, but I do a little bit different, and the dough. And I like the folding.

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I feel like it is a hand work, but you know what I mean. At the school sometimes when they're little, we do a lot of hand work. And I like and I kind of developed a way that I started to be faster on doing that. And people, usually they ask, "How do you do that?" Then last year I did it live on my Instagram to show people how to do those little folds, which I learned in Brazil. It's an ancient recipe that I learned in Brazil, was already an adaption with the Brazilian spices. And then coming here I also changed it a little bit, so it has a lot of stories. So that's why it's my favorite. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Well, how did the spices change between the adaptation in Brazil to what you do now?

Livia Alves: Yeah. In Brazil, for example, we used a lot of black pepper.

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And here for the recipe they use cayenne pepper. I'm not a big fan of hot spice. I like a little bit but not in the way that sometimes people like a lot of hot, so I put less. So I would also say it's

child friendly, children friendly. [Laughter] They can also eat. The dough, I can't say for sure how the Indians do but I do in the way that looks more like an empanada, like Brazilian style. And I do a fry, or I bake, which I don't know the Indians—if they bake it. It's something more western.

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For example, the ancient recipe they call for clove powder, cinnamon, and a bunch of other—ginger powder. I took off the ginger powder, the clove powder. I put a hint of cinnamon and much less turmeric than the recipe calls for. Of course, the spices also are good for health but it doesn't change much in the sense of—but it's just more like an adaption for the western palate.

[Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: Oh, that is so interesting. Wow. Is there anything that I'm missing that you want to talk about?

Livia Alves: Not that I remember. [Laughter] I'm trying to think. No, but you can have questions. [Laughter]

Jessica Taylor: No, that's great. That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

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[End]