



**Annie Clapper**

**The Family Crumb - Bentonville, AR**

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Interviewer: Jordan P. Hickey

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Jordan Hickey: Today is July 5. We're here in Bentonville, Arkansas. I'm Jordan Hickey, and I'm speaking with Annie Clapper. Annie, would you mind introducing yourself for the recording?

Annie Clapper: Hi, I'm Annie Clapper, here in Bentonville, Arkansas. I bake for The Family Crumb.

Jordan Hickey: And what do you specialize in? Like, what do you do?

Annie Clapper: I think the thing that I'm known for is a very slow-fermented sourdough bread. That's kind of our wheelhouse. But I also make a lot of vegan goods and pastries to go on the side. But the main thing is the bread.

Jordan Hickey: Got you. Are you from Bentonville? Are you from Arkansas?

Annie Clapper: No. No, I'm from Chicago. I'm from the Chicago area. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, and then lived there for 15 years as an adult, and then moved here with my husband, Matt, a little over six years ago.

Jordan Hickey: So that would've been what year?

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Annie Clapper: When I moved here was 2017. [Laughter] I'm doing math now. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: I can tell you that that's actually going to be a key part of this.

Annie Clapper: [Laughter] I am a baker. I do a lot of math in my head. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: So how did you get into baking? How did that start?

Annie Clapper: In general, baking I started doing as a kid with my family. And my dad would make pancakes, that was sort of what he shared with me—was these really, really skinny—we call them skinnies—pancakes. They're thinner than crepes. And my grandma made them and then taught him. And I think they're Norwegian in root. So that kind of has passed down, and I got to learn how to make those. And he made bread when I was a kid with a bread machine.

Jordan Hickey: Oh.

Annie Clapper: Yeah, so, like, really, really hearty whole-grain bread, and we'd have it fresh in the morning. So that was, as a kid, how I got into it.

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And then, as an adult, in my mid-20s, I was trying to figure out why I felt ill all the time. I had stomach aches often. It had been happening for a long time. And someone said, "Oh, you should get seen for food allergies." So I did, and eventually realized I have a dairy allergy. So then, the baking had to shift significantly because if I still wanted to eat cookies—and this is in, like, 2010? No, 2012. Again, math. I guess it's not my strong suit when it comes to years. [Laughter] But I had been doing that because a lot of the recipes I had found were, like, good enough, but I wanted something that didn't taste like it was, like, missing something, you know? So I worked forever just tweaking all these recipes just for my own personal enjoyment of desserts. And then, bread baking, when we moved here, I had watched Michael Pollan's *Cooked* documentary, and there's that episode, I think it's the air episode, about incorporating air into sourdough bread and then the roots of sourdough bread. And I just—I got hooked.

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So I wanted to eat some sourdough bread, real sourdough, and I drove to Fayetteville to get The Dirty Apron's sourdough. It was delicious. If you haven't had their bread, I recommend it. But I didn't want to drive 40 minutes for a loaf of bread. [Laughter] So instead, I decided to make one, which took me weeks. [Laughter] So much easier. But I had a baby, so that was part of it. I was pregnant when I started, and tried, and failed. And then, when my son, Robbie, was six months old, I was like, "I'm going to try again. It was so good, and I don't want to have to drive to Fayetteville to get bread." So that's kind of how that started. I fell in love with it, got kind of obsessed with it, and then from there, it went on.

Jordan Hickey: I am kind of wondering, the bread that your dad was making when you were a kid— that wasn't sourdough, right?

Annie Clapper: No, it was a yeasted bread, but it was really good. I feel like I should ask him more questions about it now because I can still remember the texture of it.

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And I don't know why, as a child, something I really loved was mint jelly. [Laughter] It's a little weird, but I think my parents had packets of it around or something from, like, a lamb meal— says the woman who runs the vegan bakery. [Laughter] But I got really into it. I would eat peanut butter and mint jelly sandwiches on this very crusty, whole-wheat sandwich loaf that my dad would make. [Laughter] I can remember that. And it didn't taste bitter because whole wheat, if you get it with grocery-store whole wheat, sometimes the flour's been sitting there a long time. And whole wheat, it won't make you sick if it's been there a while, but it can start to taste really bitter, and it wasn't that. I think my dad must've been sourcing his wheat from a very fresh source. [Laughter] I've got to ask him about it now.

Jordan Hickey: And so, you start baking. You're doing sourdough. And you said that was after you moved?

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Annie Clapper: After we moved here, yeah. That was not in Chicago. I didn't know what sourdough was. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: How did you learn? Because I think the major leap for people is going from making it for yourself to making it for others.

Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: What were those early years of sourdough like?

Annie Clapper: It wasn't that long, to be fully honest. So I was baking it successfully from when my son, Robbie, was six months old—well, we started the bakery when he was a year old. So it was six months of, like, amateur baking hour. [Laughter] And it's interesting because the leap from baking for others is more like a baby step, right? I learned with Andrew Janjigian's recipe. He used to be the bread editor or the baking editor at *Cook's Illustrated*.

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And he wrote this really great—their recipes are so well-edited. It was very easy to understand, and I was like, "Well, if anybody can teach me, it could be Test Kitchen." So I went through and read his recipes so carefully, started the starter, did the whole thing. And I did his recipe for a couple of months. And then, a couple months in, I was like, "Well, this is really good, and I like it, but I kind of want to try something new." We all want to play around with things. So I took out *Tartine* from the library, Chad Robertson, and there was a holiday coming up, so I baked it

for a holiday. And I was like, "Well, this is, like, next level. I loved the recipe I had before, and this is much harder, but I like the results." So I started playing with that, and I was, all the while, posting stuff on Facebook, or Instagram, or whatever. And a friend of mine who saw these was in charge of opening up a Wednesdays farmers' market. And he reached out and said, "I need a baker for Wednesday nights for bread. I need a bread baker. And I see what you're doing. And are you interested?"

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And at the time, my husband was traveling so much for work because we were from Chicago, he's a musician, and when you're freelance, if you move and you need to be in person at your job, it's an odd transition. And you kind of move one gig at a time. It's a little at a time. It's not, "Oh, I'm going to move my job with me." It's weird. So he was still flying back to Chicago every weekend for work to play weddings, and shows, and festivals, and all of this. And we were desperate. I was like, "This sucks." We had a baby. It was really hard. So we started the bakery kind of out of desperation and also because I loved doing it. Oh, but the, like, little micro steps. Sorry. I got sidetracked. When you're baking bread, and you're baking the Tartine recipe, right, you have two loaves. It's a recipe for two loaves. And it works so well because that's how bread is, right? You bake one for your family, and you're like, "Oh, this is fresh bread. I'm going to bring it to my neighbor." Or, "Oh, so-and-so just had a baby, let's bring her a loaf of bread." Or, "So-and-so just got home from the hospital. Let's bring them a loaf of bread."

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And that's a Southern culture thing, which I feel like I've picked up since we've moved here, is the act of bringing food just out of love. It's so much more prevalent here, and I love it, and I love that bread can be part of that.

Jordan Hickey:        So you're saying that community is baked into the bread.

Annie Clapper:        Mm-hmm. And I think that's true for everyone I've talked to who has even toyed with the idea of doing bread for work. They're already giving bread to people. So baking for other people is part of why so many people love to bake bread recreationally is that it's such a joy to, like, get a fresh loaf of bread and to be able to pass that on to someone else is so incredibly special. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey:        You start doing the Wednesday night farmers' market.

Annie Clapper:        Yeah.

Jordan Hickey:        I'm guessing you were doing more than one loaf.

Annie Clapper:        [Laughter]

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Jordan Hickey:        And therefore, like, really spreading this love of bread and baking.

Annie Clapper:        Yeah.

Jordan Hickey:        So just to kind of get a sense of scale, how many loaves of bread were you doing before for that?

Annie Clapper:        So it was really scary. I will be honest. I was so scared. I was like, "Oh, what are we doing?" The first one we did, we made 24 loaves, and that was after, like, a month

of just solid R&D. I was really nervous because it was—like, going from two loaves to 24 loaves is a huge leap. And just for weeks, I was, like, running numbers in my head. Like, "Okay, 16 loaves, and da-da-da-da, and this many hours, and this is going to go"—and I was trying to reverse engineer Outerlands Bakery, they're in San Francisco, like, on the outer—I can't remember the name of the neighborhood, but they're right on the coast. And they had...

Jordan Hickey: Outer Sunset?

Annie Clapper: Yes, thank you. I'm like, "I know what it is."

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They had pan loaves that they would proof on the counter overnight. I was like, "How can I do this? Because I don't have the refrigeration space." So I was, like, stalking their Instagram, [Laughter] trying to figure out how to make their pan loaves or make something kind of like their pan loaves. And I ended up doing that. And that way, I didn't have to take up the whole fridge. And I didn't have a bread oven, so we took those, like, camping Dutch ovens, basically. They're, like, combo cookers is what they're sort of known as. And I could fit four in the oven at a time, so I would do four an hour, which is—it's stupid is what it is. [Laughter] But when you're desperate, you make it happen. So yeah, that's how we made it happen. I just started with bread, the first bake. And honestly, the first bake that I did, I was exhausted doing it, the shaping, and all of the baking. And we woke up crazy early. And, like, at the end of that bake day, I had come down with a high fever, and I was like, "Do I want to do this?"

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Everything had been safely baked, and we were very careful about food safety. And he took our 5-year-old to the farmers' market, and I didn't go because I was like, "Well, I'm sick." And I was

like, "Is this my body trying to tell me don't do this?" [Laughter] It was awful. And it was the first bake. I think with everything, when you try a new thing, and it's a real risk, if you don't have a moment where you're like, "Is this the worst idea I've ever had?" then, like, you're maybe not doing something risky enough. Like, we all doubt ourselves. I was like, "This is a terrible idea." But yeah, that was how we started. And then, it went up from there. That was in June, and then once we got to July, I was like, "Okay, 4th of July is coming. I should do a small item." So we made pretzels. And then, I was like, "Oh, I can make cookies." And that was when we had to decide to make the bakery vegan because I was like, "I have a dairy allergy. I don't really eat meat. I'm not, like, 100% vegan, but I'm mostly vegan.

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Why would I make cookies that I can't eat?" So that's when we made that choice together. And my husband and I started the bakery, and it mostly just turned into my thing. But yeah, those little steps along the way, they felt enormous at the time, and now they're just markers of history. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: I wonder, especially after going into that first bake where it's like, "Is this a good idea?" how did you decide, "Yes, this is a good idea"? You've done the first bake, you've done that farmers' market. Like, how did you decide, "Yeah, I'm going to do it again"? What was that moment like?

Annie Clapper: Well, there are a couple of pieces that kept me going, one of which is that I am very big on honoring my commitments. And I had committed to a season. So that's one thing, is, like, my own internal need to, like—"I said I'm doing this." And I'm also okay with,

like— if something is terrible for me and not going to be a good idea, I'm fine eventually cutting the strings.

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But I had only done one. And there's the old adage, "Don't quit on a bad day." So I didn't want to do that. But the other thing was, I have a very good friend who ran a restaurant in St. Louis for a long time, and she was a friend before then, so I asked her about it when I started the bakery, and she said, "Just so you know, the first day you do it, you are likely"—and I can say, it's Lulu's Local Eatery. She talked about her first day opening Lulu's, and they had a brick-and-mortar. And she said, "About halfway through my first shift, I was like, 'Have I just ruined my life?'" And she was like, "It was like that for weeks. I was exhausted for weeks. But when you run a brick-and-mortar, the commitment level is so much higher. It's not like, 'Oh, this is a bad idea. I'm out.' So we talked about it, and she was like, "Yeah, there were weeks where I was like, 'Did I just make the worst decision ever?'"

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And she was like, "When it's a food-service business, and you're opening it—anything new, it's so hard." So that kind of kept me going because she talked about, like, that was very hard, but any transition is going to be hard. And then, as you move on, you dial it in more. You build your own muscles, right, your mental muscles. And your literal muscles. Like, shaping 16 loaves was really exhausting for me, and now I can shape 60 loaves, and I'll be tired, but, like, I'm fine. And you get going, you get used to it, you build better systems, you have better plans, you buy tools, all of these things. Things get easier, and you can make more and do more. It gets easier.

Jordan Hickey: You had mentioned looking to the bakery in San Francisco, these different places. Because I think this is a different kind of toolkit. Like, the recipes, people you're looking at.

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Who was inspiring you, especially in those early days? Like, how did you incorporate that into your practice as a bakery?

Annie Clapper: Well, Instagram is this huge tool in baking, and especially in cottage baking. Because none of us have time to systemize it basically and be like, "Here's how you do it." [Laughter] Everybody has to just, like, creep on each other's Instagram page. And early on, when you're a novice, you don't know who to follow. And especially with cottage baking, I didn't know it was called cottage baking. So early on, I was following Chad Robertson and looking at Tartine, and they're a great example of, like, how to automate so much of your baking, I think, because they can still keep it pretty artisanal. And I've been there now. Everybody's hand-shaping everything, but they also have these really amazing machines that do a lot of the work for you and keep it still delicious and artisanal. It's pretty amazing to see.

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Not the right follow for a cottage baker, but that's where I started. And then, I looked at Outerlands, and they're also a restaurant, so I wasn't getting all the nuggets I wanted from their page. So then, I started following their head baker, Matthew Jones, and he is an amazing, amazing baker. Now, he's doing sort of his own thing, and he bakes and does their farmers' market there. I think his bakery is Avast Bakeshop, something like that. And those are the big ones that I started with, just, like, "How can I find places"—and then, the Bread Bakers Guild

was another one. From there, I found Justin Gomez, who's now, like, a really, really dear friend. They posted about his cottage bakery. That's how I learned the word cottage bakery, and I looked that up. I was like, "Oh, there are other people like me with little kids doing this crazy thing I'm doing that I don't understand why anyone would do it, but we're doing it." So I found him, and I reached out to him. We became friends.

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And I was like, "Oh, it's not just me, it's all these people in different pockets of the country and the world, like, wearing their babies and baking bread. Like, we're a little nutty, but that's kind of what we're doing." So from there, that opened the door, and I found Bonnie Ohara from Alchemy, and Jeff McCarthy from Bread Service. Like, so many people, I can't name them all. But once that door, the cottage baking door, was open, I was like, "Oh, there are other people, and they respond to my messages." Tartine's got, like, however many followers. They're not going to be like, "Yeah, here's how I did this with the hydration at 2 p.m.," or whatever. But Justin would be like, "Hey, I cut a hole in the bottom of my Cambro so it could fit on the mill easier," all these little things. Because we're wild people, DIY-ing our way through cottage baking.

Jordan Hickey:           It sounds like it wasn't just a, "Oh, how can I learn from these people?"—it sounds like it was more a support system, right?

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Annie Clapper:           Both, absolutely. It was like, I would say, "Oh, I see this in your"—I think it was Mike Hilburn from The Sourdough Podcast. His fridge, he had these really cool racks. So all the sudden, instead of doing this weird, like, Tetris-ing of all the bannetons, [Laughter] I

could just drill holes in the side of my fridge so that they're perfectly fitted for the bannetons. And I went from being able to comfortably fit 36 loaves to being able to fit 44 loaves. And so, like, that was helpful. But then, also, like, seeing that Jeff from Bread Service was up at 4 on a Saturday being like, "Hey, buddy. Hi. Are you also looking at the darkness?" [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: Was that helpful to kind of, like—I don't even know if it's commiserate, but, like, to be able to see...

Annie Clapper: Yeah, community, for sure. I think cottage baking is so isolated, which works well for so many of us because I think so many of us recharge our batteries in the quiet alone with our dough. [Laughter]

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Which sounds so weird but is the truth. But then, even if you're an introvert, you still need community. Like, both can exist simultaneously. So the idea of being alone, making bread—like, I would be alone at 5 in the morning at this kitchen that I had rented out, and I'd almost always put on a podcast when it was 5 in the morning, and I'd listen to someone talk about their baking experience, whether it was the Sourdough Podcast or the Rise Up podcast, and now I can't remember the host's name. And I'd put that on, and I'd feel in community, even if I wasn't, like, on Instagram taking 32 loaves out of the oven. But I didn't feel like it was just me. I felt connected enough.

Jordan Hickey: Correct me if I'm wrong, but it almost sounds like social media, in the way that it showed you how to do it, and the community it built, and, like, being able to commiserate at 5 o'clock in the morning, all these different ways, could you have done this had it not been for everything that social media and, like, the internet has to offer?

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Annie Clapper: No. Also, sourdough in the pandemic and social media, like, that's its own chapter. I'm like, "I did sourdough before it was cool." That whole thing is its own entity. But the amount of community, and being able to feel seen and known by other bakers going through the same thing—and not just other cottage bakers. Like, there are amazing, amazing bakers who are so prolific who don't have kids, and being seen by them is one thing, which is really special. And then, having friends with kids the same age, where I'm like, "Dude, we're potty training, and Robbie is screaming on bake days. And oh my gosh, I'm so exhausted." [Laughter]

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Like, it gets so idealized on Instagram, I think by people who aren't in it, but the baker parents who get it and are in the weeds, like, they get that, like, the shenanigans that happen on bake days, when a child is having a meltdown, and if you don't get to the oven in the next 30 seconds, stuff is going to go sideways. Like, being torn so hard in two different directions, that is a pain that cottage bakers with young kids really know. So that really got me through, like, a lot of tough times.

Jordan Hickey: So I want to jump back just a little bit. You had mentioned that at one point, you learned the term cottage baking. You said it was through...

Annie Clapper: Bread Bakers Guild and Justin Gomez. And Humble Bake House is his bakery, I don't remember if I said that.

Jordan Hickey: Humble Bake House. That makes me wonder, with Arkansas's cottage food laws ...

Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: At what point did you learn about those, and was it, like, around the same moment? How did you learn about that?

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Annie Clapper: I learned about cottage food before we opened the bakery.

Jordan Hickey: Oh, okay.

Annie Clapper: I had to. [Laughter] But I didn't tie that together as, "That's a thing." I just didn't put those pieces together until probably, like, three or four months in, and that's when I found Justin. Doing the work, like, not just baking in general, but, like, three or four months into having the bakery. And the cottage food laws in Arkansas have changed in the last five years, so at first, it was, like, very specific labeling, but no one has ever, not once, seen my home kitchen. Which is a little disconcerting. [Laughter] Like, I know I keep it clean, but I'm like, "Oh, goodness." But I know in California, it's extremely stringent, where you have to have every recipe submitted and approved before you can sell anything, which really puts a damper on creativity, I think.

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So yeah, cottage food laws, I learned about those very early. And sometimes, I just, like, fall back to the one that I know. The most recently, I think the one that I know well is from, I want to say, a year or two ago, where now, we can wholesale to grocery.

Jordan Hickey: Was it difficult to learn all that?

Annie Clapper: Yes. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Annie Clapper: Yep. I have a music degree. [Laughter] I personally have a very difficult time reading legalese without feeling like I'm in over my head. I can do it, but I have to read it, like, three, four, five times now. I've gotten better at it after, like, having to learn the food stuff, and I had to get certified for, like, wholesale and all of that when I was in a commercial kitchen, so I developed those muscles. But when we started, I was like, "I don't understand what any of this means. Please, someone who understands this, please help me."

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Jordan Hickey: And so, I kind of wonder, obviously, the cottage food laws, that's, like, this whole thing. I kind of wonder, you started baking, started doing, like, the markets, were in it for the season. I kind of wonder what the learning process was like. Did you learn more about the industry and all, like, the things that go into having, like, a cottage bakery? I guess the question is, was it, like, a trial and error, on-the-job, constantly learning thing as you did it? You mentioned kind of, like, this idealized version of, like, the bakery. I guess, like, what was it like to kind of just be thrown in and kind of, like, have to learn all this stuff as you were doing it?

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Annie Clapper: Yeah, I think the thing with cottage baking is, it has to fit inside your personal life and home. And so, it can't be systemized. And so, you have to, like, excavate what is going to—or that's not the right word. You have to really dig and figure out what is going to work. You have to carve your own path, that's what I'm saying. It's such a cliché. But in this case, there's not really going to be a clear path for you that is laid out for you. You can't get a how-to really because you have to figure out, if you have a partner, what is their schedule? And

when do you want to spend your time with them? And do you have kids? And if you have kids, how can you fit the baking around maybe school pickup, or naps, or whatever? And that's got to constantly be shifting. Like, my baking schedule now is so different from when we first opened because my son is now 6 and not 1. And all of that.

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And I was nursing for the first two years, basically, that The Family Crumb was running, so, like, fitting in that part of it. And it's so much trial and error. It's so much trial and error for that reason because it's in your house and your home. I heard Jeff McCarthy talk about, like—on a podcast, [Laughter] talk about the idea of, like, turning over the bakery so that you can make room for family dinner. And I felt so seen in that moment because that's a weird stress. I'm not in a restaurant trying to get food on the table. "Table 86 needs"—not 86. I'm, like, thinking about *The Bear*. I love that show. I've worked in restaurants. There's not that level of stress, but it's a similar stress because the hungry customer is a 5-year-old with no self control. [Laughter] And they're like, "I need dinner now." And then, you're fighting your own inner battle of, "Oh my gosh, can I just throw mac and cheese at the problem? Or am I, like, not feeding him great food because he's so hungry?"

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The whole dance. There's so much to it. It's so complicated. And nobody's posting that on Instagram. For multiple reasons. One, I don't think people want to see that. But also, I don't think my son would like me to post a picture of him crying on the internet. That would not be a very kind move of me as a mother. [Laughter] So yes, it is trial and error. And because there are so

many living beings in my house, what worked yesterday is probably not going to work today.  
And my dog is outside, and I need to bring her in because it's raining, I'm sorry.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh, no, that's okay.

Annie Clapper: Like, worst pet mom. Oh, she's waiting by the door. Hi, puppy, I'm sorry.  
I'm sorry, come here. Hey. Good girl. Okay. Go be naughty. Good girl. Go on. Sorry.

Jordan Hickey: No, no, it's totally fine.

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Annie Clapper: If we need to, I can put her in my room. She should probably calm down.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder, you're learning how to juggle all this stuff. How long did it take you to figure out, especially in those early days? And, like, do you feel like you *did* figure it out? Like, was there ever a moment where you were like, "I got it," or was it possibly, like, a ground shifting under your feet kind of thing?

Annie Clapper: Always. Always. And I think it will be that forever more, but I think the, like—[Laughter] I don't know if this is a scientifically sound answer, but it's what's popping in my head. I'm like, "The tectonic plates," [Laughter]. The tectonic plates of the bakery, I assume, will move a little slower as everything else moves a little slower.

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As my kids grow, they're not going to need as much from me. They don't need as much from me. So things aren't moving as quickly there, and that allows for slower movement. But things are always going to be shifting. Nothing ever really stands still.

Jordan Hickey: You had mentioned you had done it for, like, six months before kind of really, like, opening the bakery. Is that right?

Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: You did it for six months, opened the bakery. I guess a question I have is, how did it develop over the course of, like, those first couple years?

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And how did that change once you started to hear murmurings about COVID and everything shutting down?

Annie Clapper: So when I opened the bakery in general, five years ago—almost exactly five years ago—I did the farmers' market through that season, and I remember we were baking out of this—like, we were renting our house, and there was this small oven. We called it a landlord special, and we could fit the four cast irons in there, and I had a baby in the house. And I was like, "I don't want to do this. I don't like the rhythm of this." I was exhausted, I felt like the separation of bakery and family would be very helpful for working hours. And so, eventually, I sublet a commissary kitchen, and I did that for a little over a year. And during that whole time, I realized, "This is a stepping stone. This is not a long-term scalable business." So I was looking at it like, "I either need to scale way up and build out a space, or scale way back and move home," and I didn't really want to do that.

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I couldn't figure it out. And for months, I had been looking at retail spaces. I almost signed a lease. It just wasn't working with the temperature control for a bakery. But it was a really, really

great option other than that. And it was just like nothing felt right, I just couldn't figure it out. And this was all in, like, the start of 2020. I was like, "Man," I was so frustrated, I remember leaving the space, I had tried to bake bread out of it, but it was just too cold, and it was going to be too cold all year. Because it was either too cold because in the winter, the heating wouldn't warm up the space enough. Or in the summer, the air conditioning was so cold, it wouldn't really proof bread very well. And I had to tell them no, and I drove away, and I was crying in my car. I was feeling really upset, and I was like, "I just don't know what to do, nothing feels right." And that was, like, mid to late February of 2020. And I was like, "I just wish I had the answer."

[Laughter]

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And yeah. So then, March happened, and the pandemic hit, and I remember going into the space, and the people working in the restaurant were, like, really trying to make it happen for their business, and they were trying to figure their stuff out. And I was like, "I don't want to try to make this business happen in this kitchen and also try not to kill my family with the pandemic." And I was like, "Okay, I kind of feel like the answer is being shoved at me." So I ended my lease and moved all my stuff back into our house. And I was like, "Okay, if we're doing this, we're doing this." And I had read enough about the pandemic where I was like, "I don't think this is two weeks to stop the spread, I think this is, like, a year at least." And so, I moved everything in, we kind of recalibrated, we made our home work in a way that I had, after doing it for almost two years at that point, realized, like, "Here's how other cottage bakers are making it happen in their space." So I got to look at a vast array of other cottage bakers, and I was like, "I need to have a bread table."

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Because at that point, when I had been doing it at home, I had this tiny, tiny kitchen. If you go on a deep dive on the Instagram, [Laughter] you'll see, it was, like, the size of a closet. And I had been shaping bread on the counter, clearing everything off, sanitizing everything, and then shaping 30 loaves on this very—it was, like, the size of the table we're sitting at.

Jordan Hickey:           And this is maybe, like, four or three-by-three.

Annie Clapper:           Yeah, it's, like, 3x4, 3x5 maybe. And it was smaller than this, actually. It was not as deep. Anyway, it was ridiculous. So I commissioned a local woodworker, I was like, "Can you please make me a bread table?" And he was like, "Yeah, I'm sitting around. I'm happy to do it." I just ran into him the other day. [Laughter] I was like, "Thank you, it changed our lives." So we moved that into the house, we changed where we ate, we moved our dining table somewhere else, we made that space work for a few months, and then we decided instead of putting the savings we had into opening a bakery, we would put it into opening a better cottage bakery, so we decided to buy a house. And we bought this house that we're sitting in right now.

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We looked around for houses that would have a space for an oven. That was part of it, was, like, I needed a bread oven because I'd been doing it out of this home oven, and it's really exhausting lifting four cast iron Dutch ovens in and out of a home oven. A lot of squats. [Laughter] Because I didn't want to burn out my wrists. Anyway, we did all that. That's how we made that work. And so, once we bought this house, things made a bit more sense. It's a little unconventional, where we're sitting is this dining room table, and it's not in the kitchen, it's off to the side because I have the bread table in the kitchen. And maybe at some point, we'll renovate, but this works for now. And I'm trying to be in the now. I'm like, "This is working enough for right now." Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: So from, like, a business perspective, COVID is shutting everything down. Like, we're early in the pandemic. What was going through your mind at the time?

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Was it like, "Oh, how are we going to make this work"? Or were you thinking, like, "What's going to happen?" Especially from, like, less of the more general, like, "What's happening to the world?" but more specifically, like, with the business.

Annie Clapper: What's happening in the bakery, yeah. It was a lot of gratitude. I felt really lucky. Sorry, I lost track of the COVID question. [Laughter] When it started, it was really scary. I think we were all feeling very scared. Scared and grateful simultaneously. What is the word for that, when you're, like, looking at your own mortality? [Laughter] You're, like, feeling both scared and grateful. So I was incredibly grateful that we were able to make enough money to pay our bills because my husband is a performing musician. So he was vastly underemployed. Once the pandemic started and no one was going anywhere, he wasn't playing. And so, our main source of income was actually his work, and that was another reason we moved the bakery was the overhead of paying for the commercial space.

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Taking that way made it so that we could pay our bills just with the bakery, which we needed. So I was able to do contactless pickup, I had, like, a bread shed, we called it on the porch, people could pick up their bags. And I just felt grateful that I could do this and keep our family safe, that I could be a food service provider and do that for people, and again, coming back to the, like, providing joy, COVID was such a—we're still in it, people are still getting sick. I don't want to not acknowledge that. But at the start of the pandemic before we had vaccines and everything,

and medication for it, and we were all terrified, I was so grateful to provide joy in a time when we were all so scared and to be like, "Here's something special. Twice a week, you can come get your bread on my porch." And people got really excited about it in a way that they hadn't before.

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It was like, "I went out of the house today." You know what I mean? We were all so starved for these little moments of joy. And so, to be able to bring that to people was very fulfilling, more than it had been before. It was like, "Oh, this is a moment of community with your family. You're going to slice the bread, you're going to do this thing." I got so many messages. "Oh, we made this thing today with my family with your bread."

Jordan Hickey:       Were you surprised that people were still wanting to buy bread? Or it just kind of felt, like, logical like, "Oh, this is a different kind of community thing"?

Annie Clapper:       I wasn't surprised that people still wanted to buy bread, I was surprised that they still wanted to buy my bread because my bread is expensive. And it has to be because it takes so much time, obviously. [Laughter] That's a different conversation. But it's not, like, a \$3 or \$4 bread at Walmart. And I assumed because they were such hard times that people would be scaling back on their grocery costs, and I found that to not be true.

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I think a lot of people, because they weren't going out to eat, were buying higher-end grocery during the lockdown part of the pandemic because it was like, "I need joy where I can find it." And so, I think that was a big thing, was people were cooking more, and they were cooking with local goods. Especially here. I found a lot of people were going way out of their way to support

local business. I just felt so lucky, and we would sell out all the time, and I was just so grateful that we could continue to make ends meet in such a scary time.

Jordan Hickey: Again, just kind of getting a sense of scale, like, how many loaves were you doing a week at that time?

Annie Clapper: At least 100, minimum. Yeah. Out of the tiny oven. Thinking about the house that we were in before, I would dream about bread. We were watching this really silly show, *Drunk History*, which I love a lot.

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And it's, like, really great historical stories that we should know and often don't. Have you watched it?

Jordan Hickey: I have.

Annie Clapper: [Laughter] We were watching it every night. My husband and I would, like, go to sleep watching it. And I would dream about, like, "And then, she was making bread every day. [Laughter] And she just kept making piles of bread." I made so much bread during the first six months of the pandemic. And bake days were four loaves an hour out of my one oven, so I would bake for 16 hours while raising a 2-year-old and a—gosh, how old was Hazel? She was 6. Yeah, she was 6 and my oldest. And, like, trying to be there with my kids in this insane time, and be a good parent, and make sure we all got outside for a couple of hours a day. It was wild. And I was making so much bread, I don't even know. I look back on it, and I'm like, "How did I even do that? I don't know." I scaled it back. Once we got in here and I got a Rofco to start, and then I now have a Simply Bread oven, and I sold my Rofco to another amazing cottage baker, Noel.

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Yeah, so once I was able to do that, my hours got scaled back, and I feel like my sanity came back a little bit. [Laughter] But it was crazy.

Jordan Hickey:        So having, like, the Rofco, like, how did that change things? I'm guessing you were able to do more than four loaves an hour, right?

Annie Clapper:        [Laughter] Well, I'm a bit of a stickler when it comes to the quality of the bread as well, probably to my own detriment sometimes. So I insisted probably on no more than nine an hour because I didn't like the way they came out when I put 12 in there. 12 could fit, but sometimes they would touch, and the browning happened unevenly. And the Rofco's really, really hard to bake with. It's a great oven and an amazing tool, but, like, it will put hair on your chest real quick. [Laughter] I remember just, like—I thought I was a good baker, and then I got a Rofco, and it was very humbling.

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And it really kicked my butt. And I felt like it took about six months before I was producing the kind of bread I wanted to be making out of it. But now, I feel like I learned so much in those six months about it. You need the proof to be just right. You need every little bit to be just so. The scoring needs to be perfect, you need to steam it right, each deck is a different temperature because it's not perfect. It's very imperfect. [Laughter] And you have to seam accordingly. You have to rotate. It's really, really intricate. And so, I feel like I became a much better baker baking out of that. And I could bake a lot more bread. And I remember when I got it, I was so excited, and at that point, I had enough—like, the community on Instagram was huge, I had a lot of really good friends doing similar work, so when I got it, it was this weird celebration on the internet,

like, a lot of people. [Laughter] Because until this point, I had a lot of people following me being like, "I can't believe you're still doing cast iron," and I'm like, "Listen, money is real." [Laughter]

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I'm like, "We couldn't afford it, and also I rented our house, and I couldn't do it." So, like, all these people who had been following me for so long were so pumped about it. And I got a message from a friend, Omy, who was running his own company at the time, and was like—I posted, I'm like, "This is going to save me so many hours." He's like, "No, no, no, I've seen you on the internet. You're just going to do three times as much." [Laughter] He wasn't wrong. Yeah. So that was nice because I could do more, but then I did less days, so that really helped.

Jordan Hickey:       The reason I ask is because you talked a little bit about trying to balance everything. Did that help with balance? Like, what else was helping with, like, maintaining some semblance of balance in the house?

Annie Clapper:       Therapy. [Laughter]

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I'm going to give you a real answer. Therapy is great. No, I think I am very prone to workaholism. So I'm at war with myself often with that, as a partner, as a parent. Even if it was just me living on my own, that would still be a thing because I still need to, like, care for myself. So I will often push myself to the point of exhaustion if I am not deliberately looking at that often. So being very aware of that was essential. I probably wasn't looking at that too hard until, like, fall of 2020. I was just going and doing, and doing, and doing. And then, we had a pod in the lockdown period where, like, we had my brother and his family and then a very dear friend of ours. We all were in, like, a pod. It was, like, the best situation for what it was. And we would do

tradeoff childcare, so the kids would do virtual school. My parents are in their 80s, so during the pandemic, we didn't want to stop seeing them, and we also didn't want to put them at risk.

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So we had, like, a set of rules. We would trade off childcare, the kids did virtual school, and this was great. I share this because it was also, like, our pod, we would talk about really deep things, and we would hang out together. And I got into Brené Brown, and I read *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Have you read it? I highly recommend. She talks about perfectionism and how it's just like second-hand smoke. You think you're only harming yourself, but you're harming everyone around you because they can breathe it in. And I read it, and I had to sit down. I was shaping bread, and I had to lie down on the floor. [Laughter] It hit me so hard. Like, in here. I lay down on the floor because I was crying so hard, and I was like, "This is terrible. Who gave me this book?" [Laughter] I was listening to it. And I was like, "Why did I read this stupid book?"

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And I was just like, "Oh, gosh." But when you feel attacked by something—it's very true. And I remember hearing that. So from that point on, [Laughter] I was like, "Oh, I'm using this as some sort of weird armor that I think is going to protect me. And really, like, it's harming me and everyone around me." So I began exploring that. I know we're talking about cottage baking, but I'm getting into, like, the depths of all of it. Yeah. And that hit me so hard, and it was such a wakeup call that moving forward, I was like, "Oh, if I keep freaking out about, 'I burned this loaf, I can't believe it, and what am I going to do?'"—and I was really getting, like, very upset when things would go wrong with baking. And if I continued that pattern of, like, freaking out about it,

I was showing my kids that, like, the world is ending if you make a mistake. Which is, like, yeah, you could feel that way, and I did for decades. [Laughter]

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Or you could try and dismantle that inside yourself, and then everything else feels so much easier. And the perfectionism and the workaholism of, like, "Oh, I sell out of bread, and then people get angry with me." Now, I'm working on, like, if somebody gets angry with me because I fell out of bread, their anger is not mine to manage. [Laughter] So that whole thing, trying to unpack that and maintaining more balance. But it's work always, it's never easy. It's just constantly work, trying to unpack that. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey:           And so, was this revelation in fall 2022?

Annie Clapper:           That was, like, fall 2020, that, like, lying on the floor, crying about perfectionism. And then, moving forward, with the bakery—it's not like then, everything changed. Because I think when you learn stuff like that, it's like a rubber band. You're like, "Wow," and then it just springs right back, right? [Laughter] You're like, "But I'm still me. [Laughter]

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And I still have all these, like, internal systems in place where I—I still had all these commitments, I was still sort of exclusively building my image of myself on how others might view me, and the level of perfection I demanded of myself, and all of this. So I'm still trying to undo that. Things are much better than they were, but it just takes a lot of work to constantly be undoing that. Are you referring to me, like, taking a non-baking job, sort of?

Jordan Hickey: Well, I guess indirectly. But, like, I'm still just wondering—because I think to be able to say, like, "Yeah, fall 2022 is when I kind of was able to balance the scales"—I was kind of wondering, like, what was going on? Because I think it's really interesting to know that, like, you identify with this, like, kind of tendency toward perfectionism in, like, fall 2020, but it takes two years to really kind of get to where it felt healthy?

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Annie Clapper: I would say, I think part of it is that baking is never going to pay—well, I shouldn't say never. At this time, baking doesn't pay enough combined with my husband's salary and all of that to live the life we would like to lead, where we can, like, go on vacation, and go out to eat. Things that I sometimes will berate myself and be like, "You have a good life." But I'm like, "Every now and then, we'd like to go out of town, and do things, and not be really scraping by." We'd like to do a little more than that. So baking isn't, at this time, covering that unless I really work myself to the bone.

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And then, I can't enjoy that stuff anyway. So I was really trying to balance the scales for years with the baking. And then, in the fall of 2022, I was still feeling exhausted. I had thought about opening a storefront. I had someone interested in investing in that last summer. That's the first time I've said that publicly. [Laughter] I had someone kind of approaching me and saying, "We'd really like to help make this happen. And we can help you financially, we can help you with building a space, et cetera." And I was really considering it. And I went to San Francisco to visit with friends, and go to Tartine, and talk to bakers commercially and cottage bakers who were friends. And I learned that—and there's an article about it, this isn't news—but Tartine is sort of

subsidized by a real estate company that owns them now, that owns the company. And so, they're not necessarily turning a profit, even as probably the most famous, well-regarded bakery in the world.

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Or sourdough bakery in the world. And I looked at that and was like, "What am I doing? [Laughter] What am I doing with my life? I love this, but do I love it enough to make it my whole life? I don't think so." And so, that really shook me. And a few months later, I was still baking here and there, trying to kind of figure out—I was very burnt out, feeling really exhausted, and feeling like every time I'd go to bake, I was like, "I don't want to." And then, I got approached with a job offer from someone who needed—from my brother. [Laughter] I'm going to say it. And he was like, "I need someone who I can trust in this position. And it's part-time, so you can still keep baking." And I was like, "Great." Because I didn't want to give up the baking yet, and I started doing that work, and I was like, "Wow." I joked about this earlier, I was like, "You know what's amazing, is, like, getting seven hours of sleep a night." I was like, "Have you heard of this thing? It's called sleeping enough." [Laughter]

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I'm like, "Wow, all this perfectionism stuff I've been trying to unpack and do better at is so much more accessible when I simply sleep enough." [Laughter] It's ridiculous. But yeah, so that was a real gift. It allowed me to take care of my body in a way that, like, now, I can still bake, but it's, like, one-off. Yeah, I'm exhausted. Like, I'm going to do a pop-up this weekend, and by the time it gets to Saturday afternoon, I'm going to be so depleted, but then I will have enough time to actually recharge. Whereas before, I was so depleted, and then 24 hours later, I had to feed the

starter and mill the flour. And I love that feeling because perfectionism. I'm like, "I would like to use all of my battery." [Laughter] It's a little unhealthy. But Saturday evening this week, I know I'm going to come home, I'm going to unpack my stuff from the pop-up, and then we're probably going to get takeout and watch a movie, and I'm going to be asleep by 9 p.m.

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And, like, I love that. I'm excited about that. But it's different. Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder...

Annie Clapper: I have to just—I'm so sorry to interrupt. My husband is asking me—because he has our children, and I just need to say, "Yes." Okay. Because he was like, "Are you still doing the interview?" He doesn't want to bring our wild, wonderful, rambunctious children back into the house.

Jordan Hickey: Well, I appreciate that.

Annie Clapper: And I'm sorry to interrupt you. And I didn't want to leave him hanging.

Jordan Hickey: No, no, that's totally fine. I do wonder, especially kind of thinking about—you'd mentioned burnout, especially over the course of going from, like—I guess over the course of the bakery, experiencing burnout, and all that. But was there anything that you did before kind of, like, stepping back and doing part-time, was there anything that worked for burnout? Like, was there...

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Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: There was?

Annie Clapper: Long breaks.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah.

Annie Clapper: And I've looked at this a lot of different angles, and I'm sure there are things that I don't know that I'm missing. So I'm sure I'm missing things. But from my experience, I think most people I know who succeed at cottage baking in the long term, they take a long break now and then, and they take regularly scheduled breaks. When we were in lockdown and all of that, I couldn't afford to do that and make our bills. And so, that's part of how I got so burnt out. And then, also, trying to bake out of a home oven, all of that. There were a lot of things that led up to it. But breaks are a big thing that I've heard about. The other thing is, I can't go without saying that for mothers and fathers—parents in general—it's exhausting.

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But a nursing mother running a cottage bakery, it's a different level of exhaustion versus a father who is relying on his partner or his wife, whatever the situation is. I think dads have it easier, and there's a lot of data to back that up. [Laughter] And it's not just heteronormative households. I think if you have a really balanced division of care, that's one thing. But I think if you're a nursing mother—a nursing parent, I should say, it's different. The hours you put in are different. And so, I think that contributed to burnout in a different way for me, personally. And I think, also, every cottage baker I've seen do it long term, they have a partner who has a day job that can really just sustain their family. But they rely on that. Whereas I married a musician. [Laughter] And while he works really hard, during the pandemic, during the part where we were all home and trying to stay home, we couldn't make it on that living.

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And he has other skills, but, like, what are you going to do, try and apply for remote work in the middle of a global pandemic? [Laughter] With no experience? It didn't really work very well. So yeah, that was my own personal experience with the burnout. I feel like that wasn't the most articulate answer, but basically being a parent burns you out, period. Being a parent and a cottage baker burns you out big-time. If you're a mother, that's probably even more, at least in my experience. And my husband does a lot. That's not to say that he doesn't do anything. He does probably most of the housework and all of that, and I'm still just, like, completely drained. I was. Not now. I'm fine now. Like, "Everything's great now."

Jordan Hickey: We've talked a lot, I think, about mental health aspects. I wonder, like, what other challenges there were. Especially, like, I think about during the early days of the pandemic, it was impossible to find, like, flour.

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Like, the shelves were bare. Are there other challenges beyond what we've been talking about as a cottage baker?

Annie Clapper: Well, I guess, with that, I think, thankfully, if you do it smaller scale, if you zoom out away from the, like, global supply chain and try and get a little bit more into your own local supply chain, things get easier. So flour was not an issue for me because I buy my flour from a mill in Illinois. The only real issue was that shipping took a little longer. But I knew that if we were in a real pinch, we could drive up there. And it's a long drive, but Matt wasn't working. [Laughter] So he was like, "I'll just go get in the car and get your flour if we need to." So that's one thing. That was huge. The flour, which is the biggest ingredient for us, that's easy to

get to if you're not buying it from, like, a major distributor, dealing with the—the supply chain issues were very real, and they really exposed a lot of vulnerabilities, obviously.

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And that was the biggest thing. The other thing was, people were very concerned because they couldn't get yeast. Well, I make my own yeast out of flour, so that was easy. Flour, water, and salt are my three essential ingredients, so I was very lucky. I was very, very lucky with that, for the most part. I didn't come into issues with that. Then, weird things were, like, packaging. Every now and then, I'd need paper bags, and then we were out. But I would try and buy early enough that that wasn't a headache. And since that's not perishable, that wasn't an issue. I'm trying to remember if there was anything that really knocked us out. It was more with the small items, like they were out of oat milk or whatever, and that was because I was buying it at Walmart.

[Laughter] And that was, like, "We can work around that." The big things weren't an issue for me, thankfully.

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Some people would buy flour from me during that time. I remember they'd be like, "Do you have flour?" And I was like, "Yes, I do, and I can sell it to you." But then, I used to be like, "Just buy it on Janie's website. They're such a great mill, I love them. Just support them."

Jordan Hickey:       At one point, you'd mentioned baking some other stuff as well. Are you doing that at all now?

Annie Clapper:       Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: I guess to what extent now has sourdough been the only thing you've been doing? Can people order other things from you?

Annie Clapper: Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: And how much was that happening? Maybe not a percentage, but, like...

Annie Clapper: I would say I probably made, like—well, the numbers on the small items, I don't have percentages, but I was doing a lot of cookies and bagels, especially when we were just doing it out of the home oven, because I could make 32 bagels in 30 minutes as opposed to four loaves of bread in an hour.

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Or 60 bagels in an hour versus four loaves, whatever it is. And now, I do a little bit here and there because I think it's—a lot of times, people get excited about the little things, and then they get bread. So I prefer to just make bread, that's my favorite thing to make. But also, I run a business, so I have to make the other things. People really get excited about the cookies. For the last pop-up, I think I made, like, 150 cookies. People get really excited about the orange rolls. I don't remember if you've had them. They're, like, cinnamon rolls with orange zest in them, and they're sourdough made with specially milled Kamut flour, so they've got the, like, sort of nutty—they're delicious. Not to toot my own horn.

Jordan Hickey: I was going to say, we can't talk about that because it's 12:30 and, like, lunchtime, so we can't have that talk.

Annie Clapper: [Laughter] Sorry. [Laughter] I'm like, "And I didn't provide snacks."

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Jordan Hickey: No, no, it's good. I was sort of checking some of the boxes, thinking of other things you've baked. But honestly, I think one of the big last questions I have for you is, you've scaled back to part-time. At one point, as we were chatting, you described it as work.

Annie Clapper: Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: I wonder if, like, now that you're kind of in a better place with it, does it feel like work again? Is it something you enjoy? Because I think, like, baking, like, it's inherently creative work. But like with so much creative work, if you put a dollar sign on it, it's like, "Well, it's not as much fun." But what is baking for you now?

Annie Clapper: I feel like it's a question I'm tossing around in my head a lot right now. I think I have some, like, anxiety around it that I'm still sort of working through when I can feel myself tense up when it's time to start milling and all of that, where I'm like, "Ugh."

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And I don't want that because I love it. [Laughter] So I'm trying to undo that right now. I think I still have some healing to do around that. But it's like trying to untie the knots in your brain. Where you're like, "Okay, I've got to just relax about this." And the rigid thoughts about, like, "Everything's got to be perfect." Well, if I let go of that, then it's like, "This can be fun." So trying to rebuild those, like, neural pathways in my own brain so that this can be fun again. I think personally, creative work, for me, can easily turn into overwork just because of my own tendencies. So if I avoid that altogether, then I think I'm probably not growing. If I'm just, like, trying to make it so that my work is, like, just a job, then I'm avoiding growth. So I'm big on, like, confront that stuff head-on.

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So I'm doing that. [Laughterterter] And I don't want to stop baking, I love it. So I'm doing pop-ups here and there. I have, like, a five-recipe book that I'm finishing up the edits on, and mainly just pushing the snooze button on, on finishing it. [Laughterterter] Because I have other stuff going on. But I don't know, there's grief in it right now because I'm not doing it as much. So I guess there's, like, grief in the letting go. I'm in a very transitional year with this, trying to decide if the other work I'm doing should become full-time, trying to decide if I never want to do that, if I just want to balance these two things. I can't really give you an answer because I'm sort of in the thick of it right now. I'm in the middle of trying to undo the panic that sets in when it's time to start milling.

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Because I don't want that. So every time I mill, I have to take a deep breath and be like, "This is fun. You like this, remember?" [Laughterterter] Because once it gets going, I'm really happy to be there.

Jordan Hickey:           Yeah. And this is just to kind of step back just a little bit, but that sensation, kind of the panic, that wasn't always there, was it? Like, was there a point when you were doing this, like, that you remember that, like, setting in for the first time?

Annie Clapper:           Oh, I don't know.

Jordan Hickey:           And did you address it at the time?

Annie Clapper:           I think it may have always been there because I think I'm working on not motivating myself with anxiety. So I think forever, I have been motivated by a deadline, by anxiety. I think that's my most productive is a looming deadline or anxiety about whatever it is.

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And now, I'm like, "Oh, wait, I can just do work just because work is worth doing." The other thing is, I enjoy my other job. And, like, I don't feel panic about that. Sometimes I do, and then I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no. [Laughter] That is not necessary. No one else at my job wants me to feel that." So I think I can undo it. I think it's something that, again, like, I'm very susceptible to, using my own motivation. And unfortunately, with The Family Crumb, I'm my own boss. [Laughter] So that's another joke with this new job is, like, the company I work for, my boss is a much better boss than I am. My boss will close my laptop and be like, "Hey, you've worked enough, you need to chill out."

Jordan Hickey: As opposed to...

Annie Clapper: As opposed to, "Can I just stay up until 2 in the morning? Because I saw someone else just do this really cool thing on Instagram, and I better have it at this pop-up." I'm like, "Why do I talk to myself like that?" [Laughter]

1:05:06

But I'm sure other cottage bakers can relate. I think being motivated by anxiety is something I'm—I think that's why that started, that, like, fear at the start of a bake, like, "Gosh, okay." But once I get into it, I'm happy to be there. So it's trying to remember the reason we do it, and I think most of us do it, because, like, "Dang, food is the best." And being able to share delicious food with people in your community and spread that, that's what bread's about. That's why it's, like, one of the oldest foods we know about that's been cooked.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah, I think it's no coincidence that the saying is you break bread together. That's how you build community.

Annie Clapper: Yes. Yeah. And in this community, I think it can bring us back to each other. We're all humans, we're all trying to do our best. When we break bread together, we remember our humanity.

1:06:01

And that's what I try to remember if I feel my heart racing. [Laughter] I'm like, "It's just bread. It's just bread. It's everything and nothing. It's just bread." But yeah, I'm in the thick of it is my short answer. I'm in the thick of it, I don't have a lot of answers. [Laughter] I don't know. I hope to keep doing this for a long time, but I'm not sure where—who knows where this will head in the next six months to a year?

Jordan Hickey: So I think the last question I was going to ask you is, and I mentioned even before we started talking, I've talked with some bakers who are kind of still early on their path with this. I've talked with people who are a little bit farther along. What would you tell people who are—I'm sure that you have people reach out and be like, "Hey, I'm going to do this. How do I do this?"

Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Like, what kind of advice do you give people, and how has that advice changed over the course of your path, do you think?

1:07:07

Would you be giving someone the same advice when you first started compared to, like, the advice you'd be giving them now?

Annie Clapper: I was asking for advice when I first started. [Laughter] I was accepting all the advice. And I am still. But I think the advice is similar. The problem is, I'm the best at giving advice, and I think if I had taken some of the advice more seriously, I probably wouldn't have gotten as burnt out as I did. I feel like you're probably going to talk to these optimistic bakers, and I'm like, "I'm so burnt out." [Laughter] I'm sorry to be that voice. [Laughter] I still love it, don't get me wrong. There's this cottage baker, and she's still a cottage baker, and she is amazing at setting boundaries.

1:08:03

And that, I think, is, like, a huge piece of advice, is set your boundaries, and be firm. Because other people's responses to your boundaries are not your business. And so, her thing—actually, it may not even be her, like, thing, but she posted it on Instagram, and it has sat with me. It's like, "Take your sick days before they take you. Take your rest days before they take you. If you don't pick a day to rest, your body will choose it for you." And I read that, and I was like, "Why are you attacking me?" [Laughter] But that's a huge one with baking. Be sure to rest because it's so physical. Make sure you're taking care of yourself. And the other thing I wish I had done better earlier on was more—and I didn't have the tools, so I can't really beat myself up too much about it, is be better at understanding the economics. And, like, it's very difficult to price out a loaf of bread with the cost of labor because labor fluctuates with how warm the temperature is.

1:09:08

Jordan Hickey: What do you mean?

Annie Clapper: Like, if it's a hot day, you might spend less time in front of the bread table. So, like, even just that little piece of the whole financial picture is really complex, so you can't

really cost out your labor in the same way that you could with, like, a linear item like a cookie that doesn't have to proof. Unless it's sourdough, but even then, it's much more flexible, et cetera. So, like, maybe take a class or two on, like, the economics of food businesses. So that's something that maybe, if you're a cottage baker coming at it from accounting, you are in luck. We're all coming at it from different places. But I think that would've been really helpful to me, is that. And I remember having somebody—I get a lot of people asking about the oven I have because it's a newer model of oven, and I love it so, so, so, so, so much. They don't pay me any money to say that. I'm like, "Simply, I'll take your money."

1:10:06

But I love it so much because it's so good, it saves me time. But I remember getting a lot of questions from people being like, "I just started doing this, and I'd like to buy a Simply." And I'm like, "Well, Simplys are, like, \$8,500. So how much do you love this? Do you love this that many loaves of bread?" Because, like, sometimes we think that a piece of machinery is going to fix our life. And I think that's a temptation with baking, too. I do give that advice a lot. I have people who call me for, like, consultation with cottage baking. I have that on my website, you can buy an hour of my time. Because it's so personal to your life, sometimes it helps to have a conversation with someone who will, like, listen to what might fit in your life as opposed to, like, a how-to, which is too broad. This is such a long answer, I'm sorry. [Laughter] Yeah, the big things are, be sure to rest, look at the big picture with what you're deciding to buy because the bakery profits, like, the margins are so small, you want to be really deliberate.

1:11:05

And don't kid yourself into thinking that machinery will make your life easier when you're not sure if you want to do it. Like, I would wait on purchases. That's my own personal—but then again, I baked out of a home oven for much longer than I should have.

Jordan Hickey: I have to say, I didn't know that you were doing consultations for cottage baking. What has that been like? How long have you been doing it, what kind of people have you talked to?

Annie Clapper: That was something that started probably, I don't know, a chunk into the pandemic, at least six months. And the reason I started doing it was because sourdough became such a thing during the pandemic. I was getting inundated with messages. "How do I do this? My starter looks like this. Can you help me, can you help me, can you help me?" And I wanted to say yes to everyone, but I think that may have also contributed to the burnout was all this unpaid labor I was doing, which we—and that is a danger with the social media is, like, we want to give back.

1:12:07

We want to be part of the community. And my time is valuable. So I hadn't put a price tag on it until that point. And my pod was like, "You need a paywall." And I was like, "Oh, but it feels icky, I don't know." And then, I finally did it because I was just getting too many messages a day from people who didn't—they weren't trying to monopolize my time, they had a genuine question, and I was relatively accessible. And I would try and answer all of them. And I was spending, like, hours of my day answering these messages. And so, yeah, a couple of years ago, I started doing that. So then, when I get people who are sending me a lot of messages, "Oh, I'm starting my bakery, and I really could use your help. Can I talk to you on the phone?" I did get a

lot of that, people asking for an hour of my time, and I would do it for free. [Laughter] And then, I realized, "Oh, no, I really need this time. I need to monetize this for my own sake." Now, I've done a lot of them at this point, and I really love doing it because I get to listen, I get to hear, "What's your story?"

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"I'm doing it, and I have a 2-year-old and a 5-year-old. This one's in school, this one's not. How did you fit it around your nursing schedule? How did you fit it around nap time? Et cetera, et cetera." And I have this perspective. Like, I've done it for years around a family schedule, so I can be like, "Hey, if you do it here, that worked for me. You can also do—like, I fed the starter here." Or, like, one tip that Noel Deeb from El Breadshop helped me with was, she refrigerates her starter before she mixes, and that way, she can sleep a full seven hours before she mixes, but then the starter's ready to go first thing in the morning. Which, for me, was, like, a game-changer. Because then, I'm a morning person. I actually don't mind being up really early in the morning. And then, I'm done by, like, 2. And that's huge for me. So all those little nuggets in a phone call, I've got them in my brain, and this person tells me A, B, and C about their life, their setup, what they need, and I can be like, "Oh, this may work for you."

1:14:04

I have this whole toolkit. And I love that. I find it really fulfilling.

Jordan Hickey: That's so cool. I think one of the main themes throughout this conversation we've had is this idea, this isn't just I'm making bread because I feel like it today.

Annie Clapper: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: You don't sit down and make all these loaves of bread just because, like, "Yeah, I felt like making 60"...

Annie Clapper: [Laughter] "I felt like making 60 loaves of bread today."

Jordan Hickey: Just casually.

Annie Clapper: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: But the thing is, it's like, no, there's also, like, that shift toward, like, "Yeah, no, this is a job." And I think what goes hand-in-hand with that is understanding, "Yeah, like, if I'm going to take several hours a day answering messages, yeah, I'm happy to help, but this is also my time." And, like, valuing your time—sometimes you need to put a dollar sign on your time.

Annie Clapper: Yeah. It's difficult because you're right, and that was something I was getting a lot of feedback from friends where they were like, "You can't be spending all this time. Yeah, you want to be kind."

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But, like, coming back to how you're perceived, I'm like, "I want everyone to know that I'm nice." And you can't sacrifice your own wellbeing, and also, time as a parent with my family, answering everyone's questions. So yeah, I did put the paywall up. I hate it because I think cottage baking is so hard and doesn't pay that well. But it's not that much money, and my time is probably my most precious resource and has been for a while. So yeah, you're absolutely right. And the inform that you get in a one-hour phone call—and it's not just me. Like, Bonnie from Alchemy does this. Chelsa B, I think, is her bakery's name. I don't know. But she does it, too.

There are plenty of people who do this where you can call, and they have all these years of knowledge and, like, doing it as a cottage baker for years, and sometimes as not a cottage baker. Like, Jeff from Bread Service was also, like, a baker-baker and, like, a pastry chef for years.

1:16:03

So you can take all that knowledge and plug it into whatever your situation is. It's worth every penny. Because you're going to save money on not buying stuff you don't need and whatever else. Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Speaking of time, I think...

Annie Clapper: Yes. [Laughter] I'm sorry I've talked so much.

Jordan Hickey: No, but it's been wonderful, though. I'm looking at the questions. I think I've asked every that I was hoping to ask. Is there anything that I haven't asked or that we either touched on a little bit but I didn't delve into? Anything about either the experience you've had or kind of looking forward that you'd like to put out there?

Annie Clapper: Hm. I feel like we touched on a lot. [Laughter] Yeah, I feel like, too, I haven't talked a lot about—publicly, I guess, a lot about why I've scaled back so much.

1:17:03

So I guess it was just nice talking about that, and I think it will be nice for people who are like, "Where have you gone?" [Laughter] And I think in general, just sort of closing out, I feel like cottage baking is, in my opinion, where some of the most creative baking is taking place, so I'm excited that you're doing this for that reason. I'm sorry to be the seasoned old voice [Laughter] on this journey of, like, "Ah, I'm exhausted," and all of that. But not to be too Taylor Swift about it,

but I think a lot of the problem is me in that realm. [Laughter] Yeah, those are the big things. I'm excited to hear all of your other conversations. These are going to be public, and I can listen?

Okay. [Laughter]

1:18:00

Jordan Hickey: I think, like, despite the fact that you said, like, yeah, you are this voice coming from having seen so much, I think something like this, so much of it is idealized and romanticized online. It's like, "Oh, yeah, look at these incredible loaves of bread." They didn't just spontaneously manifest on the table, especially if there are 60 of them.

Annie Clapper: Oh my gosh. No, the amount of times that those loaves of bread looked beautiful, and my children ate, like, chips for lunch—I feel like we need to talk more about [Laughter] what is happening in the background of those perfect Instagram photos. And I'm glad that we can talk about it because it's just like everything else. People on the internet used to tell me how chill I was. And I was finally like, "Listen, y'all, I am the least person ever. This is fake. [Laughter] I am not chill." Yeah, it's very lovely and romantic on the internet, but in real life, it's just like anything else.

1:19:03

It's so beautiful, and magical, and exhausting, and depleting, and delicious. All of it. Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: All right, well, like I said, I think that covers everything. I'm going to leave 30 seconds at the end of this just for editing purposes. But yeah, thank you so much.

Annie Clapper: Thank you.

[End]