



Hannah Lavender

Sweet Lavender Bakeshop - Little Rock, AR

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Jordan Hickey: Today is July 2. We're here in Little Rock, Arkansas. I'm Jordan Hickey. I'm speaking with Hannah Lavender. Hannah, would you mind introducing yourself for the recording?

Hannah Lavender: Sure. My name is Hannah Lavender, and I am the owner of Sweet Lavender Bakeshop, a cottage bakery in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Jordan Hickey: And what do you specialize in?

Hannah Lavender: A lot of cakes, a lot of weddings. But cakes in general.

Jordan Hickey: I got you. So I said we were in Little Rock. Are you from Arkansas?

Hannah Lavender: I am, but I'm from Texarkana.

Jordan Hickey: How'd you get here?

Hannah Lavender: Kind of baking brought me here. I wanted to go to culinary school but could not afford it, and my parents didn't think it was worth spending a lot of money on culinary school. [Laughterter] So we found the Pulaski Tech Program, and it was pretty new, I think, when I found it. And so, I moved here to do that.

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Jordan Hickey: And so, when you say Pulaski Tech, like, what kind of program was it?

Hannah Lavender: It was a culinary arts program, and they've expanded a lot since I went. Now, they have their own building. But whenever I went, it was—we shared a building with—

gosh, it's still in the same spot, but now they have, like, their own separate building. And I can't remember what all we shared a building with, but it was one kitchen for every single class.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my God.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, it was pretty crazy.

Jordan Hickey: So how many people would be in a class?

Hannah Lavender: Maybe, like, 15 to 20, if I'm remembering correctly.

Jordan Hickey: That's a lot of people.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. There was a big hallway that we used that had a bunch of prep tables lined up, and then the actual kitchen that also operated as a cafe. So it was pretty crowded from what I can remember. I didn't stick around the whole time. I took classes for about a year and a half and then dropped out.

Jordan Hickey: You mentioned that baking had kind of gotten you to Central Arkansas, but why baking? What drew you to it?

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Hannah Lavender: I always liked it. I kind of always feel like I fell into it. It was the only thing I felt like I was good at, I guess, or wanted to be good at. So I just kind of picked a career and stuck to it. I don't really know why. I liked the Food Network as a kid. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] As a kid, did your parents bake? Did you see anyone in your family baking? Or was it really just the Food Network?

Hannah Lavender: No, it was my mom and my mama, her mom. They did a lot of cooking and baking. And my mom cooked for, like, church every month. Like, once a month, she did a meal for the church. And so, I liked to be able to help out when I could and, like, help with whatever dessert they were doing. So I liked making stuff with my mama and watching my mom bake. And so, yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Did they have any specialties?

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Hannah Lavender: My mama did. There's this family cake that is, like, the tops. It's called the Mama McDaniel cake. It was my papa's mom's recipe, and it is still made at every family gathering. My mom makes it now. I still have never attempted to make it, honestly.

Jordan Hickey: And okay, just to pause here, you are a professional baker.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: And yet...

Hannah Lavender: I don't make that cake.

Jordan Hickey: Why?

Hannah Lavender: My mom makes it. I guess one day, I'll attempt it. But she just always does it.

Jordan Hickey: Can I ask what makes it such, like, a—is it your Everest?

Hannah Lavender: My family just really loves this cake. I don't know. It's, like, a boiled icing, and then you have to whip it, and it's really temperamental. And I just have never tried to attempt

it. My mom has thrown away so many batches of this cake because she thinks it won't turn out, or she thinks it's a bad one.

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But every time she does that, it just, like, always ends up being one of the best ones, which is really funny. So I don't know. I'm sure I'll try to attempt it soon. But I've just never felt the need because she always makes it. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] That's so funny. So to jump back, you've gone to Pulaski Tech, and you're there for how long, you said?

Hannah Lavender: I think a year and a half.

Jordan Hickey: Year and a half?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, so I did three semesters, I believe.

Jordan Hickey: And so, kind of, when you were going there, did you know that you wanted to be a baker? How did you picture that career going?

Hannah Lavender: I pictured opening up a bakery, like, a coffee-shop-vibe bakery. That was probably my ultimate goal when I moved here. I had a friend who also enjoyed it, and she lived in Little Rock, and we talked about going into business together and running a bakery/coffee shop. And so, that was probably my goal at that point.

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Jordan Hickey: Okay. How did that change?

Hannah Lavender: It changed once I actually started working for myself and realized—and working for other people who owned brick and mortar businesses, and seeing just how time-consuming it was, how hard it was, like, having employees and just handling the day-to-day of owning a business. And so, that kind of shifted what I wanted to do.

Jordan Hickey: So after you finished at Pulaski Tech, did you immediately jump into working for brick and mortars?

Hannah Lavender: I did. So I worked at Cupcakes on Kavanaugh while I was in school, and then I quit Cupcakes on Kavanaugh shortly after I dropped out of school and took about a three-month break. And then, I worked at Boulevard Bread. And I worked there doing cakes for almost seven years.

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Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: And so, just to kind of get a sense of timeframe, roughly what year were you at Pulaski Tech? When did you go to Boulevard?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, so I started school in 2009, and then I guess I left in the end of 2010. Yeah. And then, I started Boulevard in 2011.

Jordan Hickey: Okay. Okay. So you're at Boulevard for seven years. I don't know if the best term is, like, baking for yourself. But had you started your business at that point?

Hannah Lavender: I had not. I started it while I was there, though. So I was probably five years into working there maybe, ish. And all my friends started getting married. And I started making their wedding cakes. Which I never wanted to do, I never wanted to do weddings.

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That was not my goal. Never was. The stress of weddings really put me off from doing them. But then, all my friends got married, and they asked me to do their cakes, and I did, and it kind of made me realize, "I can do this." And so, that's kind of what started it all. I think a year or so after the year of the weddings was when I really jumped into figuring out how to start my own business.

Jordan Hickey: So when you say it was the year of the weddings, are we talking, like, two weddings or are we talking, like, 10 weddings?

Hannah Lavender: No, I think I did four over a summer.

Jordan Hickey: Oh, wow.

Hannah Lavender: So it was, like, May through July or something like that, I did four weddings. I think that's right.

Jordan Hickey: And so, you're doing these cakes for your friends. At what point were you like, "Yeah, I could do this"?

Hannah Lavender: Man, I don't really know. I guess maybe by the end of it.

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And I was just like, "This wasn't as bad as I thought. Like, I think I could handle doing this for myself. Like, I think I want to do weddings." So yeah, that's why I say I just kind of fell into it.

[Laughter] It was not my intention.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] And so, you have the year of weddings.

Hannah Lavender: Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: At what point did you start baking for people—the more that you did it, were you baking for people you knew? Or did people approach you? I feel like that's a major jump, going from friends or maybe acquaintances.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. Right. Definitely started out as just doing stuff for friends, friends' birthdays, whatever events. I would always just take baked goods pretty much anywhere I went. And then, probably once I actually started my business, that's when I started baking for people I didn't know.

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And it was really just word of mouth, friends of friends, then their friends. I don't really know how it expanded, but it did. And it wasn't, like, a crazy amount of people in the beginning. But it was enough. I don't know. Because I was still working, so I wasn't trying to take on too much at that point. So yeah, really just word of mouth. Gosh, I can't even remember, maybe doing, like, three to four orders a week, or every other week, or something like that for a couple years.

Jordan Hickey: And so, was that, like, the following year after the weddings?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, I think so. Something like that. I should have that timeline in my head, but I don't. I know what year I started my business, but I don't remember what year everyone got married. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: So what year did you start your business?

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Hannah Lavender: I say that, now I'm going to forget. I think it was 2015. Yeah, it was 2015, the year I actually, like, applied for a business license and did all that.

Jordan Hickey: When you were applying for the business license, did you already know about the cottage baking laws? Or did you find out about those later? Like, how did that work?

Hannah Lavender: So when I decided I wanted to start a business, I started looking for a kitchen, I guess. People told me to look at churches. I don't know, people gave me a bunch of random suggestions. So I called around and tried to find a church I could bake out of or just a commercial kitchen that would lease space out to me, and there was just nothing. I think there was maybe one commercial kitchen, but it was really expensive, and starting out, I was like, "I can't afford to do this." Plus, I was still working full-time at Boulevard. So someone told me about, "Hey, you can bake out of your house. There's this thing called a cottage law that you can sell baked goods."

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So I looked into it, and it sounded perfect. There was this, like, forum that I found online that broke down literally everything you needed to do, all the steps for you to get your business

license, and get approved, and get zoned, and all that. So I just followed that forum and did all the steps it told me to, and then I was in business.

Jordan Hickey: Wow.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Was that how you imagined baking, either growing up or being at Pulaski Tech? Is this the picture of, like...

Hannah Lavender: No, it's not. [Laughter] It sounded nice once I learned about it, like, baking from home. At the time, I was like, "Oh, I can kind of just do it however I want, have whatever hours I want." But then, you quickly learn once you get busy, like, that's not necessarily the case. Like, you're not controlling your schedule. [Laughter]

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Jordan Hickey: And actually, speaking of schedule, so you had started your business, but you were still working full-time. How were you managing that? Like, baking all day, and then coming home and baking more?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. Yeah. It was a lot. That whole time kind of feels like a blur. Like, I don't know if I really have a whole lot of memories from it, if I'm being honest. It was a lot. I was working all the time. I felt like I was working around the clock. It just felt like so much. But I just was too scared to quit my job to try and sustain myself with just my business. So I was just kind of waiting until I felt comfortable to do it.

Jordan Hickey: When was that?

Hannah Lavender: It was after I got married.

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. We got married in 2017. Yes, that's right. And we got married in October, and then I quit my job in December and started full-time for myself in January of 2018.

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Jordan Hickey: Wow. So at that point, you'd been doing it for, I guess, a couple years.

Hannah Lavender: Mm-hmm.

Jordan Hickey: Obviously, I'm sure getting married, having your partner probably give you a little bit of confidence, financial, all that.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, absolutely.

Jordan Hickey: But I'm sure you must have been getting quite a few orders at that point, right?

Hannah Lavender: Yes, I was. I remember we got back from our honeymoon, and I was on the schedule at Boulevard, like, the following week or whatever, and I also had a wedding, maybe two weddings, that next weekend, too. So it was like, I hit the ground running as soon as we got back, and then it was just, like, nonstop from there. And I told my husband that I thought I could do this. Like, I felt like I was busy enough now, I had done quite a few weddings that year. At the time, it felt like quite a few.

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Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Hannah Lavender: I think maybe I'd done, like, 15 weddings for the whole year. But I was like, "This feels like a lot." Now, I do, like, 70 or 80 a year.

Jordan Hickey: 70 or 80 weddings a year?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, it's insane.

Jordan Hickey: Okay, we'll come back to that. [Laughter]

Hannah Lavender: So yeah, then I quit. And he was so supportive, and he told me he thought I should, and it was wonderful. It was also really hard and a big change. Like, I thought I was working a lot when I was working for myself and for Boulevard, but I had no idea, like, the hours that I would work once I worked for myself. It was crazy. Because I just took every single order that anyone—like, any inquiries, I just said yes. I did not say no to anyone.

Jordan Hickey: I feel like this is, like, a tough question to ballpark, but, like, how many hours a day were you putting in? Or how many hours a week, maybe?

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Hannah Lavender: Man, I don't know. Even still, I work crazy hours, so I'm probably around the same. I kind of maybe leveled out a little, but I don't really know. But I probably work anywhere between—and it really depends on the day, depends on the week—between, like, 8 and 14 hours a day.

Jordan Hickey: Between 8 and 14 a day?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. I've worked, like, 24 hours before, like, straight. One time, I think my longest was, like, 36 hours, and it was awful.

Jordan Hickey: And just to clarify, this is just you, right?

Hannah Lavender: Mm-hmm. Yeah. The time I worked, like, over 30 hours, I had a friend help deliver my weddings with me because I didn't feel comfortable driving by myself.

[Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: So I'm kind of wondering, like, I feel like when a person is in school, there are people you can ask. You can turn to a teacher and be like, "Hey, am I doing this right?"

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Someone you can kind of turn to and be like, "Hey, can I have some advice?" Was there anyone, especially as you were getting started with cottage baking, was there anyone you could turn to and be like, "Hey, I need advice"? Or did you know anybody else who was doing the cottage baking thing?

Hannah Lavender: I didn't. It was really just me. I had another friend who was a business owner, so I would ask her questions. But it was obviously different. But if I had, like, general business questions, or just needed to vent, or needed advice, I would go to her. But other than that, I didn't really have anyone to ask, like, help in the baking end of it, I guess.

Jordan Hickey: So I kind of wonder then, I know you've been doing this for several years now, do you think attitudes toward cottage baking have changed?

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Like, do you know of other cottage bakers now? Is there a culture? Has the culture changed?

Hannah Lavender: I think so. I feel like when I started out, it wasn't a super big thing. Like, I feel like a lot of people didn't know about it. And maybe that's just because I was in such a small circle. Like, there could've been way more people doing this than I realized. But I feel like it is a

more common thing now, and I feel like people are more—like, it's not as much of a shock to people when you're like, "I bake out of my house." Like, it's pretty normalized now. It's not weird. Where in the beginning, I always felt, like, "Oh, that feels, like, really unprofessional." Like, I never felt like I could call myself a professional baker or a business owner.

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah. And I still feel weird about calling myself a professional, but that's just my own deal. So yeah, I feel like it has progressed a lot in that sense, I guess. Like, I don't feel as weird being like, "I work from home. I work out of my house. I bake out of my house."

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Like, no one bats an eye. No one cares. They usually are impressed, which makes me feel good.

[Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: Your time at, like, Cupcakes on Kavanaugh and Boulevard to now, like, working for yourself, I kind of wonder, is the relationship that you have with customers different now from, like, when you were, like, behind the counter at one of these places? How does that relationship dynamic change?

Hannah Lavender: I think it changes a lot because for the most part, I'm not really seeing my customers. Because I have a pickup location, and I just drop all my cakes off, and they are able to pick them up whenever is convenient for them. So the only interaction I have is emails or phone calls, so it's not really face-to-face, it's not, like, chatty or small talk. I do have a few customers who have been with me for years and years, which is so kind.

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And I consider them to be, like, acquaintances or friends-ish. Like, we talk about general stuff in emails, or if I see them, like, we can small talk and chat. And I don't know, I guess it feels kind of like if I were behind a counter and interacting with people, in a sense. I don't know if that makes sense.

Jordan Hickey: No, I think so. Part of the reason why I ask is, if you're working at, like, a brick and mortar, like a Cupcakes on Kavanaugh or Boulevard, you might see these people every day. Like, let's say if they're coming in, like, every day and getting a coffee or something like that.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: But I kind of wonder if once you are—Lavender Bakes, it's you. There's not, like, a handful of people working. It's you.

Hannah Lavender: Right.

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Jordan Hickey: So even if you're not seeing these people face-to-face, I wonder if that dynamic on email changes. They're not talking to you, they're talking to the business, right?

Hannah Lavender: Right. Yeah, yeah, for sure. I don't know. I—sorry, I'm not really sure what I want to say or how I want to answer that.

Jordan Hickey: Do you feel like you have more personal relationships with people because of it?

Hannah Lavender: Probably not. Like I said, there are a handful that yes, I feel like I have personal relationships with. But then, there are some that it's just like, "Oh, they get a few cakes

from me every now and then." But I've definitely had some customers that, like, I'm excited when they email me because they're really kind, and I like making stuff for them just because they're nice people. So yeah, I don't know. And then, I have the people who, like, come back year after year.

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Like, I did their wedding, I did their baby shower, I did their kids' cakes, like, every year. So that's really fun. And I think that matters, and it makes me feel like we have some sort of relationship-ish.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah, I love that.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: And that's kind of, like, the reason I was asking that is because I think if you are getting those emails, like, every year, like, someone's birthday, you go from, like, birthday number one, birthday number two, like you said, going from, like, wedding cake, to baby, to birthdays. I think that's a really cool idea about always being the one who's doing that for them.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, it's really cool. And there's an event that I've done every year for five or six years. It's Dinner on the Grounds for Our House Shelter. And I've met a lot of people through that, and I've met a lot of people who come to the events, and they're like, "Oh, you made my kid's birthday cake, like, four years in a row."

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Or, "You did my wedding, and then you did my baby shower." So, like, I meet people that way, too, and so that's really cool, for people to come up to me and tell me that whenever I'm able to interact with them.

Jordan Hickey: Yeah. I love that.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: I was thinking about how to pivot to this next question, but—COVID?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] I guess the question I would have is, like, you're baking, your business is going along, you're doing more weddings, you're working a lot of hours. And then, COVID starts happening. Like, what sort of an impact did the global pandemic have on you as somebody, especially who's doing a lot of wedding cakes?

Hannah Lavender: It was pretty crazy, very scary at first, obviously.

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I just kept getting emails like, "Hey, I think we're going to postpone." And people just had a lot of hope that they could postpone until the end of the year, and it'd be fine. So I really had a lot of people who postponed or maybe just did, like, small—they still got married, and it was just them, so they still got, like, a small cake just for them. But because I did have so many people who postponed or even canceled, I kind of switched gears and started offering these little sample boxes. So, like, three times a week, I think, I would get together these boxes full of different items and deliver them all around Little Rock. I picked a day to go to West Little Rock, North

Little Rock, and Midtown. And I put it on Instagram, and people just emailed me saying, like, "Oh, I want one," or whatever. And it really blew up. And I had, like, insanely busy months.

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Like, April and May were, like, just wild. I was doing probably, like, 25 to 30 boxes a day on those three days I was delivering. It was so crazy. Like, I could have never imagined that it would've been that way.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh. And this was April of 2020?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Wow. So that's, like, not long after everything kind of started to shut down.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Is that kind of just, like, what your life looked like the next year? Or what was going on?

Hannah Lavender: I probably did the boxes—I don't remember how long I did them for. I know I did them April and May, and then maybe did some June as well. But then, I did have people just start ordering birthday cakes, still. Like, so many people just wanted cake, or desserts, or whatever. And people were so kind and wanted to support small businesses during that time.

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And so, I did end up still being really busy, despite all the weddings being postponed or canceled. Like I said, some people still did have small weddings, so I was able to do some

wedding cakes for that. But yeah, there came a point, probably in, like, early fall maybe, where I just couldn't do the sample boxes anymore because I got, like, busy with, like, just regular cakes again and then, like, some small weddings. So it really didn't last a crazy long time. So yeah.

Jordan Hickey: I feel like you were, like, in this, like, unique position to—because everything started shutting down, and I feel like you probably more than just about anybody else probably had your finger on the pulse of, like, are people having gatherings again? When are people going to be getting married again?

Hannah Lavender: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

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Jordan Hickey: How long was it before things became—I don't want to say normal, but how long before weddings started picking up again?

Hannah Lavender: I did have a few in, like, the fall/winter of 2020. It wasn't very many from what I can remember. But 2021 was crazy busy.

Jordan Hickey: Really?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, it was so busy. A lot of people, once summer, spring-ish of 2021 hit, people were just like, "I want to get married." And so, they went ahead with it, they followed different guidelines. A lot of venues had, like, specific things that had to happen for people to get married. And so, yeah, I started really picking back up then. Plus, just regular orders other than weddings. 2021 was a crazy, crazy year. It was insane. I think it was the busiest year I've ever had.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: And this is coming off of years pre-pandemic, too.

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Hannah Lavender: Yeah, yeah. It was crazy. Like, 2022 was, like, burnout for about six months from the chaos that was 2021.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] Wait, really?

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Can you tell me more about that? Like, so you're doing this all yourself, and you've had your busiest year, it sounds like by a significant margin maybe, in 2021.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: If you're still having to do everything yourself, like, how do you deal with burnout? Do you start saying no to people? Or, like, how do you do that?

Hannah Lavender: I told myself all of these things I was going to implement to where I wouldn't get, like, major burnout again or to where I could start recovering from it. And I was like, "I'm going to take one weekend off every month. I'm not going to take any weddings." I didn't do that.

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So I probably did try to take less orders in 2022. And I felt like I did. But then once the end of the year hit, I didn't. Like, I still took a lot of stuff on. If I'm remembering correctly, in 2021, I think I did about 80 to 85 weddings. I think. And then, I was like, "Okay, I can't do that again.

That was too many." And so, in 2022, I said, "I'm not going to do that again." And then, I looked at the end of the year, and I think I did, like, 70. Yes, that's less, but it really wasn't that much less, considering I still, like, did events and still took on other orders. So I don't know, I think that's why it took me so long to recover from burnout, because I just kind of kept going.

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Jordan Hickey: Yeah. Especially looking back on 2021 and 2022, we're in 2023, what have you done differently? Like, do you feel like you're managing everything better? And how do you do that?

Hannah Lavender: I feel like I have managed things a bit better this year. I don't feel like I've done as many weddings as I usually do, which isn't a bad thing. Like, it's been kind of nice having a little bit of a break. October's the busiest wedding month for me. I usually do between, like, 15 and 20 weddings in October alone.

Jordan Hickey: Oh my gosh.

Hannah Lavender: And so, that involves, like, a lot of all-nighters. So I was very used to doing that. I would pull all-nighters probably a couple times a month for the better part of the year, like, during my busy seasons.

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And then, I didn't do it any in 2023 until, like, April. And I pulled an all-nighter because I had to, and I was miserable. And then, I was like, "I can never do that again. Like, my body is not recovering the way it was even six months ago." So I feel like I have learned that, like, I can't do as much as I try to do. I hate saying no to people, I've gotten a lot better at that. But at the same

time, it's like, "What sacrifice am I making on my body or my mind if I keep saying yes, and I keep taking all these orders, and I keep just going and going? Like, I'm not going to be able to put out the same quality of products I would if I was, like, sleeping, and resting, and being a normal human." Like, I want to be able to interact with my friends and go see my family, and whenever I'm working nonstop, there's no room for that.

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So I've definitely tried to find balance this year, and I feel like I've done decent at it. I'm still learning. I'm still trying. But definitely better than in years past.

Jordan Hickey: We've talked a lot about sort of I think, like, physically, challenges like doing—by the way, I think about what 15-plus weddings would be like in the month of October, which is, I guess, like, one wedding every two days, and I don't know what that would be like, it's very hard for me to imagine.

Hannah Lavender: It's, like, four to five a weekend.

Jordan Hickey: Oh, okay.

Hannah Lavender: Typically, three. Three is usually my limit a weekend. The most I think I've done is six in a weekend, and it was awful.

Jordan Hickey: Beyond physically demanding, especially because you're baking out of your house, have you tested the limits of what your kitchen can manage?

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Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: How has your kitchen changed over the last couple years?

Hannah Lavender: Really not a lot. So we've added, like, another deep freezer. So I have my regular fridge, which is massive and wonderful. And then, we bought a deep freezer. And then, I had a really busy weekend maybe sometime last year or the year before, I don't remember. And I was like, "These weddings are not going to fit in my fridge. Like, I physically cannot do this." And I think it was during spring or summer. So I was like, "They can't sit out. Like, it's hot. It's so hot. I have to have another fridge." So my husband and one of our friends went and picked up another refrigerator. So I've added a refrigerator, so now I have two, and it's wonderful. And then, I've upgraded my oven, but it's still just, like, a standard helm oven. It's nothing crazy.

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Jordan Hickey: And this is, like, a little bit of a nitty-gritty question but, like, how many cakes...

Hannah Lavender: Like, layers. Uh-huh.

Jordan Hickey: How many of those would you be baking in, like, a very busy October weekend?

Hannah Lavender: In a week? Oh, gosh. Oh, man. So my cakes in general are three layers for each tier. So, like, say I have three weddings in a weekend, and I have a three-tier cake and a couple four- or five-tier cakes, I can't do quick math, but that's a lot right there. And it really varies. So this past October, I cut off most orders other than weddings because it was so busy. So I said no to custom orders for the majority of October and just focused on weddings, which was wonderful.

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It helped immensely. But typically, I do between 7 and 10 other orders a week. And sometimes more, sometimes less. Like, it just varies. So then, I have all of those cakes as well. I could be baking up to maybe 50 to 60 layers of cake in a week. Maybe. Does that seem right? Probably.

Jordan Hickey: I think so. And it does make me wonder, if you've got kind of a standard kitchen oven, and you've got, for the sake of math, let's call it 50, like, how many layers can you fit in the oven at one time?

Hannah Lavender: Well, it depends on, obviously, the size of the cake. So I love it whenever I have, like, smaller cakes and then, like, sheet cakes or something because I can fit so many more in the oven.

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Because I can fit, like, five six-inch cakes on one rack of my oven, and then I can fit, like, three to four eight-inch cakes on another rack of my oven. But if I have, like, really big cakes, like, a 14-inch, I can only fit two 14-inch cakes in my oven at a time, so that slows me down a lot. So I've really had to figure out how to maneuver my baking days and, like, what needs to go in first, like, what makes the most sense to—really, just for the alignment of the oven or whatever. I don't know. It's a lot of finagling, figuring it out. But I've kind of got it figured out for the most part.

Jordan Hickey: Part of the reason why I ask is I'm thinking, you've got all these cakes going, but also you're probably doing icing. My guess is, you're probably not just, like, sitting at your kitchen table, waiting for these cakes to come out. You're probably doing, like, a million other things.

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Like, how much of that is just, like, automatic? Like, "Okay, I've got this number of cakes, this number of orders." Do you even have to, like, really kind of do that mental calculus at this point about, like, what goes where when it needs to go in the fridge, oven, whatever?

Hannah Lavender: It's pretty, like, second-nature, I guess. I don't really think much about it at this point when I'm baking. So I have, like, my baking days. And there are days when, like, I have orders on those days. But if I'm baking, I'm typically, like, just baking. So once I put a batch of cake in the oven, I start on another batch, and I just keep rotating them in and out of the oven for hours, and hours, and hours. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] You mentioned you're doing some custom orders. But it sounds like you're really focusing mostly on cakes, and especially wedding cakes. Do you ever wish you could be doing, like, pastry?

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The question I'm trying to get around is, like, do you ever get sick of making cakes?

Hannah Lavender: Maybe sometimes, I'm just like, "Oh, I'm kind of over this. I wish I didn't have to do it." But for the most part, it is what I love. Like, I like doing cakes. I think it's fun. Sometimes, I wish I could, like, branch out and do a few other things. But I just kind of don't. Like, every now and then, I'll do something just for myself. But I'm happy with, like, what I offer, and I don't see myself branching out any time soon. And who knows? In a few years, I may want a change. But for now, I like just doing cakes and that being my focus.

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Jordan Hickey: Kind of talking about the future, what does the future look like? Does the future look like a brick and mortar? Does the future look like a brand new oven that can hold more than what the current oven can hold? Like, what's it look like?

Hannah Lavender: The future does not look like a brick and mortar. I really just don't have a desire for that. I like doing it out of my house, it's convenient, I can wear pajamas. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter]

Hannah Lavender: I like being at home. I like working out of my house. And a brick and mortar just feels like such a—I hate to say this—burden. I don't want that responsibility of being open, I don't want the responsibility of having hours, or employees, or anything like that. It just doesn't feel right for me. But I give props to anyone who does that because it is hard. And I don't think I could handle it.

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I think I would be, like, permanent burnout all the time. I just know I couldn't do it.

Jordan Hickey: I feel like the thing you described, which is having hours, but then, like, having customers constantly coming in and out, and, like, I'm sure, like, if a person comes in, they're like, "I want blankety-blank."

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: And I kind of wonder if you'd be like, "Well, I don't have any of those in the case," and having to be, like, "So I'm going to turn around and, like, try to make this other thing." And tell me if I'm wrong, but I feel like by having your email, having the word of mouth, you get to control a lot more, it sounds like.

Hannah Lavender: Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: Do you think that's the case?

Hannah Lavender: I do. I don't have a case to stock. I don't have to provide certain things every single day because everything I do is custom and made to order, I can control what orders I take and how many orders I take throughout the week.

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And I don't have to worry about making a bunch of stuff for some other thing just to have something to sell. Which I really like.

Jordan Hickey: We kind of briefly touched on, like, other cottage bakers, and some of the bakers I've spoken with talk a little bit about the community of, like, cottage baking, like, on Instagram and that kind of thing. But I kind of wonder, somebody who's mostly doing these custom orders, like, to what extent are you in the cottage baking social sphere?

Hannah Lavender: I would probably say I'm not in it, which may be unfortunate. I bet it'd be good to have a community who understands the ins and outs of your business and what you're going through.

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But I really don't have any friends that are cottage bakers. I know that there's a lot of them out there, and I've seen a lot of really wonderful work. But I'm just kind of in my own little bubble, I guess. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: So we've talked a little bit about some of the challenges that you've faced doing this on your own. What keeps you doing it? Like, what keeps you going?

Hannah Lavender: I guess I just really like it. I guess that's what keeps me going. I like that I can work for myself and do something that I enjoy.

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There have definitely been a few times where I've wanted to quit and give up. But I do like what I do, and I think I'm pretty good at it, and people seem to think I'm good at it. And so, I think I'll just keep going and see what happens. [Laughter]

Jordan Hickey: Nice. Well, I'm kind of glancing over the questions I have for you, and I think that we've covered just about everything. I think the last question I would have is what advice you would give to someone, anyone, who was thinking about doing what you're doing. And then, also, even beyond that, kind of if there's anything we didn't talk about.

Hannah Lavender: Man, I'm not very good at giving advice. But I would say to—man. Should've thought about this more. Let's see.

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Jordan Hickey: Sorry, this was a pop question.

Hannah Lavender: No, that's okay. I would say really try to find balance in what you do. Like, I feel like a lot of people who are cottage bakers—and this may just be from what I've seen online, I really don't know because I haven't talked to anyone—I feel like they just work themselves to death. Like, people want to keep saying yes because you don't know what the next week's going to look like. Like, you want to take all the orders you can, and you want to get your name out there. But that can end in some pretty serious burnout. Like, I know I've said burnout a lot, but it's something I probably go through at the end of every year just because it's been so

busy. And I'm like, "Oh, like, there's no balance here." You need to find time for your friends, for your family, for yourself, and not just focus all of your energy on your work.

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Because in the end, I just don't think it's worth it. And that's something I have really come to realize, I guess, after saying yes to so many orders and so many people, and wanting to really get my name out there. Which has been great and wonderful, and I'm so thankful for all of the people who recommend me and all of that. But I just have finally come to realize, like, I can't go at that rate forever. And so, I really think people just need to really set boundaries when they start and figure out what they want their, like, niche to be. Because there's so many really talented people out there, and I feel like if you're doing so many things, you can kind of get lost. If you're trying to do everything, you can kind of get lost in the fold because what are you—I don't know if that makes sense, but it's like, find your thing, and focus on that, and become really good at that.

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You can do a ton of things. But I don't know. I guess that's what I would say. I don't know if that's good advice, but that's probably advice I would give myself. Like, slow down, find balance, find your thing that you want to do, and focus on that.

Jordan Hickey: One thing I do want to touch on, because we have talked a little bit about burnout, like, I think burnout is very real in every industry. But let's say at the end of the year, you have a crazy year, you're tallying up, you've done, like, 80 weddings. Hopefully not anymore.

Hannah Lavender: Hopefully.

Jordan Hickey: But do you go to the beach? Like, how do you kind of rebound and kind of build yourself back up?

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Hannah Lavender: Honestly, usually in January, which is usually one of my slower months, I just try to be really slow. Like, not do a whole lot. This past January, I was able to, like, go on a trip with one of my friends who I hadn't seen in a few years and meet up with her. And yeah, I don't really know how I recover from it. I really just become very lazy. And I watch a lot of TV. And I sleep a lot, just trying to, like, recover from the chaos that was the year before and, like, the chaos that is—and at the end of every year, my mom always books a big—like, an Airbnb. We usually go to, like, Hot Springs. And so, my family has, like, a whole week to kind of rest, and recuperate, and have Christmas together. And so, that's always really great because I'm with my family, and it's really relaxing to be able to do something like that.

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So yeah, I feel like that helps me, too.

Jordan Hickey: Does anyone make the cake?

Hannah Lavender: My mom always makes the Mama McDaniel cake.

Jordan Hickey: At the...

Hannah Lavender: Yeah, when we're there. Yeah.

Jordan Hickey: What is it like to have that when you are not baking? Is it, like, a breath of fresh air, like, to have a bite of your family cake?

Hannah Lavender: Oh. [Laughter] Yeah, I love it. It's a good cake.

Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] Maybe someday, right?

Hannah Lavender: Maybe. Maybe. Maybe I'll start offering it. I've just got to get it down, start practicing.

Jordan Hickey: Cool. Well, like I said, I think that's everything I have. I know we've talked about a lot. Is there anything that I haven't touched on that you'd like to mention? Anything like that?

Hannah Lavender: I don't think so. I feel like I've said all I need to say.

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Jordan Hickey: [Laughter] Awesome. Well, thanks a lot for your time. I'm going to leave 30 seconds at the end of the recording for editing, so I'm just going to let the recorder go for about 30 seconds. Thank you so much.

Hannah Lavender: Awesome. Thank you.

[End]