



Rob Segovia-Welsh

Chicken Bridge Bakery

Pittsboro, North Carolina

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Interviewer: Kate Medley

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Kate Medley: I'll start by saying this is Kate Medley interviewing Rob Segovia-Welsh at his home in Pittsboro, North Carolina, on June 4, 2018. And with that, Rob, I'll get you to introduce yourself.

[0:00:24.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: My name is Rob Segovia-Welsh, and my wife and I, Monica Segovia-Welsh, started Chicken Bridge Bakery, and we're bakers and parents here in Pittsboro.

[0:00:37.0]

Kate Medley: Awesome. And tell us your date of birth for the record.

[0:00:40.1]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: August 23rd, 1977.

[0:00:43.8]

Kate Medley: And now, if you will, introduce us to your bakery.

[0:00:47.9]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: So this is Chicken Bridge Bakery. We're a wood-fired bakery, home-based, and we sell mostly to the Carrboro Farmers' Market. All of our stuff is baked in a wood-fired oven, which I think is kind of what makes it kind of special, or at least a little bit different, and also kind of requires us to bake in a specific manner so the

wood-fired heat—there's a lot of heat over time, so if I like one particular kind of bread, I can't just make that, a bunch of that, because every time I load the oven, the oven environment is just a little bit different, so I kind of have to plan the baking schedule and just, in general, plan our bakery around being able to bake a variety of different things that will bake at different temperatures. So, yeah, we try to arrange it from flatbreads to sourdoughs to pan loaves and then down into pastries as the oven loses its temperature. It also means that we can use a lot of different grains and a lot of different local fruits and just things that farmers are growing. We're not locked into one kind of bread or one specific style of bread. I think the oven makes us kind of keeps us on our toes a little bit.

[0:02:16.6]

Kate Medley: Keeps you flexible.

[0:02:17.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah.

[0:02:19.0]

Kate Medley: Introduce us to that oven.

[0:02:21.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: So this oven, it's a mobile wood-fired oven. It's about five feet deep, three feet wide. It was built by a fellow named William Davenport, and it came to us about three years ago. We did a crowdfunding campaign to get it. We had kind of

outgrown our old oven, an earthen oven that we used for five years that we built ourselves. We're not oven builders, so it was impressive that it lasted that long, but we were definitely ready for something that was a little bit technically better, like more efficient and that didn't use as much wood, that was designed more for the style of breads that we were baking. So, yeah, the oven is pretty exciting. It was an addition. In the one year we got the oven, we built a walk-in cooler and we got a new mixer, and all three of those things really set us up to be able to use— because it was just shortly after that that we were able to use almost 80 to 90 percent all North Carolina-grown wheat and rye in our breads. Up until that point, it was like any factor would really kind of throw us off. So the fact that we are able to mix it in a gentle mixer and we can do bigger batches, that was really important, then we could slow-proof it overnight in a walk-in, that was really important, and then that we have, like, an oven that would just stay nice and even-temperated as something would go in, yeah, it really kind of like all came together that year. [Laughter]

[0:03:52.5]

Kate Medley: Tell us a little bit, Rob, about, for instance, what you're making right now, this time of year and who are your clients. Who's your customer base?

[0:04:02.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: So right now is kind of a busier time of year for us. We're baking four times a week. Tuesdays, we're baking for a small cafe in Pittsboro, it's like a small bed and breakfast. We also bake for the local co-op in Pittsboro called Chatham

Marketplace. There's a new farm cafe out in Saxapahaw called Reverence Cafe, and we bake for them on Tuesdays as well. We do all of that wholesale baking on Tuesdays and then also on Thursdays. But our biggest customer base and kind of focus is the Carrboro Farmers' Market, and that's one that we do Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings, so we bake Wednesday morning, all morning long for that afternoon market, and then we bake on Friday night and into Saturday morning for the Carrboro Saturday market.

[0:04:57.3]

Kate Medley: Who are your clients, for instance, at the Carrboro Market?

[0:04:59.6]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: It's a real mix, and it's kind of an exciting mix. I feel like there's so many UNC students, like older grad students that come through, so I feel like every fall I feel like we get a new influx of people that are coming from different parts of the world or different parts of the country and it's pretty interesting because I've got people that will come from Arizona and they say, "Oh, there was this really great bread baker there, Barrio Bread." And I was like, "Oh, I know Don Guerra. He's a baker friend of mine." But people that are seeking out particular kinds of breads that maybe can't be found everywhere, but can be found in certain places, so I'll get customers like that, which is really kind of exciting. There's a good group of—I don't know if they've just kind of assembled here or they all seem to have different professions, but of Polish descent, and so it's kind of interesting. I get older Polish women that will come and they want very

specific breads. They're often like, "Give me the bread that was in the back corner and got, like, half-burned on one side." The one lady was like, "That reminds me of my mom telling me to go down to the bakery, wait in line, don't get the light bread. Ask for the one that was, like, way in the back," you know. And so I get a general mix. We also have—I didn't know there was much of a Danish population in Carrboro, Chapel Hill area, but I feel like I've tapped into this Danish population who was really homesick for this specific kind of like rye bread that is used for kind of a lot of different purposes in Danish cooking, and I wasn't familiar with it and I've never been to Denmark, so I was like, "I don't know if I would know how to make this." So one of the women translated a formula for me, and she was like, "If you make this, I'll try it and let you know what I think about it." So I baked it like twice, two or three times, and I thought, "There's no way this can be what they're looking for." As far as hydration was concerned, there was more water in it than there is flour. There's more whole grain in it than there is flour. The amount of whole grain and seeds combined is like more than double the amount of flour. So it was just this like soup, kind of—I'd pour it into these bread tins. I couldn't even—there was no shaping. It was just like pouring it in. Anyway, so she gave me her—after a few times, I was, "I guess this must be what it is." So I gave it to her, and she gave me her stamp of approval. And now I get Danish people all the time that are like, "This reminds me of home. This seems like real deal rye bread." So, I mean, that's kind of an exciting compliment that I feel like to get. But, yeah, I feel like the clientele at the farmers' market is, it's broader and deeper than I could have imagined it would have been, and because of the just influx of new folks coming to the area for schooling, I think it's kind of constantly, like, regenerating. It's kind of reinvigorating.

[0:08:25.8]

Kate Medley: Cool. Coming back here, where we are now, tell us what your bakery space looks like. For someone who will never get the opportunity to visit, take us on a tour.

[0:08:39.5]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah. So we live in a small house out in like semi-rural North Carolina, Chatham County, and our house is about 1,200 square feet, and the bakery is below the house. It's, like, in a big like a partial basement, and the baking space itself is only about 400 square feet, has kind of low ceiling, so tall people beware. Yeah, some of the stuff that we're required to have from Department of Agriculture, we had to put in a sink and, like, a ceiling and lights and things like that, so it has all those things in it. At first it was hard to imagine that this was going to feel like anything other than a basement, but we got some nice big glass doors that we were able to put in, and once everything kind of got put into place, it felt like, "Hey, wait a minute. This is a bakery," you know. We had one nice big wooden shaping table that was handed down to us, and so we got that in place. Now we have two mixers in the bakery, which really helps out. And if you walk right out of those—that's where we do all the mixing, all the shaping. It's all done indoors right there. We built a cedar-framed, like, pole barn just outside those glass doors, and that's where the oven is parked. That's where the walk-in—we built the walk-in. And so once the bread is all mixed and shaped and ready to go, we wheel it out into the walk-in. It sits there for, like, anywhere from, like, fifteen to twenty-

hours to kind of cold-proof and ferment, and then we fire the oven. And after the oven is nice and hot, then we're ready to bake, and we just load the bread in straight from the walk-in right into the oven and bake it up.

[0:10:24.5]

Kate Medley: On that note, if and when you need to duck out to tend the fire, just let me know. So let's step back a little bit, Rob, and tell me a little bit about where you come from.

[0:10:39.5]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So I was born in East Liverpool, Ohio. It's, like, a rural—well, I guess not even rural, but it's, like, a river community in Ohio, right next to West Virginia, and my folks, all my family were steel mill workers. So I lived there. That's where I was born and grew up until third grade, and then when the steel mills all kind of collapsed, my dad lost his job and my, like, uncles lost their jobs, and basically kind of the town, like, kind of turned into a ghost town, and so everybody left. My dad ended up getting a job at Federal Express in Cleveland, and so we moved to a little town south of Cleveland called Medina, and that's where I grew up the rest of my years.

[0:11:28.2]

Kate Medley: What were your growing-up years like?

[0:11:30.2]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: I was pretty happy, I mean pretty good, when we were in Ohio, surrounded by aunts and uncles and grandparents, went fishing all the time on the Ohio River, and I remember having, like, a really good childhood. Moving was hard. I have a younger sister, and I think she had a much easier time with it. I think moving was kind of tough, being nine years old and starting a new school. I don't know. But, yeah, I mean, I felt like it was a character-building experience [Laughter] when I think back about it now and who I am, and my personality I feel like was kind of shaped by having to put yourself out there and being young and not knowing people, but needing to make friends. So, yeah, my time in Medina was good. I do feel like I look back now and think, like, as soon as I graduated, I just wanted to leave. Like, it didn't feel like home. It didn't feel like a place where I was like, "I'm connected here and I'm going to stay here forever," and I feel like that—it's interesting, because we talk, my wife and I talk about it with our kids now, because they're just growing up in this place and being part of the farmers' market and having this, like wider community all around them from the time that they were born. I mean, at some point we might have to leave, but just in this way where this feels like their hometown, this feels like their place, and I feel like both Monica and I don't necessarily feel that, feel that about where we grew up or feel that about here. We've only been here fourteen years, so in the long run, that doesn't feel like—it seems a little presumptuous to claim this your hometown after fourteen years. [Laughter] But, yeah, yeah, yeah, I feel like I had a good childhood. [Laughter]

[0:13:32.4]

Kate Medley: For the record, will you tell us your parents' names?

[0:13:35.0]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. My dad's name's Rick Welsh, and my mom is Marsha Welsh.

[0:13:41.6]

Kate Medley: Tell us a little bit about the food of your youth.

[0:13:48.6]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So I just spoke at a class at UNC and this came up, as far as, like, food memories, and I don't have a lot of food memories, like, being young. Honestly, after my dad lost his job, we were on welfare for a while, so I have, like, very clear memories of, like, going and getting, like, big blocks of cheese and noodles and crummy cereal. And so I feel like there were specific things, like my dad really likes to make these—it was like his family tradition to make these kind of Christmas cookies called Pizzelles, and so that was like a—I feel like that's a food memory that I have. That's like, "Oh, yeah, I remember that." But as far as, like, just general daily nutrition and cooking, I feel like my folks did the best they could with what they had and I feel like that was important. Later on, my mom started—there was, like, the Friendship bread that got passed around a while, and so it was like a potato-based bread, where you feed a starter. It's not sourdough, but you feed potato flakes and sugar to this mixture and it creates carbon dioxide, so it acts as a leavening agent, so you mix it with whatever kind of flour and ingredients you want, and then it just [demonstrates], like blows up and

bakes well. So I do have that memory of my mom baking. And that was probably like when I was middle school, middle school to, like, through high school. So I, yeah, have that as, like, a specific bread memory.

[0:15:48.8]

Kate Medley: My mom got super into, I think, that same kind of bread. She didn't call it Friendship bread; she called it sourdough, but it was not sourdough. [Laughter]

[0:15:54.6]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:15:57.2]

Kate Medley: This might be jumping ahead a little bit, but what do you feel like first stoked your interest in food or bread or baking in general?

[0:16:06.2]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. I feel like both Monica and I kind of came to food in this very much of like a necessity to pay bills. We both went to school at a college called Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. It was a small, liberal environmental college, but it was really small and it was like nine hundred people were in the college. The town itself was less than 8,000 people, and that was the biggest town within like an hour-and-a-half radius. So it was, like, a very rural area, very economically depressed. There weren't tons of jobs at all, but I feel like we absolutely fell in love with the area. It's, like,

right on Lake Superior. It's beautiful. It was like you could—I mean, you can go, like, five minutes out of town and be in the wilderness. It was a pretty magnificent place. From where I moved from, Ohio, was just like flat, strip malls everywhere. Monica is from San Antonio, so it was just this, you know, city everywhere, neighborhoods and neighborhoods. So I think for both of us it felt like this really special place, and we spent four years there at school. So when we were done, we didn't really want to leave, but we also didn't have a lot of, like, employment prospects, so we ended up staying there and Monica was working in a café and I was working at a group home for youth-at-risk boys. I mean, it was interesting work, but there was a fellow actually who came, kind of serendipitously came from Chapel Hill, he was the head baker at Weaver Street Bakery, and had met a business partner and they decided to make a bakery in Ashland. So he came up and he was a really great baker, with lots of experience, and he was going to run the bread program and he wanted somebody to do the pastry program. So Monica was kind of doing pastries, I mean just biscuits and cookies and muffins, and he was like, "If you want this job, you can have it, and we'll pay for you to go take some courses at CIA," to do, like, laminated pastries and all that kind of stuff. So, anyway, she got on there, and I think it was great. It was, like, a great employment opportunity for the town that we were living in, but it was also we were out of school and student loans were like—we used up our six months' deferment, and now we had to start paying back, and so I felt it was really good for her. She had, like, her foot in the door, and she had, like, in the pastry program. I ended up trying to unionize the group home for youth-at-risk kids. [Laughter] We got paid—if you worked there, you could go in at 8:00 o'clock at night and you'd come out at 8:00 in the morning, and you got paid \$25 for that overnight shift

because it was, like, kind of like—like based on, like, some kind of, like, nursing home hour guideline things, where it was like since you weren't—since people were sleeping for part of the time and you weren't technically having to do labor, they didn't have you pay you an hourly wage. It was miserable. I don't know how—I just don't know how they get away with that. But anyways, we started signing up blue cards for people, for the NLRB to have an election, and in the middle of that kind of campaign, it was like kind of quiet. It wasn't like a big—I think there were only fourteen employees, so it wasn't like we were this mass of, I don't know, force or anything, but we were kind of doing it quietly. Monica and I got married kind of in the middle of this, and we took two weeks off and we drove around Lake Superior, camping and backpacking for our honeymoon, and when I got back, I, like, went in to my shift and they were like, “Oh, yeah, you don't work here anymore.”

And I was like, “What?”

And they're like, “Yeah, you took off. You've been gone for two weeks.”

I was like, “Yeah, I know, because I was on vacation and I just got married.”

Anyways, they didn't say it was because of the unions, and I didn't have a lot of recourses, but it ended up that was like one of those serendipitous things where it ended up being like, “Well, now I have no job and I don't know where to work.” And the bakery was hiring a delivery driver, so then I was like, “Well, I guess I'll just get this delivery driving job.” So then I started driving, and then they ended up needing somebody to help mix, so then I started mixing. Then they needed somebody to shape, and then I shaped. Then “Now we just need like a full-time baker,” so then I just ended up being a full-time baker. And Monica and I worked there together, like, in the same

bakery for about a year and paid back our student loans. [Laughter] So I don't feel like I came to it as, like, "I feel super inspired about food and I need to create this." It was more like, "We need to pay back these loans." And even after working there for a year, even after moving to Chapel Hill and working in bakeries, different bakeries for a few different years, I still don't think we thought of ourselves as bakers. It wasn't until we had, like—until I had a job that I just really hated, that made me think, "You know what? I was much happier when I was baking. Maybe I should just be a baker." And I feel like that's kind of how we came to it.

[0:21:37.4]

Kate Medley: Before we leave that chapter, Rob, tell me how you and Monica ended up at Northland College and what y'all studied there.

[0:21:45.4]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So I think I was just excited about getting away from Ohio. [Laughter] I was kind of interested in studying environmentalism, and I thought I would be, like, an environmental biologist. I don't know. I think I got a brochure in the mail from them, and it looked kind of interesting, and I went and checked it out, and it was like, "This sounds like an amazing place." And it was affordable at the time, so it seemed pretty good. Monica, she did a Student Conservation Corps, like the SCA program, her junior summer, and she was on a trail-building crew in Washington, and I think she had an amazing time being away from home, being out in the wilderness, and I think she kind of thought of herself as, like, this would be like a way to kind of become an ecologist and

get out. I think it was the same thing; she got a brochure and was like, “This place looks pretty amazing. I’m going to do it.” But [Laughter] I don’t know, I can’t speak for Monica, but, I mean, I took a few biology courses and I was like, “This sucks. I’m, like, no good at science like this.” So I ended up studying religion and philosophy, and Monica ended up studying Conflict and Peace Studies. So both of us kind of ended up on really different paths than what we thought, but I always say, like, there’s, like, no better profession for a philosopher than being a baker, because there’s all kinds of things to think about and look at, and lonely times to reflect on what’s going on. [Laughter]

[0:23:27.0]

Kate Medley: How’d you meet?

[0:23:27.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: We were just at the same school. I mean, like I said, I think the school was like eight hundred, eight hundred fifty kids at the time, so everybody just knew everybody. We just kind of met up and started hanging out and started dating. Yeah, that was when we were eighteen, and there’s been off-and-on parts, but, I mean, for the most part, we’ve been together ever since.

[0:23:56.7]

Kate Medley: Cool.

[0:23:56.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah.

[0:23:57.3]

Kate Medley: We'll pause while you run downstairs.

[Begin File 2]

[0:00:00.0]

Kate Medley: Where we left off, I wanted to ask you, Rob, about how you guys got to North Carolina.

[0:00:10.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So after we worked in the bakery in Wisconsin for about a year, some friends, a lot of our friends started buying up land and having kids, and I think at that point we were like, "We're not ready for that. We should do something totally different." [Laughter] So we decided to go to Central America for like six months or so, so we went to Guatemala, went to El Salvador a little bit, went to Nicaragua for a while. And then we were there for about three months, I think, and Monica was, like, having a really rough time and she was, like, sick all the time, and we were just like, "Maybe it's the roads," and we were hitchhiking a lot, so it was just kind of like kind of crazy. Then at one point, she was like, "I'm just going to go to the doctor and see," and she was having morning sickness and she was pregnant. [Laughter] So we were like, "Oh. Well, that's what that is." So we decided to come back to the States. I think at that point I think

she was—I could have gone back to Wisconsin easily. I think she was a little bit like, “I’m done with these winters. This is crazy, and I just need to be somewhere warmer and maybe more populated.” So then we went to Austin, close to San Antonio, just to kind of check it out and she would be closer to some of her family, and that wasn’t—just didn’t seem like a very good fit. But her brother was doing a master’s program here at UNC, and he was like, “You guys have been away for a while. You speak Spanish pretty well. Like, you guys, I’m sure you could, like, find some interesting jobs here. You, like, have some skills, and you should come here.” So we came and visited, and we really liked it, so then we just said, “Yeah, okay, we’ll end up here.” So we settled down here. I mean, it was kind of tough because Monica was—at that point, was—what was she—like five months pregnant, four months pregnant. So I think she was like, “What kind of work am I going to get, being this pregnant?” And I felt like it was just kind of a race to, like, find—I mean, we kind of sold everything in Wisconsin to, like, just go on this trip, so we didn’t have, like, a car, we didn’t have a place to live or anything. So it was kind of like piece it together and then try to find jobs on top of that. So I worked construction for about two months, which was great for my Spanish because I just like kept learning. And then I couldn’t find anything, so I started looking at bakery jobs, and Ninth Street Bakery was hiring, so I ended up getting on there.

[0:02:51.8]

Kate Medley: What year was it when y’all came to North Carolina?

[0:02:53.9]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: This was 2004. This was 2004, yeah.

[0:02:58.7]

Kate Medley: What did Monica end up doing?

[0:03:00.1]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: She ended up getting a job [Laughter] at Weaver Street as a pastry chef, and it was great because they were very understanding, and so I think a lot of her jobs, she was able to use a stool and just sit and scoop cookies or, I don't know, do weigh-outs and things like that. So, yeah, that was really great. She worked—I mean, she worked up until close to giving birth, and then she went back, I think three months afterwards.

[0:03:29.6]

Kate Medley: Now seems like an appropriate time for you to introduce us to your children.

[0:03:33.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah. So our first child was Simon. He was born in 2004. He's thirteen and a half. And then five years ago, we had another little boy, named Milo.

[0:03:46.1]

Kate Medley: Cute. And then, Rob, tell me a little bit about your journey here in North Carolina from working at Ninth Street to starting a bakery of your own.

[0:03:56.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So, worked at Ninth Street for about a year, and that was also really a great experience because I was the only—at that time, at the shift that I was working, I was the only white guy, and it was a group of some African Americans, but mostly Mexican guys. The head Mexican baker, he was a third-generation baker from Pueblo, Mexico, so it was really amazing talking with him, because we got to talk all about this is how they did it in Mexico, this is how his dad does it, this is the oven that they built, this is how they do wood-fired baking in Mexico, and at that point, wood-fired baking really wasn't on my radar. It just was this thing out there that historically this is how all cultures baked breads. This is, like, how bread was baked everywhere, and at some point, we just don't do it that way anymore. So I was always kind of fascinated with it, but in talking with Joaquin, I got, like, this whole, like, look into, like, how his parents and his grandparents have always done it. So that was really fascinating. It was great, and he was a great baker. I mean, I just remember him, like, we'd get deliveries of flour and he would, like, open up a bag and, like, feel the flour with his hand and just tell the driver, like, "No, take this back. This is old. This is old flour and we don't want this."

And I was like, "How could you feel that?"

And he was like, "Yeah, you just feel it, like you can tell it's not soft, it's not silky." I mean, there was a ton of stuff that I felt like I learned from him, and all of it was in Spanish, so that was kind of exciting, too, because a lot of it was like, "Wait a minute.

What did you say?” And like, I don’t know, just good stories and interesting stuff. But after a year there, I was commuting from Carrboro and we had a new little baby, so the schedule was just kind of crazy, so when a baking position opened up at Weaver Street, I got on there, and that was great because at that time there were four brothers from Oaxaca, they were all second-generation bakers, and they had all kind of come together. Actually, their parents are still bakers, wood-fired bakers in Oaxaca, and actually one of the fellows, Pablo, went back and we’re still in contact. So every once in a while during a bake-off, he’ll send me a picture of him baking in his wood-fired oven, and then I’ll take a picture of me and send it back, like, “This is what I’m baking tonight.” But it was the same thing with them; I really got to be good friends with them and close with them and talk a lot about baking, wood-fired baking and oven building and just all that kind of stuff. So it was a really great experience. Monica—it was hard because I would do the bread shift, so I’d go in at like 4:00 in the morning and get off at noon. Monica would do the pastry chef, so she would come in at noon and work till 8:00 o’clock at night, and she would, like, wheel Milo up and he would be in the bakery with us until we cleaned up, and then I’d wheel him home, and then we’d just kind of go. So it was kind of a hard—it was a hard schedule, and it was not sustainable, for sure. So I had an opportunity, kind of a random opportunity to start working with the state in the Agricultural Safety and Health Division of North Carolina, doing inspections of migrant labor farm camps and work conditions and whatnot. So when that position—when I got offered that job, the idea that we wouldn’t have to have this crazy schedule and maybe I would have some more time at home and make a little bit more money, it all kind of seemed like that was a good idea. But I stayed in that position for about five years, and it was soul-crushing, and it ended

up being this—felt like a very powerless and thankless job to be in, didn't get paid nearly what I thought it was going to be, ended up spending—there was only four inspectors for the whole state. At the time, I was the only inspector that spoke Spanish, and I'm not even, like—I'm not a native speaker by any means, but all the Spanish I know is just stuff that was learned through traveling and working with people, so it's not even like university-level Spanish at all, so I don't even know how qualified I was for that.

[Laughter] But it meant that anytime there was an injury or a fatality, which was, I mean, multiple times a year, I would have to go on these inspections, and they would often last more than one day, so then it was just—I just ended up being gone in, like, weird and random parts of the state for, you know, kind of longer periods of time than I thought. So, on the side, kind of what we did for fun on the side was, like, we were renting a house, like an old farmhouse on this little road, Chicken Bridge Road, in rural Chatham County, and the landlady said that we could build a wood-fired oven there. So I kind of had all these plans and ideas after, like, working with Joaquin and Martinez brothers from Oaxaca. I had all these ideas of, like, this is how we'll do it, this is how we'll build our own oven. And we built that oven and it was pretty small. It was a circle. I think it was, like, 36 inches, yeah, about three feet in diameter. It could fit like eight loaves of bread in it at a time. We said to make it, like, kind of like that we were using it and that we were baking, we should get, like, a subscription, like people pay for—kind of like a CSA, but with bread, where people pay upfront for five weeks of bread, and we deliver bread every Sunday, you know, we'd just do it like that. And it started, I think with like eight families, and I think after two years, I think we're up to like thirty-two families that we're delivering bread to. So in my mind, it just kind of was this thing that—this is really

growing. I really love doing this, and I love it way more than the state job, and I also saw that there was room to grow economically, that maybe I could make enough that I could be doing this. So, yeah, I think it was in 2007, 2008, we ended up buying this house, and it kind of started the whole transition, because once we bought this house, then we had a space that we could really turn into a bakery. The Carrboro Market is super established and, like, well known, but at that time didn't have any bread bakers in it, so it was kind of this opportunity where we could apply to this market and almost guaranteed be accepted and come in with something that nobody else was doing at the time. So, just a lot of things that lined up, and it kind of all fell into place.

[0:11:00.5]

Kate Medley: Chicken Bridge Bakery started in what year?

[0:11:03.9]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: It started in 2006, 2006, and we baked for two years at that Chicken Bridge farmhouse, and then in 2008, yeah, the end of 2008, was when we moved here to the current location.

[0:11:21.3]

Kate Medley: Tell us a little bit, Rob, about the grain that you're using.

[0:11:28.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. So I always tell people I think this is, like, the most exciting time to be a baker that I can think of in North Carolina. We have so many grains available to us right now that just knowing for a fact that when I came fourteen years ago at Ninth Street, there was no way that we could have gotten the flour that we're getting now. Even at Weaver Street, like, ten years ago, I don't think it would be possible to get this. So when we first started, the whole idea of North Carolina grains was kind of laughed at because North Carolina's known for not having very good hard wheats, so it's just like really good for soft wheats and you can make really nice pastries and biscuits and pancakes, but the idea of making, like, a quality loaf of bread, I think was kind of just like accepted that, well, you're not going to get that from North Carolina. And today I think that's like—I mean, I think it's turned on its head. So a lot of the initial grain that we started getting was through Lindley Mills, and they work with Burch Farms, and we get—it's kind of sad, because all these wheats have really cool names except for the one that we get from Lindley Mills. It's called Tam 303. So I just call it Tammy, because I feel like it deserves a cooler name than Tam 303. But it has been an awesome wheat. I feel like there's been years where the protein in it is a little bit low and it doesn't perform quite like how I'd really like it to, but, by and large, it's been kind of the backbone that we can build our breads around because it has enough protein in it that it'll get loft and it'll have volume, but it's not anything like a super high gluten refined flour that I think that we were using before, that a lot of bakeries use. So we're using that. When Jennifer Lapidus and Carolina Ground came on the scene, that was a huge thing because it meant that we could get all of our whole grain flour through their stone mill, which they also do extractions, but I just kind of think for what we're doing, if we're going to be getting this

really great grain from North Carolina and she's going to be milling it on this stone mill that was, like, designed to, like, mill beautiful whole grain flour, then I don't want anything extracted. I just want to buy the whole grain that's been milled and be able to use it, and that's been really good. There's been times where that grain, too, has been, like seasonally a little bit off and maybe the protein is a little bit down, and she's had to get, you know, kind of supplements from grain grown up in New York or Virginia. But I think, by and large, that has changed. Those two things, Lindley Mills and Carolina Ground seeking out farms, North Carolina farms that will grow a particular kind of wheat and rye that was suitable for them, that was suitable for the mill, that's suitable for bakers, I think it's, like, a huge game change. So I think from five years ago, I bet we were using maybe 10, 15 percent grain that was grown in North Carolina, and that was all based on, like, kind of like cobbling together, like, "There's a little farm out here, and I heard that they grow something, and maybe I could connect with them," to now I think 80 to 90 percent of all of the stuff that we make it made with North Carolina wheat and rye, and that 10 to 15 percent that's not is—I mean, it's still through—it's all through Carolina Ground and Joe Lindley. I mean, I feel like it's all quality stuff. There's just some things that just don't grow as well in North Carolina, which is fine. But, yeah, I think it's changed what we bake. It's changed what we think of as good bread and good pastries, and I think that we try to communicate that to our clientele, and I think a lot of our clientele, like, really accept that. I think that the grain, especially, like, our European customers, I think the way that grain is milled in Europe is really different than the way it's industrially milled in the United States, so the fact that we have some kind of communication with a stone miller like Jennifer Lapidus is, like, I think what we're

getting, the flour we're getting is much closer to those kind of like older-style breads that you might have found in Europe.

[0:16:37.7]

Kate Medley: The flour that you mentioned, the Tam 303, where is that grown?

[0:16:42.4]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: So that's the one that Burch Farms grows for Lindley Mills. It's a wheat variety that was, I think—I don't want to say developed. I don't know what the proper terminology is, but Dr. Marshall from NC State was doing these grain trials, and it's one of the grain varieties that worked best for—I think worked best for the humidity in North Carolina, but was still able to get, like, a decent protein value out of it.

[0:17:19.1]

Kate Medley: Rob, how would you describe the size or scope of Chicken Bridge Bakery in 2018?

[0:17:27.7]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. I still consider ourselves, like, a micro bakery. I mean, we bake, in our busiest times, we're maybe making four hundred, three hundred to four hundred fifty loaves a week, so I think that's a lot for the space that we're in and for it just being Monica and I. But you can drive ten miles into Carrboro, and Weaver Street is probably making, you know, four times that in a day, and I still think they're a small

bakery. So I think of us as being very small, market-driven, looking to kind of the Carrboro Farmers' Market as our main focus, and reaching those, you know, few hundred people a week that are excited about the breads that we're making.

[0:18:20.8]

Kate Medley: Okay. Tell us about the role of your children in the work that you do.

[0:18:27.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. I think they have, like, an increasing role in the bakery. I used to kind of think that we'll be a baking family and this'll be beautiful, and I don't necessarily think that anymore. [Laughter] I think what Monica and I talk about all the time is that we were very separate from the way our parents made money, and I think a lot of people are, and I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with that, but then now we have friends that, you know, they're farmers and they're raising their kids on the farm, or we know people that were farm kids that were raised in that way, who had a very different childhood and saw exactly what their parents were doing to make money or to not make money or to make ends meet. And I feel like a lot of times the connections that we have as parents are with these different farm friends of ours, and that the same way that maybe the farm becomes—it's not just your livelihood, but it kind of becomes your way of life, and you can't go on vacation at certain times of the year because this is what's going on, and I feel like the way that we've structured the bakery, the way we have it here at the house, the way that, you know, we work a lot with natural leavening, so sourdough starters that need to be fed on a certain schedule, or firing the oven, and the

need for, like, firewood and dry firewood and have it be stacked, and having to take the time to make a fire and let it sit for eight hours before you can even bake in that oven. So there's just these things, there's these living processes, I guess, that take a lot of time, and I think that our boys have, like, a real, like, part to play in that. [Laughter] Whether or not they love that or not, but I think that in the end, I think they will have a closer understanding of where food comes from, for sure, but the amount of effort, the amount of labor, the amount of, like, passion and love that it just takes to say that, like, this is what we're going to do for our life and this is what it's going to take of us to be able to do this. And my son Simon, the older boy, he has started to come to farmers' market with me now, and so every Saturday morning, like 5:00 o'clock, he wakes up and we load up everything, and he goes to market and spends, you know, six hours there, just working with me. I see that he is—I see this glimmer in his eye that he, like, sees what it takes to do it, and that when somebody gets a loaf of bread from you and says, like, "Thank you so much. You weren't here last week," or, "We weren't here last week and we couldn't get this and I missed it all week," I mean, I can see that he sees that, wow, there's some meaning here, you know. So I don't know. I don't know if they will want to be bakers, necessarily, but I always tell them, like, baking bread, being able to, like, make bread, like, it's a good, important life skill, it's a good thing to know, whether you have another job or not.

[0:22:10.2]

Kate Medley: What is your favorite part of your job? When you get up each morning, what's the part of your day that you look forward to the most?

[0:22:16.9]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Hmm. That's a good one. I mean, I don't love running all around and doing the errands and everything that are part of the baking, but I do—I don't separate it out, maybe, so much as, like, there's this part that I love the most or this part. I think having worked that crummy state job [Laughter], the fact that I can—I guess I'll say this. Getting up, sometimes I'll get up at, like, 5:00 in the morning, and maybe it's, like, the wintertime and it's cold and I've got to go downstairs and start the fire, and that might be, like, the kind of the worst part of my day, and that doesn't feel, like, bad at all. That feels like I could get up early and see the moon in the morning, and I'm going to start this fire and I'm going to stand there and watch, like, watch this whole process get started. I guess I like the things—I like all the aspects of the baking. There's parts of it that are a little bit mundane, like I'm going to weigh out this flour and this is the same thing that I did yesterday, but I think because it's just Monica and I, and we do all parts of it, that none of it feels compartmentalized or like I'm just doing the shaping today or I'm just doing this part of this today. It all just is this whole long process that I feel like because this is how we're making our living, it doesn't really ever stop, and each day is kind of its own new thing. Yeah, I just kind of enjoy the whole process of it. There are definitely things that invigorate me more, if we get a new flour in or I get an idea or, like, some formula that I think like, "Oh, I think this is going to be a really good bread," or, you know, something like that, it might be something new enough about it that kind of lights a fire under me, that I'm like, "Oh, yeah, this is my new thing." So, yeah, yeah.

[0:24:30.0]

Kate Medley: When I was doing some research for this interview, I read some things that made me think that you don't shy away from politics—

[0:24:42.1]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah.

[0:24:42.4]

Kate Medley: —when it comes to your craft. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[0:24:48.1]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I do think—I think I've always been, like, politically active and kind of on that—honestly, I think it all comes back to my dad losing that job and they were all union workers, and my grandpa, like, helped in forming the steel workers union in this mill. I mean, I just think that that experience of kind of seeing a whole town kind of crushed because you can make steel cheaper somewhere else and for less, and just seeing families kind of destroyed and being moved and spread all over, I mean, I think being that young and, at the same time, old enough to kind of understand a little bit what was happening just impressed a lot on me about what labor—how working people are treated and what kind of economic system and political system kind of benefit from that, and how that's maybe not in the interest of working people [Laughter] to keep those systems around. So I do feel like I have, like, kind of like the inclination, and I feel like Monica is kind of a similar mindset, but the other end of that is

that baking is kind of a lonely occupation. It's like you're required to be doing stuff at weird hours. I don't always have the energy or the time to say, like, "There's this protest and I'm going to it, because I believe in this." So it's really—I feel like it's really kind of forced me to come up with a way or come up with, like, yeah, just ways of bridging that dichotomy and ways of connecting with people that maybe I wouldn't have connected with or, I mean, really I kind of hate to be like—I don't want to—I don't know, social media is like—and I feel like it's a catch-22, and I don't love it all the time, but there are aspects of Facebook and Instagram that really feel like—connect me with lots of things that are really passionate and really exciting, and things that I would want to be a part of or want to contribute to. So I feel like baking has—there's an aspect of baking that can be like a dialogue and it can kind of increase that dialogue, and so stenciling is one of the things that I do a lot for our breads. Sometimes it's just to kind of distinguish one bread from another and maybe because this is a particular kind of wheat, like our sprouted wheat breads, I'll often do, like, a sprouted wheat stencil that I made, so then when people say, "What's what all about?" then I can talk about how Joe developed this process of sprouting wheat and what that flour's like and why that is so much more nutritious, and what I think of it as a baker, you know, and just kind of use it as a way of talking about, you know, something interesting about a bread. But in other cases, I think that bread is this thing that has a symbol, it's a symbol, it has a meaning that kind of goes beyond politics, in a way, that it's, like, so fundamental to human life that it is that kind of like staff of life, and that bread can kind of be this food that brings people together, and you don't have to agree, you just have to be together and you can talk about it and you can talk about it over bread. So there's a symbolism there that I think is pretty

powerful, and if I'm able to use that, that symbolism, to kind of carry a message, then I think that can become powerful too. So, just recently, there's stuff going on in Israel and Palestine, and Palestinian civilians being shot while they're protesting, and I reached out to a friend who's from Lebanon, and I asked him, I was like, "Could you translate into Arabic 'Solidarity With Palestine' for me?" I was going to make a stencil out of it.

So he was like, "I'd love to do that."

So he did it up, and he sent me this PDF file of the Arabic script, and I printed it out and cut it out with an Exacto knife, and I put it on a few loaves of bread, and I didn't want to put it on all the loaves of bread, and I respect that some people might not agree with that, but I felt like this is important and this is something that people could be talking about, especially Americans. I just felt like this could be something that I would want to put out there. I took it to market with me, and the first woman that said anything got big tears in her eyes, and she said, "I'm Palestinian. I'm here going to school at UNC. My parents are in a refugee camp in Jordan, and I want to take a picture of this loaf of bread to send to my dad, because he will really like it, that somebody, like an American, put this out there." So that just like gave me goosebumps, and that was pretty powerful. Had another man come and say that their neighbors were Palestinians that ended up leaving and going to northern Iraq and kind of identified more with the Kurdish population, and so intermarried and they've immigrated to the United States now, and he was like, "We were just talking about this the other day, and I'm going to buy this loaf of bread to go give to them, because this is something that they would be pretty stoked about." Then another guy came right at the end of market, and he said that he was friends with—he was from Lebanon. He was friends with a Palestinian family who lost two

daughters and a son-in-law last year, that were shot by Israeli military, and that he wanted to take this picture and send the picture of this loaf of bread and just to tell—he was like, “I don’t think Americans know how desperate the situation is, where just knowing that somebody else somewhere in the world is, like, thinking about you, thinking about that maybe this isn’t right, how much of a meaning that has.” So I think about—I mean I think—I mean, those are exceptional stories, but it was one day at market, and we’re just one small bakery, and it was just this feeling of I’m not stuck in this bakery, but here I am in this bakery, I’m so isolated. Monica and I agree we, like, chat each other’s ears off about this, but what does that do? How does that help? And I just feel like, well, then I’m going to put this on bread and I’m going to put it out there, and maybe that will mean something.

[0:32:13.1]

Kate Medley: Can you list a couple other examples of politically-minded things that you’ve stenciled on bread?

[0:32:21.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah, yeah. So we did a series when Trump had the ban, the ban on folks from different Arab countries coming to the United States, and we were in touch with a Palestinian baker who put up a sign that basically was like—I don’t know exactly if it translated, but anyways, I translated it to “Bread Without Borders.” So then we started doing that. We started doing it in Arabic, we did it in Spanish, and I just think that the Spanish, in particular, because there’s a Hispanic population in Carrboro, Chapel Hill.

I got to talking to somebody, and they were saying, like, you miss your language so much when you're in a different country, and to see on a loaf of bread, you don't expect to see Spanish there, and to see that it says *Pan Sin Fronteras*, Bread Without Borders, at a market, it's just kind of this—takes you off guard and you're like, “I love that. I love that this person—here's like this clear sign that this person is with me, this person isn't—I'm not afraid of this white guy that's going to maybe think I should go back home or something. So I felt like that was kind of an exciting one. Back in the Occupy Movement, demonstrations were going on. We did an Occupy bread, and I felt like that was pretty good because there's so much in agriculture and there's so much in food that is owned and operated and controlled by large corporations that don't necessarily have our nutrition and health in mind, that the whole idea of the Occupy Movement felt like that could be translated to food really easily, and that we should occupy our own food and, like, our own production of food, and, you know, those systems of growing food and getting food and making food. So that was kind of an exciting one too.

[0:34:34.4]

Kate Medley: Cool. What's next for Chicken Bridge Bakery?

[0:34:38.9]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Um, I don't know. That's a really good question [Laughter] Our youngest son is going to be going to school. He'll start school in August, and I feel like that's going to be a big change, where it's going to give us a lot more time to be here, and energy, not chasing him around, so I feel like what we have talked about, what Monica

and I have talked about was we just kind of want to get him in school and have this feel like this chapter of having small kids is kind of closed [Laughter], and now we can kind of look forward to what's next. I know the—I mean, this isn't our dream house by any means, so I think maybe a move is in our future, and I think that would entail some exciting things of now that we've done it in this really limited space for so long, I think we have ideas of what it would be like to have a bigger, more open and accessible bakery, but one that was still market-driven and not retail, but one that we could invite people into, so maybe we'd do workshops, maybe we'd be able to do more stuff with the community. I mean, there's bakeries out there, I know, that do, like—they tap into new refugees that come to the area and do, like, trade skills, like maybe you did a lot of baking in, I don't know, Burma, and so let's bake together and we can figure something out. Or I know there's also places that do things with mental health programs, where people just need to kind of have that tactile experience of doing some kind of physical labor that feels wholesome, that feels good, and so maybe those are things that we could kind of look towards. What we talk a lot about is the older that we get, the baking of the bread is always great, it's always amazing, we enjoy the process, but it's also kind of something that you get a method down for and then that's how you do it, and you don't have to change it all the time. So what is—it feels like where there's room to grow is the depth of the bakery and why are we doing this and what impact does it make on our community, and what do we kind of want to do with that, and I feel like those are the questions that we'll have to answer to figure out the growth.

[0:37:17.0]

Kate Medley: Rob, are there things that I haven't asked you about that you feel are important to mention?

[0:37:23.8]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: So one thing I wanted to say, just about grain, though, is that increasingly—a lot of our stuff is coming from North Carolina, but increasingly, in this area there are people that are growing grain that we're super excited about. So one of the farmers that we hooked up with is these two guys, George and Danny from Red Tail Grains, and their farm is eighteen miles from our bakery. They have a stone mill that they use, and so we started making a new bread called 18 Mile Sourdough because I go to their farm, get the wheat berries, we mill it together right there, and then I come home and bake with it, that flour, that day, and I feel like that's as—so far, that's as close as I can get to having grain—you know, the grain from our bakery, and I think what they're doing is really amazing. I think the challenges that they're facing are, like—I feel like these are the new challenges, is that there's people that want to grow grain, but they don't have land, so there's that challenge. There's people who want to grow grain, but they don't have the infrastructure to get the grain cleaned or get grain harvested or get the grain milled, and you could be a farmer and you could sell to a mill and then make kind of pennies on the bushel that you sell, or you could mill your own and you could really make money selling flour. So I think that there's kind of these exciting relationships, and I guess that's the word that I'm thinking of, is there's these relationships that are building with Joe and with Jen, is a little bit different because they set themselves up to be mills, that kind of corresponded with farmers and with bakers. This is the first time that I feel

like I have, like, a personal relationship with this specific farmer, and we're in correspondence and talking to each other and, "What do you think we should plant for next year?" and what worked and what didn't work, and, like, I'm super excited to give you this loaf of bread because it only touched three hands, like, these two farmers and my hands, and, you know, this is like—this is kind of as close as it gets. And I feel like that—I feel really inspired about that, and I feel really excited about that, but I also think that that's where the kind of grain movement has to go, because in so much of the grain has just been outsourced to the big farms in the Midwest or in Canada, and just this loss, not just the loss of diversity in grain that we're using, but the loss in the skills that actually workers have to know this is when the grain is ripe for harvest, this is how we clean it, this is how you should mill it. If you're going to do this with the baking, mill it this way. If you're going to do this, then we've got to mill it this other way. And the fact that those are human skills that people have lost and now generations kind of removed and there's only, I mean, a handful of millers in the state, it just seems, like, mind-boggling when you think about there were probably ten grist mills just on the Haw River from Saxapahaw to Bynum, and now there's probably that many millers in the whole state, so, yeah, forming those human relationships feels like kind of an exciting and important part of being a baker now.

[0:41:01.8]

Kate Medley: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

[0:41:04.3]

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Yeah. Thank you.

[End of interview]