Dawn Orsak

Austin, TX

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Evan Stern: I'll tell you what, before we get started, just to test my levels here, could you tell me what you had for breakfast?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] I had a leftover cheese quesadilla for breakfast, with avocado on the side, and serrano Yellowbird sauce on top. And then I had a kolach.

Evan Stern: Hey, good! Well, that's good, because most people I speak with really haven't had anything for breakfast.

Dawn Orsak: [laughs]

Evan Stern: Before we get started, excerpts from this oral history interview may be shared on the *Gravy* podcast, a production of the Southern Foodways Alliance. Do we have permission to use this tape on the *Gravy* podcast?

Dawn Orsak: Yes.

Evan Stern: Fantastic. Let me just—uch—what is going on here? Okay, I think that's much better there; we fixed that.

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I'm Evan Stern, and I'm speaking today with Dawn Orsak, in her home in South Austin. For the record, Dawn, could you please state your name and occupation?

Dawn Orsak: My name is Dawn Orsak, and my day job is Director of the Philosophical Society of Texas.

Evan Stern: What is the Philosophical Society of Texas?

Dawn Orsak: It was started in 1837 by Sam Houston and Mirabeau B. Lamar and some other founding fathers, sort of modeled against the American Philosophical Society. But basically it's a nonprofit that members are pulled or elected from all areas of Texas endeavors, from academic to writers to business, and they have an annual meeting every year on a topic of interest, and they publish the proceedings, and do a lot of networking.

Evan Stern: Very cool.

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Before we get started—or I should say to begin—could you maybe describe for me your childhood home and tell me about where you grew up?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] Actually my dad moved us around a lot. So we lived in Connecticut and New Jersey and Georgia and several places in Texas, even though my parents are from south central Texas and I was born in Houston. So I had many childhood homes. The constant was my grandmother's, in Hallettsville. Although my parents did settle in Houston when I was in sixth grade, and then we moved out to Katy. So their home actually was the constant after that, and they owned it for over 40 years.

Evan Stern: I guess despite all of this moving that you did, in what ways did they maybe make you aware of your Texas roots?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] Well, we would come back to visit.

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Visited my grandmother. My parents would leave my sister and I with grandparents when my parents went on business trips. And my dad's a *huge* Texas history buff. So even, I remember

living in Connecticut, I got a Tanya Tucker album for my birthday [laughs] and we listened to a lot of country music. So I was well aware I was a sixth-generation Texan.

Evan Stern: I love Tanya Tucker. And I loved—her latest album, too, was wonderful. She's a great—*The Wheels of Laredo* I think is just a beautiful song.

Dawn Orsak: Right. [laughs] Well, it was the album on which the song *Delta Dawn* appeared. So, that was why I got it. [laughs]

Evan Stern: That's great. You just said that you are a sixth-generation Texan. Can you tell me about where your people came from, and why they came to Texas?

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Dawn Orsak: I'm a sixth-generation Texan, but that's on my dad's Polish side. As far as Texas Czechs go, I'm only maybe a third-generation Texan. I know much more about the Texas Czech side of my family, which is three quarters, and they almost all came from around the same village in Moravia called Frenštát, where actually many, many Texas Czechs came from that area. Three of my great grandfathers all came from the same village.

Evan Stern: Going back into time, do you know why it is that they moved to Texas as opposed—can you tell me about the conditions they left and what brought them here?

Dawn Orsak: Right. I'm not a historian [laughs] but certainly it was really for economics. Most people came for economic reasons, for better opportunities, because the political and social climate in the Hapsburg Empire in the mid to late 19th century made conditions that—for especially people like my ancestors, who were not landholders or very wealthy—made it almost impossible for them to get a leg up, or ever own land, or sometimes even feed themselves.

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And so, when word started coming about opportunities in Texas, my great grandfathers came actually on their own, or as the only member of their family, but they came with other family members, like with an uncle, for example.

Evan Stern: In what ways were you made aware of your Czech roots growing up?

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Dawn Orsak: [laughs] My mother's mother, my maternal grandmother, spoke Czech as her first language. Well, so did my grandfather, too, but he passed away when I was 13. My maternal grandmother spoke Czech as her first language. I mean, my mother was really embedded in the community in Lavaca County, meaning we went to family reunions, we went to weddings where traditional food was served, or they were doing the wedding march. My parents took us to polka dances; and, learned to dance. We went to church picnics. So, we were really embedded. I didn't learn to speak Czech and actually neither did my mom, but grew up with prayers, and songs, and little phrases. My grandmother would speak Czech to her sisters on the phone, so I would hear Czech in that way.

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We'd visit bakeries and meat markets in that area of the state. So, it was just sort of part of growing up.

Evan Stern: In what ways could you articulate, did your grandmother maybe provide a link to history for you?

Dawn Orsak: My grandmother was the baby of her family, the baby of ten. All of her siblings were older. She became the caretaker of things as they would pass away. So there was this sense of history and preserving history that she gave me. The house that she lived in—she lived there 70 years, actually, so there was this continuity in the house, of things, and people.

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So, growing up with a sense of the past, for all of those reasons—environmental, talking about family stories—history was also sort of part of growing up and understanding the world. You understood your past to know who you were, and where you were going.

Evan Stern: Are there any favorite memories you can share of your grandmother in the kitchen?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] You know, she didn't actually like to cook. Because she was the baby, and she had two older sisters, she didn't spend much time learning how to cook. Then her mother was killed in a car accident the year that she got married, so she didn't have her to rely on once she was establishing her own home.

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So I think she did it because she had to, cooked because she had to, not because she really wanted to. She put her all into it. She collected recipes and cooked from scratch. Cooked for the dogs, even; cooked dog mush for the dogs. So she did what she had to do, but there was never this love of it communicated. I more remember her presence in the kitchen, because it was the center of the home, so we were always in there at the kitchen table. We were either eating meals, we were coloring at the table, or we were talking or playing cards at the kitchen table. So I remember it as her domain but not necessarily her cooking.

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Although she certainly had some dishes that we—chicken noodle soup at Christmas was definitely hers. I don't remember her making kolaches, actually, but she made what she called cheese roll or poppy seed roll. It was a buchta; that's kind of like kolach dough with the same fillings in it. She would make those, and she would make klobasniki. So there are some dishes that I remember, but mostly it was her presence in that space.

Evan Stern: Mainly, this discovery of food, is maybe something that you kind of found on your own, to a certain degree?

Dawn Orsak: Well, you know, the cooks in my family were my parents. Food has been the theme of their married life, even though it wasn't their actual jobs. They started gourmet cooking in the sixties.

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They started collecting *Gourmet* magazine. They would eat out at restaurants in these different cities that my dad was sent to on business trips. And they started exploring food, and cooking together. Then when we moved back to Texas when I was in junior high, my dad got asked to be on a chili cooking team. So, the rest of my high school years and beyond, my dad and a cooking team were going to barbecue cookoffs, chili cookoffs. Then my parents started catering on the side, because they were just good at it. And, they provided opportunities to cook together, and with my brothers and sisters and I and grandchildren, as an activity. It wasn't just a side—it wasn't just that you ate for some other activity; the *cooking* was the activity.

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So as a family, all of my siblings and I have gotten that bug, and when we get together, we never leave the kitchen. It's just a legacy from my parents of their love of food.

Evan Stern: Speaking of food, in 1994, you said that an opportunity fell into place for you that broadened your ideas about what was relevant about food's place in your life. Can you maybe talk a little bit about that?

Dawn Orsak: Right, and you mean the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Yeah. So, I was working for Texas Folklife Resources, which is now called Texas Folklife. It's like the Texas equivalent of other states' folk arts agencies, although it was a private non-profit. I was working for Texas Folklife Resources, and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival that year was going to feature the Czech Republic.

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The Smithsonian contacted Texas Folklife to try to find Texas Czech cooks who could also cook on the stage with the Czech cooks, and sort of talk about how traditions have changed. My boss knew that I was Texas Czech, and so she started with me, asking who I knew. And I managed to somehow get the Smithsonian to pay me to go interview some first cousins of my mom's, who I knew had lots of traditional recipes and that traditional Texas Czech cooking was a part of their family. And, they loved them. And so I *then* somehow convinced the Smithsonian, though I had never done it before, to be their Foodways presenter, if that's still the term that's used.

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So I went with them to the Folklife Festival and got to be on stage with them, and help them present their story and recipes and talk about food in their lives, for an audience. And I met all these Czechs who had come from Czech Republic for the festival. And it just literally changed

my life, getting to meet—I had never been to the Czech Republic before, so meeting Czechs, talking about Czech food, talking about the comparison of Texas Czech food and Czech food, I just found the topic fascinating, and knew that I wanted to be more involved with this, or study it myself as a layperson, and learn to cook better, and hound all my relatives about their recipes, and how they learned. And I've never lost the bug for that now.

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Evan Stern: I know it was a long time ago, but thinking back to that experience where you got the Czech cooks, and the Texas Czechs together, are there any interesting interactions that maybe come to mind for you?

Dawn Orsak: I think there were—it was interesting how some things were so similar, and then interesting how some things were very different. Sausage-making for example, the ingredients that my relatives used were the exact ingredients that the Czechs would use for making their sausage. The same thing with apple strudel. The differences would be that the kolaches look different. Certainly my relatives made kolaches on a rectangular baking sheet, and the kolaches squish up together and make that square shape that we think of as Texas kolaches, whereas the Czechs were making small, round, maybe what you'd call wedding kolaches.

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So, the kolaches were different. So that was I think an endless topic of fascination for people. And certainly, the language. My cousins spoke Czech with the Czechs, but the language—the dialect of Czech spoken in Texas is unique, and based on 100 years ago, and so the language sounds archaic to modern Czechs. So that was always a point of fun, was that my cousins and the other Texas Czechs sounded like people's great grandmothers. [laughs]

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Evan Stern: Piggybacking off of some of what you've said, you've said that much of the passion that has fed your journey since then is because food is one of the easiest and most natural ways to connect with your family, your background, and who you are. Are there any personal stories you can share that maybe illuminate that?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] I'll tell you about a thread of a meal, throughout my life, and it touches on my family's love of history, tradition, and our Czech background. On Christmas Eve, Czechs eat some—the event is called Štědrý večer, which is "Christmas Eve," Christmas evening.

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Czechs would normally, and even Texas Czechs, would have a bigger meal on Christmas Eve than on Christmas Day. My parents cooked Štědrý večer, which we sort of bastardized into the word Štědra, which doesn't have any meaning for Czechs, but my family ended up calling it Štědra. My parents would make Štědra, just like my mother's mother would make Štědra, and she made it like her mother would make it. So, there are dishes now on our Štědra table that my great grandmother would make, say, in 1910, the very same dishes. And the same menu. So, my parents learned to make it from my grandmother, who learned to make it from her family. And then, once my mom passed away, I started to make it for my children.

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And it's this just thread—when I sit down to eat it, I think about my grandmother having made the same dishes, my great grandmother having made the same dishes. And it just sort of encapsulates those things like history and tradition and being Czech that make me who I am.

Evan Stern: Speaking of particular dishes, I know you said that your grandmother didn't make kolaches [pronounced kolach-ees]—or kolaches [pronounced kolach-is] as—

Dawn Orsak: Kolaches [pronounced kolach-is].

Evan Stern: —kolaches [pronounced kolach-is], as I hear you saying right now. But on what occasions did you get kolaches growing up?

Dawn Orsak: My grandmother didn't make them, but we certainly ate them. There were several local bakeries in Hallettsville where my grandmother lived, and where my mother grew up, where we would get kolaches. We would have them at family reunions, and at weddings. Those were the big places.

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Or, on holidays. To be able to feed a crowd. We didn't eat them for breakfast; they were a special occasion food. And really reunions and—or church picnics, too. They would be served at church picnics. So big, group, community events is where I grew up eating kolaches.

Evan Stern: For the uninitiated, how would you *define* a kolache?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] So, a kolach is a pastry, made of yeast dough, that's risen two or three times, and then an indentation is made in the center for some sort of fruit or sweetened cheese filling, or poppy seed. Then you can have a sprinkling of what people would know as streusel—in Czech it's called posypka—a sprinkling of that on top, and they're baked until they're golden.

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Evan Stern: What would you say is like a traditional—when you think of kolaches, what are maybe the purest form of kolaches you can think of?

Dawn Orsak: In Texas in the 21st century, you can find people who still make kolaches in a round shape, and you can find people in many, most commercial bakeries, make them and they are in sort of a square shape, because of the way the kolaches bump up against each other in the pan. When you use the word "traditional" it really depends what you mean. Because certainly the round shape is more similar to the way they are in the Czech Republic, but 150 or sixty years after people started immigrating to Texas, what does traditional mean then? Or can traditional mean what your great grandmother made? Or can it mean what your grandmother made?

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I think for many people, it was just what—especially our age—whatever their grandmother made seems traditional to them now. And by then, kolaches may have morphed enough to where they were eating a square-ish kolach that had sour cream in the dough, and pineapple in the filling. So for them, that seems traditional. And certainly it *is*, after two generations. I do think there are still things, though, that you could—aspects of kolaches that you could call traditional despite that. One is a soft yeast dough. Certainly people recognize prune and apricot and cream cheese and poppy seed as traditional fillings; though people also cooked whatever they might have access to.

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So if somebody had dewberries growing on their property, they would make dewberry kolaches; or they had pear trees, or they had peach trees. So those can be considered traditional, too. And certainly posypka as the topping, people would recognize as traditional, though people vary from that, now, too, and might do cream—just sprinkle it with sugar, or sprinkle it with powdered sugar, or drizzle like a powdered sugar icing on top.

Evan Stern: What is posypka?

Dawn Orsak: Posypka is like a streusel. It's butter, sugar, flour, crumbled together with your hands, so that it makes like a lumpy—almost like a course meal, and you sprinkle it on top of the kolach, just as a decoration, and it adds more butter and sugar. [laughs]

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Evan Stern: I think everything is better with butter and sugar.

Dawn Orsak: Exactly! [laughs]

Evan Stern: Just talking about that, can you maybe talk about some of the evolutions that kolaches have undergone here, in Texas? If you're maybe looking back at—yeah.

Dawn Orsak: Right. I think there are several factors. Absolutely commercial bakeries I think have made the biggest impact on what especially non-Czechs think of as kolaches. I think places like Shipley's and Kolache Factory and even Texas Czech-owned bakeries like Hruska's and Weikel's, and Czech Stop, and all of these places, have evolved the pastry over the years. Whether it's the shape—most people think of kolaches now as square, when they really were round.

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The word "kolach" is based on the word "kolo" which means round, or wheel. So, an evolution of shape has happened. Certainly fillings have changed. But even within the Texas Czech community, fillings have changed. It isn't just that craft artisan non-Czech bakeries are now making peanut butter and jelly kolaches. It's not just that. Czechs themselves adopted new ingredients and things as the decades passed. Whether it was cream cheese didn't exist when people immigrated to Texas in the late 19th century; they used cottage cheese. But cream cheese

was then adopted as a filling. Pineapple. Whenever canned pineapple became popular, and I'm not exactly why or what the prevalence was in grocery stores in smalltown Texas, but Czech women in those places figured out how to make a kolach filling out of pineapple.

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So certainly fillings have evolved. I think kolaches have gotten bigger over the years, probably because of commercial bakeries, and giving people a bang for their buck. The kolaches I remember when I was young were not as big as they are now.

Evan Stern: Also, talking about these evolutions, do you have any ideas about how, when, were the meat-filled—is it the klobasnek—

Dawn Orsak: Klobasnek?

Evan Stern: —the klobasneks started? And, why is it that people here call them kolaches and what do you feel about that? If we can get into all of that?

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Dawn Orsak: This topic is worthy of a master's thesis in research, I think. [laughs] But the word klobasnek, I've seen people in news articles and things claim that klobasnek—that klobasniky are a Texas invention, and they are not. They're not a Texas invention. You can find sausages in bread, or meat in bread, in the Czech Republic. And you could 100 years ago, too, although the form was a whole link of sausage in a loaf of bread. When they became—sorry—so there was that tradition of a whole link of sausage in bread, and the word used *was* a klobasnek.

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The Village Bakery in West claims to have invented klobasniky, and they even copyrighted the word klobasniky. They may have been the first commercial bakery to do that. I can't say they are, and I can't say that they're not. I don't know that they checked with every bakery in Texas to make sure. They certainly weren't the first bakery to make kolaches. But they do claim to be the first all-Czech bakery and to have invented klobasniky. I've seen news articles that mention klobasnek in the early sixties, like for fundraisers and things. Whether those people had traveled to West and seen the new invention of klobasniky at the Village Bakery and then went back and made it for their fundraiser, who knows? That takes more research.

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Evan Stern: Until I started working on this project, until really just a few weeks ago, had someone said to me, "Oh, would you like a klobasniky?" I don't know what—I would have thought, "What is that?" But if they said to me, "Oh, would you like a sausage kolache—?" When they did they start calling these kolaches?

Dawn Orsak: Again, I think it's a commercial bakery thing, a non-Czech commercial bakery thing. Because certainly the Village Bakery was calling them klobasniky, and they opened I think in 1952 or '3. So they are a commercial bakery that was using the correct term. I think that the word "sausage kolache"—this is actually ironic, that a commercial bakery like Kolache Factory or Shipley's would use the word "kolache" which is Czech, but not feel like they could use the word "klobasnek" which is also Czech!

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So I'm not sure—my sense is that those kinds of bakeries that are owned by non-Czechs and that have really spread the word about kolaches to non-Czechs—I just lost my train of thought. [laughs]

Evan Stern: That's all right, that's all right.

Dawn Orsak: I know, 'cause you can edit this. I do feel like those non-Czech commercial bakeries are the ones that got people to first eat sausage kolaches; I'm going to use the term "sausage kolaches" because that's what they have, or that's what they call them. But I don't know why they chose to continue to use the word "kolach" and not "klobasnek" if both words are Czech. I don't know! [laughs]

Evan Stern: That's perfectly fine.

Dawn Orsak: Although, there is a Southern tradition of pigs in the blanket. And certainly people—I remember people calling sausage kolaches or klobasniky "pigs in the blanket" sometimes.

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I think it just depended on that particular person's family background. In fact, my family would call them "pigs" for short. For example, "Are you picking up the pigs at 10:00?" would be something you might hear the morning of a family reunion. So we didn't always call them klobasniky either, although I definitely knew the term, and knew it was the correct term. So, I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I feel like this needs not just oral—not just research talking to people, but documented research, of menus, newspaper articles, things like that, to nail—"Wait a minute, this is the first time I see klobasniky in print, in this county," or "This is the first"—whatever.

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Evan Stern: Wow. [laughs]

Dawn Orsak: So I don't have the golden kolach answer that you're looking for as far as klobasnek go.

Evan Stern: No, that's perfectly fine. But what are your feelings about the fact that people call klobasniky "kolaches"?

Dawn Orsak: I have mixed feelings about the whole popularity in general of kolaches now. If it takes a sausage kolach to spread the word about Texas-Czech food, that's wonderful. I think it again is really strange that people would use the word "kolach" and it is Czech, but not use the word "klobasnek" when it's also Czech, so I think that's kind of strange.

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I'm happy that Texas-Czech food is getting recognized, nationally, and internationally, but I do worry about the authenticity getting diluted by people using the wrong term, or kolaches and klobasnek with non-traditional ingredients becoming the most popular thing that people know. I'm worried that in a generation, the only place you can get a kolach is in a commercial bakery, and that people don't know how to make them anymore.

Evan Stern: Why does this worry you, and why is it important for you to preserve all of this?

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Dawn Orsak: [laughs] I feel like Texas-Czech food—just like there's a Texas-Czech dialect of language, I feel like Texas-Czech food is its own cuisine, like Tex-Mex. Maybe not so popular or with as many proponents or eaten as often, but I do feel like it's its own unique cuisine. Because

it's not Czech food. We don't eat Czech food here; we eat Texas Czech food, that has been influenced by American ingredients, new ways of being able to cook, things they couldn't get that they had to substitute for, different ways the communities works together. The food has changed because of that, and it's its own cuisine. And I think that's important. I think it's unique.

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I think it's important to preserve. Just like any other regional cuisine of the United States, whether it's Cajun food, or Tex-Mex, I think it should be documented and celebrated.

Evan Stern: I guess maybe getting a little philosophical—

Dawn Orsak: Yeah, [laughs] right—

Evan Stern: —but *why*, like for you, is this important?

Dawn Orsak: I was thinking about this a little bit before you came over. [pause] You know, Texas-Czech culture was—I know a lot of people reject the culture that they grew up in, or want to distance themselves. For me, it was the opposite. I wanted to know more about the parent culture of my ancestors.

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Because it made me—maybe because of a love of history, it made me feel more rooted and grounded, as opposed to just being a consumer of popular American culture, which I certainly was, growing up in the seventies. Texas-Czech culture reached farther back in history. It gave me things to both celebrate and also distance myself from. It made me feel connected to something bigger than myself. It probably seemed exotic. When I was growing up until after I graduated

from Hopkins, Czechoslovakia was under communism, so there was always some little discussion about that, so the culture seemed exotic.

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That just imprinted on me. All of that love of history and culture made its imprint on me. And I think it's important to maintain those ties, those things that are unique about—all Americans should maintain those ties and unique aspects of the culture from which they came, even though we all celebrate a common American culture, too.

Evan Stern: By the way, if you ever get tired or need a break, you're more—no, seriously, you're more—if you ever need a time-out just please let me know.

Dawn Orsak: I feel like I'm terrible talking on the fly.

Evan Stern: No, you're not. You're doing great.

Dawn Orsak: Yeah, I feel like I'm terrible talking on the fly. I would much rather write everything down.

Evan Stern: Oh, sure. Well, of course if you have any insights of inspiration that you care to share afterwards, please, you can always reach me.

Dawn Orsak: Okay. [laughs]

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Evan Stern: But talking about preserving these traditions and everything, I know a few years ago, you started a business baking kolaches out of your kitchen.

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] Right.

Evan Stern: Can you tell me a little bit about what led you to that, and what that experience was like?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] I never thought about myself as a baker, and I never thought of myself as somebody who would work in the food industry *making* food. But in 2019 I was laid off from my job, and had the opportunity to sort of take a breath and figure out what it is that I might want to do, because I was on unemployment, which helped. For several years before that, I had been writing a blog about my family's connection with Texas-Czech culture and what food meant in our family, and had been practicing baking kolaches.

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Always got a wonderful reception [laughs] when I made them or took them to events. Also, by 2019, I feel like there was a real resurgence of cottage food industry, people baking from their homes, or baking for farmer's markets, or doing really tiny businesses of jams or jellies or something. All of those things together made me think that I could bake kolaches in my apartment and deliver them to people. I couldn't sell them individually anywhere; I didn't have the resources or the bandwidth to do that. but I felt like I could bake a pan and deliver to someone's office for, you know, an office party or an office meeting or something.

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And so I tried it, and weirdly, it worked, for a while. Yeah. It was really hard. [laughs] Baking kolaches takes a long time. I got a system down where I was baking—where I was making fillings in advance, keeping them in the freezer, had to have everything ready for what a particular person would order. I would do the dough in the morning, but I would get up at like 4:00 a.m. I would get the dough rising and then take my son to school, come back and fill them,

and then figure out how to deliver. That combined with Austin traffic made it a horrible option to try to get to someone's meeting by 9:00 a.m. with a fresh pan of hot baked kolaches. But it was fun for a while. Yeah.

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Evan Stern: I can only imagine the amount of—what you're telling me here, I can only imagine the amount of work—

Dawn Orsak: It was fun, oh—

Evan Stern: —and the traffic.

Dawn Orsak: —but—so I called the business Old School Kolaches, because I wanted people to know what a kolach like from my youth was, and what the community thought of—what the Texas-Czech community thought of as traditional. So instead of someone picking up a dozen kolaches from—can I name names—in—[laughs]—so instead of someone picking up a dozen kolaches from Kolache Factory, I wanted them to know what fresh out of the oven *true*, *real*, kolaches were, and be able to experience that. So the fillings I offered—I think in my marketing materials said that, "Your grandmother would recognize these fillings." I only offered fillings that someone's grandmother would recognize.

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So it was the very traditional prune, poppy seed, cream cheese, apricot, and then a nut filling and poppy seed. Because I felt like that was lacking in Austin. You couldn't find that anywhere.

Evan Stern: It's so interesting that Austin is kind of right in the center of what people might call the Czech Belt, but you really don't find that much here, do you?

Dawn Orsak: No, you don't. As far as I know, there has never been a commercial bakery opened in Austin by a Texas Czech. The one bakery that I feel was close was I think opened by German Texans, maybe with a family friend recipe or something, and they were really close. But no Texas Czech has opened—I take that back! There was a trailer, a food trailer, opened by somebody named Andy Zubik, in Austin. It was called ZubikHouse. And he was at the downtown farmer's market at Republic Square, and *he* made great kolaches.

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But he experimented with the flavors. I think he had a culinary background and would experiment with different kinds of flavors. But he may be the only one that there was, yeah.

Evan Stern: What caused you to step back from that operation?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] I stepped back from that because it was not going to pay my bills. [laughs] I had to find a full-time job.

Evan Stern: That's a perfectly understandable reason. Were there any kitchen disasters that you [laughs] care to share?

Dawn Orsak: You know, that was part of the stress, because I *had* to get it right. If somebody ordered the pan that morning, or a couple days before, it's not like I had four pans and would pull the 24 best out of those four pans. I baked it, and by god, it had to come out right, or—I was going to lose the money and face. [laughs]

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So there was a lot of stress involved in that. Luckily there were never any disasters. The potential disasters were related to Austin traffic keeping me from getting them delivered in time. [laughs]

Evan Stern: Looking back on all the times that you've made kolaches, is there a particularly meaningful batch that you can remember making?

Dawn Orsak: Let's see. A couple. One was good, and one was a disaster. I just thought of this when you said it—I was friends with Virginia Wood, who was the longtime *Austin Chronicle* food editor.

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Towards the end of her life, I once took a pan of kolaches over to her. I think she was in rehab, for something. And she was *so* supportive of me. She was so supportive. We didn't spend that much time together, but over the years she was really supportive of my kolach baking efforts and my interest in Texas-Czech food. And of course, she said they were wonderful, when I took them to her. Then, a meaningful disaster—I once and only once entered the Caldwell Kolache Festival Bakeoff. This was after I had the baking business for a while, so I was really confident in myself.

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And I failed to make sure my alarm was set in the morning, so I had to rush with the dough, and they were underbaked. But my son got in the car with me that morning, and we drove to Caldwell anyway and entered them. And of course they didn't even get anything. [laughs]

Evan Stern: That's a sad, sad story! [laughs]

Dawn Orsak: So, you know, I don't know how well that bodes for me writing a cookbook about Texas-Czech food that I couldn't win the Caldwell Kolache Festival, but [laughs]—

Evan Stern: Just a few more. We kind of touched on some of these a little bit earlier. It's just a question of if there may be any more thoughts that can be articulated in these areas. But it's still a little hard to find kolaches in the U.S. outside of Texas, save a few corners of the Midwest. Would you have any concerns about kolaches becoming more readily accessible?

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Dawn Orsak: Hmm. That's an interesting question, because again, it relates to in what form they become popular. If what the rest of the country comes to know as kolaches are dense, filled with cherry pie filling, then yes, I have big concerns [laughs]. But if Texas-Czechs are opening bakeries that offer traditional fare, then of course I'm all for it. Yeah. It really depends on in what form they are. You know, I always think about [laughs]—I think about tacos. Like if you put turkey and dressing in a tortilla, and offer it with gravy and call it a taco, does that serve Texas-Czech food—I mean, does that serve Tex-Mex food at all?

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Or would you then hold it against somebody who was a Tejano if they thought that was a horrible thing or tell you that's not a taco? Of course you wouldn't. You would say, "Of course not," and you would respect that. So how can we be putting peanut butter and jelly in kolaches and offering that as traditional fare? I do think about those things.

Evan Stern: I guess towards that matter, earlier today I did try the brisket and, you know, jalapeños.

Dawn Orsak: Oh, did you go to Kerlaches?

Evan Stern: I went to Kerlaches. I mean, what do you think about that? What's your opinion on that?

Dawn Orsak: Well, of course they're *delicious*. [laughs] There's nothing about Kerlaches that isn't absolutely delicious. Are they traditional in any way? They're not. The dough doesn't seem traditional.

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I mean, they're not traditional *Czech* kolaches. They're not really even traditional Texas-Czech kolaches. *Unless* you see us on a continuum—you see kolaches and klobasnek on a continuum, and what's happening with things like Kerlaches are morphing and feeding that continuum now so that in 10, 15 years, we'll think of that as Texas-Czech. I don't know. They're delicious; they're not traditional. Should they exist? Sure. Because they're delicious. [laughs] Yeah.

Evan Stern: Do you have any thoughts on how you see Texas kolaches evolving over the next few decades?

Dawn Orsak: The things that make me hopeful about traditional kolaches are community events that act as almost community apprenticeships, where older people in the community are bringing in, for a church fundraiser for example, younger parishioners, to—the excuse is to raise money for the church, but in the process, they're learning how to make kolaches.

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That makes me hopeful that more community folks are learning how to make them in a traditional way. And I'm hoping there's some kind of bakery backlash, where more Texas Czechs might open mom and pop bakeries and offer traditional flavors that are more artisan

made. The first time I saw a sign for "kolaches"—and you can't see my air quotes in a podcast—but the first time I saw a sign for kolaches in like a CITGO gas station window, I think I cried. Yeah.

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Because I had a vision of rotating hot dogs in there, or pizza that came out of the microwave in a triangular box, and it made me horrified to think that kolaches could go that route. But, those things like community events make me hopeful that there will be a countermovement [laughs] basically.

Evan Stern: So is that maybe how you feel when you see like a Buc-ee's billboard that says, "Kolaches ahead"?

Dawn Orsak: [laughs] Oh, god! Right. I don't like Buc-ee's kolaches, by the way. I have a long list of commercial bakery kolaches that I don't like, of course.

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Uch, I don't know. It can be sad. It might be really sad. The number of kolaches that are sold at places that aren't making—that take so many shortcuts that they really aren't presented as traditional. They don't present as traditional. But so many are sold that I wonder if just sheer economics and volume are going to start to tip the state's understanding of what a kolach is.

Evan Stern: Just a few more. I know we've talked a lot about kolaches.

Dawn Orsak: [laughs]

Evan Stern: But you also mentioned the buchta. Obviously kolaches aren't the only Czech—

Dawn Orsak: Right.

Evan Stern: Are there any Texas-Czech pastries that you'd like more people to know about, or that can still be found here that people should look for and know about?

Dawn Orsak: Right. In many Texas Czech owned bakeries, you can find other kinds of pastries besides kolaches and klobasnek.

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One is apple strudel, and some people think that it's German, that apple strudel is German, but it was popular throughout Germany and the Austrio-Hungarian Empire, so even Czechs adopted it, and strudel is very traditional to the community. But also what Texas Czechs call buchta. It's got a little different connotation in Czech Republic Czech than it does in Texas Czech, but basically it's kolach dough that's sort of shaped like a jelly roll with the same fillings in it that a kolach would have, and then you slice it. Almost like a strudel made with kolach dough that has either cream cheese or poppy seed or apricot in it, and it's rolled up and sliced.

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But nowadays you can even think cinnamon rolls are traditional to the Texas-Czech community. They're not traditional Czech, but the Texas Czech community I feel like naturally made cinnamon rolls out of leftover kolach dough. There's actually a buchta that's got nuts and cinnamon in it, that you can drizzle with powdered sugar icing, that's very similar to a cinnamon roll but with nuts in it. Those would probably be the big ones.

Evan Stern: Okay! Great. If decades in the future, after you've left this Earth, say someone wanted to commune and get to know the spirit of Dawn Orsak, where should they go look for you?

Dawn Orsak: Oh, my gosh.

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Even though I wasn't born and grow up in Lavaca County, that is my spiritual home, I think. Because my grandmother lived in the same house my whole life, and that was always the place that we would visit her. My mother is buried there. My grandparents are buried there. Hallettsville, especially. But, oh, the rolling hills around Hallettsville, Shiner, Moravia, especially in the spring when the wildflowers are out, that's absolutely my spiritual home. Yeah.

Evan Stern: Dawn, I thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. Are there any final thoughts that you care to share?

Dawn Orsak: No, we have to try the kolaches I baked for you! [laughs] Oh, and I have to tell you what I made, though. Can I tell you about the fillings?

Evan Stern: Please! Yes, you sure may!

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Dawn Orsak: Okay, so I made three kinds of fillings to give you an overarching perspective of what is traditional. I made prune, because that's absolutely traditional. But, you can still find it in Texas-Czech bakeries. I made pineapple cream cheese, because cream cheese is very traditional if only, say, 75 or 100 years' worth of using the ingredient can be traditional, and only in Texas and not in the Czech Republic. And I combined it with pineapple, which is obviously there are no pineapples that grow in the Czech Republic, but in Texas, women started to make kolach fillings with canned pineapple. I used fresh, though. And actually my son tasted it this morning

and said it tasted like a piña colada, so we're now going to call them "piña kolaches." And maybe I'll add rum extract to the cream cheese next time! [laughs]

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But then the third kind of I made are called zelnicky, and they are cabbage kolaches. You can find many recipes for them in community cookbooks, but *nobody* makes them anymore. And I made them for you because I doubt you'll ever find them anywhere else. They're certainly not sold in bakeries. And I think most people don't make them anymore because people turn their—their kids probably turn their nose up at them. But it's just shredded cabbage that's sweetened with sugar but still has salt and pepper in it. So I hope you're not a cabbage hater, because I want you [laughs] to try it!

Evan Stern: I'll totally try it! Obviously, you know *infinitely* more about kolaches and this subject than I do. But I just keep reading that in the Czech Republic, you would never find a savory kolache. Is this cabbage kolache, is this a Texas thing?

Dawn Orsak: No. No, zelnicky are a Czech thing.

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But again, it's got a half a cup of sugar in it. So they're not really savory, even though it's got a little salt and pepper in it—although I haven't compared Texas Czech recipes to a recipe from the Czech Republic—they would totally be considered sweet kolaches. Yeah, they would be considered sweet. We'll see.

Evan Stern: This sounds so cool! I can't wait! Let's eat! [laughs]

Dawn Orsak: Let's eat! [laughs]

Evan Stern: Thank you, Dawn! [laughs]

[End]