



Vatsana Souvannavong

Koala Kolache

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Evan Stern: I know there's just going to be so much to talk about here.

Vatsana Souvannavong: I came here when I was four, from my country. I actually came to Houston. Yeah. After my mom died, and I was 14, I left Houston and went to California. But do you realize—yeah—do you realize that that long that I had been here, I didn't know what a kolache was, until I came *back* home, the second time around?

Evan Stern: Amazing!

Vatsana Souvannavong: Isn't that crazy?

Evan Stern: No, but I—okay, so we gotta—

Vatsana Souvannavong: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just—

Evan Stern: No, no, no, please, it's all exciting. No, I want to get all of this. But before we get started, first of all, just to test my levels a bit, could you tell me what you had for breakfast?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Absolutely nothing.

Evan Stern: You know what? That is the most common answer that I get from people.

Vatsana Souvannavong: [laughs]

Evan Stern: It really is.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Water. Does that count?

Evan Stern: Yeah, sure, why not? And so, excerpts from this oral history interview may be shared on *Gravy* podcast, which is a production of the Southern Foodways Alliance. Do we have your permission to use this tape on the *Gravy* podcast?

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Vatsana Souvannavong: No. No, I'm kidding. [laughs] Yes.

Evan Stern: Thank you so much. And for the record—so first, let me backtrack here—gotta remember this. So yes, I'm Evan Stern, and I'm talking today in Houston, Texas, with the wonderful Vatsana. And for the record, Vatsana, can you tell us your full name and occupation?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Vatsana Souvannavong, and I am a baketress.

Evan Stern: A baketress.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yeah, like a baker is for a guy; baketress for a female, I guess? So yeah.

Evan Stern: I've never heard that before. Did you make it up, or—?

Vatsana Souvannavong: No, it's an actual term!

Evan Stern: It's an actual—okay.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yeah, I know! [laughs]

Evan Stern: All right. I have never—see, I have never heard that before. And no matter whom I'm talking with, I always like to start off by asking if you could describe for me your childhood home, and tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Um, *okay*. Where do we start?

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Okay, so, I'm an immigrant, which I'm proud to say. My dad—I don't really want to get into like, you know, deep into it, but my dad died, as a refugee coming to the U.S., and we actually

came to Houston. Mom, single mom, raising three kids, didn't know the language. In my home country, she was very pampered. Had maid, chef, driver; I mean, you name it, the whole nine yard. She didn't work. She took care of me, my brother, and my sister. And then of course when my dad died, coming to a brand-new country, not knowing anyone, right, maybe a handful of people, I know it must have been very scary for her. We actually raised ourself, believe it or not, because she had to go get a job. Not one, but two. And then had to go to get her GED. Had to learn English. So we kind of raised ourselves, which I feel like that built our character, and built who we are.

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I love my country—don't get me wrong—but I also love America, because without America, I don't think I would be who I am. This is the country of—I guess people say like, what, the dreams? And it's true. You can come here, and you can accomplish and do a lot, as long as you're willing to do it. And I believe that. I believe that you work hard, you have integrity, and it will pay off. It may not pay off in a year, two years, three years. But eventually if you keep going at it, it will pay off. And I love both my countries. I'm proud of being American, for sure, and also Lao, so yeah. But growing up, like I said, we struggled. I'm not going to lie to you. We [0:03:40] food stamp, welfare. Like I said, me and my brother and sister took care of ourselves. We didn't really ask much from my mom, just because we know she didn't have much to give. We never were brats, like, "Hey, how come the kids have this, and we don't have that?" We did have the church that helped us a lot. As far as like Christmas time, they would come by, give us gifts.

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So I do have a soft spot for—not church in itself, but like I guess—faith. There’s a difference between religion, I think, to me, and—I don’t want to get too political or anything like that—I think religion is manmade, which is fine. But for me, I’m more faith. I have more faith, if that makes sense. And yeah, I have a soft spot for that. But yeah, I mean, my mom was loving, caring. She gave us what she can. We didn’t have fancy meals. I remember eating eggs and rice. But I still love eggs and rice! I’m not gonna lie to you. [laughs] I’m still obsessed! And at times, we were super poor. We had like sticky rice with salt in the middle. And I still like that. I mean, even though it’s like I guess you call it poor food, I still like it, I guess maybe because it brings comfort, and it brings home, in some sense. It’s like home comfort food, for me. But yeah, like I said, you know what? I don’t regret how my life has been. I don’t regret my past. It has made us who we are.

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Yeah, and I appreciate my mom, more than anything else, seeing the sacrifice she has been through, and knowing that all of her 14 years or whatever we were—ten years that she was in the U.S., she suffered a lot. And I’m okay that she’s not here with us, because I know she’s not suffering anymore, and I know she’s in a better place. And I’m happy for that. And I know she’s always with us. So—didn’t want to get spiritual. I know it’s kind of crazy, but it kind of went there. I’m sorry! But yeah, like I said, people always say, “Oh, if I had money,” or “Oh, if I had a connection,” or “If I had this”—“I can be better off.” That’s a lie. ‘Cause I can say the same thing. [laughs] I didn’t grow up rich. We lived in a really like ghetto apartment. Like it was falling apart, things like that. We didn’t have much. We didn’t have books, we didn’t have anything. And I feel like I’ve overcome that. And it had to have been because of my mother’s

love for us, and seeing how hard she worked. It made me realize, if she can make it at that age and all the obstacles you're throwing at her, we can do the same thing!

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And we know the language. I mean, basically I grew up here. I know the language. I know the laws. I know what I'm getting myself into. Unlike she didn't. If that makes sense. I don't mean to ramble on, but yeah, okay, go ahead. [laughs]

Evan Stern: There's an incredible story in there. There's a lot in there. You talked a little bit about some of the food that you had growing up. Was baking something that was going on for you when you were a kid?

Vatsana Souvannavong: No! We were too poor! Like we couldn't afford all that fancy stuff! We couldn't afford—to us, sweets like donuts, cookies, cakes, that was a luxury? Like we didn't have the money for that. We never ate that in my house. The only sweet we got was fruits. But again, it stemmed from our culture. It's like, after we eat a meal, we had to eat dessert, I guess, to America. But to us, it was fruits.

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So that's what we ate, every time. It was always dinner, and then fruit. That was our dessert. We couldn't afford anything else. And I still do that now! I love fruits. Like whenever I eat, I have to eat a fruit right after. Just like America have to eat dessert, right after. So it's kind of like resemblance, in some case. But yeah, like I said, too poor. We didn't know what pancakes were or anything like that. We couldn't afford it.

Evan Stern: At what point *do* you discover baking?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Literally five years ago when the company opened! [laughs] Yeah, like—you know, I’m not gonna lie to you—like, I don’t cook. I don’t bake. I mean, prior to this. I had never cooked, never baked, never even liked it. It was too much work. To me it was a chore. Because think about it—you have to go by the recipe, gotta measure it out, then you gotta make it, make sure it doesn’t burn. So, a lot of time consuming. And then you gotta clean up, which is the worst part, at least for me. I don’t know about anyone else, but I don’t like to clean my mess.

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You know what I mean? So it was just too much. So I’m like, you know what, it’s much easier to go and buy, and then throw away the packaging. Like, isn’t it? You know, easy cleanup, not much thought to it. And I know, it’s ironic, how I’m *in* the industry, and it’s a lot of work.

[laughs]

Evan Stern: Would you say it was your discovery of kolaches that pushed you to bake?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh, definitely. That was just *it*. Like, nothing else. Like, it’s crazy, because now that I look back, it’s like, even my friends and family, they get so in shock when they realize what I’ve done. Because I’m not the girl that was passionate, or like, you know. This wasn’t my *passion*. I wasn’t like, “Oh, let’s bake cupcakes” when I was two. No, I’m not that prodigy kid. That’s not me. I was lazy; I’m not gonna lie to you. I just don’t like to bake. I don’t like to get my hands dirty. I hate it when my hands are sticky. I don’t know what it is. It’s like—I don’t know, it’s just, “Uch!” But now it’s like my hand is always sticky. But even if I wash my hand like 10,000 times a day. I just don’t like that feeling.

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But, yeah. Like I said, prior, I lived in Houston for like ten years of my life before I left to California. And I still, that ten years I lived here, didn't know what a kolache was. Like I said, we couldn't afford any pastries. But when I came back home like five, six years ago, from California, that's when I discovered kolache. And the only reason why I discovered kolache is I was craving a donut, okay? For some odd reason—and I never craved donuts. So I craved a donut, and I was like, “Where can I get a donut?” So I Googled. And I was like, “Oh, okay, let me go to the closest place.” So I go in, and you know, it was like—they had an array of like donuts, and then like there was this section, that was like, I don't know—to me, it was like pigs in a blanket. And I kind of like gravitate towards that, because I'm a savory person, right? And I was like, “Hey, what is that?” And the lady was like, “Oh, it's a kolache.” I was like, “What's in a kolache?” She goes, “Just try it.” So I literally bought one of each flavor. Because I'm that girl. I'm compulsive, right? So I bought one of each flavor, and I took my first bite, and can I tell you—I fell in love.

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And *literally* as I'm sitting in that donut place, right—it's a mom and pop—I'm Googling “kolache near me.” [laughs] And I see like—I realize, every donut shop in Houston literally had kolaches. I was like, “What is this phenomenon!” So then I go to a next shop, and I'm like, “Okay, let me see if it tastes the same.” So I go, and I get another one of everything. And soon, I quickly realized it was literally the same kind of kolache. Like, sausage and cheese, and sausage only, or jalapeño. It wasn't like anything extravagant. It was just kind of like very, you know, simple. And it was the same menu. But I was hoping it to be a little different. Because the dough, in my mind I'm thinking dough; I wonder if this is better. So I taste it—“Okay. Same.” So then I

wanted to go outside of Texas. So the next day—well, that night, I Googled “kolache in and around Houston,” because I wanted to go outside of Houston, thinking, you know.

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[0:11:05]. I did not know how big a deal kolaches were in Texas. [laughs] So then I went to West Village, which is like I guess, to me, like the most authentic, after doing my research. They sell the fruit ones! And I’m like, “*Wait! These are kolache?*” And the lovely lady there was like, “This is a kolache, which is fruit filled. *This is the klobasnik.* I was like, “*What?*” I was like, “Well, what are they doing in Houston?” She was like, “They're just confused.” And we started laughing. And yeah, like that opened my mind, like, “Wow, there's sweet and savory.” Instantly I thought of croissant. So, until this day, I feel like kolache is a stepchild to a croissant. As you guys know, kolache is also like a European pastry, but it’s Eastern, and croissant is French, right? And I think that croissant took off. I mean, who doesn't like flaky, butter croissant. I love croissant, right?

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But I feel like it got like, you know, stepped down a little bit. And I thought of croissant. I’m like, “Oh my god, you could do so many things with this.” You could do what croissant does. Croissant—there’s savory, and there’s sweet croissants. That’s how my mind started playing. And I started experimenting, and here we are. [laughs]

Evan Stern: Incredible. But what were you *doing*? Like, at that time, what were you doing in your life, when you tasted that kolache for the first time, professionally? How did we get from there to here, five years later?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Well, okay. So I just got out of my last business in California. I was in search for something else. Maybe I wasn't; actually, I wasn't in search. I wanted to take a break from like being in business. I kind of wanted to enjoy life for a little bit. And, I didn't really enjoy life, because I—it literally just fell into my lap. The first week I came back, okay, this fell into my lap. Like *literally*. And like I said, I'm that type of person who's very compulsive. Like I'm [0:13:00] but I'm also extreme.

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If I like something and I see something and I see the vision and I understand it, I go head-in. And I literally just drove right in. After talking to the lady at West Village, how we—she was telling me her experience, and how long, and how it should be nationally. And I'm like, "I know! I'm from California, kind of, and it's not there!" I'm thinking, "Oh my god, people need to hear about this!" So my mission actually was to introduce kolache to the nation. That *is* my mission. Just to spread the love. It just brought me so much joy, in a time of my life where I was so confused and didn't know what I wanted to do. Because like leaving a state that you've been there also half of your life, to back home and trying to figure out what you want to do—and I wanted to take a break from the whole business aspect of things. And it just felt onto me, and I loved it. I can't explain it. It's like a love affair. A love-hate affair, I guess you can say. Yeah. It's like, why did you come in my life when I just want to take a break! And it's like but I love you so much! [laughs]

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And I do eat a kolache every day for the last five years. Matter of fact, I can eat up to five kolaches in one sitting. My staff can concur that. Yes.

Evan Stern: And yet you stay so trim. I mean, I'm jealous of this!

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh, man. Do you know what it is? It's all the heavy lifting, the fast pace. It's the endlessly—I mean, all that kind of adds into your health, your lifestyle. Like my lifestyle completely changed from what it was into what it is now. I'm doing everything I hated. I don't like waking up at 2:00 in the morning, but I'm doing it. [laughs] Like I said, I hate cleaning; I'm doing it. So everything that I did not like, I'm discovering that, it's not that bad! [laughs]

Evan Stern: Going back to that, first of all, a lot of steps go into making—

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yes.

Evan Stern: —and starting a business and everything. So how did you teach yourself how to bake after tasting that kolache?

Vatsana Souvannavong: So—Google! Google is your best friend. I literally believe that. So I Googled all types of recipe, I tried every single one of them, and it—it just wasn't my taking.

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I was like, "It's missing something." I kept playing with it, kept playing with it, and I'm like, "God!" I was always told, "Step away from something if you get so caught up." So, you know, "I'm going to go for a walk." Left the kitchen, went for a walk in the parking lot. And something clicked. I was like, "Oh my god. My friend in California has her grandma. She's Czech! What am I doing?" So I phoned my friend, I said, "Hey, friend. I need a favor." She's like, "Wassup?" I go, "I need you to call your 92-year-old grandma, and ask her for a kolache recipe." She was like, "How do you know what a kolache *is*?" I was like, "Apparently I'm the only one from

Texas who did not know until now.” And she’s like, “Oh my god, okay, cool.” So she called her grandma, and her grandma flipped out, like, “Wait, *what? Her?*” So she sent—so they emailed me the recipe. And the rest was history. It was the *perfect* recipe. But of course, it was dated 1942, so it was very authentic.

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Yeah, and it was perfect. And I go, “Oh my god, thank you so much, granny! I appreciate it!” I told her, “If I ever become a millionaire, I’m buying you a new house!” [laughs]

Evan Stern: So, but so you teach yourself how to bake kolaches.

Vatsana Souvannavong: All of it.

Evan Stern: You teach yourself all of it. From that point, how long did it take you to start this, start—?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Like, less than three weeks. Yeah. So, okay, no gonna lie to you, the first three weeks, oh my god, like I almost wanted to die. Because remember, I don’t know anything about baking. Let alone yeast baking? I mean, come on; that’s a different beast on its own. I struggled. I cried, the first three weeks. I’m like, “I’m never gonna get this. I’m never gonna get this.” Like I didn’t know what rising is. I didn’t know what proofing is. I had to learn all the little techniques to help progress the yeast, to help make it softer, and what makes a dough more fattier.

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I had to learn all of that. And it was some rough, rough nights; I’m not gonna lie to you. Yeah. But the recipe was great. I just needed to figure out the system, after the recipe. It’s like, do I

leave it out to rise it? Do I put it in the proofer to help it proof it? How do I know it's baked? It was difficult. And the other hard part was rolling it. Because I wanted to fit other fillings in. As I'm Asian, I like to incorporate other flavors in, and I was playing with my cultural food in it. And it was so hard. Because our food is very moist and very liquid. So I can't just throw a piece of, you know, chicken, basil chicken, curry chicken, in a kolache, right? Because you can't roll that. So, that was my frustration, was trying to figure out how to be one with the dough [laughs], if you know what I mean. So, yeah, but don't get me wrong, it was some painful nights. I mean, I spent all day, all night. It was painful.

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I read books, YouTube, watched videos. Google. I mean, I did all that you can think of. And I just started like—yeah, just I dived right into it. I didn't even think about like financially how I was going to do it. And mind you, I have a kid! He was like, what, seven, ten, at this time? I don't even remember how old, but he was young. But I dove right in. Like I just—you can't think. I think if you think, you second-guess yourself, if that makes sense. So yeah. But something was in me to just do it. I don't know what it was. I can't explain it!

Evan Stern: How did you choose the name Koala Kolaches?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Okay. *So*, I got very quiet. So I came back to Houston and I got very quiet, right? And my friends were like, "Hello? How are you? Where are you?" And then I text my best friend, and I was like, "Hey. I think I'm going to start a kolache shop." And your phone doesn't recognize the word kolache, so he responded back and was like, "A koala shop? You don't even care for animals!"

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And I was like—I laughed so hard. I was like, “No, no, not a koala shop, a *kolache* shop.” That’s how it came about. It’s an autocorrect iPhone—yeah. That’s what I came up with. It stuck to me. You can’t go wrong with that, you know what I mean? So yeah, until this day, we laugh about it all the time. So.

Evan Stern: That’s hysterical. Autocorrect has gotten me into so much trouble—

Vatsana Souvannavong: Trouble?

Evan Stern: —so many times.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Or hitting the send button. [laughs]

Evan Stern: Absolutely. So sorry, here. Ah, technical difficulties; I apologize here. Dang. It’s just—my phone was heating up; I was like something’s—

Vatsana Souvannavong: [laughs]

Evan Stern: —something’s wrong here. But, so, then now can you tell me about your first week of business, and everything that led up to that first week of business?

Vatsana Souvannavong: So I have very high expectations of myself, and I want things to go as smooth as possible. I think that’s one of the characteristic that I’m working on, is for it to be okay not to be like a bang [sp] out the front door, right?

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So the first week, it was kind of like, okay, you know what? I had high hopes. ‘Cause I have standards, and I know my ability. And to think what it is now, I would never imagine that. That’s for sure. Now, I knew it would be some kind of a success, around the community, but I didn’t realize it was going to be bigger than that, right? Because my goal was just to be the best baker I

can be, because that was just my goal. It was a challenge for me. Something I never did before in my life, so I felt like, if I can master *this*, I'm good! What's next? Right? So when we first opened, a few people came in. And then all of a sudden, *literally* it just buzzed. It just took off. And we got busier, and busier, after the first week, second week, third week. And we just got busier. It's insane, how busy we've gotten. And now, after all the press that we got—which, thank you guys—I wouldn't be here, because of you, that's for sure, because I wouldn't know where to start, when it came to media, reaching out to people locally—so I appreciate every single one of you that have covered Koala Kolache. I appreciate it so much.

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But yeah, it just took off. And then social media definitely helped out. Because people started like doing stories, tagging us, saying, “Oh my god, best kolache.” It just became I guess like a social media trend at some point, and we got very popular. And now we are a staple to those who do visit Texas or Houston, because everyone knows, “Oh, we've got to try kolache when we go to Houston or Texas,” and we became that staple place for people to try their first kolache. Yeah. We were actually on *Business Insider* a few years back when we first started. Because of *Business Insider*, we met so many international people. This guy came—well, he didn't come all the way here to visit us, but he flew in from China for work, to Houston, and his first stop from the airport was *us*.

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I was *floored*. I mean, I'm like this little girl with this big dream. And like I said, I had never cooked before. And for people to love our goodies, and compliment it, and say how good it is,

it's just—it just fills me with warmth, you know? I'm like a big girl in a candy store, if that makes sense.

Evan Stern: I think I read somewhere though that you had some permitting issues, your first week. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh, yes! [laughs] So, you know how the city is, right? They want to get you for everything possible! So, we were scheduled to open a week prior, but we couldn't, because the fire marshal didn't come out to do their last inspection. So instead of opening—and we have already put it all out there to the public that we're going to open this week—we baked for the whole week for free and gave out free food. Because if we can't sell, might as well just give it out! And that's what we did. So then that following Friday, he came in, gave us a permit, and then we opened the next week.

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But yeah. So, free food for everyone, yay! [laughs]

Evan Stern: Can you now just take me through a typical day on the job? What happens? What is your full day?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Okay, so I wake up at like 2:30 in the morning. I live about 30 minutes from here. I try to be here by 3:30 at the latest. Because if I'm here later than that, then I know my day is just off. So I'll get here about 3:30. I turn the light on. Sometimes I turn on some music, sometimes I don't, depending on my mood, right? But I love rain noise. I don't know what it is. It soothes me, I guess. So I will turn on some rain noise, and start baking. I will make the dough. Once the dough is done, I'll let it rise. I'll make the filling. Once the filling is done,

I'll cut the dough. Then I'll scoop it. And then I will leave it out to rise. Turn on the proofer, to let it rise to temperature.

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Then I throw the kolaches in the proofer, let that rise, and then I bake it! Then by like 6:00, 6:30, we open the door. And [0:24:10] front. We service the people with a smile, you know? You have to be a morning person to be in this business. If you're not, stay home. Don't try to tempt it. Because it *is* a morning kind of job. And also, I think it's so important that when you do get in this industry, that you love the morning. Because a lot of these people come here—you're the first person they see. You can literally break or make their day. And I tell my staff that all the time. If you're not a morning person, don't volunteer to open. I only want those who are a morning person. Because you don't understand; your energy and who you are that person can impact somebody. And that's not our goal, you know? Our goal is to serve them, with joy, *give* them our joy, and have them walk out of here with joy, if that makes sense.

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That's one thing my mom told me—"Never let anyone leave your presence happier." And that stuck by me. So that's one thing I tell the staff all the time. Like, "Make sure—no matter where you are, don't let anyone that comes interacting with you or come near you, leave here happier." And I stuck by that. And that's my big motto for the morning, you know? Like I said, we can make or break someone's [0:25:23] how important our job is, because we are morning—and like I said, we are the first thing they see. And we don't know what they go through the night before. But if you bring that little joy into them, why not? And hopefully our kolaches bring joy. [laughs] But yeah.

Evan Stern: Speaking of your kolaches, what can you tell me about your flavors? What goes into making these flavors, and how you choose them?

Vatsana Souvannavong: So as of lately, I've been so creative, because we have gotten into wholesale, and we're actually selling like the top five flavors, so I've had time to create. But before that, whenever me and my son go out to eat, which is often—again, I *still* don't cook, at home. [laughs]

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Or bake. [laughs] So we go out to eat often, right? I get inspiration going to dinners with my kid. Or him talking to me—“Oh mom, you should put this in a kolache.” Even my kid now is involved in making the menu, because he's—I'm always thinking of different flavors for kolache; his mind goes there as well. It's crazy, yeah. So, we'll laugh about it. I'm like, “Oh my god, this is crazy. Look at you; you're turning into me.” And we'll just giggle about it. But yeah, most of the times, flavors come into like inspiration, as far as like when we go out to eat for dinner. Or my kid will be like, “Hey, try this.” Like, we do cinnamon rolls. The cereal cinnamon rolls, which is Fruity Pebbles, was an inspiration of my kid, because my kid loves cereal and milk. Yes. That's all he eats in the morning is cereal and milk. It's crazy. And that's how the idea of the cinnamon roll came about, when it came to the Fruity Pebbles. And as far as the Asian flavors—I'm Asian.

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I *love* Asian food, whether it's Vietnamese food, Filipino, Hawaiian, you name it. And so, that also comes into play. But American food is something that I didn't grow up on, right? So I did some research, like the top ten American food in the U.S. Pizza is number one, of course. So I

had to make a pizza kolache! And that's what we did. So but I try to put my own twist on it, and I try to use like very high ingredients. Like I don't want to use like a lot of processed stuff. So like the cheese, we try not to use so many processed. But sometimes you can't help it; it's only what's in the market, right? So it kind of becomes what it is. And then the sweet ones, *that* took me a few challenge, because I wanted to go more beyond than just fruit, right? So I started trying like other fruit, like pineapple, guava, like Asian—passionfruit. It was a hit and miss. To me, some things are hit and miss depending on your taste palate, or depending on what also your culture, what your accustomed to, and what you've been introduced.

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Like the prunes—which, everyone know what prunes are—believe it or not, that's my favorite kolache. But it did not take off, because people had the notation, “Ew, prunes.” And I'm thinking, you realize Dr. Pepper was because of prunes, right? It's like, how many of you drink Dr. Pepper in Texas? It's the same concept. But it would never take off! I was so disappointed! So I had to stop and slash that. But that is *my* favorite kolache, is the prune, believe it or not. Yeah.

Evan Stern: And prune is probably one of *the* most traditional—

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yes!

Evan Stern: —kolache flavors out there.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Exactly! But it's so good. I wish people would give it a chance, instead of judging it because of the industry of, like, oh prunes, you only eat prunes because of this. But prunes has a *lot* of nutrition benefits to your body. And it tastes *so* good in a kolache! I

don't know, maybe I'll just bring it back, just like for giggles, and see what happens. But *that's* my favorite, and it's not even on the menu. Isn't that crazy?

0:29:02

Evan Stern: Can you just take me through some of the—just some of the flavors that—you talked about the Asian flavors. What are some of the Asian flavors you've come up with?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh, so bulgogi and kimchi. I love Korean barbecue. Well, of course; California, it's everywhere, right? That was one of my first few that I made was bulgogi and kimchi, and I *love* bulgogi and kimchi. I also made Thai chicken basil, because again, Laos and Thai is very similar, and I love basil, so I made some of that. Also made tikka masala, which I love Indian food. See, the things that I—I've come up with things that I love. You know what I mean? I've also made Pad Kra Pao. Do you know what that is? It's like a Thai dish. It's just either ground beef or ground turkey, with basil. So good. Yeah, I mean there's so many Thai dish. My other favorite is oxtail. I made that like one time. It was too expensive. But oh my god, *phenomenal*. I wish I could do it again, but no one is going to buy a \$10 kolache. [laughs]

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I mean, as much as I love creating, it has to make a little sense, you know what I mean. But maybe I would do it again; we'll see. But that was also again one of the favorite kolache. Then of course Texas, they're big on barbecue. So we had to—had to do Texas brisket barbecue. And believe it or not, surprise—not really—it's our number one seller. [laughs]

Evan Stern: What are your top five? You said that you have a top five. What are your top five?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Brisket is one. Sausage and gravy. So let me tell you how sausage and gravy came about, okay? I loved Chick-fil-A before Chick-fil-A became very big, right? Which, I still do. The one thing I ate at Chick-fil-A every morning was their biscuit and gravy. That's where the sausage and gravy came from, the inspiration, was that biscuit and gravy from Chick-fil-A. I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to make my own version of it." So that's top two. And then of course the classic sausage and cheese. And then the spicy sausage and cheese.

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And then, the cinnamon rolls, believe it or not. And yes, our cinnamon rolls, it's made from the same dough as our kolache dough. There's no difference to it. People think it's different. No, it's not. It's the same dough. The only difference is I put cinnamon sugar and frosting. That's it!

Evan Stern: It's interesting, because you have a heavy emphasis on the savory kolaches. I know there are a lot of people out there that say that they shouldn't—if it's savory it shouldn't be called a kolache at all. Do you have any feelings about that, or thoughts on that whole debate?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yeah. So, when we got I guess a little bit known, outside of like Cypress, we got a *lot* of like I guess DMs, emails, and saying, "You should not be calling it a kolache! It's not a kolache!" And I'm like, "I *know*. It's a klobasnik." But I mean, let's be honest, it's Texas. It's like Tex-Mex. So I consider it as a Tex-Czech, if that makes sense, right? And I get it. I want to honor the tradition. I want to.

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That's why I have a kolache which is sweet kolache, and then we have savory. But as much as I want to add more flavors to the sweet, which we do—we have all kind of fruits you can think of. We've got strawberry, cherry, blackberry, blueberry, cream cheese. I mean, we have all tons of

flavor and fruits. I want to expand that. Like I said, I did mango. That didn't do well. [laughs] I know. I did taro. I did passionfruit. What I *really* want to do, just for fun, is durian. [laughs] But I think my staff will kill me. You know what durian is, right? The stinky fruit? Yeah. That's one thing I really want to do, just for fun. But that might not turn well, for people. But yeah, like I said, for me, either/or, how people call it kolache or klobasnik, I know the difference, and I'm pretty sure a *lot* of people know the difference now. But I don't know, kolach just sounds more—it's smoother on the tongue. It comes out easier, versus klobasnik. And I hope we are not offending anyone, in any means; I just feel like saying kolache is more easier and smoother, than a klobasnik.

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It's already hard enough as is, trying to promote kolache on its own. Trying to promote kolache *and* klobasnik? Oh my god. It's going to be so much more a battle. Like I said, it's hard for me right now to educate people what a kolache is. Imagine like I call myself—or I call—our kolaches—“This isn't kolache; it's klobasnik.” It's going to be more confusing. I just feel like it's easier just to stick with the one—that's why I call it sweet kolache and savory kolache, to make it easier.

Evan Stern: I know kolaches are very much kind of a symbol of Texas Czech pride.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Exactly.

Evan Stern: In doing this, have you gotten to interact at all with the Texas Czech community? I know that you said you called your friend in California whose mother was Czech, but beyond that, going on this journey, have you gotten to interact a bit more with the Texas Czech community, and can you maybe talk about that?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Yes, so believe it or—like, I don't go out much. As you see, I live at the shop. I work seven days a week, 2:30 or 3:30 until sometimes 9:00 at night, depending on what we have going on.

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So I don't really have much luxury time. But there's a lot of festivals that I want to make this year. I know they have like an October Festival with the Czech. I want to go and support that. I want to be a part of that. That's my goal this year. At least it's a stepping stone. But other than that, for me, what I find so much pleasure—and I'm not saying that other people don't count—but like, people who are Czech that come to us, and they tell us, "Wow, this is a true kolache." And like I said, I want to try to remain tradition and honor that, right? And when I hear that, it just makes me so happy. Like it brings joy to me. I don't know why. It's like a type of tingling feeling that I get when a Czech person tells me, "Finally, a kolache." And I don't know, it's such a simple couple words, but it means so much.

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It just hits in the right spot. And it makes it all worth waking up at 2:30 in the morning, if that makes sense. Because like I said, we've gotten bashed from other—from some of the Czech community because they're like, "It's not a kolache! It's a klobasnik! This is a kolache!" Or, "They don't have a kolache." And I'm like, "No, we do, we do. Just come on, give us a chance." And those who does give us a chance from the Czech community, we appreciate that so much. And I don't think they realize how much it means to us, when they tell us, "Wow, you did it right." 'Cause we know a lot of people don't have the sweet, and they don't have the true tradition recipe, either. It's either a donut dough recipe, or like another kolache recipe that they

got, and that's not a true—and again, I don't know if it is or isn't; I'm just saying, right? But doesn't taste like mine, so—[laughs]—and I know mine's true! [laughs] But yeah.

Evan Stern: Kind of in that same vein, what is the most meaningful batch of kolaches you've ever prepared?

0:36:02

Vatsana Souvannavong: The very first one. Because that was by hand, 100%. Now that we've grown, I have a dough cutter. Before, I used to cut by hand. And before, I had to boil water to get that filter water. Now I have a filtration. I mean, you can't compare from the very first time you did something until now, because now, it's more I guess commercialized. Because you've learned more, you know how to shortcut things. But that very first batch, I will never forget, how much love—how much labor of love it was. I don't think people know how hard it is to cut dough by hand. You know what I mean? It takes some time, yeah. But now, it's like, we have a proofer that helps it rise. Before, I didn't have a proofer to help me rise. Had to wait two hours for it to rise! [laughs] Do something else in between, you know what I mean? Yeah, now it's like, it speeds up the process. Now we have a rotating oven, right?

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Before, I had two double decker—like two little shelving oven thing, right? It just speeds the process. And I'd just have to sit there and rotate. That's the one thing I hated, was to rotate them, *every* five minutes, so they won't burn on the edges. Oh my god! So now, from then and now, you can compare the two. But to say that it's easier now is not true, because we've expanded so much more. Our volume is so much more. It's more business, more work, more masses, more

quantity of everything. It's its own little challenge, if that makes sense. So from the beginning to now, there's always challenges, and the challenge is still—same pain, just different challenges.

Evan Stern: What would you say is your volume?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Now, we do at least a thousand a day. At least. Yeah. And we want to do *two* thousand a day. We can. Yeah. It's just—time. And I want to grow organically. People are always like, “Oh, you ought to franchise.” And franchise is not my thing.

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I want to—I'm not a control freak, but I do want control of the quality, if that makes sense. And yeah, we're in business for profit, not gonna lie, but at the same time, we also want to remain true to quality, too. I eat this thing! [laughs] If you ask my staff how picky I am, I'm *so* picky, with my food! So, yes, I'm going to be picky about this!

Evan Stern: Are there any particularly meaningful specific interactions you can remember having with customers?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh, I have *tons*! I remember a lot. Okay, there's one that really touched my heart. There's this guy, older guy, and he would come every morning, on Friday, and would get a sausage and cheese kolache. Just only one. I don't care who you are, I don't care you get one or ten; I would treat you the same way. He would come literally three months straight.

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One day, his daughter came in. And I didn't know it was his daughter. I'm sorry. And she goes to my line, and she goes, “I just want to tell you thank you.” I was like, “What'd I do?” And she goes, “My dad passed from cancer, and the only thing he could eat was your sausage and cheese

kolache.” I did not know that. I just cried. Because, like I said, you don’t know what people are going through, you know? You don’t judge people. So when she told me that, I didn’t know what to do but just cry. Because I’ve seen him every—seen him for the last three months, and I won’t see him anymore. I get attached to my kolach like I do to my customer. They go hand in hand. So yeah, that was like probably the one thing that I’ll never forget. But yeah, god bless him, he was so sweet. [laughs]

Evan Stern: What you've described here, there’s so much work. Getting up at 2:00 a.m., all of this, in addition to which—you have a son to raise and shape.

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I’m exhausted hearing everything that you're telling me about. But what is it about this that fuels you, and gives you this energy?

Vatsana Souvannavong: To be honest, it’s the people that I’ve connected. To me, it’s more relationship. There’s days when I don’t want to get up, trust me. I’ve been sick. I’ve never missed a beat before. Not saying I’m perfect or I’m great; it’s just I know I have an obligation *to* my customers. And even now that I’m not in the front as often as I would like, that I was in the beginning, I know they ask for me. I’m like, “Hey, come in the kitchen!” Literally, this little shop is my kitchen, and everyone is welcome to walk into the kitchen, at any time. And ask the customers—they do. I’m like, “Hey, come in!” I want that home feel. Because it is—it belongs to you and I. We create this kitchen. We create this community.

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I’m just so blessed to create around kolache. And for me, kolache, yes, it’s great, I love it, right? But it’s just that I feel like food is the universal language of love, and I feel like kolache for me is

that way with my customers, if that makes sense. So, yeah, I don't know, it's just—it's just there for me. Don't get me wrong; there's some days I don't want to be here, because I'm here like 24/7 and I get frustrated. You'll see me run up and down the driveway sometimes because I'm so frustrated. But other than that, I try to find joy in what I'm doing. And even if I'm heated at the moment, I try to find joy and meaning as to why I'm doing what I'm doing, if that makes sense. And truthfully, it's my relationship with the people, is what gets me going, because trust me [laughs], I'm tired. [laughs]

Evan Stern: I know the shop itself is only open right now Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Why is that?

Vatsana Souvannavong: It wasn't always like that. It just so happened that way.

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The first two years, oh my god, we were so busy, and I was very understaffed. It was literally me. Like I would leave home at like—well, leave the shop at like 9:00, 10:00 at night. I would come back at like 1:00 to 2:00 in the morning. Because remember, I'm still learning the trades of things, okay? And I don't have like a PR company, or marketing, or anyone. I'm just like a solo—and I'm still kind of solo. I do have mentors now, that I am blessed to have. But before, I just dove right in, and I didn't really have anyone to rely on. So there's a lot of things that I needed to do, like accounting, and marketing, and the branding. My mind's always thinking about everything, right? And then flavor, and then how to make this go by faster, finding a system. All this stuff. And yeah, I needed to figure out how to delegate myself. I needed to figure out okay, what's important? And even now I feel like I'm—I'm lost. [laughs]. If that makes sense.

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Yeah, even now, where I feel like, “Okay, I have it together,” I feel like, “Okay, yeah, I’m not. I’m still lost.” So, yeah.

Evan Stern: So what is going on Monday through Thursday?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Right, I’m sorry.

Evan Stern: That’s quite all right.

Vatsana Souvannavong: My mind just spaced out a little bit.

Evan Stern: That’s okay; you’ve got a lot going on!

Vatsana Souvannavong: [laughs] Yeah. So, Monday through Thursday, like I say, we do wholesaling now. So our days, Monday through Thursday, we provide for wholesaling, and that’s what we do. Day in and day out, we make kolaches. We package them. We make—I mean, full process. We make the dough, filling, roll it, we proof it, we bake it, we *package* it, then we freeze it, then we ship it.

Evan Stern: And where does it go?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Go to other places, like hospitals, and colleges, and, yeah. We’re getting into other places—coffee shops, and things like that.

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We’re still in the beginning process of it, and I’m learning a lot of things as I go. Because we are a small kitchen. To do what we do is very impressive. I hear that a lot. [laughs] Yeah, so we’re still learning. But right now, we are in different hospitals, so that has been keeping us really

busy. And we haven't been able to catch our breath. Then there's coffee places that want us to provide us, and there's colleges. There's a list of things that people want us to be, and I would love to be there. I would love to bring a little joy into their life, and then I guess that sense of home, to them as well. But yeah, like I said, I'm one person [laughs], trying to do this all, and trying to figure out how I'm going to navigate, how I want to turn this into an actual real business. Because like I said, it started off as a hobby. Now it has turned into something bigger than my pay grade. [laughs] You know what I mean?

Evan Stern: Where would you like to be, five years from now?

Vatsana Souvannavong: I want to be nationally. I do. Rather it's wholesale, or rather me opening up stores myself, I want to be nationally known. I want to be a household name. Yeah.

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Like I said, I just want to bring joy to everybody, through pastry, through kolache, that brought me so much joy. And then hopefully the community agrees with me, to that brings them joy as well.

Evan Stern: Thinking in terms of the future, let's say decades in the future, after you have left this Earth, say someone wants to commune with your spirit, get to know a little bit about you. Where should they go? Where should they go?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Koala Kolache. [laughs] Yes. So hopefully, this will—it will be like the next Dunkin' Donut for kolaches. [laughs]

Evan Stern: Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share with us?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Go get a kolache, wherever you're at! I don't know where you're at, but just go find one! And we will soon be shipping, so look out for that. [laughs]

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Evan Stern: Excellent, wonderful. I'm just going to look through my notes, just to make certain—

Vatsana Souvannavong: No, of course, no worries!

Evan Stern: —there isn't anything that I have forgotten to ask here. I know that you were in California, you came back here to Texas. I know you say like "Texas," "Houston," to people who aren't from here; they have a lot of ideas. But how would you describe Houston to someone who has never been here before?

Vatsana Souvannavong: One thing about Houston that I—two things that I love—one, diversity. Believe it or not, Houston is the most diversity city in the U.S. And two, the community. We might hate each other, we might yell, we might fight, honk, road rage. But at the end of the day, when we need one another—like Harvey has proven that, the Freeze has proven that—we will always have our neighbor's back. That is a fact. Like I said, you might hear things on the news, might see things, but at the end of the day, when it comes down to it, when it comes to coming together and being loved, as a community, that's it. Houston has that, hands down. Yeah.

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In L.A. or in California, they're nice people, laid back, but they're just nice and kind, if you know what I mean. They're not going to be like, "Oh, okay." They don't go out of their way, if that

makes sense. I'm not saying everyone's like that, but yeah. Like you have a flat tire in Houston? They'll pull over, help you. In L.A., "Oh my god! Are you okay? Do you need anything? Okay! Thank you! Have a good day!" That was it. They won't—their attempt [sp], I guess you can say. That's the only thing I can describe, like, the two analogy. I hope I don't get backlash. I love you, California! [laughs] I'm just speaking the truth. They're kind. Don't get me wrong; they're kind. But it's a different kind of kindness. Yeah.

Evan Stern: Actually, I will just ask too, if you have any advice for anyone who wants to make kolaches that maybe goes beyond just a simple recipe, what would you tell them?

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Vatsana Souvannavong: Go to the source. Grandparents, great great grandparents, are the best. Because remember, back in the days, they had no choice but to cook, and baking was a big deal. So I always say, go to the source. *That's* what I learned, quickly.

Evan Stern: Just going to skim here. I think that we—I'm pretty confident that we covered everything. I just want to make certain because, you know. [pause] Okay, all right. [pause] Oh, yes, this is important—this. A few years ago, you spearheaded an effort to get March 1st proclaimed National Kolache Day.

Vatsana Souvannavong: [laughs]

Evan Stern: Why was that important to you, and what can you tell us about that experience?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Okay.

0:49:00

Well, I mean, there's national holidays for *everything*. I couldn't believe there wasn't one for kolache. Especially it's such a big deal in Texas. That was mind-boggling to me. I mean, come on, there's National Underwear Day, right? Why isn't there a kolache one? So I made it a mission and a goal that I had to do it. And, I did. [laughs]

Evan Stern: What can you tell me about that? What happened?

Vatsana Souvannavong: Okay, so the process was kind of like—it took a while. And we didn't want to say anything, because you know, there's other kolache places, that are also competitive, right? I mean, I'm an A type, don't get me wrong. I'm competitive, as you can tell. So we kind of kept it hush-hush. We just couldn't believe the whole time that no one tried to proclaim the holiday. People always ask me, “Why March 1st?” When I first started—I'm known in the community as the crazy kolache lady. So I Googled it. Again, business-minded; I wanted to trademark that.

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And I saw there was a lady, already they called her the crazy kolache lady. She was like from south of Texas. And I saw her story on YouTube, and I just found out, at that time I was doing the research, that she passed away on March 1st. So, I thought, what a better way of honoring someone? We had a common name [laughs]. She's first. She opened first. She is older than me. I said, “You know what? Why would I not just make it March 1st in honor of her?” And then the first year, when we did do it, we actually donated half our proceeds to MD Anderson, for cancer, because she died from cancer. Her daughter did had a kolache shop in Dallas, and we did reach out to her. We had a communication. I don't think she's open still yet. But I wish she would have

came to me when she was—again, I don’t know why she closed down, but if it was financially, I wish she would have come to me.

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I would love to collaborate with her and figure out how to make her—because I know her mom was probably proud of her. If I could help some kind of way to get her going, or still standing today, I probably would have. But yeah.

Evan Stern: Was there a ceremony with Mayor Turner? Did I hear something like that happened, or—?

Vatsana Souvannavong: No, that didn’t happen. We reached out to his secretary. They were trying really hard to schedule us in, but he was already booked for the whole week. Because you know how busy he was. But he did say, “Congrats, this is your plaque.” And, you know, good guy. I mean, yeah.

Evan Stern: I thank you again so much for finding the time to speak with us. It has been a great honor, and it has been great fun.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Oh my god, are you kidding me? I’m so honored to be here. I’m so honored like you picked us out of all the thousands and millions of kolache places. You don’t know how much that means to us, you know what I mean? I appreciate that. And I’m sorry, guys, if you didn’t understand me; English is my second language.

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I am trying. Sometimes I talk too fast. I’m sorry. I do everything fast. [laughs] So I apologize in advance.

Evan Stern: You do everything beautifully, too, because the kolaches were absolutely delicious, I have to say.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Aww.

Evan Stern: So thank you so much.

Vatsana Souvannavong: Thank you!

[End]