



Amelis Paz-Kerlin

Kerlaches

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Evan Stern: Just to test my levels right now, could you tell me your name and what you had for breakfast?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Amelis Paz-Kerlin, and I haven't have anything for breakfast yet! [laughs]
A glass of water.

Evan Stern: That is the most common answer. Most people nowadays don't have breakfast.

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: No.

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

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yes, you do.

Evan Stern: Thank you so much. This is Evan Stern. I'm speaking today with Amelis Paz-Kerlin in Austin, Texas. For the record, Amelis, can you state your name and occupation?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: My name is Amelis Paz-Kerlin, and I am a baker, self-employed, and—

Evan Stern: To begin, could you describe for us your childhood home and tell us about where you grew up?

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Amelis Paz-Kerlin: I am from Venezuela. My childhood was very traditional for like South American. I have a lot of family. So, it was really always so busy with my mom and my brother, so it was really nice how—always around a family. Very nice.

Evan Stern: Where in Venezuela are you from?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: I am from Barquisimeto. I know it's a little bit like—long and hard. But it's a really great place. It's south from Caracas, from the main capital.

Evan Stern: I know most American kids today kind of are raised on macaroni and cheese and hot dogs. What kind of food did you grow up eating in Venezuela?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: I grew up eating arepas. It's like a cake made with like cornmeal, like a masa, and then you bake it or you can fry it. That would be mostly for breakfast. And typical for lunch, like rice and beans, and any other protein.

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And then, a lot of bread. That's the cachito. We will talk about that later.

Evan Stern: Who taught you how to cook?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: You know, it was almost like self, in the beginning, because like my mom was so busy, so I always would have to cook for my brothers. Then, I moved with my grandma, and that was like, really nice, because she will have the—her job was like cook, for the whole family. So I will help her, all the time. So I think like my grandma have like a [0:02:34] influence on my cooking, that I learned, over there.

Evan Stern: What was the favorite foods that your grandmother would make?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: We will make a lot of stew, and we will go, you know, to the market, and get the stuff. And of course arepa is like, you know, bread for Italy, I will say, or pizza for Italy. It's like all the time arepas. And a lot of stew, rice. And beans. Yeah.

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And that's a lot of—it was really basic. But the way she will make it was so much flavor. Even to put in not much ingredient, but it was just like, you know. But the main food in Venezuela will be like—like for lunch, I will say, it's like rice, beans, a protein, plantain, and some kind of like cheese. Yeah.

Evan Stern: How wonderful. I have to set up—just give me a second here—I have to set up an alternate backup in case—absolutely. And are there any favorite memories you can share of your grandmother in the kitchen?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh my god, yes. She taught me to not waste anything. And I remember that's—and I tell to my [0:03:48] right now—peeling potato. That was a crazy—you know, because I will peel the potato, and then I will take too much, and she will always say, “No! Not like this! You have to peel really fine. Do not waste anything!” And I'm like, “Oh my goodness.”

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So every time I will have to cut potato, or peel potato, I will be like so nervous. Like she's watching, you know? And like also like cleaning beans. Because the beans sometimes have like rocks, you know. So that was like—and she will be like watching me, and I'm like, “Oh my goodness.” Or, yeah, like—it was just like a lot of time with my grandma cooking. And I learned so much. Using these ingredients. For example, something simple to make black beans; the way you make sofrito. Like you have to cook—in her—you know, you will have to cook the garlic first, then the onions, and then the peppers. So if I will cook the peppers, she's like, “No, not like that. Do it again.” And I'm like, “Okay.” And I'm like, “I don't understand.” She's like, “Well, this is stronger than this, and you have to cook the garlic first because it's stronger, and then the pepper doesn't have too much.” You know, it's like—little stuff. And I'm like, “Okay!”

Evan Stern: So would you say the most important lesson she taught you in the kitchen was just not to waste anything?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yes. Big time.

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For me, that was the priority, like not to waste anything. Especially like back—in the South American countries, you know, you are like not really rich. So you don't want to waste anything. Also, like we make a lot of—they call it here *agua fresca*, but we make a lot of juice; like that was our lunch. We didn't drink too much soda, like kids do right now. So for lunch, we will have to make fresh—whatever will be fresh in the market. Like cantaloupe, pineapple, or like lemons. So for the pineapple, we didn't waste *that*. We will cut the pineapple, and the skin, we will soak it in water, and leave it like fermenting, and for the next day we will make like juice, like tea. You know, will be like a—they call it, yes, like *jugo de piña*. Like the skin, it have like a different flavor, so we will—one day we have like blended the fresh pineapple, and the next day we will drink the water from the skin. And it's like so much—I guess that's why like—I don't know, back in the day [0:06:01] were so like healthy, you know, a lot of nutrients, not so fat.

[laughs]

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Not like—because whatever we were using over there, it was like really good. And yeah, my lesson of the whole—with my grandma, it was like, “Do not waste anything. Use whatever you have. Make the best of out.” Yeah. So good.

Evan Stern: That sounds absolutely delicious. But can you tell us now about what brought you to the U.S. and where you first ended up here?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Well, it's a long story, and I want to make it short. I came because I was dating this guy back in the day, and he told me, "I'm going to the U.S. for a month." And he took three month and he still was here. And I'm like, "Wait a minute." So I got my passport, and I got my visa, and I surprised him for his birthday. He didn't expect it. So, I went to Miami, and we stayed for like a little bit. And to make the story short, he moved back to Venezuela—obviously we broke up—but I like it here. I like the culture.

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We actually moved to New York. From Miami, we were like maybe two month, and then I was like, "I want to learn English. I want to explore more." Miami was a little bit like a high-end South American place, it felt for me, you know. And I was like, "I want to explore more." So we moved to New York. It was really rough, because—I was like maybe 28 years—and I didn't speak any English. And New York—not like now; now a lot of people speak Spanish, so it was really hard, for me to be in New York, with him. So he will work; I will stay in the apartment. And I was like, "I want to get out. I want to"—you know, I always like to explore. So it was really rough. But it was a good lesson for me to risk it and be in New York. We got like a crazy winter, when I moved. Like it snowed to my knee. I'm like, "Wait a minute. We don't have this in Venezuela." I was like freezing. New York was rough, in that time.

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Then we moved to Philadelphia. Somebody that he knew, he's like, "Oh, you can move to Philadelphia." We have some friends in here. I thought Philadelphia was in L.A. I was like, "Wait a minute. To Philadelphia? How much it's going to cost? We don't have any money." He's like, "Oh, I don't know." Then it's like, no, it's only like two hours from New York.

[laughs] We were like, “Okay!” So, in that time, we moved there, and Philadelphia was a little bit better. I actually—when that happened, he got tired of working so hard, he moved back, and I stayed, in Philly. I like it. So. And then, in Philly, I met Bill. Yeah. Like that was later on, I started like working really hard in restaurants, and we met in an Italian restaurant. Yeah. It was really nice. But we were just friends, in that time.

Evan Stern: What can you tell us about Bill?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Bill, oh my god. He’s my, you know, lobster, my—my everything. Like I said, we met working like 17 years ago.

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He had a girlfriend in that time, but for some reason I moved to Miami again, with this boyfriend that I met. Crazy. And he moved to Arizona. So we lost contact. Then in one time I ended up in Philly visiting friends, and he was in Philly visiting his mom. So we got—like, “Oh my god, look at you! How are you doing? How is life?” And he’s like—he thought I was married, I thought he was married, but we were not. And somehow, I’m like—I don’t know, I always respect him as a friend. He’s an amazing person. He’s a really good listener. And he’s very patient. So, that was like—we met; I’m like, “Oh, that was nice.” And he’s like, “What are you doing in Philadelphia?” I’m like, “Oh, you know, I just moved back. I want to start over. And Philly have really good people in here.” And I’m like, “What do you do in Arizona?” He said he was there for work. And I’m like, “Oh, nice.” I’m like a little bird. I like to fly—I like to go everywhere.

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And I was like, “Oh, I can move to Arizona!” But I’m like joking. I’m like—and he’s like, “Really? There’s not really much to do there.” But he had a really good job, so he couldn't move.

But he told me, like, “I’m thinking to move back to Philly, because I’m like alone in Arizona, it’s no fun.” And I’m like, “I’ll move. And I’ll make it fun.” But I was just joking. We were friends. So I moved to Arizona. [laughs] I moved to Arizona, and everybody’s like, “You’re moving to Arizona with your friend Bill, renting a one-bedroom apartment?” I’m like, “Yeah.”

Evan Stern: [laughs]

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: So, you know. And that story—it’s really cute, because like it was everything so fast, but at the same time, we knew each other for so long, working together. I moved with him to Arizona like in October, and we got married like next year in August. It was kind of fast. But you know, when it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be. So—and he is like—he love cooking, and I love eating, so I think how he got me, you know? Like, “Fish?” “Okay. Yeah. Have food.”

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And that’s how like the barbecue thing started. We were living in Arizona. And he likes to always like create different stuff. And I don’t know where he got it from. He’s like, “I want a”—he got like a smoker, and he’s like, “I want to start smoking, just for friends.” The first thing he made was like a pork shoulder. And it was *so good*. I was like, “I never tried something like this. We don’t have this stuff.” So it was really nice. That was like our first thing, like he was making like barbecue related to, talking—a little bit out of everything. But yes, my journey with Bill has been like amazing. We actually—this year we’re going to celebrate our 15 years married, so I’m very happy. Yeah, but he’s a really great person. And I asked him, like, “You want to be [0:11:50]?” He’s like, “No, it’s your business now.” So I’m like, “Yeah. It is my business.”

[laughs]

Evan Stern: That’s wonderful. So it was through Bill that you had your first experience with American barbecue? Is that correct?

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Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Well, yeah, in the way that it was the first time that I tried like the pork shoulder that he made. And then, then we started reading about like barbecue different things. And one time—I always like to fly for birthday. Obviously I like to go everywhere. So I bought a ticket for Austin. Because, you know, it was like, “Oh, let’s”—we were planning like to kind of move from Arizona. “Let’s explore.” So we came here, just for visiting, for his birthday. Then he was like, “Oh, yeah, they have really good barbecue places over there.” I’m like, “Okay, let’s go.” But in that time, barbecue wasn’t not as it has got now, you know? It was just like, I don’t know, going to someplace to, I don’t know—like going to eat a little bit pizza. It was not like *blowing*, like it was in the past year. So our first experience was, we went to Salt Lick. And it was so much fun.

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Obviously we were on vacation, so everything is fun. And we actually have to wait a little bit for the table, and they were playing like music. And it was so wonderful. And for him, he grew up in the country so he felt like, you know, out there, eating good barbecue. It was just like live music. He’s like, “This place is *nice*.” So we’re like, “Okay!” And we talked to somebody—“Oh, this place is nice, but it’s another place that is really good, that is kind of new.” And I’m like, “Oh, really? Okay. We’ll explore.” We went back to the hotel, and we asked the concierge. I’m like, “What is the good places to eat barbecue?” Because, you know. And they recommend Franklin. And Bill hates—hates waiting line. He’s like—he won’t wait in line for *nothing*. Not even for

free—nothing. So I'm like, "Come on! It's fun! We're on vacation! Let's do it!" So we went there, and we actually wait maybe like an hour, I want to say? So that was our second barbecue experience in here. And I think like for him, too, because like it was our first time in Texas.

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Evan Stern: So what was it that inspired you to move here?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: You know, it was not really the barbecue. It was because we were planning to move out of Arizona. So we were like traveling a lot. We almost moved to Portland, but Portland was too far for me to go to Venezuela. It's all the way up there. So I'm like, "No, that's too far. If I have an emergency." And he's like, "Okay, let's just—" We quit our job, in Arizona, and we're like, "Let's pack our things, and let's drive to see where we want to move." And I'm like, "Okay!" I mean, we saved some money, and we didn't have much debts, like you know, basic—like cell phone, this and that. So we pack our stuff, and we were driving from Arizona towards this—east, I will say, because we wanted to visit his mom that live in Pennsylvania, so that was the road. I told him, "You know, we can"—we had a U-Haul truck, and I'm like, "We can leave the stuff in Austin. That's like in the middle." Because we like it.

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So that's what we did. We started driving our road trip, left all the stuff in Austin, kept driving. And it was fun, because I don't know, we went to like Tennessee, Kansas, and we were eating barbecue through the whole trip. So that was like, "Wait a minute. Even in some little place in Alabama"—I'm like, "Oh, look, they have the pork that you make!" And then they put all this mustard—I'm like, "No!" It's like—there were different barbecues that we were trying. And Tennessee was delicious, but I don't know, we kind of keep talking about the Texas one, you

know? It was like really—it make it very memorable. So after that road trip, we were still like, okay. We saw his mom. We don't know what—"Let's go for a month to Dominican Republic." We were like *exploring*. We almost thought about moving to Costa Rica. Like, we just wanted to do something different. But at the end, I'm like, "Okay, well, we have to go back to the U.S." We were in Dominican for a month.

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We came back, and [0:16:03] to Austin, because we have the stuff in the storage. And we have like some money saved, but we actually put it on hold, on purpose, and it was not going to release for like a few month, so we were broke. We came back [laughs] from that road trip broke. We had like a little small Airbnb, and I was like, okay, how long we can be this Airbnb without income? So I got a job in a restaurant, and they hired me so fast I didn't even have the uniform. I'm like, "So, we have to go to this storage to get my black server—" I'm like, black pants; I don't want to waste any money buying more clothing. So we ended up getting jobs over here, making friends. And end up like, "Okay, this is not bad. Let's just explore here." And then, we wanted to be like, you know, self-employed, wanted to do something.

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I'm like, you know—it was to make pizza or barbecue. It was those two. Because we like—he likes to make pizza, bread, and I do, too, like make bread. And then—but the barbecue is so good here; you make such a good barbecue. We actually started having parties like in our back yard, like in our little apartment, and we will invite friends for barbecue, just to taste. And people will be like, "You guys are not even from Texas. This is *delicious*." And we were like, "Really?" I mean—and we were making like very simple. Like one girl, she's from New York, she was

visiting, she's my friend. And she's like, "You guys, this is the best ribs I ever have." Like, "It's so tender. It's not overpowered. And you guys have to do something." And we're like—I mean, you bring in your friends to you house, give them free food, free beer, free, you know everything; of course—I mean, if they say, "Oh, this is not good"—I'm like—I mean, you know, they were good friends, so we were like, "Ah, they're just lying." You know, "They're just making us feel good."

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So Bill is like, "Let's do a competition." So I'm like, "Okay! Let's do it!" It was just all—it has been always me and him. So for the competition, we didn't know what [0:18:14]. We sign out [sp] for the Lone Star Association. So it's like, "Okay, you have the first one on Wimberley." It was our first competition. But, you know, I was working in the weekend. Bill was working—he started working in trailer, in a pizza trailer. So [0:18:30] we were like pizza or barbecue. We were like, "I don't know." We wanted to do something because we had some money to invest. I'm like, "Let's do something." So we started that competition, and it was really amazing experience. We show up with a U-Haul rental—you know, the van that they have—with all the equipment in there. We only had the—it's not [0:18:52] but the little smoker, the one that they sell like in Lowe's. It's like the smallest smoker. And a drum, that we bought from this guy. It was like our first smoker that we have.

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We arrive there in Wimberley and see like people have like crazy setup. Like, RVs, and amazing big smokers, and—they were like prepared. We show up with a canopy, a U-Haul truck, our drum, and a table. Of course coolers, where we were keeping the meat. We won the grand

championship from that place. We were like, “Oh my god.” The judge love our brisket, our chicken. We got first place on pork, and ribs. We got first place in everything. So it’s like, it give us the lead for the grand championship. I was like, “Oh my goodness.” I was so excited and so nervous at the same time. And they're asking me, “Oh”—and people will be like, “Who’s this girlie? Who’s this girlie?” Because there were people that had been competing for life, you know? Like the neighbors that were with us, they actually give us dinner, because we didn’t even brought food, because we didn’t know, like, you have to camp. You're cooking the whole night.

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And they were like, “You didn’t bring anything?” I’m like, “No.” Because they say, “Oh, we're going to welcome you with a nice dinner.” They only give us Frito pie. [laughs] And I’m like, “That’s not going to hold us through the night. We have to cook all night long.” But the whole experience, that first competition, it was really nice. We learned a lot. And people were like really proud, like, “This is your first competition, and you won the grand championship?” Like even my boss at that time, my manager, he didn’t want to give me off. And I’m like, “Please? You have to. You have to give me off. I have this competition with my husband. It’s very important.” And I brought him some ribs. I’m like, “Look, we're making this.” Like, “Ah, this is okay. You're not going to—you're not even from Texas. You're not from here. You're going to get swept by all these master people.” I’m like, “It’s okay. That’s the whole experience.” You know what I mean? I never think about a failure. If I do, well, I learn something.

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So when we won, I was like, “See? We won!” I was so happy and so proud. And then from that, it start—“Okay, maybe we should do something.” But we kept competing. We went to like

different other places. We went to San Marcos. We went to [0:21:17] I think is the town, the name, north of Houston I think it is. We start doing a small little competition. And of course—we still were winning. Not as—Wimberley, that was like a wow. But it give us kind of [0:21:33] will try. And in those competitions, you have to do a dish, kind of like for free, for people to—you know, because they buy tickets, and they start eating during the process. So there were like people walking around. It's like a festival. So I think we did like pork shoulder sliders, for free, and people were like, "Oh my goodness, this is so good." So it's like, "I think we have something." And that's why like, "Let's start a business with barbecue."

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It was all new for us. All new. And it wasn't easy, you know. In the beginning, it was really hard. We opened in August. It was the hottest month of Austin, Texas [laughs]. And—to cook *barbecue*, that you have to be in the fire, constantly, it was really rough. You know, you learn from that. I'm like, "Wait a minute. What are we just doing to ourself?" But at the same time, we were so excited, and so like happy to be doing something ourself, and got the response from people—"Oh, this is really good"—that that keep us going. Yeah, it was really rough, to open in August, and to start getting people. Because at that time, there were not many—in that area that we were—of course there was Franklin, a little bit far, but they start a few others, barbecue places start growing. I'm like, "Oh my god. It's okay. We just—we have something good. I don't care."

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And we kept going. But it has been like, you know, ups and down, obviously. And then also, to be in a trailer is really hard, because you are limited with the space. And also with the nature. You know, if it's raining crazy hard, what you do? You just sit there, and hopefully somebody

will come for a pickup order. Or, if it's really, really hot, nobody wants to be eating in the heat. So, it's really challenging, and it was really challenging for us. But at the same time, it was a good journey, because we have so many good stories that we live with the Kerlin BBQ.

Evan Stern: Absolutely. I know you say opening in August was a big mistake, but in reflecting on those early days, what would you say was your hardest lesson?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: You know, we didn't think like barbecue was—it's an art craft. It's like, it takes a lot, to make a good one, you know?

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I don't know, besides just [0:24:13] grown, we learn about—to have maybe like less things on the menu. Because we're so excited, and we wanted to—and we love food, so, “Oh, let's make this. Let's make that.” And I'm like, “Wait a minute, we don't have space.” So that was also a little bit of the mistake. Like we opened, and we wanted to have like almost everything. Like lot of sides, like five different sides on the menu, and a lot of different—we didn't make chicken because we didn't have so much space, but people keep asking for chicken, so we were trying to make chicken, and it was just like, “No.” So, we will be correcting our mistakes as we go, but it's like—it was really hard in a trailer, because the space. And people would be like, “Oh, why you don't make this?” and nah-nah-nah. And I'm like—I will just smile like, “Oh, yeah, when I build a second floor in the trailer, I might cook that.”

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So that was a little challenging—the space.

Evan Stern: But then you end up receiving—eventually you start receiving a lot of great praise and interest.

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh, yeah.

Evan Stern: Was there a moment when you were able to step back and say, “Okay, we're going to be okay”?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh, yeah.

Evan Stern: Can you tell us about that?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yeah, always. You know, of course it's rough in the beginning, and you deal with the space. But that's not an excuse to, you know—to give up. Because obviously you have some times that, “Oh my goodness, am I doing something right?” But *then*, as—we were putting a nice product, and you start getting the people coming back, and giving you like a nice recognition. And then, you know, we have a few things in the *Eater* right away. You know, they love us. And like we have a little other writer that wrote a book about us, because he came and he tried our food, and he like was so impressed and so delightful, and he put us like number one in that book.

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And we're like, “Wow. We're doing something.” You know? So that's—it's a nice motivation that keeps you going forward. So that's why we kept going. There were some times I'm like, “Okay, let's just—” You know, it's when you're riding a bicycle, and then you see like a hill; I'm like, “Okay, we can make it.” Then you go to the hill and you're like, “Wow! Look! I did it!” You know? So that's kind of feel with us, like, we never give up. We're always trying to make it

happen. And it's *so*—when you get those accolades from people. Like *Bon Appetit* wrote about us. [0:26:41]. They started reaching out. And I'm like, you know, I feel like, "Oh my god, it's so cute." It's like—somebody's looking at you, you know? Somebody's like taking a—"Oh my god, look, these people are working really hard. They deserve a recognition." Unlike other big places that they're always like the name, boom-boom-boom, and I'm like, you know, how about these people, that has been working really hard, and making a good product, and making people happy?

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You know, we been catering a lot of weddings and all that stuff. And when we did have the barbecue trailer, I have people that they met there—you know, like, "Hey," you know, and they got engaged, and we catered their wedding. And then they have kids—I still have people, even with the Kerlaches, that they brought me their kids. I'm like, "Oh my goodness." So I feel like we've been *part* of like the community here in Austin. So that makes you feel like, we don't want to disappear. We want to keep going, you know? So it was really hard decision to close Kerlin BBQ, and maybe we can talk about that a little bit. But at the same time, we still—you know—own the—here, with the community, making good stuff for them.

Evan Stern: I know you closed Kerlin, but before we get to that, can you tell us about how you first discovered kolaches?

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Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh! Yeah. Well, I didn't have anything like that. We were on a road trip. We love to explore. And Bill—we were hungry, so we stop in this place. And you know, we started getting a few different ones, and I'm like, "Oh"—when I—I got like—I think it was this

ham and cheese whatever, and I'm like, "Okay, this is really good." And then I was like, "Wait a minute. This reminds me of like something." And then we ordered the sausage, and it's like, "This—this like cachitos." And Bill is like, "What is a cachito?" Because it's being alive [sp] with Bill, like knowing to learn about *his* American food and my Venezuelan food, is being always like, "What is that?" Nah nah nah. You know? And I was like, "Cachito! You know? It's the bread thing, with the ham." He's like, "Oh. Really?" Because he went to Venezuela—we got married in Venezuela. And I'm like, "You didn't have that?" And like, "I don't think so." I'm like, "Weird." Because that's like—you go to a panaderia, and they have it there. It's like a breakfast, and people just grab it and go.

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And he's like, "Oh." And I'm like, "Cachito, okay." He's like, "You might have to make some of that." I'm like, "Sure." But it's a lot of work, so I didn't want to make that. [laughs]

Evan Stern: But then—you say you—how did you then come around to the idea of making and selling your own after that?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oooooohh, yeah, that's like—it was—in the November month, we were—you know, it wasn't that busy, because I guess the holiday was approaching, like Thanksgiving, so a lot of people just go—so we were having a lot of brisket left over. And then, here's my grandma—ding ding ding ding—"Do not waste anything." So I will take the chopped brisket home, and I will make empanadas, I will make arepas. I will make—even lasagna with brisket. Just for us. Or for friends. And then I'm like, "Hey, I'll make some empanadas." And they were like, "Oh, this is delicious. You should sell it in the trailer." I'm like—I didn't want to deal with frying stuff in the trailer. And I'm like, "Oh, yes, ha ha ha."

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And then—arepas. I’m like—“You should make arepas with brisket. That will be delicious. For the trailer.” Because I will give it to my friend. I’m like—I didn’t want to—you know, we’ll have to have another setup, and I’m like, “No.” And then Bill is like, “What we can do?” I’m like, “I don’t know.” And then he’s like, “How about those cachito? Make one with brisket.” And I’m like, “Okay!” So, but then I didn’t want to just make a cachito, so I’m like—“Well, let’s do a kolache.” The way we try it over there. And I was looking at some recipe, and I’m the worst—I’m the worst for recipes. Like I don’t follow recipe. I just—I didn’t learn—like when my grandma teach me, she will—you know, we don’t know quantity. She would just mix in stuff like that. So Bill is like, “Recipes.” And I’m like [0:30:46] no, I don’t know. So I found one, and I made it just—because Bill like, “You have to follow. Let’s see how it come.” And they didn’t come right. It was too dry. The dough, the bread, when I bake it, it was too dry. So I didn’t like it. Tasted almost like a biscuit.

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I’m like, “That’s boring. I’m not looking for that.” Then I try another recipe again, and I start—I’m like, “Well, that one was too dry so let me add more of this, and this, and that.” The second one, it was like, mm, not bad, but it was not—it didn’t make me happy. It just made me like, “Eh.” And the third one—I’m like, “Just need a little pinch of this.” And when I made the kolache, and I was like, “Oh my god.” And you eat it, and it’s like—well, have you had one? You have to have one in a minute. It’s like biting like a cloud of like dough and butter and—I don’t know, it’s *so* good. We were like, “This is it.” And then he’s like, “Did you wrote the recipe, right?” I’m like, “No.” [laughs] I’m like—he’s like, “You have to!” And I’m like,

“Okay.” So then I was like making it again and I start writing what I thought I was putting, and it came out good. And I was like, “Okay! See you got it? You know how to make with recipe!”

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So that—I started making those, and I started with a small batch. I was working. I had another job at nighttime in a restaurant, and we still had the trailer. So it was a lot of work. So I was making the dough in the trailer, but I will make a small amount, because we won’t have the space. And that trailer was smaller. And I think the first one that I make, it was only like 30 kolaches? Like, no 36, because they fit 12, so 36. I made only three trays. And I sold them like—like 20 minutes. Because I had it as a special. I’m like, “Oh, we’re making this kolache with brisket.” And people were like—one lady, I remember—she become like a big fan—and she got one—and I’m like—“What is that kolache?” So I’m like, “Well, it’s stuffed with our brisket and cheddar cheese.” She’s like, “Oh, well my husband love brisket, but I don’t know too much about that dough.”

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And I’m like—“Let me try just one. And if I like it maybe I’ll come for more.” She got one, and she ate it in the car. She’s like, “Oh my god. This—I don’t know what is this, but this is *amazing*.” And I’m like, “Do you like it?” And she was—you know those people that are really like—like serious and pretentious and initially hard to please? But she was like a melted butter with me, with like that kolache. And I was like, “Oh my god, she likes it!” So she bought like three more for her husband. And then we became like—she became a loyal. Like her husband worked for a construction company, and he will get—like, “Hey, I need like 36 to feed my people on Friday. Can you make it?” I’m like, “Oh my god.” Like—you know. And it got so popular, you know? But I will always make small batches, because the space. And it was just

myself. So then I have to tell my sister, “Hey, I need help in here.” But yeah, I always would make small batches.

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And then, I always will have them on Saturday, and we will open at 9:00, and by like 10:00, I will be like out. You know? So I’m like, “Okay.” So from 36 I went to like, “Let’s do 100.” And then from 100 I went to like 170. I was just trying to play with the space, with the barbecue, and the space with the kolache.

Evan Stern: And what flavors—I know you started with the brisket. What flavors do you have today? What all do you offer? Describe your kolaches.

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Our kolaches—it’s like semi-sweet dough, stuffed with barbecue, like brisket and cheddar. They all have cheese. Because I like it when they—when I’m baking it, the cheese melts into the dough, and they meet, and it makes it like very delicious. When I was in the trailer, back in the day, I start making a lot of different flavors. Like I have a crazy list.

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But then, it was a lot of work, and we just narrowed down to like four different ones. So we have, right now, our classic, the brisket with cheddar. Then we have our smoked sausage with pickled jalapeno and cheddar. We have the smoked pork shoulder with jack cheese. And we have the spinach and feta cheese. Because I always want to make a veggie for those friends that they don’t eat meat. So that’s the four ones that I keep. We used to make as a special the pork belly burnt ends with pickled jalapeno and cheddar. That is like a number one seller as well. We stopped selling it right now because, you know, in the transition of the second trailer, and the pork belly, the way we cook it, it takes a lot of space in the pit. So we’re just trying to find a way

to put it back. But I think only on weekends. And right now, I make on the weekends a breakfast one. It's like fennel sausage with eggs and cheddar.

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It has been selling like really good. Because in the other trailer, I couldn't have eggs, because it's breakfast tacos, and they don't let us. But in here, I'm able to do anything. So, I'm making it here on the weekend, and people is like loving it, that breakfast kolache. Yeah. So that's the flavor that I'm keeping it for now. But we did have a *lot* of flavors.

Evan Stern: I know you—obviously you started off at the trailer with your husband, but when you start making the kolaches, you bring your sister on to help.

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Evan Stern: Can you tell us about what experience was like? What was it like working with your sister?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: I love it. She's like, oh my god. You know, Bill is my lobster, and she's like, I don't know, my shrimp, I will say. She's amazing. She is—she start helping me with the dough. That's the only—she knows the dough recipe, and myself; nobody else. Not even Bill; he doesn't know the recipe. So it was a big help, because we started working together, and it feel like family, you know?

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And still, today, she's working with me. And I tell her, I'm like, "Please, become part of Kerlaches." She wants to do something else, but she has been helping me *a lot*. With the dough. And she's really fast, and she have a good energy. We always like joking and talking about our

memories when we were kids. And it was like, you know, “Can you imagine?” Like, “We're here, I have a business, you're here with me.” And the nieces love sometimes helping, too. So, it's been amazing to have her aboard in our business. Yeah. She is—I don't know—I will be shot if I tell you anything about her. Very hard worker. And I don't know how; she works really fast. Like sometimes we are making kolaches, she's like, “Come on, hurry up!” I'm like, “Wait a minute. I create this. And you're now like my master?” You know? But it's always so much fun to work with her. I'm very grateful to have her here. Yeah. It's been making this business a little bit easier for me, especially with this transition, because now, what we do is just kolaches, kolaches, kolaches. There's a lot of production that we have to do.

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I have a commercial kitchen, and I do have a few employees, that help us. But she's there making sure everything is the way I like. So, no shortcuts. Everything has to be good.

Evan Stern: You have a commercial kitchen now, but is Bill still cooking the brisket for you? How does that work?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yes, we have a smoker in the commercial kitchen. So we still smoke our meat over there. It's a little bit different, because now we don't do it every day, as it was in the barbecue. We smoke like big batches. And then, you know, we do the whole process as if we were going to sell it. Like, still really good. We chop it, and we just freeze, in different batches, and we be using what we need for the day. But yeah, we still smoke our meat in the commercial kitchen. And they also have like an electrical smoker that sometimes, for the pork shoulder, I can just smoke that there, because it's a small amount.

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I mean, not a small amount, but they're smaller than the brisket, and it takes less space. But we still do our own meat. Sometimes if Bill is doing something else—I'm also a pit master. Like, he taught me to cook barbecue. So, sometimes he getting started the fire, and then I finish the cook. Because sometimes I'm in the kitchen with the prep, making sure they're doing okay and making dough, and I stay through the whole 12-hour—til the briskets are done. So we still do it. And like sometimes I take trips, and he does the whole thing. Or like he's about to take a road trip with his friend, and I will stay, you know, cooking the brisket by myself. So, I'm glad that I know how to cook it. And I make really good brisket, too.

Evan Stern: I'm glad to hear now that you have more help than just the two of you. And your sister. I'm really glad to hear that. But I guess can you tell us through the prep, of like, when do they start prepping the bread and the brisket? Like what happens before the trailer opens?

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Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yeah. I'll tell you the whole process. So we—in the kitchen, my sister, we make the dough, and we make a lot of batches. So also we freeze some, and we start using. They get in the morning, and I have my list of what they have to make, what flavors, and the quantity of stuff. So they all make the kolaches, and we bring them here, and we bake them in the trailer. We also sell it for coffee shop. We have like eight different coffee shops around Austin and one in Round Rock, that they are actually selling our kolaches. And so they also are doing that over there. The dough is my sister, and the brisket, you know, from Bill. So I have one guy that, he chops the brisket, and then we mix it with the cheese. And it will be so nice if you visit when you have time, because it's another whole experience when you are in the kitchen. We have a big space.

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And so we mostly they assembling in the kitchen and we bring them here and baked. So we have the big ovens in the trailer and we bake them here.

Evan Stern: So like when does your day start? And when do your workers' days start, as well?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Okay. So they get there around 8:00 in the morning. Before, it used to be very early, but these kolaches, I make it—for example, like the one that they are making today, we put it in the walk-in, and that will be for tomorrow. So I'm always trying to plan like a day before. Because for the space in the trailer. So like yesterday, we brought later like—so let's organize. So 8:00 my workers get there, and they start assemble the kolaches, keep it in the walk-in. Later like around 6:00, either Bill or myself go to the commercial kitchen and start taking the kolaches to the trailers. And in the morning, I have my employee, my worker, and then she start baking the kolaches as soon as she comes in the morning. Sometime because the space in the trailer, she'll run out, but the commercial kitchen is so close.

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So we can either bake it in the kitchen really quick and bring it to them, if they're really busy, or we bring them unbaked, and she bake them here. So my employees work from 8:00 to about 4:00 in the afternoon. That's when everything is all done. Also depends, because I have days that we have to pack the kolache for the coffee shops, so that's a little bit longer. They work really hard. Once they are done with all the production, then they have to bake the kolaches that we have to pack for the coffee shops. But, yeah, it's a lot of labor. It's a lot of labor. That's why at some point I stopped making the kolaches, because it was just like—you know, too tiring. Like before even I have help, I will have to get up at 4:00 in the morning. That was really hard. Because we

were doing like the barbecue too. And I will get up at 4:00 in the morning, in the trailer, I start making the kolaches by hand. Spreading the dough, I mean. And then putting the filling, baking them; it was a lot of work.

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I would make always the dough a day before, so I can use it the next day, but I will be in the trailer from 4:00 in the morning, trying to make the kolaches to be ready by 9:00, so I can sell it that day, and they will sell out. And I'm like, "Oh my god, I have to make more dough." You know? It was a lot of work. But everybody said, "That's a good problem. That's a good problem." I'm like, "Yes, it's as good problem. I'm selling them out."

Evan Stern: What would you say to someone who argues that what you're selling aren't kolaches at all?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: You know, those peoples—they're like—I don't know how to call them, in the nice way. But it's like, you know—New York style pizza, for example; they're still pizza, you know? Not because they are made in New York they are not pizza, you know? There's New York Style pizza. It's like kolaches. We are not making Czechoslovakian—where the original, but I'm making Texas, so they are Texas-style kolaches. It's different. People have to like get out of that little hole, and expand your—your imagination. We cannot keep like calling this—that's why I guess we changed it into kerlaches, to make it, "Okay, this is not kolaches"—you haters—"This is *kerlaches*." Because it's a little bit different.

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And sometimes I will make jokes, because they will be like, "This is not kolaches because kolaches are sweet." And I'm like, "I'm really sorry." But I'm not the only one; I don't know

why they attack me so bad. Because you go to like other places—not to say any names of other places—and they say “kolaches” and they have this—they have this savory. You know? It’s, “I’m so sorry.” [0:44:38] I don’t even know what to say, that name. But I will say, like, you know, just as an example, you know, New York pizza, New York style pizza, doesn't mean it's not pizza. So my kolaches doesn't mean they are not kolaches. They're still kolaches. I'm making them in Texas. It's a little bit different. That's it. And I'm like, “Don't be haters. Just eat it. They are so good.”

Evan Stern: [laughs]

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Amelis Paz-Kerlin: And you know what? I have a lady, she's also really nice, her grandmother from Czech—and she's like, “My grandma will be so honored to have your kolaches.” And she's like, “I don't care if people—they don't like if you call them kolaches, because this—they have to be the effort that you're making. Like the bread, it is so amazing.” So that also made me feel like, nice, that somebody got a recognition, like even though they are from that region, original, she's like, “It's okay, don't worry about those people. This is like—my grandma that makes kolache.” And she's like, “And I know she just made the sweet one, but this is like—she will be an honor to have yours.” And I'm like—that for me is like, oh, it's really nice.

Evan Stern: Speaking towards that, is there a batch of kolaches—what's the most meaningful batch of kolaches you've ever made for someone? If you can think of it.

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: I have made for like weddings.

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And I'm very like flexible. People—sometimes they don't have a lot of money and they don't want to spend enough—being like—with this lady, she's like, "I want to have your kolaches in my wedding, because people is coming from all over, like even international, and that will be like a really good hit." So I made her like these little mini ones. And it was just like great. And I actually went to cater their wedding, because they did have barbecue also, and she's like, "I want to have your kolaches there. People have to know *you*." And I'm like, "Okay!" So I made them the mini ones. And people would just start eating them like—and you can see the reaction in their faces like, "What is this?" And she's like, "See? That's why I wanted to have her kolaches." People from all over the place. From all over the country. She had people from Australia, from London, like, eating my kolaches. And still now, she's like, "I want to froze some and take it to my friend in Australia." And I'm like, "Well"—and I don't know if she did. But you know.

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So that was really nice. I like to go to the extra mile for somebody. I'm very flexible. I always tell the people, "Don't be afraid to ask me. If I can make it"—but Bill said, "You always say yes. You always say yes. You have to plan to say no," And I'm like, "But it's okay." Like we just did something for somebody, and he's like, "We're not even making any money for this." I did something special and I spent more on the ingredients than, you know—and Bill is like—I'm like, "It's okay," you know? I make something special for this lady because we don't have the BBQ anymore, but she wanted some of my sides. And because I have to buy the ingredients separately, not as the wholesale, so I spent more on the ingredients than actually I charged it. But I was like, "It's okay, mi amor. She reached to us. She wanted really to have that side, and I want to make it for her." So I feel like sometimes it's not about the money; it's about to have those repetitive customer that you're doing something for them.

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It's like, money comes and money goes, but those moments *remain*, and people know that you're doing something special for them, you know?

Evan Stern: I know last year, after nearly ten years in business, you closed the barbecue business down and just started focusing exclusively on this. Can you talk about what pushed you to make this shift?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: We realized that barbecue has always been so hard, and it has been always like attend by Bill or myself. We did have some employees in the past, but it was really hard to trust. Like the brisket is something that you have to take it in a specific temperature. You have to feel it. Not really in a specific temperature, but it has to cook through. Then you have to kind of like, "Okay, is this jiggling," you know? So I feel like people were not doing the job as we were expecting.

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So it would always have to be Bill or me. So we will never have like I will say a life or a vacation or a day off mostly because we were always there. There. With the kerlache, it's another story. We've been able to have more time for ourself, have more traveling time. Even wake up on a Saturday and, "Let's go and have a coffee." Because now we got to the point where we have people that's helping and they're doing a good job. It was easier to—how to say—to give in charge somebody, "Okay, you make this," and they're making it good job; I don't have to be there watching you all the time. Like the brisket like we will have to be like there looking at the fire. "Oh, the fire is low." It was more labor intensive, barbecue. That's why we—and it was—last year, like when we opened the new trailer, we took a month of vacation.

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And the trailer just still keep running. I have my sister, she's my best, you know? But it was like, "Wait a minute. This is what we needed." Because I'm not getting any younger, and we've been working really hard. I've been in this country for like 28 years, and I've always been working really hard. Which I like. I'm a workaholic. But sometimes, you know, you need to take time for yourself, and like enjoy a little bit more. So Bill is like, "This is a good change." Quality of your life. And that's what we like doing. We're still working hard, but not as we were in Kerlin BBQ.

Evan Stern: And you're still doing wholesale, like your special order, yes?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Yes, yes.

Evan Stern: But what was the greatest challenge that you found in working with your—? I know you say he's your lobster—

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Mmhmm!

Evan Stern: What has been the greatest challenge though of working so much with your husband?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh yai yai! My challenge is like—I don't know, because you know, I'm very like—pushing.

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And it's just like—sometimes he's the thinker, and I'm the doer. You know? Or sometimes like I don't understand like what he's trying to say, or he's like, "Trust me in this," and I'm like, "No." So it's like sometimes, it's like we have differences. But at the same time, those differences makes us stronger. The challenges to work with him is sometime in the past, like he wanted to

give up. And I'm like, "No. We're not giving up." He's like—I'm—"No." "No, but we want to—it's not doing this, it's not doing this." I'm like, "It's okay, we keep going. And if it doesn't work, well, we just close and do something else. But, you know, we have something." Also then I will be the one, I'm like, "I'm done. I need to sleep. I need to do something with my life." Because I always liked vacation. I liked to traveling. It was really hard; we were like *working* so hard. So the challenge to be working with Bill, I don't know, it's—I don't know. I'm trying to think.

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People ask all the time, like, "You guys work together, you live together, you road trip together." And I'm like, "Yeah, and I still miss him sometimes," you know? I don't know what the challenge is. Sometimes I just don't understand things in the American way, I will say, that he knows, and I get frustrated. Because like he will know more about like laws, or America don't do it like this. It's really hard, and I will be like, "Wait a minute, but—let's teach the Americans [laughs] a little bit different something." You know? So, yeah, sometimes—I don't know. We're very flexible. I don't think I have a hard—I'm trying to think.

Evan Stern: Well, you've been making it work for a long time, which is—so whatever you're doing, you're doing something right. What are your hopes for the future of Kerlaches?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Our hope for our business is trying to keep expanding more.

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Like we opened this second location, and we are getting more accounts in coffee shops, and we just want to keep expanding, as we can, if we can. Because I think we have an amazing product that—I still have people that they don't know what we have. Like the new account that we have in Round Rock, people were like, "What is this?" And even though Round Rock is a little bit

north of Austin. But that coffee shop is selling them, and they're like, "Oh, we're really pleased." So our hope and our dream is like keep expanding, to the point that, you know, it can get managed by itself. [laughs] So I can retire. No, I won't retire, because I like to cook and I like my product. But yeah, we want it to expand, if we can, the opportunity. People talk about like brick and mortar. I think brick and mortar is a little bit hard, sometimes? And that's why we like trailer. It's more like casual. It's a little bit maybe more profitable than a brick and mortar.

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Because in a brick and mortar, you have more stuff that you have to take care, and like—it's already enough with the trailers. So I think expanding with like trailer, make it like more casual. Maybe a third location at the end of the year or next year. Like that, you know? Little by little. Yeah.

Evan Stern: You still find yourself liking Austin after all these years?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: You know, that's so crazy, because when we move here, we were like, "Okay, we'll only stay for a few month, until we get the money, and we will move to Taos." Because we love New Mexico, and we want to end up in Taos. We go there every year. But, you know, having the business, and then it was like, "Yeah, it's not too bad." Although Bill is like—he wants already to move to the country. He's like, "Let's go. Let's go." And I'm like, "Nope, nope, nope." So that's why—at some point, if we'll expand that it can be running by itself, we can just like go to the mountains, that he likes. But I still have to come here and be a—looking for. We like Austin. I do. Bill, not so much because it has been getting really crazy with traffic, and it's really expensive right now.

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But at the same time, I tell him—oh, maybe that’s the only difference that we have—that he wants to move out, and I don’t. That’s it! Oh! Thank you! I’m like, “Wait a minute.” Yeah, he always wanting to get out. And I’m like, “No. No.” We have the business here.” He’s like, “We can have this in another place too.” And I’m like, “Maybe.” But right now—but it’s getting really challenging, too. Because especially after COVID that everything closed and stuff—like even we did close. But then we opened back up. Yeah but Austin is just getting—I don’t know. It’s growing too fast, and it’s so little that, where are you going to put all these people? And it’s a good thing for our business. That’s what I tell Bill.

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Like, “Take that as an advantage.” He’s like, “Yeah, but we have to pay too much. The traffic. You can’t go to point A to point B. It’s going like L.A.” I’m like, “Wait a minute, not that bad yet. L.A. is worse.” But, you know.

Evan Stern: On a different note, just kind of thinking about place, and just touching on that a little bit, I asked you about what your hopes for the future was for Kerlaches. But speaking of the future, looking decades ahead, after you’ve left this Earth, if someone would like to go someplace where they can get to know a little bit about Amelis Paz-Kerlin and commune with your spirit, where should they go or where should they look?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh, wow, that’s hard, because I’m like a little eagle. That’s what Bill called me. I like to go everywhere. To know me—well, I love the beach. So, they would have to go to the beach [laughs], eating a margarita or a pina colada. I love the beach.

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But I think like the mountain, too, you know? Like if they want to get to know me—I don't know, go to my country! Try to call my grandma from heaven, and say, like, "Hey, what's up, grandma? Where is Amelis?" Yeah. Explore—I don't know. I don't have a place specific, to be honest. That's a hard question. Because I'm like—if I can just fly to the sky and become like rain and go—just spread my seed all over—you will find me. I guess in the air, you know, because I'm like—I love to fly. I love to be out. I don't have the places specific. That's a hard question.

Evan Stern: Amelis, I thank you so much. Before we leave, do you have any final thoughts you care to share?

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: No. I'm just very grateful for obviously the Austin community that is being amazing support for our business.

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I'm like very grateful for every single customer. The one that have tried once and for the one that keep coming back. For the one that ask me for weddings, catering for my kolaches. I've been grateful for—yeah, every community here in Austin. No, that's a—very proud of what I have done, and I feel like I did something really good, doing with the kolaches. Because barbecue, you have barbecue everywhere. And yeah, people criticize—"Oh this barbecue is bad"; "It's good"—but at the same— at the end it's just barbecue. They should appreciate the hard labor for those people that are making barbecue. Because if you—"Oh, this is too dry"; "This is nah nah nah"—it's a lot of labor. So they should just be—not criticizing too much. And for me, the people that were there taking my kolaches, I appreciate that.

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And I want to make sure they know it's a lot of labor. It's a lot of work. And sometimes I've thought about—I'm like, just to give up, because it's like, is it worth it, you know, to have this? There are good days, there are bad days, but the people keeps me going. Even *one*, it's like you—"This is amazing. Don't give up." So that stay in my memory, and I'm like, I'm not giving up, you know? From like 100 people that come to my trailer, one say, "This is not kolaches"—uh, well, that's like, "Sorry." I put a little [0:59:34] in your body and get outta here. [laughs] Because you know, the other people is what matters, that count, the people that say, "You're doing something good." It's really inspire. And then to my grandma—"Do not waste." You know, because not wasting the brisket made me feel about my grandma. So now, we have to cook *brisket* to make *kolaches*. So I'm like, yeah, so do not waste *anything*, people. Not even your time on Earth. Use it. That's—that's it!

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Evan Stern: Speaking of time, I thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. It has been a great honor. Muchas gracias!

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Sí!

Evan Stern: —un fuerte abrazo!

Amelis Paz-Kerlin: Oh, gracias, Evan! [laughs]

[End]