



**Tiesha Whittaker
Buttermilk Boutique
Clayton, North Carolina**

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Kelly Spivey: This is Kelly Spivey. I'm speaking with Tie Whittaker. I am in Memphis, Tennessee, and she's in Clayton, North Carolina. We're doing this interview remote and it's Thursday, September 1st, 2022. Can you just tell me your name and a little bit about what you do?

Tie Whittaker: Tie Whittaker. I've been a professional pastry chef for the past almost thirteen years now. Wow, I'm getting old. I've worked in various kitchens, things like that, in Boston, here in North Carolina, but in 2015 I started Buttermilk Boutique, so that's my baby when I'm not working in kitchens and things like that. I do my pastry business on the side.

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Kelly Spivey: And when were you born and where did you grow up?

Tie Whittaker: So I was born on Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico in 1986, May 23rd, 1986, to be exact. My father was in the Air Force and my mother was his companion. [Laughter] So I was born on the Air Force base. I like to call myself a citizen of the world. Since my dad was in the Air Force we traveled around a lot, moved around a lot. I've lived in Germany, New Jersey, all over, but I'd like to say Texas is where I'm from because Texas was always home base, and my mom is still there. So I like to say Texas but I'm from a little bit of everywhere.

Kelly Spivey: I very much understand that feeling. [Laughter] And what are your parents' names and where were they born?

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Tie Whittaker: So my mom is Sonya Lewis. That's her married last name. But her maiden last name is Bunton, so Sonya Bunton. And my father is Albert James Lewis, Jr. My mother was born in Texas. My father was born in Florida.

Kelly Spivey: So they're both originally from the South and have just gotten to see a lot of the world?

Tie Whittaker: Definitely. And they're both back there where they were born. My mom's in Texas and my dad is now back in Florida.

Kelly Spivey: Oh, okay. That's nice.

Tie Whittaker: Yeah.

Kelly Spivey: Do they have family there?

Tie Whittaker: Lots of family. Lots of family in Texas. Lots of family in Florida. We have family all over but mostly still in the South between Texas, Georgia, and Florida.

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Kelly Spivey: So tell me a little bit about growing up in terms of food. Did your mom cook a lot? Was that a big deal in the house?

Tie Whittaker: So my mother, when we were super, super young, she cooked for us. I like to say that my mother, she was a very good cook, but she was also a very hard worker. She was a single mother and so we had a lot of things I guess maybe that you would consider to be like microwaveable or kind of easy to do sort of things. When she had her days off then she would cook things like ribs. We actually really loved Hamburger Helper, which I'm not really fond of now but I definitely loved it then. [Laughter] And my mom usually jazzed it up. So she would season the hamburger meat a certain way.

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Or into ramen noodles if it was beef flavor she would put actual beef in it, shrimp, chicken, same thing, she would actually put that protein in there which kinda really just took the flavor above and beyond. But she didn't have a lot of time to cook. She was always at work. We were latchkey kids. My brother, my sister on her side, and I've got three other sisters and a brother on my father's side. So I spent a great deal of my younger years with my mother and so we kinda grew up like that, living in an apartment. But it was cozy. My mother was very savvy when it came to dinner. She created things like Frito pie. And when we had nachos we'd do it with Doritos instead of tortilla chips.

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So really probably not on the healthiest of sides, but who cares? We were kids, we loved it, and she did what she could. I visited my father during the summers before I moved with him my freshman year of high school in New Jersey. So I stayed a good deal of time with my mom. You

know how kids are, when something's not your favorite you go running to the other parent.

[Laughter] So I spent a lot of time with my dad. I'm very close to my dad, and he was a phenomenal cook. So I want to say that he's where I got a lot of my love for food and a lot of my experimentation with food. I think my mom cooked and fed us to make sure that we weren't hungry.

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I think my dad cooked for his enjoyment and for experimentation. That's where I had a lot of my seafood. That's where I had a lot of experiences going out to fine dining restaurants and things like that. Little hole in the wall places like little gems that don't necessarily stick out or that everybody doesn't know about, my dad was really fond of that. And so my brother and I at the time got a lot of experience traveling with Dad wherever he went. He didn't really leave us behind very much which was a nice change of pace from being a latchkey kid. So I've loved food-- obviously, I've loved food my whole life, but I think my parents have really given me different sides of it, kind of like a survival mode and enjoyment mode, so I learned both.

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And they both come in handy. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: That's so funny that you say that 'cause when you were talking I was just thinking it's kind of the perfect combination of the enjoyment of cooking and the pleasure of food with the pragmatism that you need to be able to kind of enjoy it sometimes. [Laughter]

Tie Whittaker: For sure.

Kelly Spivey: So how many siblings do you have total?

Tie Whittaker: Total I have four sisters and two brothers.

Kelly Spivey: And where are you at in the pecking order?

Tie Whittaker: I'm the oldest.

Kelly Spivey: Oh, wow. Okay.

Tie Whittaker: I'm the oldest.

Kelly Spivey: Did you end up having to do any kind of taking care of the younger ones as the older siblings tend to have to do?

Tie Whittaker: And still do. And still do. But yes, definitely growing up a latchkey kid my mom-- you're the oldest one so my mom's at work, you're responsible for the younger two.

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And I think as far as my dad went I didn't really have to care for my younger brother on my dad's side, feed him and nurture him, but he kinda wanted to tag along doing different things. So he was just kind of like that little brother that always wanted to be where you were. So there was that, but definitely growing up with my mom I babysat, I fed them, I learned how to cook when I could reach the stove. She would show me how to make noodles or how to make the Hamburger

Helper or how to put the ribs in the oven or how to defrost the chicken so that when she got off at eleven, twelve o'clock we were all fed.

Kelly Spivey: What about baking?

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Was there anybody in your family that was a baker or that you kind of learned anything from in terms of that?

Tie Whittaker: Oh, yeah. So I guess it would be a good time to talk about Buttermilk Boutique. Both sets of my grandmothers and great-grandmothers were avid bakers on my mother and my father's side. They did a lot of baking for the church. They did a lot of baking for the community. They did a lot of baking when people were sick and maybe shut in. They did a lot of baking for the family around the holidays. They did baking with their friends. They were really-- I guess you would call them homemakers. And my thoughts is that they would be like the professional bakers of that time.

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Community was really important to them. Buttermilk Boutique is an ode to my grandmother on my mother's side. Her name was Angel. And I remember spending summers with her. She made everything from scratch. She made piecrusts from scratch, she made fillings, she made breads, she made rolls. You name it, if she could figure out how to make it from scratch she did. And I guess rewind to 2008, 2009, I had moved to California with a boyfriend. It didn't work out. But

my grandmother was living in California, so I moved in with her and my grandfather. And she had been making all these pies for church and she wanted to start a pie company.

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So I wanted to get into baking more. I baked a little bit when I got stressed out or for friends or things like that, but I never really knew the nuances of baking. And she was very good at that. She didn't need to measure. She just knew the perfect amount. We were gonna start this Angel's Pies so she would sell pecan pies, buttermilk pies, sweet potato pies, things like that, chocolate-- not chocolate chess but pineapple chess, lemon chess pies. She has a phenomenal carrot cake recipe. So just kind of all these things that she learned from her mother. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with cancer so from diagnosis to death was probably two weeks.

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And so when I think about it now, when I was there with her while she was dying I'm not sure if she knew she was gonna die. I kinda feel like she had that impression. She didn't want to go through chemo. She just kinda wanted to be left alone sort of thing. But before she went into the hospital we were talking about this Angel's Pies, and we baked together and so I helped convert those recipes. So I watched her, like, "Oh, okay. Stop. Let me record that." or "Oh, wait. How much was that again?" or "Do that again. Or she'll say something like, "Just a scant," or "a little bit." And I'd be like, "Oh, uh, 'scant' it in this little cup and 'little bit' it in this bowl so I can measure it." [Laughter] And that's how we did that. And it was really nice just the last couple of months that I had with her.

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We baked together. We went to church. We talked. And she showed me recipes from her mother, my great-grandmother. They called her Big Mama. So she talked about how she used to make her own buttermilk, how she used to make her own sweetened condensed milk, just all these things that I was in awe of. I loved cooking from the moment I started home ec., just really getting the science behind it, but I loved baking with her because she was so patient. She was so patient with me. I had a million and one questions. I still do. I probably get on my husband's nerves with all the questions I ask in movies. But she was so patient with me during that process. And what makes me think that she kinda knew she was gonna die is 'cause she just shared, she just shared everything. Anything I wanted to know.

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Anything I wanted to talk about. Anything about my grandfather that I wanted to know. Or just things that the family didn't talk about, she'd talk about 'em, different things that happened. She shared recipes. She had clippings from magazines from the [19]60s just kinda in a recipe book. And she'd be, like, "Oh, take this one." We went out to the shed and she found a bunch of books, just things that she hadn't shared with anybody else she shared with me. And so Buttermilk Boutique is that ode to her. I learned how to make buttermilk pies from her and so that was the start of the business, buttermilk pies. Now, pies are not my thing. I will make them. I will bake anybody anything but that's how it started. That's what I learned from her, how to bake pies, and

so it was my way of saying, I know this is what you wanted to do. Now, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna see it through.

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And it's evolved. I'm a little bit more fine pastry but buttermilk pies will always be on the menu.

Kelly Spivey: And what was her full name, Angel what?

Tie Whittaker: Angel Faye Davis.

Kelly Spivey: Angel Faye Davis. And what about your great-grandmother?

Tie Whittaker: Lord have mercy. Gladys-- I think it's Mae but don't quote me on that-- Gladys Fuller. I might have to check. [Laughter] I might have to call an aunt today and just make sure. But I'd just known her as "Big Mama," but I remember seeing on a picture, I think it says, "Gladys Mae Fuller."

Kelly Spivey: It's so funny.

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My grandmother had a similar thing of just not measuring anything at all and would put me in charge of, like, "Okay. You're gonna make the cornbread for the entire family today. It's really important. Don't screw it up." And then they tell you, "Oh, just pour it in and mix it till it looks right." And it's, like, the panic sets in. [Laughter]

Tie Whittaker: Yes, definitely. [Laughter] Definitely.

Kelly Spivey: So I definitely relate to that.

Tie Whittaker: [Inaudible 0:16:26] just a little bit. I'd have to run over there with a bowl, like, hold on! [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: Oh, my God. My mom didn't even have measuring spoons I think the last time I went home, and I was just, like, I can't do this!

Tie Whittaker: People without a scale, I'm, like, I don't know how you do it.

Kelly Spivey: [Laughter] Do you think you could bake that way now or are you pretty scientific about it?

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Tie Whittaker: So I'm still scientific for the sake of consistency when I'm baking for somebody who's ordered something. But for my family, although it's a little cringeworthy, I can be, like, okay, I taste as I go. Like, I think it needs a little more salt or a little more sugar and can use a little bit more velvetiness, let's add some butter or something like that. So I can do both, but I guess if I had to pick a side I'm definitely still more calculated, definitely.

Kelly Spivey: I agree. You mentioned home ec. Did you take that in high school?

Tie Whittaker: I took that in middle school and high school.

Kelly Spivey: Where did you go to middle school and high school that they still had home ec.?

Tie Whittaker: So I went to a couple places but what I remember is Ms. McCarthy, seventh grade, Hillside Avenue School in Cranford, New Jersey.

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Oh, high school home ec., don't remember her name but it was at La Marque High School in La Marque, Texas.

Kelly Spivey: It's just so unusual, I feel like. I'm only a couple of years older than you and there was no home ec. going on in any of my school or my friends' schools so I think it's really-- you're very fortunate I feel like to have gotten that education so early on.

Tie Whittaker: Well, listen, my dream is to bring it back. I would love to bring it back. I mean, it's where I learned to change a tire. It's where I made my first pair of boxers. Do you know how many people got boxers after Ms. McCarthy taught me how to sew some boxers, girl? Honey, it was-- and Ms. McCarthy, I haven't spoken to her in years.

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I don't know where she is or what she's doing, but I remember that some of her children went to middle school with me and they thought, like, God, mom, stop! But I was, like, "Your mom's amazing!" She taught me how to make pizzas out of little Pillsbury dough biscuits. You want to know how many people got pizzas? Everything Ms. McCarthy taught me I went back home, I was, like, "We made blueberry muffins, we made chocolate chip cookies, I learned how to sew

boxers, she taught me how to balance a checkbook!” All those things that I think kids today are lacking.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah.

Tie Whittaker: I mean, really lacking.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah, I would definitely agree there. I think just the ability to feed yourself is such an important thing to be able to do and feel confident in.

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Did you go to culinary school?

Tie Whittaker: So not quite. My bachelor's degree is in political science and international affairs. My dad wanted me to be a supreme court justice. Girl, I wanted to cook. He said chefs didn't make any money. So after high school I really wanted to go to culinary school, but Dad had another plan. So I followed his plan. After a nervous breakdown after the second time trying to take the LSAT I was, like, screw this. I found two graduate degree programs, one at Boston University, one at NYU. NYU you had to have, like, 120 hours of kitchen work. I was, like, well, I've been in political science books, so I don't have that. So I went on to the gastronomy program at Boston University and it really changed my life.

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I did a four-month intense culinary program where we learned from a lot of the different Boston area chefs, Joanne Chang, Ming Tsai, Barry Maiden, just all these chefs that were coming in

really teaching us. They flew in some Japanese chefs to teach us sushi. Julia Child and Jacques Pépin started the program. We got a chance to work with Jacques Pépin. The people that they were putting us in front of, it was amazing! The teachers talking about the history of food, talking about food and the senses, pastillage classes, things like that. Wine courses, teaching us how to do dinners, things like that. It's a phenomenal program.

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I finished there with my Master of Liberal Arts in gastronomy and so that's where my-- I was trained as a cook in that program so that's kind of where it started. And then I worked my way through some bakeries and some kitchens in Boston until I moved here to North Carolina.

Kelly Spivey: And when did you move to North Carolina?

Tie Whittaker: That was in August or September 2012. So I graduated May 2012, stayed for a little bit longer, and then came here because my grandmother that was here was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Kelly Spivey: So you came back to kind of be with family?

Tie Whittaker: Yeah. To help her. Her and my grandfather were up there in age, and they were living on their own so just kinda provide some support.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah.

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Where did you get your poli sci degree?

Tie Whittaker: At Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Kelly Spivey: Does that ever come in handy, I feel like with food and all the things that go on in the food industry? [Laughter]

Tie Whittaker: So I won't say it doesn't come in handy, my degree in a sense, but I think the experiences that I had at Xavier University kind of prepared me for the things that are happening now and just once I got out on my own. I put myself through undergrad. I put myself through grad school. So just kind of learning those life lessons in the different courses that I took, so African American studies, the language courses I took. I stuck with Spanish in college. So just kind of those sorts of things really are helping me now.

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Would I say political science as much? I know they'll hate me for it, but I'll say, do I talk about it every day? No. Am I able to keep up with politics and understand it and converse about it? Yes. And it's a big deal right now, so thank you Xavier. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: I feel like it always ends up coming back around to help out at some point. I had a similar thing where I was in Boston for a year going to grad school and I was like, um, no, I'm gonna bake. That's what I want to do. [Laughter] And so I just left.

Tie Whittaker: I hear you. But I guess that's what I loved about grad school because I got that chance. I was, like, this is my chance. And I spent as much time in the kitchen as I could, and they allowed me to do it.

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And I took some baking courses throughout the summer with Janine Sciarappa, the head pastry chef in the program for gastronomy. So she's one of the professors or lecturers there, teachers. And so we still keep in touch today and I think, like I said, the relationships that I've built there, especially with her, have been some of the greatest.

Kelly Spivey: So you started Buttermilk Boutique after you moved to North Carolina, is that right?

Tie Whittaker: Um-hm. So in 2015 I started Buttermilk Boutique. In 2014 I had just left my job as a pastry sous-chef at Carolina Country Club which is here in Raleigh, North Carolina.

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And that was my very first fine pastry job where I learned chocolate work and kind of how to bake for the mass, like for very large groups and things like that, fine pastry for those very large groups. Unfortunately, the chef and I at that time didn't get along. I think he had a bit of a temper, but we're cool now. But back then it was rough. [Laughter] And I think it was rough for my husband, too. I met him at the country club. And so there was a big falling out. I left and I was, like, you know what? Screw this. It's time for me to start my own thing. So I had been selling cakes here and there but nothing really official, so I wanted to make it official. So in 2015 I got the LLC for Buttermilk Boutique.

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And I still work in kitchens. I still work full-time but it's definitely becoming less of a side hustle, more of a main hustle.

Kelly Spivey: That's incredible. That's the hardest thing to do is to get it to be the main thing.

Tie Whittaker: Yeah. Yes. That's what we're experiencing now, trying to get it to become the main thing. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: What was it like when you got an LLC, and it was like an official business? What was the experience like of, kind of opening your own business?

Tie Whittaker: So it was turning out to be expensive. The LLC costs money and then you have to file taxes whether you make money or not.

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You have to pay that annual report whether it changes or not, that \$200 a year, and so it was getting expensive, and I think I was not very confident, I guess. So just kind of doubtful, and I guess kinda still today I'm holding onto this job because it's like letting go is really scary. Letting go of benefits when you have children, and you have a husband. Letting go of that security blanket of a check every two weeks. Letting go of a place that I could-- my own schedule. I can show up when I want, leave when I want sort of thing.

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And so it's been a little bit difficult trying to decide is it a brick-and-mortar? Should it be mobile? Where do you get the money from? How do you keep the money? How do you keep the

interest? Competing in competitions and things like that keeps your name out there. Donating to this event or that event keeps your name out there but none of those things bring money in. And so it's like I'm at a place, at least right now, and I think I've been in the same spot trying to figure out how to grow, because the orders are coming in, but my home kitchen is not big enough to hold them anymore. So I have this job for space purposes. So I'm keeping it for space purposes, keeping it for the luxury of having a commercial kitchen to bake in without all the costs.

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But right now I'm at a point where even that's getting too small. And there's not a lot of guidance out there. I think definitely for women, for chefs of color-- I don't come from a lot of money. I don't have a stash of money saved up. I don't have investors, things like that. And as kind of embarrassing as it is to say I don't have a lot of education on those things. I'm kind of flying by the seat of my pants, just kind of experiencing things as I go. And so it's been rewarding knowing that people out there love what you do. They love what I do. They love my pastries. I guess a cool thing that I'm starting to realize is that I dream about pastry and so everything I dream about I put it on a plate.

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And even though it feels very discombobulated or stupid or maybe it won't taste good in my mind I put it on a plate, and everybody loves it. And so I think that's how I stay inspired.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah. Like you were talking about before with the pragmatic versus the enjoyment, having a business in baking is almost exactly that, where you have to know the business side, but you also have to be creative, and those two things can be difficult to get to go together. [Laughter]

Tie Whittaker: Well, I agree because I think a lot of people make the joke that, like, oh, it looks good, but it doesn't taste good, or it tastes good, but it looks like sh- . . . you know. Excuse me. [Laughter] So I think that it is a dual thing.

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It's like I have the creativity, I have it in my mind, I can see it, but it's hard knowing the business side. And it's hard trusting people, too. I've had to bring people in. I've had to hire a bookkeeper. I've had to hire a CPA. And you hear so many horror stories about it and so it's like you're always on edge, like, what does this number mean? What does that mean? Why didn't we include that number? What does that mean? Just trying to understand and process it all has been difficult. And it's also been difficult not having a ton of people to reference, not having a ton of black chefs or female chefs.

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I'm meeting them now but before in the beginning it was like I don't have a blueprint, and that made it even more frightening.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah. I wonder-- I have my own theories on this but I'm curious to hear yours, of why there is so little I guess mentorship would be the word for bakers in particular but, like you said, bakers of color, women of color, basically anyone that isn't a white dude.

Tie Whittaker: [Laughter] For sure.

Kelly Spivey: I'm just curious to hear what your thoughts-- why do you feel like that's been the case? And to a certain extent-- and really is still the case.

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Tie Whittaker: Well, I think, one, it's the thought of pastry. It's French. It's male dominated. If you didn't learn it this way or you didn't go to school and do it this particular way or learn the French way then what you're doing is not pastry or not as classic. And I really feel like there's that pressure to be classic. And I think sometimes it's just the pressure that we put on ourselves because what do you see on TV? Master pastry chef is someone from France, a white male, or someone that went to the best pastry school or something like that. It's, like, okay, so because I can't afford to do that or maybe because I don't want to do that then I can't be a master pastry chef either?

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And so it kinda seems like there's this standard set and, like I said, I think if you're not putting the pressure on yourself-- I think most of the time we are putting that pressure on ourself, like, geez, we're not like them, or I didn't do it that way so maybe that's why I'm having such a hard

time. I also think that pastry chefs are so secretive, and I get it. I get that way, too, sometimes.

Pastry chefs are so secretive. It's like it's always a competition, even with your friends. It's like you're smiling in each other's faces but you're, like, my chocolate cake's better. [Laughter]

There's this competition, I think, too, among Black chefs and Black foodies, I think.

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There's always something to prove. And so a lot of times instead of working together we're fighting to prove something when maybe if we just took a second to sit down and get together or to rally together-- which I think chefs are doing right now, which is great, but I didn't see that until much later. I didn't see that at first. At first it was like it just always felt like a competition and it always felt like if I didn't go to this particular school or learn this particular way that I wasn't worthy. I think as far as mentors, I don't want to make it a Black and white thing, but I've experienced-- at the Carolina Country Club-- I'll just put it out there-- we had some students come in from the CIA.

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And I always noticed that even though I had worked there the longest under this chef that anytime someone came in with, in my eyes, a better background as far as where they went to school or how much experience they had, never mind the fact that I've gotten to know this chef and we've built a rapport and I know how you like it and I know how you want things, it didn't matter. When they came in I was training them, but they were over me. And so it felt like I was a

last resort, like I wasn't given a chance because I didn't do this or go to this school. And so I think I could say the same for my husband.

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It's like he gets skipped over, you get looked over, and it doesn't matter how hard you work, and it doesn't matter how well you know this particular person, in these sorts of settings, these country clubs, these fancy hotels and things like that, it's like you have to jump through so many hoops just to get the chance that a new, fresh face out of the CIA can get automatically because of that name. And that's great. I think it's great that you went to the CIA, but I don't necessarily think it means that you're a better pastry cook or a better pastry chef because you came from there. Because I think coupled with your education you also have to have the skill, you also have to have the stamina, the work ethic, and not everybody has that.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah.

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There's something to the secretiveness of it that people don't want to share their recipes, or they don't want you to know what really goes on in the kitchen that I think ultimately is harmful to everyone. I don't think people having the same recipe, they're still not gonna make it the exact same way.

Tie Whittaker: I agree with that. 'Cause I'm on this fence right now, so this is why I can kinda say it, it's like I need help right now and as much as I would love for this to be a family

business my sisters aren't interested in baking cakes. My dad is still a very young guy at 56. He doesn't really want to be bogged down picking up fifty-pound bags of flour.

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So the family isn't interested and so that means I have to pull from outside, and that's some scary shit. Sorry. [Laughter] That's a scary thing. I think about these family recipes and having to share that with someone who's not family or having to share that with somebody that you necessarily haven't worked with. What if they want to do it differently or what if they take my recipe and claim it as their own? I think I'm starting to get to the point where what God has for you is for you, so it doesn't matter who has it. It doesn't matter who has Grandma's buttermilk pie recipe. Like you said, nobody's gonna do it the same way, and that's okay. And I want people to love my grandmother's buttermilk pie recipe.

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Hopefully it doesn't end up in somebody else's book but, I mean, if it does, then, shit, I hope they enjoy it. [Laughter] And I think I'm starting to come around to the idea of when you need help, as hard as it is, you have to fight that security blanket that you have or that protectiveness that you have and use your skills for good. I want to train other pastry chefs or people who want to be pastry chefs. I want to get to that point where I'm not so worried about who has the recipe but what can I teach you? What are you learning from me? And I want you to take that away and go start your own thing. I want you to do that because that's how you make great people and that's how you keep the industry going.

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Almost there. I'm getting there.

Kelly Spivey: [Laughter] It's kinda one of the-- the rising tide lifts all boats mentality.

Tie Whittaker: Yes. And I have so many ideas, but I want to train young people. I want to bring home ec. back to middle school. I'd like to bring it to grade school. Why shouldn't a first grader be able to make his own eggs or have that confidence? Take the fear out of the kitchen. It's dangerous and it can be very dangerous, but I think even if you don't become a chef I think it'd be very rewarding just knowing how to do something or learning how to do something for yourself that can sustain you. Even at such a young age -

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my girls are two and three - and they love helping in the kitchen. They love cracking the eggs. They love learning how to make omelets, things like that. And it's the joy that they get and the excitement and the courage that that builds in them. I want to do that for other children and for their parents, too. I think as parents just kind of letting them try things at an earlier age.

Kelly Spivey: Letting them fail.

Tie Whittaker: Yes. Letting them fail or, hey, you never know, you might have a Bobby Flay on your hands. [Laughter] You never know. People love him. People love him. You might have someone really great on your hands, and I just want to-- one thing I feel like we're lacking is the history of a lot of chefs of color, a lot of black chefs.

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And I love this project that you're doing because I hope that it brings someone to light that we never heard of but that really made a big impact out there that nobody heard of. Or just bring out more people, more families to talk about where their love started, get those recipes out there.

And I have all my grandmother's and great-grandmother's recipes and I've put my own spin on 'em and I love that. I love that for me, and I love that for them, to see that her corn pudding is now a molded dessert or something like that. She would've never thought about that, or maybe she never thought that she'd see something like that.

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Kelly Spivey: Yeah. It's kind of a way of continuing a legacy in your own style.

Tie Whittaker: Yeah. And I think that's how you pass it down. I feel like sometimes we're getting away from those things, trying to be not necessarily so original 'cause there's nothing wrong with being original but just something that we're getting away from in the age of technology and all these gadgets that do it for you. I feel like we're getting away from it and I think it's something that kids these days can benefit from.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah. I think there's always been kind of a split between the pastry school school of it where it's very professional and scientific and then the other side where you do learn from parents or grandparents and learn kind of on-the-job training but just life.

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And I don't know that those two things have to be mutually exclusive, but I think a lot of times they are portrayed that way.

Tie Whittaker: Well, I'd like to think that I'm at a point with Buttermilk Boutique now where I want to combine those two. Like you're saying they're separate but I'm, like, nostalgia is one of the big pillars of my desserts. I want it to be nostalgic. I want it to take you back to that time with your grandmother or whomever you remember that you shared a certain dessert with or an ice cream that this reminds you of. I want it to take you back there but when you look at it I want you to be totally floored by the way it looks or by how beautiful it is because I think that just because you have that poundcake flavor it doesn't necessarily have to look like a poundcake.

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And so really just kind of bridging nostalgia with luxury or beautifulness of dessert. And that's what I strive. I've found my niche; however you say it. [Laughter] So that's my thing. And I think that it's not a bad thing that they're separate. I don't think it's a bad thing if someone like me is trying to bridge it.

Kelly Spivey: Yeah. What was the first order that you had officially for your business and how stressed were you? [Laughter]

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Tie Whittaker: So let's see, my very first order. Oh, Lord. It really wasn't a Buttermilk Boutique order because I think by the time 2015 came around I had some skills under my belt,

but my first order was somebody, like, “This is what I want and here’s . . .” was a-- oh, God, it’s so horrible, and that woman paid me for it, God bless her-- but it was a birthday cake for a sorority sister of mine for her niece. And she wanted a red velvet cake with cream cheese icing and then on the outside she wanted a picture of a cupcake at the top with flowers like the cupcake filler, the topping was flowers, like buttercream flowers.

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And she was taking it to all her family. There’s a picture out there somewhere in the universe. So the cake tasted great but this was before I learned how to really make buttercream and so it was the canned icing from the store and it was just-- oh, God, Boston in the summer and it was just-- it’s already soft, that canned stuff, but you combine it with some heat, and you just got a whole heap of mess on your hands. I stuck it out, though. And you could see the cake kind of on the side coming through the frosting. And it wasn’t smooth and the cupcake at the top, I had just learned how to use the Wilton piping tip so there’s all these little white flowers at the top with little points in the middle, but they weren’t smooth ‘cause I didn’t know how to do that at the time.

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And they took pictures of it, and they ate it, and they said it was lovely. And I look back at it now and I’m, like, oh, Lord! I mean, you gotta start somewhere but it could’ve been a little bit better. [Laughter] It could’ve been a little bit better.

Kelly Spivey: That’s where you are your own worst critic.

Tie Whittaker: No, that cake was bad, honey. I'm gonna have to get the picture. I'm gonna have to get you a then and now sort thing. [Laughter] But they were very supportive, which I loved. They were very supportive, and I kept going. But it was bad. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: I don't want to see any pictures of anything that I made in the beginning because I'm sure I would have the same feeling about it.

Tie Whittaker: Oh, Lord. I made somebody's dairy-free wedding cake. Oh, God bless her.

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It was horrible. Dairy-free, and that was before you learned about aquafaba and all these cool things that can still make it look like buttercream. Honey, that's when it was just Crisco, those Crisco sticks that they tried to make look like butter, and powdered sugar. And oh, Lord! And it was gluten-free at that. Girl, I hope she enjoyed it 'cause it was a hot mess. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: Well, what do you see for-- I know you said that you're kind of at a turning point with the boutique. What are your hopes for it for the future?

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Tie Whittaker: So if everything went my way and it could be perfect my plan would be to have a brick-and-mortar, but it'd be a space large enough to where people could sit and enjoy the atmosphere. I kind of see it as like an ode to the 1950s. I saw a picture of my grandmother back in the day with her fancy dress and her kind of big hat and her fancy bucket purse and I was, like, oh, God! Imagine if she walked in the bakery sort of thing. Giving my pastries these classic

names but this really beautiful presentation, and also just being able to have that space to teach classes or to hold pastry tastings, to do popup dinners. My husband is a chef and he's one of the best out there. I mean, the man can cook with his eyes closed.

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So really just getting a chance to showcase what black pastry is to me, or African American pastry, or just what my interpretation of my family's recipes are and baking with my grandmothers, kind of what that is to me modernized. And really just giving people a chance to experience that. I do a lot of festivals right now and I love that 'cause that just gives me a chance to meet a lot of different people and put some different yet memorable or nostalgic pastries out there in the world and really just be an educational place where people can come to learn and to experience, and for them to understand that it doesn't have to be French.

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It could be your grandmother's buttermilk pie, and how do you transform that? Or how do you take your recipe and keep it consistent so that if you want to start your grandmother's poundcake business that you're not having these different mistakes. Really just getting back to the kitchen and teaching people the basics and troubleshooting. And if they want to learn something finer and fancier being a resource for them. And leaving something for my children.

Kelly Spivey: So just two more questions and then I'll let you get back to those children.

[Laughter]

Tie Whittaker: Yes, 'cause they're in there. They're doing good, though. They're watching a movie.

Kelly Spivey: [Laughter] What's it like being a pastry chef in North Carolina? I don't think that the first thing people think of when they think of North Carolina is pastry.

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Tie Whittaker: I agree. I think when people think of North Carolina and they think of pastry they think of red velvet cake, your very downhome southern grandma type cakes, and that is here. But I think that, especially in some of the larger cities, Raleigh, Durham, I'm trying to bring it to Clayton, that people are looking for next-level pastries. I think people here are very open, especially the younger crowd, the foodies, the folks who like to go out and try different things and dine. I think they get really excited about new flavor combinations or taking something old and reinventing it. I think they love it.

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I think I've had to do a little bit more putting myself out there, so I do a lot of the festivals. I do wholesaling to a restaurant down here called Plates Neighborhood Kitchen in Raleigh and really just using those platforms as a way to-- those things that I dream about, putting them on a plate and pushing them out there and see how they do. And so at first I think I was afraid of that, and I was really sticking to kinda what I knew and that wasn't hitting. I think the fact that I'm thinking outside of the box and that I'm presenting those things that I think maybe people might kinda-- you're not sure of how they would take it, I think I've been the most successful doing that.

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I think I've been the most successful not sticking just to one place, just putting myself out there. Somebody calls me, hey, we have a dinner out here in Louisburg, North Carolina. Will you come and do the dessert? And really just using those platforms, competing with the chef showdown which is really-- the North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association's Chef Showdown has really put me in some spaces that I would've never thought I'd be in as far as meeting different chefs. Working with rice and trying to put rice in desserts from some of the rice farmers that are here. And really just meeting those people and using their products and presenting them in my pastries in a way that I think will invoke nostalgia but also make people feel bougie and fancy.

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I think it's working for me. It's a little rough here in Clayton. It's a smaller town. But I think in Raleigh and Durham, and I've had some appearances in Charlotte, and they've asked me to come back, so I think just staying true to doing the crazy things that are in my mind have really helped me and have gave me a little following. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: Yeah. I'm from Rocky Mount so I totally understand.

Tie Whittaker: So you know. You know.

Kelly Spivey: Yes. Raleigh is the closest probably that has the most stuff, I guess.

Tie Whittaker: Yes, exactly. I've been out to Asheville. I love it out there, too. Asheville, Raleigh, Durham and, like I said, I'm trying to bring it to Clayton.

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I think people don't really know what they need until it gets there, until they walk in and they're, like, wow, I didn't know I needed that. I think if I ended up opening a brick-and-mortar here that's kinda what it would be like, what is this? And then you walk in and you're, like, oh, okay. I want to try that. [Laughter] I want to see what that's about. I think that's kind of where Clayton is.

Kelly Spivey: So just to wrap up, is there anything else that you would like to add? Anything that maybe I didn't ask you or that you just want to have out there, feel free to take this space for that.

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Tie Whittaker: I guess I just want to say to women chefs, pastry chefs, especially to African American chefs and pastry chefs, or those aspiring to be that, don't take no for an answer. I'd like to say keep pushing. Your idea is not stupid or dumb or worthless. [Crying] It's hard. It's hard but you're worthy and you are talented no matter what you see on the magazine covers or on the TV shows you have a place there, as well.

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So keep pushing and keep competing and keep cooking and keep showing up. And you do not deserve to be treated like shit. You don't deserve to be talked to any kind of way. And gone are the days where you have to accept those things to move forward. There are so many platforms

and there are so many chefs out here that are willing to put you in the spotlight. Don't be afraid and you can do it. Sorry. [Laughter]

Kelly Spivey: It sounds like you've definitely had some difficult people to deal with.

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Tie Whittaker: [Laughter] Girl, yes, but I will not give up. I refuse to. So whether it's a food truck or a cart or a box on the side of the road you will see Buttermilk Boutique.

Kelly Spivey: Well, thank you so much for your time. I'll stop the recording now.

Tie Whittaker: Okay.

[End]