



Victor King & Kristen Hall  
The Essential

\*\*\*

Date: December 8, 2021

Location: Birmingham, AL

Interviewer: Michelle Little

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcript

Length: Forty-three minutes

Project: Birmingham Central Business District 2022

0:00:00

Michelle Little: Okay. So today is December the 8th, 2021. This is Michelle Little interviewing Kristen Hall and Victor King at The Essential for the Southern Foodways Alliance project. So to start out, if you could each just tell me where you're from and how you got into working with food. Either one of you can go first, whoever feels chattiest.

Victor King: Chattiest. [Laughter] Yeah, absolutely. I'm from Nolensville, Tennessee. Lived there for eighteen years before I left for college. I went to Samford. I got into food because my family loves to entertain. They always love throwing a party, and we lived on a farm, so our house was kind of where everyone gathered 'cause it was a huge farmhouse. So we always entertained.

0:01:00

I did my homework in the kitchen. I grew up in the kitchen helping my mom, or just eating lots of things.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: She loves to try new things and kind of push the limits, so I grew up eating a lot of strange things around the table. Yeah. Anyway, so, yeah, we always cooked and had fun cooking for guests. So it could be anywhere from five people to two-hundred people, and anything in between, so yeah.

Michelle Little: What were some of your favorite things that y'all cooked as a family?

Victor King: Oh, my gosh! I love a casserole, so my mom, always trying whatever casserole was coming out in *Southern Living* or *Food & Wine* or *Bon App* or something like that. And we have this huge Rolodex of old family recipes, as well, so it might be some kind of riff on one of those.

0:02:02

Especially around the holidays if there was family coming over, it was only out of the Rolodex. It was only out of this huge . . .

Kristen Hall: The approved list.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Victor King: The pre-approved list that's been used for three-hundred years. And then, for just me or whatever, she would try things. I grew up eating a lot of chopped liver and things like that, like osso buco and . . . yeah. Wow. Yeah, so lots of things like that. Lots of roasts and casseroles and things like that. We did a pig roast a few times, and that's such an endeavor. But it was one of those, how hard could it be? Hard.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter] Turns out, complicated.

Victor King: Yeah.

0:03:00

Michelle Little: And then, when did you know you wanted this to be your career?

Victor King: I got my first cooking job when I was fifteen, and I use that term super loosely.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: I was washing dishes and making salads at this little café in town in between football two-a-days and stuff like that, and afterwards or whatever. And it proved too much, but that's, like, forever the ideal-- or I guess the anti-ideal of what a restaurant should be to me. It was lots of premade dressings and opening bags and things like that. So my first impression wasn't great. But I kind of, throughout high school and college, picked up some catering jobs here and there. And when I was in college, I worked in a few bars around here and just as a fry cook or whatever.

0:03:59

And I didn't really take it seriously until my senior year of college, a friend of mine who was kind of a mentor, I guess, said, "Either take it seriously or stop." He didn't want to see me just kind of not progressing in places that weren't even worth progressing in. And so he set me up with a stage at Highlands Bar & Grill, and I had planned to just stay there for a couple of weeks. That's all the money I could save up without defaulting on my rent or anything.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Victor King: And so I stayed there for a couple of weeks and then they asked me if I wanted to stay in exchange for actual money.

Kristen Hall: Um-hm. Actual work, right?

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Victor King: Yeah, actual money. So I stayed there for three years. But that was when-- I think the first three days of being there I was, like, oh, this is wonderful! This is everything.

0:05:01

So I realized that you can actually really love your job and work a bunch of hours at it. And you can cut yourself or you can--

Kristen Hall: Burn yourself, right? Yeah. You can harm yourself in many ways.

Victor King: -- and still say, yeah, I wanna come back tomorrow. I wanna try harder. And so it's just been a lifetime of that.

Michelle Little: What about you, Kristen? [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: Me?

Michelle Little: Your origin story.

Kristen Hall: Yes. It's complicated. Well, I'm from Dalton, Georgia, and I grew up in a family where my mom also cooked all of our meals. And her mother was my grandmother, obviously, but she was a catering cook. Basically, my grandfather was a golf pro, and she ran sort of the catering operation for the golf course.

0:06:00

So she was always throwing parties and champagne towers and all those kinds of things. But I grew up in a pretty conservative sort of southern family in terms of food. So I don't have a ton of memories growing up in the kitchen 'cause my mom was a bit more like cooking for function. It

was, like, please get out of the kitchen, you're getting in my way, sort of underfoot or whatever. But we grew up-- I was used to eating three meals a day that were home cooked. So, yeah, so I had a lot of experience in terms of cooking at home just as a daily life practice, I guess, but I didn't myself cook that much until I left the house. And then I moved to Birmingham, also to go to Samford. And yeah, I actually pursued a career outside of food.

0:07:05

I think we may have talked about this one before, but I also got my first food job at fifteen, so I started working in fast food in Dalton, Georgia, where I'm from, and I worked there for three years. And so I started, I was sort of in the front-of-house because I thought that was sort of what I wanted to do. I'd never really cooked food before. And I worked in the Chick-Fil-A drive-through actually for three years. And then, one day one of the cooks called in sick, and they were, like, hey, do you want to come back here and work? And I was, like, well, I don't think so but maybe.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: But I ended up working some breakfast shifts and really actually loved-- it's a different world. And so I did that for a few years, and then when I moved here, I got a server job while I was in college. So I had a fair amount of front-of-house experience, a little bit of back-of-house but mostly breading chicken and washing dishes.

0:08:02

We often say, I think we both washed a lot of dishes in our life. But, yeah, so I pursued a medical degree, sort of premed at Samford, and then I did a master's in public health, and it wasn't until 2013 that food-- I often say pastry, which is sort of how I got into the restaurant industry, it sort of chose me. And actually I was baking at home with my girls who were two and five at the time. Again, I had not really grown up in a home where food was generational in that way, and so I really wanted for my own daughters to be able to grow up around food and in food and underfoot making a big mess. And they did, in fact, do that. And so I just started baking for fun with them.

0:08:58

And then I did a pop-up shop in the fall of 2013, and the rest is history, I guess. 2014, that spring brought some farmers' markets for a company that I started called Baking Bandits. And that term or I guess that phrase comes from when the girls and I used to drop off packages at our neighbors' houses and we'd ring the doorbell and run away. And so we got sort of dubbed "the baking bandits." And so that's really where it started. And Victor and I met in 2014 and started a partnership in 2015, and here we are. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And since you were both in college at Samford and working, do you remember coming downtown? What are your memories of downtown when you each were in college?

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: Oh, my gosh.

Kristen Hall: Gosh.

Victor King: I think for me when I was in college, it was pretty much just Urban Standard.

0:09:59

I think that was the only thing downtown. And so I just didn't really come downtown that much. I remember going to the art museum and getting lost one day and just being, like, not terrified but just--

Kristen Hall: [Laughing] Right.

Victor King: -- it being so . . .

Kristen Hall: Foreign. Yeah.

Victor King: . . . foreign. 'Cause, I mean, downtown for me growing up was Nashville, and not the Nashville of today, but it was still like a bustling downtown. So to be in another city that wasn't like that was just very different.

Kristen Hall: Um-hm. Yeah. When I was at Samford, there was nothing downtown. It was pre-Urban Standard.

Michelle Little: Right.

Kristen Hall: It's really interesting though. I loved being downtown. It just had an energy, almost in anticipation, because there really wasn't anything down here. But I actually looked at lofts as I guess really the first round of lofts were getting built downtown and people looked at me like I was crazy.

0:10:59

Like, why would you do that? Downtown is dangerous! Which it is not. But, yeah, there was nothing, there was nothing here when we were here.

Michelle Little: Yeah. 'Cause I think you and I were-- I was at Samford late [19]90s.

Kristen Hall: Yup, me, too. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And just not Urban Standard, not . . .

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. I joke around, I moved to Birmingham when there was no Publix, there was no Starbucks, there was no Target, there was no Urban Standard. There was literally nothing. There were a few grocery stores but, other than that, there was the Samford Caf is what there was because there was nowhere else to eat. Yeah.

Victor King: [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Yes, exactly. So skip forward to when you guys were opening Feast & Forest. So talk me through deciding on that location and that process.

Victor King: Oh, wow. Okay.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

0:12:01

Victor King: So also Kristen had an event space called The Nest in Avondale that was very successful, and that's where you were baking out of the back.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: And so you had picked up the Revelator and Octane contracts. Octane at the Westin was opening.

Kristen Hall: Um-hm. And then Saturn, yeah.

Victor King: And then Saturn was also opening, or I guess The Satellite bar. So, yeah, it became the capacity was going way up.

Kristen Hall: Really high.

Victor King: And that's kind of when I came on, 'cause it was actually, like, oh, my gosh, I need help.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: Not like I'm much help.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: At least I'm a moral support.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. You have a set of hands, and you can, like, you know . . .

Victor King: It took me a while to be helpful, I'll say that.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: But anyway, yeah, you had The Nest, and we did some pop-up dinners and things like that. And we eventually were, like, man, we should open a café, we should open a thing.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, we're pretty good at this, you know, together, right?

0:13:02

Victor King: So you talked to your landlord, and it was all moving forward very well, and then the landlord just changed his mind last minute. But we had to do something.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. So we had planned on taking The Nest and really building a café in the space, and so we were gonna have to do some construction. And yeah, we were all systems go, and then, all of a sudden, he was, like, actually, no, I changed my mind. Because he wanted to sell the building and so he didn't really want any construction happening while he was trying to do that. And yeah, we were at capacity. We needed a real kitchen. And so we were kinda panicked.

Victor King: Yeah, it was getting panicky.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, it was a little panicky.

Victor King: But yeah, anyway, so we reached out to a guy we knew that had a photography studio that he wasn't really using as his photography business had kind of boomed into more national work.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, so he was traveling a lot. So he had this really cool studio.

0:14:01

Victor King: But he was basically just using it as storage. And so we were, like, "Would you be down to lease this?" And he agreed, but ultimately it was just not set up to be a restaurant. It

never wanted to be a restaurant. There was this whole mezzanine thing with the spiral staircase that everyone loved.

Kristen Hall: Right. Which people loved, yes.

Victor King: They still talk about, and they're, like, oh, my God, it's the café with the mezzanine. Yeah, I loved that place! I used to sit out there for hours.

Kristen Hall: Oh, I loved it! [Laughter]

Victor King: And you're, like, yeah, I used to carry pasta up those stairs.

Kristen Hall: Right. Yeah, I used to carry lattes up those spiral staircases while people were coming down the stairs. [Laughter]

Victor King: Yeah. Right, yeah. The stairway chicken was always just awful.

Kristen Hall: Exactly.

Victor King: But anyway, so, yeah, and the plumbing just didn't want to be-- there were terra cotta pipes in the parking lot.

Kristen Hall: [Laughter] It's true.

Victor King: Every time it rained the water would get weird. And so it was just, like, we can't do-- and we were so busy. We were so busy.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

0:14:59

Victor King: Within the first, what, three months or something we had opened for brunch and there was a physical fight. There was a fight for--

Kristen Hall: Right. So it was counter service, right? And so I very vividly remember this moment, and obviously, it's really a great thing to be busy, right? We were a lot busier than we ever thought, though, and so a phrase was given to us then and people use it a lot now, which is "a good problem to have."

Victor King: Oh, my gosh. [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: And then I remind people that that's a problem still.

Victor King: Still a problem, yeah.

Kristen Hall: I was walking some food out-- so the way that Feast & Forest was designed was that the front of house was completely separate from the back of house. And so you really could not see anything that was happening on either side. And I was running some food out for brunch one Saturday and Sunday and it was counter service and so people were always trying to save seats or steal seats. It was such an aggressive sort of situation.

0:16:01

And I walked out there with food to see a family physically altercating with someone else about who saved a seat, and my son was here, and whatever. And I just was, like, okay, I don't know what we did but this . . .

Victor King: People love it, but this isn't . . .

Kristen Hall: We can't have fights over avocado toast.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: So yeah, like, ninety days into our lease there, we actually started looking for new space. And so it took us a long time because, as you guys are probably learning, too, downtown is still in such a development stage that people have a lot of ideas, and then you're trying to negotiate with building owners and projects just take such a long time.

Victor King: Everything is new construction downtown. There aren't turnkey restaurants yet. So we just haven't had enough restaurants in the past few years that--

0:16:59

Kristen Hall: Have opened and closed.

Victor King: -- have opened and closed, so everything is brand new. Which design-wise is just always a huge challenge.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. So we actually signed a lease for The Essential, where we are now, in 2016, so we opened in November of 2015 for Feast & Forest, and then we signed a lease in November of 2016 for The Essential. And we didn't start construction until 2018. So it was an interesting couple of years at Feast & Forest because, as Victor said, it just wasn't meant to be a restaurant, and it was one of those things where-- thankfully, it looked great from the outside, right? It was a very successful café, and it was very quaint, and it was very cute and all those things, but from the other side it was quite the challenge.

Michelle Little: Well, and y'all's food brought so much beauty to the space, I think.

Kristen Hall: Thank you.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, and I think obviously Victor and I had never cooked food together or obviously never had a restaurant together, and so there was just lots of learning.

0:18:05

A lot of learning the hard way. But it was fun, 'cause we did, we found brunch . . . or brunch found us. ZaZa, I guess, was the only other brunch option, too. So there was just a lot of demand for brunch. Still is. So it keeps us really busy.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So tell me about the vision-- well, first of all did you look at other spaces? What all did you consider when you were thinking about . . . ?

Victor King: Wow.

Kristen Hall: We looked at so many spaces.

Victor King: We looked at countless spaces. Lots of things would kind of work out and then peter out. And so, yeah, we had kind of all the same concept in mind.

0:18:59

And of course, each space wants to tell its own story. So for some spaces it was, like, well, we can do a huge open kitchen, and someplace with a pizza oven or something; and then, some places it's, like, well, we can't really fit that in here. So there were little things that you could

kind of pick and choose conceptually, and that's something that's so important to us is letting the space kind of dictate what it is.

Kristen Hall: Exactly. Yeah. And I think through that process, and as we've continued to open shops, the architecture is really what drives the concept. And if you try to take a concept and sort of shove it into a space it just doesn't work. And so I think during that time, 'cause we looked at so many spaces, and it was, like, we were really under pressure to move because we were maxed out there. So it was, like, a really frustrating time for us because it was, like, yeah, as Victor said, something would start and it would gain traction, and then it would just vanish.

0:20:03

But I think during that time we really learned that the right thing always comes along. It always does. And so when it's not working that means it's not supposed to work there. And then we found this space, and obviously there was nothing on Morris. There are law offices and a few other places, but there was nothing else going on. And the space here has a fascinating story because it was Birmingham's first bank drive-through, and so when we looked at the space basically it was underground. So people entered the bank drive-through on Morris Avenue and basically it ramped all the way up to 1st. And so when we looked at it, it was basically still a bank drive-through, and so it definitely is living a new life for sure. Yeah.

0:21:02

Michelle Little: Yeah. So tell me about walking in here the first time. How far could you even . . . ? [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: Oh, yeah. They had a gate in the front, and you basically walked up to the bank tellers. So we had no idea. It was, like, a very long-term vision sort of process of we can see a restaurant in here, but you just don't have any sense-- there weren't walls. You had really no idea ...

Victor King: When we first looked at it, yeah, obviously you can see all the way through, pretty much. And so we were, like, we can take all of it. We can just fill the whole thing, like, straight through to 1st Avenue to where Cayo Coco is.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: And thankfully, we didn't.

Kristen Hall: Right! [Laughter]

Victor King: But it was there was no plan for it. It was just a big concrete underground thing.

0:22:04

Kristen Hall: Just a big concrete underground box. And so we excavated fourteen feet in the back of the space to basically find ground level. And then, yeah, they just turned the keys over. And there were new windows cut into the side, 'cause before it was basically just a concrete box.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: But, yeah, there were unfinished concrete walls and there was no floor. And it was just, like, okay, well, make some magic.

Victor King: Yeah. Go for it.

Kristen Hall: So we did! Yeah.

Michelle Little: So you had the lease for almost two years. How long did the actual . . . ?

Victor King: I think once construction started, like, once actual hammers and nails and things happened, it was probably, like, six months, I'd say.

Kristen Hall: About six months, yeah. We started construction in January of 2018, and we opened in July.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: I mean, looking back on it, it certainly was actually a pretty fast project--

Victor King: Yeah.

0:23:01

Kristen Hall: -- considering the fact there was no plumbing here, there was no electricity, there was no floor, there were no walls.

Victor King: How naïve we were, though. We closed Feast & Forest in May with the intention of being closed for a couple of weeks and then moving here to open and . . . [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: Two months later we were still-- yeah. And we had no other source of income. We were super naïve. What we've learned in this process certainly is, no offense to contractors, but never listen to them. Their timelines are always wrong. And so we kept asking-- again, this process, you learn to trust yourself. Like, you can see that this project is not getting close, and then the contractors are saying, oh, yeah, we've only got a couple of weeks. And so now we

know the answer is, no, you have a couple of months, actually. But we opened in July. We closed Mother's Day weekend at Feast and, yeah, with the intent to open a couple weeks later.

0:24:00

Victor King: [inaudible 0:24:01] moved over.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. And actually, the week we were supposed to open we still didn't have an air conditioner and it was in July, so it was, like, a hundred-plus degrees in here. We ended up just having to call off moving in because we were worried about our team having heat strokes. So it's been quite wild, yeah.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] And can you tell me a little bit about-- since you guys were the first in this, so can you tell me a little bit about kind of the neighborhood then coming together, like, more food and beverage moving into the Central Business District?

Victor King: Absolutely, yeah. I think we're still in that place on Morris Avenue, especially, but just in downtown Birmingham of, like, more is better. I hear about a new place opening, and I think great, that's amazing.

Kristen Hall: Great, more people.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: Not, like, oh, this is competition for us, but, yeah, the more people that come downtown, because it is still a destination.

0:25:04

Victor King: Right. And that's why the second avenue kind of corridor of restaurants works so well is because people don't go to-- they might go with the idea of going to one of them and realize it's an hour-and-a-half wait or something. And then they're, like, oh, I'll go across the street. It's not a problem. Like, there's such comfort there and there's such kind of a mass of people that I think--

Kristen Hall: It really works in your favor.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: And so the more businesses that open up down here, restaurants or otherwise, I think it's just better.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Victor King: And so, like, our whole team goes to Pilcrow after a shift, and on off days people go up to Cayo and eat. It's nice.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: It's nice to have a community like that.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, and it's nice 'cause, yeah, if something happens to you, there's a lot of people to call.

0:26:03

I know maybe in the past the history of restaurants and restaurateurs has maybe not been necessarily super friendly or more competitive. It's not even that it's not been friendly, it's just more competitive. And I think, yeah, for us, it's, like, no, we're basically all in this together. If you succeed that's great for all of us. So it's been really fun. And it was fun, too, because Laura Newman and Mudd, they were planning Queen's Park while we had Feast & Forest, and so they were in all the time having food, hanging out and talking to--

Victor King: Rachael and Feizal were drawing up The Atomic in there.

Kristen Hall: Rachael and Feizal were drawing up The Atomic while we had Feast, and so we've gotten to see lots of projects go from an idea to an actual buildout, so it's been really fun.

Victor King: Yeah. When Adam and Suzanne were planning Automatic, they were in here all the time. Rob and Emily, when they had moved to town.

0:27:02

So it's been really cool to be a part of that.

Kristen Hall: Kind of be a part of all that. Yeah.

Michelle Little: That's awesome. And so how have you seen foot traffic and crowds, especially during COVID and hopefully as we're emerging out of COVID?

Kristen Hall: Hopefully that's in the rearview, maybe. I hope. Yeah.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] We'll see.

Kristen Hall: I know.

Michelle Little: But, yeah, compared to like we were talking about when we were in college, just nothing, and then kinda how have you seen foot traffic or tourists and how is that flowing?

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: There's been a lot more tourism, I would say for sure. Just a lot of people that are coming here for the first time. Also, we still have a lot of new basically first-time guests here, but traffic has definitely picked up, for sure.

Victor King: Um-hm. And as the banks go back-- 'cause a lot of the banks are still not back to work.

0:28:03

So as that comes back up, I think lunch will continue to get bigger and bigger. 'Cause right now lunch is really great, but there's not the, like, 30-minute, let's have a meeting lunch.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: It's more the let's hang out, our day's done or whatever, those kind of lunches.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. Before the pandemic at eleven o'clock there would be a whole group of people ready to go for lunch. I'm here, I need to get here, I need to get home, or I need to get back to the office or whatever. And, yeah, because there is such limited people working downtown and so many people working from home that's still limited, but, yeah, we're getting a whole new push of afternoon traffic.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: So patterns are definitely shifting, so yeah.

Michelle Little: And then, so you've opened a production space next door.

Kristen Hall: Right. Yes.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

0:29:02

Kristen Hall: Sure. So not great timing, but we had opened our first brick and mortar for Bandit, so for the bakery in Homewood, in late November of 2019, and so the pandemic hit just a few months later. And actually pretty early on we knew that the pandemic was going to be something long term, and for us as owners, our job all of a sudden became protecting our team, right? We had protected our team before, but now this was what we had. So we ended up just closing that space and moving our production for the bakery next door. There was actually a space that had opened as a juice bar and then closed, and so it was actually really nice to be able to go into a space that had floor drains and all the strange requirements that are required by the health department and code and things like that.

0:30:01

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: And, man, it's been so nice. Obviously, new construction is very expensive, and so it was like part of us was really sad that we had closed Bandit in Homewood, and the other

part is actually really thankful because now everything is close. So now we literally walk cakes up and down the hill and we're able to sort of be present for all things. So, yeah, our production space is next door, which has been really nice, and then we will open a new retail next year.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Victor King: We can, absolutely.

Kristen Hall: Sure. Yeah.

Victor King: So we're opening two concepts in one-- it's technically one space--

Kristen Hall: Geographically it's one space, but yeah.

Victor King: -- but to the outside world, it does not look like one space. So there's coffee shop, bakery, retail situation.

0:31:02

So back to daily pastries.

Kristen Hall: Back to daily pastries, which will be really nice. Yeah.

Victor King: Yeah. Back to croissants and lattes and things.

Kristen Hall: We have lattes here and we have croissants on the weekends, but they don't get to hang out very often.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: So we are really ready, I think, to-- one of the things that we love-- I'll interject real fast, Victor--

Victor King: Oh, yeah. Go for it.

Kristen Hall: -- is the daily, right? It is the community, it's the neighborhood. It's being able to say hello to a lot of the same people. And we've been able to do that here at The Essential, but obviously have sort of lost that part of our business on the daily basis for the bakery. I don't know, there's just a lot of nostalgia and just a lot of warm and fuzzy feelings that come with being able to see the same people all the time.

0:32:00

Victor King: Um-hm, yeah. And so, yeah, very excited about that.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: Glad to be back. And then, Bar La Fête, our Parisian wine bar.

Kristen Hall: Yes. So ready. [Laughter]

Victor King: Very.

Kristen Hall: We're so ready.

Victor King: Without revealing too, too much, I think it is gonna be something that Birmingham definitely hasn't seen visually and just the feel of it, I think. We do have some other wine bars in town, and I love all of them.

Kristen Hall: We frequent them, yes.

Victor King: We frequent them, yes. So the goal, of course, wasn't to just do that again, the goal is to do something that feels uniquely Parisian. Which has its own vibe, yeah. Paris definitely has its own . . .

Kristen Hall: Its own energy.

Victor King: Its own energy and its own look, yeah.

0:33:00

Kristen Hall: And the project has-- it is a wine bar, but it has a full kitchen, so it's kind of like another playground, I think, for us in terms of menu and things like that. Traditionally, wine bars in Europe are all of those things. You can go get snacks. You can have a glass of wine. You could order lots of small plates and stay there.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: And so that's really our goal with that space is-- I think like The Essential, it's a bit of a chameleon. The guest gets to sort of define what kind of experience they want to have. So if you just want to have a glass of wine and a snack with your friend after work that's great. If you want to celebrate your fortieth birthday or your tenth anniversary, or whatever you want to do, you can also go and just blow it out, right? So our goal is to sort of design a space where you can do a lot of different things.

Victor King: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

0:33:59

Michelle Little: And you talked about when you look at each space, each space has its own story.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: Oh, yeah.

Michelle Little: So when you were scouting spaces for this new concept, can you tell me a little bit about that space, maybe, and how the space informed what you're trying to do or vice versa?

Kristen Hall: Sure.

Victor King: Yeah. So this space particularly, there's columns kind of running down the middle and they're load bearing, so they're not going anywhere.

Kristen Hall: Right.

Victor King: But they're so wonderfully spaced out. And so being able to kind of use that as, like, how do we have a space that uses these features? And it's got this beautiful, huge, tall windows in the front but really nowhere else as the space kind of darkens on the way back.

0:35:00

And so, yeah, we looked at it and we were, like, well, there's two different feelings in this space. And so how do you own that? And so I feel that's really what we've done is kind of had a more

bright and airy front to it. The bakery will also have those huge windows, so you get this big, natural light. And then, as you progress back in the space in the bar, you end up with--

Kristen Hall: Dark and stormy. [Laughter]

Victor King: -- dark and stormy and moody, yeah, and kind of a little bit more cozy.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. And we did, we looked at a lot of different spaces, and I think we were kind of struggling through, do we want to have a completely separate storefront for the bakery and then have a bar? If we put them together, we want them to feel separate, 'cause we didn't want something that was like a bakery that transitioned into a bar, we wanted very separate footprints.

0:36:01

And so when we say this space, there were already two storefront doors built into one singular space, and so it was really kind of perfect, actually. So from the front, it will look like Bandit and Bar La Fête are completely separate. They won't look anything the same. And if you didn't know us, you wouldn't know they were both ours, but they're actually connected in the back, and so we're able to share a lot of resources. So instead of building two completely separate spaces, we get to build sort of like 1.5, so it's been good.

Michelle Little: And this is the mercantile.

Kristen Hall: Yeah.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. So we are at Mercantile on Morris. So it's nice. It's only, like, a block and a half from where we are now. And our production space will stay exactly where it is. I think Victor and I have had enough trauma of moving bread ovens.

Victor King: I don't wanna move that oven anymore.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: Yeah. Basically equipment that is larger than life, and so it turned out that that production space for us is actually really great.

0:37:02

So it serves as our central space for baking, 'cause we also have wholesale restaurant accounts, as well. And so now we just have one team that bakes for four or five different ventures. So, yeah, we'll basically walk croissants down the street every morning to the retail store, so it's good.

Michelle Little: I feel like there's a story about moving the bread oven. That sounded very . . . [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: [Laughter]

Victor King: Oh, it's just a whole thing.

Kristen Hall: It's a whole thing.

Victor King: It's bigger than any doorway ever.

Kristen Hall: So you have to take all of the windows off of any space.

Victor King: Yeah. What does that thing weigh, like two-thousand pounds or something? So you can't just turn it on its side.

Kristen Hall: Right. And we knew that there was a concrete curb, we explained there was a concrete curb, and then we get our folks moving the oven and they thought that they were just gonna be able to wheel it through the open doorway.

0:38:02

And so trying to get a two-thousand pound--

Victor King: But they had also already constructed the pony wall at the bakery.

Kristen Hall: Right. So we had these half sort of like pony walls, and so it was, like, oh, now you have to get that over a wall.

Victor King: It was just a comedy of errors. But it's in there now.

Kristen Hall: Exactly. So thankfully it's in a great place.

Victor King: Yeah, it's in its home.

Kristen Hall: And our production space is really great. And there's space to expand if we need to expand or sort of adjust things. But it's nice to know that all of that equipment, mixers that are bigger than me and all that kind of jazz, could just stay right where they are. And then we'll be able to have-- it's a petite patisserie, so it's gonna be really fun. We actually just got back from a trip to New York, and we bought a vintage train rack, like a luggage rack, for all of our breads to go in the bakery, too.

0:39:04

So it's been fun.

Victor King: Yeah, lots of fun vintage finds.

Kristen Hall: Yeah, absolutely. So . . . excitement!

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Kristen Hall: So we start construction in about six weeks, so here we go again.

Victor King: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: Yes.

Michelle Little: I'm so excited! Okay. So I know we're running close here, but is there anything we haven't covered-- y'all have so many different spaces and such a footprint downtown-- is there anything we haven't talked about about your journey downtown and your businesses that you wanted to talk about, that you want people to know?

Victor King: I feel like we hit pretty much everything.

Kristen Hall: Yeah. And it's been really fun because I think, for us, we've been the ambassadors of downtown.

0:39:59

And thinking back when both of us moved to Birmingham, different seasons of life, but I never would've imagined being here. And a lot of people move to Birmingham to do undergrad and then they're, like, I'm getting out of here, right? And so I think for us it's been really fun to be ambassadors of downtown, but also now we have a lot of guests who live over the mountain, which has its benefits. And there's some really great schools and a lot of other things, but it's been really fun for a lot of our regulars to be, like, well, I brought my neighbor down here and she said she was concerned about the safety of downtown, but I think she feels comfortable now.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Kristen Hall: And so that's been actually the really fun part is that we feel very comfortable downtown. We love downtown. It is who we are, and I actually will say this, we're never gonna open a shop outside of downtown, right? We're never doing that again. [Laughter]

0:41:01

Victor King: No.

Kristen Hall: No offense, but there is so much energy that's lost when you have to get in a car and drive somewhere else when you own another business. Which we, again, learned the hard way. But it's been really fun to see people become comfortable coming downtown and knowing that it is, in fact, not dangerous. And it seems silly to us, but for a lot of people there was a time that downtown wasn't as safe as it is now. So it's been fun to see a revitalization and that comfort level change over time, especially with our sweet old grandmas that live in Mountain Brook.

And, you know, well, I brought my friends down here and they loved it. They felt safe. So anyway, that's been fun to sort of be an ambassador for a certain part of the city. Yeah, it's cool.

0:42:03

[End]