

Where Are They Now? Jenn Smurr of Born & Bread Bakehouse ===

Dalia: [00:00:00] Hey, it's Dalia, and I spent my summer vacation catching up with some past Zest guests. I couldn't wait to share the updates with my friends at Florida Matters Live and Local. Have a listen

Matthew: Welcome back to Florida Matters live and local.

I'm Matthew Peddie. Well, this summer, The Zest Podcast is checking in with some past guests. Now, if you're from Lakeland, you probably know Born & Bread Bakehouse. Jen Smurr owns the wildly popular bakery, and back in 2019, The Zest host, Dalia Colon, visited Smurr to interview her for a series about honey.

The bakery uses local honey in many of its recipes, and here's Smurr from that Zest interview in 2019.

Jenn: It's really important for people to realize just about the importance of what bees provide for our culture from a standpoint of everything can't be readily available. And if we don't protect the society of bees or what they're producing and value honey and their life more There's such an important part of what we think about not only our livelihood, but the food [00:01:00] culture in the United States and beyond that revolve around these bees and revolve around slowing down and respecting things a little bit more, and I think that can only come from education.

Matthew: And now Smurr, in that interview, talked with Dalia in detail about honey is used in the products that she and her team create at Born and Bread, about the local honey suppliers, and her favorite variety of honey.

Jenn: My personal favorite honey might be buckwheat. It's made from honeybees that are, are living off of the buckwheat plant, and it creates this very dark amber colored honey.

It's very rich. It's not for everyone, but this like caramelized flavor that comes with it and this depth of earthiness is so unique that I think it's, it's... So it's fun for someone to try it.

Matthew: That is Jen Smurr, owner of the wildly popular Lakeland bakery Born and Bread Bakehouse talking with The Zest host Dalia Colon back in 2019.

Now, Dalia checked back in with Smurr recently, and she joins us now. Welcome back to Florida Matters: Life Local.

Dalia: Happy to be here.

Matthew: So how did Jennifer Smurr get [00:02:00] started with baking?

Dalia: Yeah, I think for a lot of us it was that COVID, you know, uh, sourdough. But, but Jen is an OG baker. She was looking for a change from the fashion industry, and she started studying under, uh, Zach the Baker, who's another wildly popular baker in Miami and a past Zest guest.

Mm-hmm. So in 2015, she started selling bread at a local farmer's market, and she would sell out before the market even opened. Wow. So today she runs Born and Bread.

Matthew: Now, what was her life like then, both professionally and personally, when you first met her back in 2019?

Dalia: Well, I think she was all in on the bakery, which she still is, you know, busy career woman, focused on that, didn't necessarily want kids, and the brick-and-mortar location was open just a few days a week.

Matthew: Now, you talked to Jen just a few months before COVID-19 changed all of our lives, and since then, many people have gotten into baking. You mentioned that the sourdough trend that took off during 2020. What is Jennifer's advice? W- what is Jen's advice for [00:03:00] baking bread?

Dalia: It's the thing nobody wants to hear.

It's patience. I need that. Have you ever made sourdough successfully?

Matthew: Uh, we've ha- we have tried making sourdough. I mean, the, the challenge I think is getting the, what do you call it, the starter or what is the, the little-

Dalia: It's the star- that was my problem, too. Yeah. Yeah, send help, you listening. Yeah, but you can't rush a natural process.

I mean, she told me that croissant dough takes three days, and It's been really fun catching up with these past Zest guests over the summer, but I think Jen takes the cake, no pun intended, for the biggest life updates, including the birth of her twin girls. And you know nothing will teach you patience like kids.

Matthew: Wow. But the bakery's still going strong?

Dalia: Very much so. They're open more hours now, more days of the week. I was just there. I had the, uh, you know, nice work if you can get it, I had to go back to the bakery to interview Jen, and of course, I had to leave with some goodies.

Matthew: Yeah, indeed. Now let's take a listen to that interview now.

Dalia: Okay. Of all the people I've talked to so far, I feel like you've had the biggest where are

they [00:04:00] now updates-

Oh, man ... which is

so exciting. I last saw you in 2019. Yeah.

Wow.

So much has changed.

Jenn: Right, like what even was before COVID? I cannot remember life.

Yeah. I can't. I was a completely different leader than I am now in the bakery.

I didn't have twin baby girls.

Dalia: Insane.

Jenn: Um, COVID had not happened, right? Which changed the dynamic of our entire business. Before it was like you came, you got what you got, we sold out fast. And then we started pre-ordering systems, um, which have changed and adapted over the years, trying to figure out how to meet the, the needs of our guests, and yeah, the expectations maybe even more than the needs.

Yeah, so much has changed. I'm a mom.

Dalia: Amazing. That's gotta be the biggest change.

Jenn: Yeah.

Dalia: So what changed in your working life?

Jenn: In some ways, the things that I thought were important weren't. And in other ways, I learned how to be much more efficient. I think that the way that I valued my team changed a lot, right?

I saw them in a different, in a different way. [00:05:00] They were always kind of like my kids, but I didn't birth them, and I had never birthed anything. And I think as a mom, your idea of human beings or the human life really could never shape until you became a mom, right? And I'm trying to figure out how do I de- develop them for the world, for themselves, and I don't think I had the patience prior to motherhood, um, that I needed as a leader to develop the team the same way that, like...

I think for, for me, one of the biggest gains that I've had from being a mom is patience

Dalia: That's beautiful.

Jenn: Yeah.

Dalia: Yeah. Yeah. It, like, unlocks this portal to this- Yes ... whole other world, and you're like, "Oh, people have been living in this world? What was I doing?"

Jenn: Yeah.

Dalia: Yeah. It's pretty wild. Okay. So we chatted right before the pandemic.

Yes. How did that affect your business? I mean, everybody started baking, thinking they could- Sure ... bake bread at home.

Jenn: I love that, by the way.

Dalia: Oh, you do?

Jenn: Oh, yeah. We give sourdough to, like, anyone who comes in. They're like, "Do you have sourdough culture? Do you sell it?" I'm like, "You can have it. Go home. Have fun. Kill it. Bring- Oh ... come back. I'll give you more."

Dalia: I've already killed one.

Jenn: I'll, i'll give [00:06:00] you more. Welcome to the club.

Wow. Yeah. Amazing.

Yeah.

Okay.

But how did it change our business? We have an incredible community. I really feel like there was this part of Born & Bread from the beginning, which was kind of this, like, phenomenon.

It's like right place, right time, right community, right product. You couldn't really, like... I don't know that I could have a recipe for Born & Bread in another city to have worked just like it did here. So during the pandemic, really, like, our community came, and I can remember, especially towards the beginning, we were on the luckier side.

I had a business manager who was like, "Seriously, you have to cap production. Your team can't handle it." And that's h- that's the type of support that we had from the- Wow ... everyone wanted us to make it through and to succeed. But we, we did everything that we could to get through.

Dalia: Yeah. And clearly you did.

Yeah. It's packed. We're here on a Wednesday, a bustling day. When I spoke to you before, we were specifically focusing on honey, because we were- Oh ... in the middle of a series- Okay ... about honey and- And- ... we talked all about your honey lemon pie. [00:07:00] I don't know if that's still on the menu. That's right.

Are you still baking a lot with honey?

Jenn: We do still bake a lot with honey. In fact, we are teaming up with the National Honey Board again in September, and, um, really try our best at this point to focus on the... We've always focused on quality, but really the type of ingredients, right? So pretty soon we'll be a no seed oil bakery. We're trying our best to, like, incorporate honey more into the recipes that we're producing.

But yeah, we have a new honey maker. Um, he's awesome. Honey is so expensive, though. So, like, even just getting the team to value it. Like, earlier there was a honey- We call them honey buckets. That's what they're delivered in, and I was like, "Dude, look at all this honey in the back of this, the bottom of this bucket.

Like, can we please respect what it takes to make this?"

Dalia: Respect the honey.

Jenn: Yeah.

Dalia: Yeah. It's a weird question because baking is, you know, a tradition as old as mankind. Yeah. But there are always trends, like the Cronut. Okay. So what are you seeing? What are people coming in and asking for?

Jenn: I try to not be super trendy, right?

[00:08:00] Like almost the, the year that we had started, there was really only one other bakery, two total, doing a cruffin. So I try not to be a trendy bakery, more so focusing on like what's the next thing we can do texturally with one of the pastries that we're, that we have, right? What's the next thing that we can do flavor combination-wise, or maybe there's a shape.

Being playful and artistic is great, um, but fads come and go. And so I think like we don't wanna be known as a bakery who's always trendy, but just like classic, modern, consistent. And trendy doesn't always fit into those, but I'm sure people think that we're trendy, right? We're popular with young people at times.

Now especially that we're open Tuesday through Saturday is probably one leaning a little bit more in the cafe. Everyone knows we can bake, right? Uh, other people even tell us, uh, with nominations we can bake. I've heard about that.

Um, but I think that, um, for us it's time to kind of shine into an area that I, I miss whenever I go out into Lakeland, and that's some of the cafe things that we could do, whether it's bowls or different sandwiches, [00:09:00] salads.

Yeah.

Dalia: Nice. Okay, since you brought it up, James Beard.

Yeah.

OMG.

Yes.

So tell me everything.

Jenn: Yeah. Actually, it was s- it came at a really wonderful time. Uh, we had just started the, the year. Was actually gearing up for potentially a huge move with Born & Bread in terms of the business side of things, which I've kind of backed away from.

But in, in that moment, I was here. It was a busy day. We had some friends coming in from Canada, and they were in the kitchen with us that day, and so I was kind of hosting someone, and my phone just would not stop blowing up. And I'm at, I had been in, uh, St. Pete, uh, earlier that week with them, and so I, I have a St.

Pete friend that had written, and I was like, "I wonder if she just saw us around and she's wondering what we were doing." So I opened up my phone, and it just says like, "James Beard bleep." Oh my gosh. Finally, right? And it was like, "Oh my gosh. Congratulations, Paulina." And this is the owner of Cafe Clementine in St. Pete, and I was assuming she was saying she had gotten nominated. She was like, "No, you, Born & Bread." And I was like, "What?" And then that's when I just, like, saw every other message of [00:10:00] friends in our industry, that it was like, yeah, it was such a, such a rewarding nod, like an encouragement to continue to go in the area that we are as a team.

It means a lot to me that it was outstanding bakery and not outstanding baker. It was really fun. It set our team up also to be very inspired by what we're doing and the reason why we do it the way that we do it. Yeah.

Dalia: I just love this for you. Okay, so this was earlier this year, James Beard Award semifinalist- Yeah

for best bakery.

Yes.

I don't even think people understand how difficult that is. To even get onto that list-

Jenn: I don't think so. I

don't think so ...

incredible. Yeah.

Dalia: Incredible, and very well deserved.

Yeah.

Okay, I shouldn't even be asking you this, but what's next?

Jenn: Um, what's next? As a business, we're gonna continue to make opportunities for the team that we have.

We're looking at opening up on Sundays, so I'm really excited about that. I think it would lean a little bit more brunch. There's something like being from Lakelands and being, waking up on a Sunday and saying, "I want X, Y, or Z," and like, "Ah, I can't get it until 11:00," or whatever. So I think keep providing for the team.

On a personal [00:11:00] level, my girls are growing. They're about to be three in less than a month, so that's exciting. And, um, I'd like to qualify for Boston. Oh. It's one of the major marathons. And it's a really hard one to get into.

Dalia: You're getting in.

Jenn: Yeah.

Dalia: You are.

Jenn: Yeah, I've, I've got to shave off a lot of time, but-

Dalia: You got this.

Jenn: I think we're close.

Dalia: Yeah. You got this. You've come this far. Yeah. It was so great to catch up with you. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that you wanted to mention?

Jenn: No, you have such, such a great ability to ask new questions and- Keep me smiling.

Dalia: Thank you.

You make it-

Jenn: You are so lovely ...

Dalia: you make it so easy.

Thank you so much.

Yeah. This was

fun.

Yeah.

Matthew: That, uh, was Dalia Colon, host of The Zest podcast, talking with Jen Smurr of Born & Bread in Lakeland.

Dalia: Don't you just love a good where are they now update? Thanks so much to our friends at Florida Matters: Live and Local, which you can listen to Monday through Thursday from noon to 1:00 PM on WUSF 89.7.

You can listen on wusf.org, or you can even watch the show on YouTube. How fun is that? I'm Dalia [00:12:00] Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF. Copyright 2026, part of the NPR network.