

Selling Homemade Desserts for 17 Years with Lauren Cortesi

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager podcast, where I talk with cottage food businesses about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today I am talking with Lauren Cortesi.

Lauren lives in Pennsylvania and runs a home food business called [Bella's Desserts](#). She has actually been doing this for 17 years, and to put that into perspective, when Lauren started her business, almost no states even had a cottage food law.

Pennsylvania is unique in that it was one of the only states that had a cottage food law before the Great Recession. They didn't even call it cottage food back then. They actually call them limited food establishments, but that's the reason why Lauren's been able to run this business legally for so long.

Not only does Lauren run a cottage food business, but she occasionally even teaches classes on starting a home baking business. Clearly, Lauren has a lot of experience to share with us today, but one thing I appreciate about her is that she always keeps it real. She's never afraid to be honest and talk about some of the downsides of the industry, and that it's not a good fit for everyone. So I expect to hear a well balanced perspective on today's episode. And with that, welcome to the show, Lauren. Nice to have you here.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:01:23] Thanks David. It's nice to talk to you in person after so long.

David Crabill: [00:01:28] Yes. You were one of the first people on Forrager so it's great to talk to you too.

So I wanted you to go back to when you started the business. Why did you start from home, and take me through those first few years.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:01:44] Okay, so in 2000 I was 38 years old. I was pregnant with my first and only child. I was at the time I was commuting into Philadelphia every day, which was an hour and a half commute. I was an interior architect in my previous life. I decided that I wanted to stay home and raise my child, and luckily for me, I have a wonderful husband with a wonderful job, and we were able to survive on one income. My daughter was born in July of 2001 and after about a year I was going stir crazy. For so long I had worked in a professional environment. I now find myself at home in an area that I really spent very little time in, and I started looking at things I could do while still being a stay at home mom.

I love to cook. I've cooked professionally in restaurants. I thought about, catering from home. In Pennsylvania, you cannot cater from home; you need to have an absolutely separate kitchen from the rest of the house as that falls under the department of health. I was, at a mommy and me class with my daughter in November of 2002, and was talking to a friend about some ideas and she said, Hey, if you do some baking, I have an event coming up that I would hire you for.

So I ran home that night and I jotted down a menu and gave it to her. And she was my first order.

As an aside, my daughter was born with food allergies. And when she turned one at the time in 2002 you couldn't just go to a bakery and buy a vegan birthday cake. So I started an allergen free baking company and offer things like cakes and cookies and brownies. that lasted a little while and then I decided I wanted to expand into full blown dessert catering.

So from 2002 until my daughter started kindergarten, I did a lot of research. I started a free website. I, did work for friends, did a lot of free stuff for churches and everybody that called. And by the time she hit kindergarten, I was ready to go legal, publish my website now with prices, contacted, the department of agriculture to be inspected, and just hit the ground running because I spent that four years kind of doing research and getting ready.

So that's kind of my story of how I got started.

David Crabill: [00:04:10] Okay. So there's a lot in there. You clearly wanted to start this business from home cause you initially wanted to do a catering business and that wasn't possible legally. So you did a major shift in what you wanted to do just in order to work from home. Is that correct?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:04:28] Correct. Where I live, it's too far out of the city to have been a contractor for interior architecture, and I've always loved cooking and baking. And like I said, I've done it professionally. My whole life, was in interior architecture, and my next passion was food and decided that's what I was going to do. You know, after a lot of thought and research came up with dessert catering.

David Crabill: [00:04:51] So what were your main goals with this business? Were you trying to have something to do and take time or were you wanting to make a lot of money with it? What was your thinking back then?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:05:04] Then it really was to have something to do. Honestly, as I mentioned, we could survive on, one salary. I wanted to be paid for what I did. I knew I was never going to make enough money to support us as a family, but I thought, Hey, you know, these few dollars, I can buy my own equipment, I could go to some cake shows. That's really what my initial goal was, was to fund myself business wise.

David Crabill: [00:05:33] So let's take it up to present day. What does your business look like now? In contrast, what are your goals now what's the difference today from back then?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:05:45] Wow. That's a big jump. Cause now we're in to 17 years. I started realizing that I needed to make more money because my daughter was entering high school, and I realized, Oh, she's gonna start college soon. I want to be able to contribute more. Now at this point, I had, bought and paid for a car which was great and gratifying. Didn't come out of the family funds. So I've got to get the exact car I wanted, which was great for deliveries. I was able to fund going to cake shows around the country. I was able to buy clothes with my own money, and I was able to buy some really cool baking equipment, but now I needed to make more to help with college.

I contacted a person who started doing cake talks on Facebook. His name is [Jay Qualls](#). I'm sure most of the audience knows who he is, and at the time he was offering, you know, for 100 bucks, let's talk about your business, where you want to go, what you want to do. So I was like, okay. Let's do it and called him up and we clicked.

I ended up paying him for his services. We completely revamped my business model to make more money to reach a higher clientele. I revamped my website. I revamped my menus, took off a lot of things. Now that I knew how to price correctly, I had to redo my menu because people just were not going to pay what I needed to charge for certain items such as pies and tarts.

It was a rough year. This was about four years ago. I lost a lot of business, in that one year. And as Jay kept saying to me, you're not losing your customers. Your customers will come. Those are not your customers. And that's still to this day goes through my head. I wasn't feeling good about putting out cakes for 30 bucks that I had spent hours on and I just was in a rut. Now I'm charging correctly and I feel so great. I am making enough to contribute to college. That's where I'm at today is just keep on going. Last year I did double the amount of the business the year before, hoping this year will be just as good.

David Crabill: [00:07:58] Okay. So you're talking a lot about what's known as an ideal customer avatar, or who your right customer is. Who would you say you've learned your ideal customer is?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:08:10] My absolutely ideal customer doesn't care about the costs. They care about the quality, they care about the relationship. And they care about pleasing their guests more than they care about the money.

David Crabill: [00:08:25] So Lauren, can you tell us what you make in your business? What is your menu?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:08:31] So because my market is more high end, my menu has gotten much smaller than it used to be in the beginning. Now it consists of cakes and cupcakes, which are available allergen-free various levels of allergen free goods, because my new motto is no one should go without a beautiful, delicious cake on their special day.

I also have a full line of mini desserts given the new dessert bar trend. I also have a line of pastry shop cakes is what I call them. Everything from strawberry shortcake to dacquoise to a variety of other higher end cakes that aren't specialty cakes. I also have a small menu of confectionary, which include things such as, caramels, chocolate covered Oreos, macarons, meringues, and so forth, again, to help furnish the dessert tables.

So I've limited quite a bit in my mind as I was limiting it towards high end events such as weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, baptisms, showers, and so forth.

David Crabill: [00:09:41] And what is your price point in general for a number of your items?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:09:46] So my cupcakes, cupcakes are tough. I used to charge, I think I started at a dollar then \$1.50 and then 2 and they were at \$3 for a lot of years, but whole

foods moved in. And I went there because I didn't know how much their items cost, and they were charging \$3.50 for a cupcake.

I tried their cupcake. It was certainly very dry. We know, you know, grocery stores don't make stuff from scratch in the back. and so I was like, Hey and I raised my cupcakes. They start at \$3.50, and I have about 20 flavors in that price range. And then they go up from there. \$4 for fancy ones, which I consider to be filled, cupcakes with more exotic frostings and toppings, and then my Allergen ones are at \$4.50 each. My wedding cakes start at \$5 per serving, which is about average for this area. There's a bakery that's lower in a bakery that's higher. But that's priced higher than I actually need it to be for my cost structure. But because of the other bakeries, I placed it at five, and it's been there for several years.

My specialty cakes are priced on size. I have base prices, with minimal decoration, and then it goes up from there based on labor and if they go beyond my basic, flavors. My decorated cookies start at \$4, average is \$6 per cookie. So those are my most popular items.

David Crabill: [00:11:17] How long does it take you to make an individual cookie? Have you figured that out?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:11:22] From start to finish, from making the cookie dough to rolling it out, to cutting the cookie, to baking the cookie, to frosting the cookie, to decorating the cookie and the drawing time.

Technically it is two days, and the majority of that time is drawing time of the icing.

David Crabill: [00:11:38] And how many cookies can you make in two days?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:11:42] I can make probably in two days, depending on the level of decoration, average, let's say 50 cookies in two days. There's just too much involved and it depends on the level of decoration. I do a lot of watercolor. I do a lot of, drawing as opposed to piping. Those obviously are a lot faster. But if it's like my Christmas cookies where there's a lot of piping and colors and everything else, those just takes so much longer. So I have to say probably between 50 and a hundred, depending on the level.

David Crabill: [00:12:15] Okay, so you can make about a hundred to \$200 per day with the cookie side of the business for a custom order.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:12:22] Well between four and \$6 per cookie. So more than that.

David Crabill: [00:12:26] Oh, I see. Because it's \$4 is the base price,

Lauren Cortesi: [00:12:29] Yeah. \$4 is for like the level one cookies. \$6 is the level two, which is all the piping. So if that's 50 cookies in two days, that's 50 times six. So that's \$300 in two days.

David Crabill: [00:12:44] Got it.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:12:45] That's pretty good.

David Crabill: [00:12:46] Yeah, I mean, your pricing is definitely right about where I think it should be for a cottage food business. I see a lot of businesses that are priced much lower than that.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:12:58] Well, that all came and how I started pricing because this is what you saw online and people are still doing this 17 years later, your ingredients times three. Right? How many times have you heard that calculation? We all did it, and that's why I was so angry and why I hired a business consultant, because when I did the calculations based on what I should charge, I was paying people on average \$50 to take a cake from me.

David Crabill: [00:13:28] I totally agree with that. And it's something I hear a lot still today. Or if people say, you know, calculate your ingredients. Add up your time, add up this add up that, and then you have your costs and it's like, well, the market really determines your cost.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:13:41] It does, and it doesn't. And in my case, I was a lot higher than my market, but as Jay promised, they will come and they did. But like I said, that first year was rough. I lost a lot of my old customers. If you think about it, ingredients for a cake average less than \$5 for an eight inch cake. They really do.

If you're only charging \$15 you're not charging for your overhead. You're not charging for your labor. You're not charging for the gas it took you to get to the grocery store. You're not charging for any of that. So if you think about it that way, that your ingredients are less than \$5 and you're only charging \$15 but there's no way! You're paying that customer to take your food out of your hands.

Over the years, I've seen so many people argue about upping their prices because they say, no one will pay me for that. And what we always say to them is, then don't go in to business. If people around you don't understand that you need to charge this, then there's no market for you where you live.

That is the truth, and that is the bottom line as opposed to just doing ingredients times three or even less, or should I do it for free because they're a friend of someone I know or you know, you always get those questions and we always started out doing that way, but bottom line is never do anything for free.

If you can't charge what you need to charge, then you need to find another type of work.

David Crabill: [00:15:22] So do you think this industry is only suitable for hobbyists or people who can only afford to work part time.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:15:30] You know, there are so many different ways to be a home-based Baker, and there are so many different laws all over the country. I know, for instance, in New York, right? You can only sell at farmer's markets. You can't sell from your home. So the people that go to the farmer's markets, whether they be permanent booths indoors somewhere I think you can make a living doing that because you have all the foot traffic. It's, it's kind of the same as having a brick and mortar, right? You're setting up a table. People are walking by and people are going to buy your stuff, and I think you can make a living doing it that way. But just working from home in your kitchen with a family... I just, I don't know

how, like you said. Maybe people that just do high-end wedding cakes, probably, yeah. But then you pretty much have to have a wedding cake every weekend.

And again, it depends on where you live, right? Where I live, it's super expensive. Rent here for a two bedroom apartment is \$2,000 a month. But if you live in the middle of the country somewhere where you can get a two bedroom apartment for a few hundred dollars a month, well then maybe you will make some money. So again, there's so many factors and where you live as a big part of that.

David Crabill: [00:16:45] So if you were starting this business today, what would you choose to do differently, or how would you go about starting the business without knowing anything about food businesses.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:16:59] If I was to start today? I would have to do some research into the state to see if it was allowed. Pretty much all of that is the same, that basic research into your state I think you're the only website really, that makes it simple and easy to go on and see if it's even feasible. I highly recommend everybody go to forrager.com and check and see if you can do it.

I would join the Facebook groups, because there are so many, there are several for home based businesses. And there's a lot of people within those groups. And then I would look at my area. How many bakeries are there? Lucky, there's only two. I would also look at how many licensed home-based bakers there are here. I would look at, which is exactly what I did last time, was research pricing, see what other places are charging. The big thing I would learn that I didn't learn that time was how to charge for my products the right way.

So I think that's really how I would approach it today is similar to what I did back then. But you would have the community in those Facebook groups to throw questions out at and ask questions of, which would have been really nice back then, instead of second guessing yourself all the time and being alone doing it.

David Crabill: [00:18:25] So it sounds like you're recommending a relatively passive approach to starting the business where you do a lot of research. You'd take an analysis of the landscape, and then I guess the goal is to figure out if you even want to start the business.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:18:40] Yes, absolutely. You have to look at also your family's situation. How many kids do you have? What times of the day are you going to be able to bake? Are you doing this pocket money? Are you doing this to support your family? So there's a lot of factors to think about first.

David Crabill: [00:18:58] And so what sort of circumstances would you have had to see to decide you would not want to start your business.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:19:08] I was lucky. We had enough money that I could purchase all the equipment I needed, all the cake pans I needed. All of that kind of stuff because let me tell you, it is not cheap. I think that would have stopped me if I couldn't afford to buy cake pans and I couldn't afford to have a mixer and I couldn't afford to buy the ingredients. All of that

would have stopped me in my tracks, but you wouldn't know that unless you did research first.

David Crabill: [00:19:34] I know that you've talked with a lot of people about their cottage food businesses or aspirations to be a home baker. What type of person do you think a cottage food business would be good for?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:19:48] A self starter, someone who's not afraid to put themselves out there because the marketing aspect of this, to this day, is my biggest struggle. So you have to have that entrepreneurial spirit, which is all about self-starting and not relying on others because you're on your own. You have to be able to not second guess yourself and make good decisions, and also be able to take risks. So if you're that kind of person, then go for it because in the end, if you're pricing right and you have the type of clients you want, this is one of the greatest jobs I've ever had.

David Crabill: [00:20:28] I'll also add in there, I've noticed you seem like a very adaptable and flexible person. You are willing to adapt your vision for this business to fit the needs of the laws, your market, et cetera. So do you think that that's another major factor for being an entrepreneur?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:20:47] Absolutely. I've met many bakers, especially professional ones; they're very stubborn to change. They're very stubborn about listening to advice. And that's a real problem. I think that's a real problem to run any business, really, is not listening to people who have way more experience than you.

And there are several bakeries in my area that have gone out of business, not home-based, but regular bakeries, for various reasons. Most of them, I got to say, are, customer service. And that goes along with the stubbornness. You know, if you think your cakes are the best in the world and there's nothing ever wrong with them, then this is not the business for you.

And I'm not going to say the customer is always right, because they're not, but you have to be open to criticism.

David Crabill: [00:21:35] Let's talk about marketing a little bit. You said that it's the hardest thing to do. Share with us some tips or strategies or things that have worked well for you in terms of getting yourself out there.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:21:47] The first thing I did was start a website, a free website. This was way back when it wasn't optimized. I didn't know about tags and, that kind of stuff. We didn't have Facebook, you remember. We didn't have any of those things, so what I did was I started a website. Then I contacted some local newspapers. I ended up getting interviewed for some of those local newspapers. And I was lucky to be interviewed by them, but you really gotta put yourself out there. Now, back then also, I did everything. It was like, Oh, you have to pay for leads, you know, pay the Knot, pay WeddingWire.

So one of the things I did, which really didn't pay back was pay per click. Now that's still a thing, but back then, that was one of the biggest ways to get your name out there, and that was through Google. And what that means is you can put an ad on Google and you can pay

per click, meaning, every time a customer clicks on your ad, that goes to your website, you paid a certain amount of money to Google.

I spent a lot of money doing that, which as you can imagine, I didn't have a lot of money to do that, and it really didn't pay off in the end, so I stopped paying for clicks. Then I started paying for leads, through various places, which ended up also costing me a ton of money and didn't pay off in the end.

So what did work in the end, I kept remaking my websites. Now my website is hosted on GoDaddy. I have my own domain, which is really important, and I paid to have it optimized. And what that means is search engine optimization is the most important thing you can do after you build a website because you can have a beautiful website with lots of beautiful pictures and everything else, but it won't get anywhere unless it's optimized. And I don't understand how to do it, which is why I hired someone to do it.

And the way I hired someone to do it, is I put a call out on Facebook, on my page, and I happened to hook up with this great startup in Florida that gave me an amazing deal and optimized my website so that now I'm on that front page of Google. And 95% of my business right now comes from Google, and I don't pay a penny for it.

I would also highly recommend, because there are so many home-based bakers that only have Facebook pages. They do not have websites. And I have said this for many years. A Facebook page to me, if I was a customer and found you on Google, and you took me to Facebook, I would not take you seriously. I've had a lot of pushback from people over the years, but bottom line is you got to have a website and you don't have to spend money for it, they have them out there for free. Or if you want to spend money for it with your own domain name, go for it because that's where you're going to get the biggest bang for your buck, not the pay per clicks and not the pay for leads. I'm always trying and thinking of new ways to get my name out there, but I think it's just a constant struggle for everybody because you don't have a brick and mortar.

David Crabill: [00:25:10] So what year did you start your website?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:25:14] I started my website in 2003.

David Crabill: [00:25:17] So it's interesting to hear you talk about the website and SEO and Google search, because you know, my background is in website development. I've been a website developer for the last 10 years. For someone like you who started in 2003, you sort of have an incumbent status, in that you started in the early days of the web and you built up your search engine ranking when there weren't that many websites on. You could just put up a website and people would start to find you automatically.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:25:47] Exactly.

David Crabill: [00:25:48] I'm not sure if that's the case anymore today, because it's so noisy on the internet. But you said that. 95% of your business comes from that method, so it'll be interesting for me to see from other interviews I do with relatively new cottage food businesses, if that is also a strategy that's working for them.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:26:08] It would be interesting. And the reason why I also say, I know that Facebook works for a lot of people, but whereas I say 95% of my business comes from Google, only about 2% comes from my Facebook page. So I'm talking out of experience, but I am sure there's a lot of home-based bakers that would argue with me because I know that a lot of Facebook users that have pages are heavily involved in the yard sale groups, and they get a lot of business that way, but they're not making any money because they're not charging what they need to charge.

David Crabill: [00:26:43] Have you experimented with paying for Facebook ads?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:26:47] I have. While I get a lot of people following my page, I get some click-throughs to my website, I can't say there's been a lot of orders from it. But I still do it. I'll do like, Valentine's day is coming up and I'm trying to push my cookies every single year. I will put up an ad for a week and for cookies, it's harder because I target the country.

but for other things like tastings, for my wedding business, I will do a week long ad, I will spend \$30, and I will target it to within 20 miles of me. And still, I don't get a lot of business from it, and I don't understand why. It just doesn't work for me. Maybe that's my area, maybe because Philly's an hour away. I don't know. It just doesn't translate as well. Most of it's from Google and the majority of searches on Google are bakeries by me.

David Crabill: [00:27:45] Well, certainly one problem is that it's all noisy nowadays, and so many Google ads, Facebook ads, it's just that it's a lot of people trying to advertise themselves online. So the conversion rates, typically very low for a cold lead. You know, somebody who's not familiar with you and just sees an ad come up in their Facebook feed.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:28:07] Absolutely true. And that that's just more, you know, back when there wasn't the internet available, that was hard. Now there's too much available, and that's hard. So that's why I'm saying marketing is a constant struggle for a home-based baker.

David Crabill: [00:28:22] So let's say you didn't have the incumbent status in SEO. If you didn't have 95% of your leads generated through Google, then what do you think you would do to get yourself out there in market today?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:28:39] Oh, David, this is a hard question because you know, 17 years on, if I, I probably wouldn't be in business if I didn't have that. I mean, I would have not continued at this point, especially as my daughter got older. I was kind of back to the, I'm going stir crazy again, because as my daughter got older and didn't need me as much and was driving and all of that, I would still find myself going crazy.

So knowing that I wasn't getting the leads, my phone wasn't ringing, I have no idea what I would do. I probably would just take the odd order now and again, but I'd probably sell off most of my stuff and go get a job to keep busy.

David Crabill: [00:29:23] I know that I'm asking you tough questions and

Lauren Cortesi: [00:29:27] you are.

David Crabill: [00:29:28] This is actually exactly why I want to have diverse perspectives on the show, because for you, this is obviously working extremely well after 17 years and it's still working, and that's completely valid, and it'll be interesting to see if that's what works for someone who started two years ago, or if they're using something totally different.

So I wanted to get that different perspective from people who have been in the industry for different lengths of time.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:29:54] I'm curious how many people you find have been working from home for 17 years and not wanted to open a brick and mortar. Because to me, I find that, especially in the groups, so many people's goals are to have a brick and mortar and that's just never been one of my goals.

David Crabill: [00:30:14] Why haven't you considered starting a brick and mortar or using a commercial kitchen to expand?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:30:19] When my daughter was younger, it was because the whole point of this was to be a stay at home mom, and if I had to open a brick and mortar, I wouldn't be home. Right? But even now, I don't want that struggle. I don't feel, after working in restaurants and knowing the percentage of restaurants that fail in the first year, I just don't have that money, to put forward and fail. And I guess I'm too much of a realist about it.

I'm not going to go in and say I'm going to be successful and this is it, and this is the rest of my life because, again, I've done so much research. I know the odds are against me and I just can't afford it. I also didn't want to be on my feet all those days. I'm older now, so I'm pushing 60 here. Yeah, just never been interested in that.

David Crabill: [00:31:10] Well, of course, a lot of people move on to a commercial kitchen because they want to expand their business. They want to make more money. There's more risk, but it also could be more lucrative. Can you talk to us a little bit about how lucrative your business currently is, and if that's something that you could actually do from home indefinitely by yourself, if you didn't have the support of your husband and that other income?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:31:35] No. Absolutely not. one of my most popular Periscope that I did, was a reality check for the home-based Baker. And I think this is what you meant by me being honest with people, whether they wanted to hear it or not. I was getting really upset one day on Facebook about people who were going on and saying, you could become rich and you can support yourself on all these people saying, I'm going to quit my job and I'm going to work from home and I'm going to make enough money.

And the reality is, even when you price correctly, just working from home, not talking about a commercial kitchen, not hiring people, working from home by yourself. You will never make enough money to support yourself, let alone a family, let alone have a car or anything else. As I said in that Periscope was, if you live in your parents' basement by yourself and take public transportation, you could probably support yourself on it. But that's about it. It's just not possible by yourself with a family to support yourself with what you can make.

David Crabill: [00:32:51] I'll be interested to see if I have any guests on this show that do support themselves with their cottage food businesses.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:32:59] From home with no commercial kitchen and no one else helping them. Yes.

David Crabill: [00:33:04] I'm thinking maybe somebody who does wedding cakes exclusively, like really high end wedding cakes. You could probably do pretty well with those, but we'll see.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:33:13] Yup. I would love to know how they market.

David Crabill: [00:33:16] Let's talk a little bit about running a home business with a family. How has that been a struggle, and what have you done to deal with having kids in the house?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:33:28] That's why I really didn't hit the ground running until my daughter was in full day kindergarten. I only have one child. I didn't have multiple children. At the time, in Pennsylvania, you were not allowed to have your children in the kitchen when you were baking. It's different now. Rules have changed. You can even have pets now, which you couldn't have back when I was first licensed.

I only worked when she was in school because, being an only child, she was very clingy and needy, and you can't really bake and, calculate recipes when you have a kid like, mom, let's go play.

So I only worked when she was in school. I did not work at night. I was able to do my work during the day. Nowadays, now that she's older, I again do most of my work during the day because it's just easier, and that's what I've been doing for so long. But there are times, like, especially if I have a cookie order, which are very labor intensive, after dinner, I'll just pull out my pens and my paints and start decorating while watching TV, but that's my choice. It's not, I have to. Whereas I see so many bakers pulling all nighters, not doing their work till the kids go to bed, because in a lot of cases, these home bakers are working, and they have a family and they choose to do this, but they're doing it at night. And this is something I never wanted to do. And I was lucky that I didn't have to, I didn't have a daytime job.

I only work on weekends if I have early week orders, which it's rare that I have a Monday or Tuesday order. My husband hates it now. He tends to work at home on Fridays, and for most of us, Fridays are our busiest day because we're decorating, we're putting the finishing touches on desserts that are getting picked up, Friday or Saturday. and so when he works from home and I'm working in the kitchen and he wants to come down and make lunch or whatever, he's getting the stink-eye from me because he's in my way and he's in my space. So that's my only problem. And he's told me like, he's over it at this point. He's over me cooking from home at this point, but hey, it's what I do for a living, so he has to get over it.

David Crabill: [00:35:48] I can definitely relate. Over the holidays is when I make the most of my fudge for my fudge business, and there was so much fudge and fudge equipment and

fudge supplies all over the kitchen all the time during November and December, and my wife, Tara, was definitely not pleased about that all the time.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:36:08] Exactly.

David Crabill: [00:36:09] So I understand. So can you tell us a little bit of information about Pennsylvania in particular and what it takes to become registered and keep your registration active, or what's that process like for you?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:36:22] Well, like you said, Pennsylvania is one of those rare states where it's just really fabulous. There are very few limitations. When I was doing all my research, the first thing I had to do was register the name of the business with the state of Pennsylvania. I think that was \$75, because they also do a search to make sure that no one else has the name of that business.

Once you've registered the name of your business, then you contact the department of agriculture. You find the PA department of agriculture, they'll hook you up with your County department of agriculture inspector. You fill out a large application, which includes things like, are you on well water or are you on public water? If you're on well water, you need to have your water tested annually. What do you plan on selling? Are there kids in your home? Are there animals in your home? And so on and so on and so on. Once you fill out that and you send it to the department of ag, then they will arrange an interview and an inspector will come to your home and they will inspect your house and they will meet with you, and if you pass, they give you your license right there. Once you have that, then it's a biannual inspection. Every two years they come to your house and just inspect that you're following the rules.

Now the rules in Pennsylvania are pretty simple. You have to have separate areas for your cooking equipment. So I have a separate drawer for all my spatulas and everything else. I have a separate cabinet where I keep all my bowls and measuring cups, and I have a separate cabinet that has all my things, like my flavorings and other ingredients. And then I have dry storage in my basement, and I have all my edible stuff in my cake room, which is the old dining room. So it's completely separate from your family. You can't share your stuff with your family stuff. So that's one thing.

In the old days, you couldn't have any animals, which... I did. I would put my dog upstairs when the inspector came, and I totally get it. I totally understand it, but now they allow animals. They're just not allowed to be in the kitchen when you're cooking. I don't have one anymore. You're also not allowed to have your kids in the kitchen when you're cooking. As you can imagine, kids stick their fingers in things and so on and so forth. And then your well water and that's it.

Every year I get my certificate for \$35. That's it, folks. \$35 to get legal. It's not a lot of money. And to keep your stuff separate isn't a big deal either. And that's why I'm always pushing people, especially in this state, to get licensed. And I get really upset when someone is brought to my attention here that is not licensed because they're competing with me, and because it is so easy to get licensed here.

David Crabill: [00:39:06] Yeah. Pennsylvania is definitely one of the best states in the whole country for cottage food businesses, and they have been for the longest time, so that's pretty great.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:39:15] The only limitation is you can't sell cheesecakes. You can't because it needs to be held at certain temperature and falls under the department of health. So that kind of thing, custards and puddings and cheesecakes, those kinds of things are not legal to sell here.

David Crabill: [00:39:32] Right. Anything refrigerated, right?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:39:34] Yes.

David Crabill: [00:39:35] But they do allow meat jerkies, which is a unique thing in the cottage food industry.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:39:42] I didn't know that, but make sense. Especially there's so many Amish around here, and their farm stands are always selling jerkies and pickles and cheeses and everything else. And yeah, that's all allowed.

David Crabill: [00:39:53] Well, we've been talking for a while. I have one more question for you. Why do you after 17 years, still love running your cottage food business so much?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:40:04] Because I only work for me. I worked for people for so many years and to be able to make my own hours and to say no when I want to say no, to take vacations when I want to take vacations, to be creative, to see the looks on people's faces, that instant gratification. Because in my old line of work, I could design a building that would take two years to build. There was no instant gratification. I love that instant gratification. I love when people write me and say it was the best cake they ever had. I just love that, and that's why I love still doing it after 17 years.

David Crabill: [00:40:46] Fantastic. Well, can you tell us what your website is and where can we find you online?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:40:54] Well, because I had been doing this for so long, I was able to get handles in every social media and my website are all the same. It's bellasdesserts.com. It's bellasdesserts. That's my website, and those are my handles on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

David Crabill: [00:41:15] Wonderful. And I hear that you are going to be speaking in March?

Lauren Cortesi: [00:41:19] Yes. I will be teaching a Business for the Home Based Baker demo at the [National Capital Area Cake Show](#) in Sterling, Virginia on March 28th. I have been trying for several years to teach. I actually was accepted as a teacher for two other cake shows that ended up getting canceled, so I am super excited about this, and it's a great show in Virginia. So if you live in the area, come on down. It's a lot of fun. There's a lot of great guest judges, and there's great cake competitions too.

David Crabill: [00:41:52] Well, congrats on being accepted to that cake show. And Lauren, I thank you for taking the time to teach all of us on this show. I know I learned a ton from your 17 years of experience, and I'm sure everyone listening did too, so thanks so much for sharing with us today.

Lauren Cortesi: [00:42:10] Thank you, David. It was a pleasure.

David Crabill: [00:42:13] All right. That wraps up the second episode of the Forrager podcast. One thing I like about Lauren is that she runs her business on her own terms. The business most certainly does not run her.

As Lauren said, research is an important first step, so if you are interested in starting a cottage food business of your own, head on over to forrager.com to learn about your state's cottage food law.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/2. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.