

From Breast Cancer Battle to Busy Baking Biz with Lisa Petrizzi-Geller

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'm talking with Lisa Petrizzi-Geller. Lisa lives in Berkley, Massachusetts, and sells cake pops and other custom decorated desserts with her cottage food business, Pop Culture.

The story of how Lisa started this business is quite unique and involves her recovery from breast cancer. Although she started with cake pops, today, she actually sells many different and creative items.

Lisa is licensed as a residential kitchen in Massachusetts. That's what they call their cottage food businesses. And it's actually relatively difficult to set up a residential kitchen. I know because I actually looked into setting one up myself when I lived there a few years ago.

But because of that, there aren't that many legal home food businesses in her state, at least that I'm aware of. And I do know that there are a number of people currently trying to improve the laws there and make it easier to use. But I am looking forward to getting the inside scoop about what it's like to run a residential kitchen in Massachusetts.

And with that, welcome to the show, Lisa, nice to have you here.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:01:10] Thank you for having me.

David Crabill: [00:01:13] So, Lisa, can you take us back to 2013 and just take us through the story about how this all got started.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:01:20] Sure. So back in may of 2012, I had gone for my um, my 10 year checkup for breast cancer. I had it 10 years previous and it was discovered it had returned. And from there I had to go through Five months of chemo. And then a couple of months of radiation, which led me into 2013. And between radiation after radiation, I had to wait six months to have a double mastectomy.

And it was in that time period. I started playing around with making cake pops. So I just started playing around and I saw them on the internet. It was kinda like therapy for me. And I had a bunch of extra treats, cake pops, rice, crispy treats and stuff. And I sent them into shop class with my middle son Dominick.

And he came home that afternoon and informed me, he made \$10 and he said he was selling my treats to the other kids in his plumbing shop class. So anyways I started posting, my little creations on Facebook and I was still out of work at the time. And. Friends and family started ordering because they knew my situation, but what happened was it started to snowball and their friends and family started ordering some of the custom treats as well.

So after my surgery in the fall after I recovered in 2014, I said, well, let me see if I can make this into something, I did start back with my real estate career. And in the meantime I

started doing um, the cake pops and few other treats. And I started doing vendor shows, craft shows just to test the waters.

And from there, I was like, okay. I, you know, it seemed to be going well. I said, I gotta get this, make this all legal. So I went and applied for my business license through the town. I did my ServSafe and Allergen certificates and I had to apply for it, the um, board of health to come in and inspect my kitchen.

So they did come and I got inspected and I was completely terrified, but it went very well. The inspector at that time was very, very tough, but he was very informative. And from there I purchased my liability insurance, and I just kind of hit the ground running. here I am, a few years later, I stopped doing real estate.

And I do custom orders and I did previous to COVID. I did do lots of vendor shows, craft shows, including the big Christmas festival that was held in Boston. I did that for two years in a row. And that's how I would get new customers corporate orders and just get my name out there and be able to sell my, my treats right off the table.

David Crabill: [00:04:06] Great. So I do want to get into the next steps of your business, but I do want to go back just for a moment to the origin story and your bout with breast cancer. And I was just wondering if, if you think this business would exist, if you hadn't been diagnosed with breast cancer

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:04:27] I don't think so. I don't think so. I always made stuff for my kids when they were little, like I was the mom that brought in brownies and, you know, but nothing, nothing fancy. So I always had an interest in that as a matter of fact earlier. In 2013, I did take some cake decorating courses through Michaels just to learn the ins and outs of it.

So it was something that I always was interested in, but I would never thought in a million years that I'd be doing what I'm doing now, making, three tier cakes and, decorative cake pops and some of the other treats cookies and everything that I, that I do make.

David Crabill: [00:05:06] Hmm. That's interesting. But um, yeah to, to move forward with your, your business. I know you, you went into getting licensed and inspected and I did want to talk about that. You said your inspector was a bit tough. Can you talk about what it was like to go through the process of getting permitted as a residential kitchen in Massachusetts?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:05:29] Oh, sure. Um, I really read through as much as I could find online about the cottage food industry. Like your dishwasher has to either have the sanitizing button or it has to get to so many degrees.

I believe it's 160 or 180. I can't remember off the top of my head. I know mine had a sanitation button everything in your business, it has to be in located in your kitchen. As a matter of fact, when he had come, I actually had like a jumbo muffin tin over in the back of my living room. I was going to make muffins for my kids.

And he wrote me up on it saying that needs to be in your kitchen. I'm like, but I don't make muffins. And he said that's a bakeware needs to be in the kitchen. So he was, he was very made sure everything was where was supposed to be, had to have a, a separate shelf in my refrigerator. dedicated to just pop culture or any products That I use say like eggs or whipping cream, anything like that I had to have my bathroom set up with hand wipes, like paper towels, and a sign that says, please wash your hands.

And I didn't understand why this is my home. I'm not. I don't have people coming into my home, like a restaurant or employees, but he said, no, that is required. He didn't want me to having a hand towel in there anymore. Also you had to have all your baking um, utensils that you use for your business, separate from your house. Same with your ingredients. So I do have a pantry and everything is either in containers or I have a certain part of my shelf area that is reserved just for pop culture.

So then when he came in, he went through all that and made sure like everything was clean. And checked. I had to put the monitors in my refrigerator to make sure that everything's at the right temperature checked my microwave. You need gloves. I had to have a, so I have to have food safe gloves. You have to have a sanitizer to spray everything down that has to reach a certain alkaline.

You have little strips to check that and no sponges can't use sponges. Um, You have to use the handy wipes to clean any of your, utensils or anything that, you know, that needs to be washed, a lot of, it's just common sense, but some of it was kinda eye-opening and I think the more you read about it the more aware of what really goes on behind a restaurant, you become.

David Crabill: [00:07:53] Yeah, no, it sounds pretty similar to what commercial kitchens go through. And I should just clarify that Massachusetts law is like dates back 20 years ago from 2000 and that's before the whole kind of modern cottage food law era. So their law really reflects what a typical commercial food. Service establishment would have to go through, but what's kind of amazing to me is that even though you have to jump through all these hoops to get yourself set up, you're still totally limited in what you can make. Right?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:08:31] Yes, we cannot make anything. That's not shelf stable. So I can't use cut fruit. No whipped cream, no custards, no cheesecakes.

David Crabill: [00:08:43] Yeah. I think that's really unfortunate because if you're going to go through all these hoops and that actually happens in other States, but usually they let you at least make a cheesecake or something. At least make you, let you make something that's refrigerated.

Um, Hopefully Massachusetts will make some adjustments. I know that Boston doesn't even allow them at all. Like the whole city

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:09:08] as a matter, I was just going to say that I know a lot of towns that don't Attleboro doesn't. I had a friend that lived in Attleboro and she couldn't work out of her house. And I think a lot of the cities, I think Taunton doesn't allow it either, but I, I'm not a hundred percent, but I heard that before.

David Crabill: [00:09:23] Yeah, I don't know. I just know there's not a lot of people who pop up in the residential kitchen space in Massachusetts. I know there aren't too many people who are actually using the law. And I do know, like I said, there are. Uh, A few people who are pretty actively working in this year on trying to make improvements to the law.

I don't know if that'll go through this year, but I do know that it's a known issue and it needs to be improved. So hopefully those changes will come sooner than later.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:09:52] I don't know if you know, too, that it's different for each town as well. Each town kinda can override what the state has put into place. I get inspected every six months, but I have friends who only got inspected once a year. And I know other people that they were like one and done and they never got bothered again.

David Crabill: [00:10:11] Yeah, I did actually know that because as I said, I lived in Massachusetts and it was like, You need to talk to your local health inspector. They're the ones that kind of make, make up the rules. And now when people ask me and they reach out from Massachusetts, I'm like, I wish I could tell you exactly what you need to do, but you really have to contact your local health inspector.

And if you can't get ahold of them, then you can operate under the table I guess, but that's, that's really the only way. anyway, it sounds like it's been working well for you.

And what has it taken for you specifically to maintain your residential kitchen? You know, you went through this complicated setup process, but what's it like on a yearly basis to keep it running?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:10:54] Yeah, so, like I said, I usually get inspected twice a year and every year I, in December I have my permit fee. So in Berkley I have my food permit fee and then I have a milk and egg fee, which totals to \$200 a year for me.

David Crabill: [00:11:13] I've never heard of a milk and egg fee.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:11:15] Don't ask me. I have no idea. I know. Oh, and a new one, they started in 2018. Maybe. I have to have my water inspected because I have well water. so every once a year I have to have that done and that usually runs between \$180 and \$200 as well.

David Crabill: [00:11:36] Yeah. Now that is actually pretty standard across the board.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:11:39] And again, I'm the only one of all my friends. I know who had to do it.

David Crabill: [00:11:44] Hmm. Well, it might not be built into Massachusetts law, but it is built into a lot of laws where if you're on a private water source, then you have to get it checked for E. coli And all that stuff, but anyway, I'm glad, you're keeping it and making it work. And yeah, let's talk a little bit about your business itself. And can you talk a little bit about what you make, what kinds of items you make or what your business looks like today?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:12:11] Sure. So as I stated, I started off with cake parts and then it branched out into other chocolate treats. I do of chocolate covered Oreos rice, crispy treats Twinkies devil dogs. Chocolate covered pretzels. Then I started doing cakes. Uh, the way I started doing cakes, somebody asked me to make a cake and I told them no.

And then they were like, yes, I need you to do the cake. my first cake, I think it took me three days to frost it. Cause I was a nervous wreck. I had to do it for a 60th wedding anniversary. And I was copying the um, wedding cake from a picture from 60 years prior. So um, so I did, Oh my God. I was a wreck, but I did it.

I do do the cakes now. Not so much for the wedding industry. I do do some wedding cakes, but mostly like birthday cakes and celebration cakes. this year, the big hot item for the holidays was hot cocoa bombs.

I just added it up between September and December. I did over 3000 hot cocoa bombs out of this house.

David Crabill: [00:13:18] My gosh, I can't tell you how many cocoa bombs I've seen on Facebook, the last, whatever. It's just exploded.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:13:28] It did no pun intended.

David Crabill: [00:13:32] Okay, can you think about just. I know you're called pop culture, but like how much of your business is cake pops? How much of it is cakes or cookies or, you know,

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:13:44] I can't even answer that, to be honest, I um, really just started keeping track of that. Back in October, I just launched my website. So that helps me a lot. Now keeping track of what is being ordered. So I really, I have to admit I've been bad at keeping track of math on that even when I do my vendor shows, I've always kept track of my inventory, of what I've brought and what I sold.

But I never kept track of what it was yearly, I think, cause it's always just been kept going and kept going and kept going. So I never really put it down into an Excel spreadsheet. Shame on me.

David Crabill: [00:14:22] you said you just started this website. And maybe that's in response to that pandemic, but for the vast majority of your business, you haven't been taking orders through your website.

And I was just wondering, what was your process like before that for taking orders and invoicing them? Can you share a little bit about that?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:14:43] Sure. Most of my orders came in through my Facebook page. People would message me they would usually send me a 50% deposit through PayPal, or they would mail me a check or drop the money off. And or square and then pay the balance before they picked up. Some people would just pay for the whole thing upfront. It really depended on their um, what they wanted to do, but I usually for a custom order require 50%

deposit. I do ask people now to order. Two to three weeks in advance, especially if it's a cake or custom cookies, because those do take time to plan out.

And it does depend on the time of year, of course, because the holidays are always busier. So they would do that. It was mostly Facebook, some Instagram, but most of my business comes from Facebook or they will call me. Again, like I said before, COVID I did a lot of vendor shows. I used to do a lot of the local craft shows, but I also was very involved in the Irish step dancing competitions.

I was one of the vendors there, How I got into those was my niece started doing Irish step dancing and her first feis. I went to and I was like, Oh my gosh, I should be a vendor here, all the other vendors were people who were doing the wigs and the shoes and the costumes or the earrings, But here I came and I made cake pops that looked like Irish step dancers Oreos that, you know, had shamrocks on, um, and all kinds of other treats. So I'd have a table full of treats. That the kids loved they would, after they had their competition, they would come and get treats. So it really worked out well.

the feises were a great experience. I really enjoyed doing them. I miss them.

David Crabill: [00:16:31] Yeah, I did see that you've done a lot of themed things like house warming themes or real estate themes or baby special delivery themes. And I didn't even see this Irish theme, but it seems like you do a lot of that. Is that just because you find it fun or is it to expand business?

Like what's the uh, is that? Is that all your creation? Is that what customers ask for?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:16:56] It's probably a little bit of both. So I do deal with a lot of real estate agents and mortgage brokers who do client gifts, so I'll do gift sets for their clients when they have a closing um, with the Irish step dancers. Yes, I would do items on the table that would gear towards the Irish step community. But. A lot of times their feises were near holidays too. So if it was mother's day or father's day, I would have treats on the table for that or teacher appreciation Valentine's day.

So a lot of the families loved coming there because they would load up on Oreo gift sets. And give them out to anybody that they needed, you know, gifts for.

David Crabill: [00:17:38] Yeah. And you also, as you said, you've done so many. Pop-up events. And I've seen that on your Instagram feed, but if you think back to like maybe five, six years ago, what it was like to run those events and now you do them, you know, I know you haven't done them this year, that much because of the pandemic, but just what have you learned over time?

How have, have those change and are there any tips that you know now that you wish you had known five years ago?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:18:08] Well, my table has definitely morphed over time and if you're doing the same events, you start to know the clientele and what to bring I would always. Look back to see, Oh geez.

That didn't sell. So I'm not going to bring that or, Oh, I remember they really enjoyed that treat. you know, that is a good product for them. Like chocolate covered marshmallows. People love them because kids love marshmallows. It's a great treat. And also there's so many gluten-free people.

So I would try to do the big jumbo chocolate covered marshmallows on a stick. So it kind of covered a few bases, a few you know, what they, you know, what the clients wanted or needed. Um,

David Crabill: [00:18:49] Will you go to like the first day of an event and see what works well and then shift the next day or next two days based on the first day.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:19:00] No, because by then everything's made for the whole, if it was a two or three day event, then everything's already made because different craft shows say like the local one in Berkley at the community school, you're there early seven, eight. O'clock you set up usually out by three, four o'clock by the time you break down. But there's been times where I've sold out. I had no idea first time doing an event. I sold a certain event.

I sold out, I had like four pretzels left and I had an event the next day. And that night I was up all night making treats for the next event. But that hasn't happened too often

David Crabill: [00:19:38] Now what has been the largest event you've done. Is it the Boston Christmas festival?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:19:45] Oh, yes. By far.

David Crabill: [00:19:47] Like what's the size of that event?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:19:50] Oh, I think there was about 350 vendors. It used to take place at the world trade center in Boston. And um, I want to say 30, 40,000 people would go through in three days. That was a great show. I loved that show and I got a lot of business out of that as well.

David Crabill: [00:20:07] You mean like recurring business?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:20:09] Yes. After that show, I've had people order the past couple of years or at least put an order in after the show for some of their business needs personal needs. So it was all, it was a very, good. Event for contacts. And just for the general sales, I was always, I was and it grew the first year I had the smallest booth the next year I invested in the larger booth, which was much better,

David Crabill: [00:20:38] What was the pricing for the booths

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:20:41] uh, probably about a thousand dollars. I think the smaller booth I want to say was \$650 or \$750 sticking in my head. And then I think the larger booth was a thousand or \$1100, but then you also had to purchase you had to rent the backdrop. Which I think the first year I did all three sides and I think that was like \$180.

Then the second year I just did the back. and um, I think it was \$60. then you also have to pay for parking which was 20 to \$30 a day.

David Crabill: [00:21:16] And can you remember about what revenue you were doing from your sales on those days?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:21:24] Saturday was always the best day, both years. The first year, my gross sales before expenses was, I want to say I'm thinking like around \$6,000 is sticking in my head. And then the second year it didn't grow. And I think I was in the \$8,000 range. I think I did just over 8,000. Yeah.

David Crabill: [00:21:49] So you came really prepared.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:21:52] Oh yes.

David Crabill: [00:21:53] Yeah. Do you remember? I mean, what, What are we looking at in terms of preparation there? Like in terms of number of items, do you remember?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:22:02] I can remember the first year. I want to say I made like a thousand cake pops, but I, I only sold a couple of hundred. It was mostly Oreos. The Oreo gift sets. Were the big things. I make these Oreo gift sets that with mini Oreos geared for the holidays. And what was great was I was getting Thanksgiving and Christmas out of it.

So because it was before Thanksgiving, people were buying. Their Thanksgiving desserts and Thanksgiving treats for other people in the mini Oreo gift sets they're really cute cause everybody gets one and I have them have them in two sizes a set of 12 and then a set of 24.

And those I probably made, probably 50 Thanksgiving and 50 Christmas of the. Set of 12 and I think 25, the each of the two dozen the set of 24. And then I also do six packs of Oreos. And those God, I can't even remember. I felt like I did a million,

David Crabill: [00:23:08] Well, do you think the reason why you did more sales the second year is because you were better prepared and knowing what people would buy.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:23:17] to be honest. No, I think what it was is I had a larger booth because the first year people couldn't even get into my booth. It was just like a 10 by 10. And I think I did a 10 by 20 the second year. So people could come in and walk around. The first year people were walking away. They could not get into the booth.

Not only that, the second year in 2019, it was the last year for it to be in Boston. So they had a huge turnout because they, this was going on for like 20, 30 years. This was, people were doing this. This was their yearly ritual. So they had I mean, they, they, these people lined up down the street to get in the door.

David Crabill: [00:24:01] I'd imagine you must have had help on the day of the event.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:24:07] Yes, I did. I had two of my best friends did come in and help. And my sons come in and help me. Unload and pack up.

David Crabill: [00:24:17] And that actually raises an interesting point because I believe Massachusetts law doesn't even allow you to have employees to help you make the items unless they're family members, I think,

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:24:28] Exactly. Exactly. Yes. So you can't have any hired help and. Thank God. My boys helped me when I'm in a crunch. Like can they they'll they're not making cake pops, but trust me, they'll bag and tag and, and they'll help with the heavy lifting, things like that. So they're really good when it comes to that, putting, you know, putting boxes together, you know, packaging, things like that.

They do, they do step up to the plate.

David Crabill: [00:24:56] I can imagine that's a big, big endeavor. And I was wondering, you said that you made like a thousand cake pops the first year and then didn't sell like 800 of them. So what happened to all those cake pops?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:25:08] Yeah, so what I did is because they're cake pops, I could freeze them. So I froze them and I used them for my events that were remainder of the month and took out what I needed.

David Crabill: [00:25:19] So you really didn't lose anything.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:25:21] Not really, no, there was minimal loss when he came to that.

David Crabill: [00:25:25] Yeah, that's nice. Yeah. And I did want to talk about your Oreo sets because your Oreos do stand out to me. They're not like, I mean, you think of chocolate covered Oreos. You might think of just dipping an Oreo in, in some kind of candy melt, but your, Oreos are like they're in the mold, right? Like what, can you talk a little bit about what you do to make your Oreos.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:25:48] Sure. So there are different molds out there that you can use. And some of them are very decorative and some are very plain. And I always like to try to go above and beyond. So I tried to decorate my Oreos with a lot of color. And if it's a plain Oreo, I try to use different colors to coordinate with whatever the theme is with different color um, drizzle or sprinkles.

And try to really bring them up to the next level. And that's what I was saying. Like my mini Oreos, they're just the little mini um, Oreos, and then I'll do some drizzling or I might put a lot of Royal icing decorations on them. And they, I think they're adorable. I love they're my favorite, when I do them for the holidays.

For Thanksgiving I'll have one, that's like a Turkey and sunflowers said, and then I have one at the Pilgrim set it has pilgrims and little Indians and some other fall decor on there. And then the same with Christmas, I'll do a few different um, holiday themed ones.

David Crabill: [00:26:51] Is there a certain brand of a mold that you're using that you like.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:26:57] I use a few different ones. Some of them uh, one of the larger names is Spinning Leaf. And she does some really nice designs for her molds. Another is CK

products has some and life of the party. I do, I do have a lot of them, so I'll see a lot of people use them for like little like teacakes, but I'll use some for Oreos and different designs or sometimes I'll do something else in them say, rice Krispie treat or something. So I try to use them as much as possible for different treats.

David Crabill: [00:27:30] I also noticed that you do uh, printed images on Oreos. How did that evolve and what are kind of the logistics of making that happen?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:27:41] Again, something that I probably saw on Facebook that another chocolatier was doing. And I invested in my first edible printer and tried to, master that and started just really taught myself on how to make them with some help from people that I'd met through different groups.

As a matter fact, I was printing some last night. I couldn't figure out my edible printer. Wasn't working. For an hour and then it was um, plug needed to be plugged, unplugged and then plugged back in. So, but yeah, so I was, I'm getting ready for some Valentine's day treats. And sometimes the little edible images is just another way to make it more fun.

David Crabill: [00:28:20] Yeah. And also along the same lines the whole paint, your own cookie thing. And I wanted to ask you about that. Cause it's a pretty unique product. How does, how do those work.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:28:31] So it's, um, a cookie that's frosted, and then there is a stencil over it. and there's a certain method, to swipe it with royal icing, like usually I use black. So it will stand out and it will be like the outline of a certain design, say a Teddy bear or, um, Santa Claus or a snowman.

And the little paint palettes I use, um, little fondant circles that I air brush with color, with food coloring. And I add a paintbrush and instructions and the kids can take the paintbrush, uh, add a little bit of water and use the paint pallet and color the picture that is on the cookie. So it's like a BOGO. The kids get to decorate a cookie. So it's an activity and then they get to eat their treat. They get eat their creation.

People love them. People love them. They're just a fun activity for the kids.

David Crabill: [00:29:25] yeah, there are a lot of unique items that you've done. I I've seen the advent calendar. You got this wine bottle

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:29:33] Those are a huge sellers

David Crabill: [00:29:36] Can you talk a little bit about the, the, you know, you got to smash cake, I think new smash cake brain that I saw. What are some of the unique items that you've been, you've done?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:29:47] So the brain. So what's really trending now are it's not really a cake. It's a big candy. It was a big candy brain. And it cam comes with a mallet and the kids could smash it and then inside were treats. So I put in some Halloween. Oreos and cake pops and some other Halloween candy underneath it.

So it was a fun activity for the kids. And they got to smash it up and then they could eat the brain. And if the customer wanted, they could even put, like, if they wanted say money underneath there or a special gift, as long as it fits underneath it, I could put the money in a little Ziploc bag, put it underneath.

And the kids could smash it up or whoever smash it up and their gift is underneath. So those were fun. Little idea. The wine box holders, those are always a great seller and I don't do cake pops or like um, bon bons or anything in there.

I too, I put the mini Oreos in there. Again, people can buy them in advance. They have a long shelf life, and then people don't feel like they have to eat them right away either. And it's a great. You just pop it over wine bottle um, you could even just tie it to a gift cause it's got the hole, you can just tie to the gift and it's a nice little add on and it dresses up the bottle really. I think it's really cute.

David Crabill: [00:31:06] And the advent calendar.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:31:08] Oh yeah. The advent calendar. So I started doing those two years ago and inside would be some mini Oreos and I usually did about. Maybe a little more than half mini Oreos and then some other treats may be some chocolate covered pretzels. Hershey's kisses. Rolos. Maybe a candy cane, a small candy cane, so that every day when the kids would open up their window, they would get something different,

David Crabill: [00:31:38] Is that something you're printing yourself or are you buying boxes online that you just stuff them with the candy. Like how does that work?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:31:46] Yes. I bought the boxes online and the trays that go inside. So yes, those are definitely something that I did online. And I want to say CK products had them. And mod pack was another company. I believe had them along with the trays.

David Crabill: [00:32:04] Now. I, I did see that you did a business accelerator this summer, and you said you'd taken online classes. Just, I was wondering about, you know, what that experience was like and how you've upped your business knowledge.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:32:21] The E For All. And if anybody has an E For All in their area, I highly suggest you apply it's for entrepreneurs and you do not already have to have a business established. It can even just be an idea. I applied two years ago. And I got a second interview, but I did not make it into the cohort last year at the last minute, because COVID had just hit.

I applied like right before the final hour I applied, I had my interview, a zoom meeting and I ended up getting picked for the cohort. We were the first cohort that um, met. It was a 12 week course and we all, we met online for 12 weeks. We would meet twice a week. And we also had mentors and we would have a business meeting with them. Once a week, mine was on Monday evenings, and each week in class, you would learn different aspects of being a business owner. And then you would interact about it. then they would teach you on how to make your business pitch.

You had to work on your elevator pitch like your 30 second, you know, who are you? What do you do? And then at the end we had to do our business pitch in front of judges. And the whole purpose of this was to hopefully win the money. So it was a definite, it was a true business pitch. They gave away a scholarship and three prizes that evening. So one of the girls won, I believe it was a \$500 scholarship I came in third. I won a thousand dollars.

David Crabill: [00:33:55] Congrats.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:33:56] Yeah, it was awesome. it was very exciting, very emotional night. Now we just had our quarterly meeting in December And they awarded a few more monetary prizes to some of the other cohorts that evening.

David Crabill: [00:34:11] Now you have obviously been doing business for many years. So did you feel like this program that you did this year was really beneficial? Did it teach you a lot about business that you didn't know? Or was it just a kind of a refresher.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:34:27] It was half and half cause I have been in business and sometimes because you've been in business, you have a harder time accepting other ideas. And I know that about myself. Like, you know, you think, you know, your business inside and out, but you really don't. It did push me cause it made me one, it made me set goals to do within 12 weeks.

We had to do blind surveys. They really pushed the envelope on us. One of my biggest things was getting that website done. I spoke about it for so long and wanting to do it and boom, I did it. I love how my website has really worked out for me. It has cut down. Um, Probably a lot of time for me and my customer, because what I have to offer, that's not custom made.

It might be like the, you know, the seasonal gifts set or the seasonal treat. Or a design. Say like the paint, your own cookies for Thanksgiving on our Halloween. I'll have a couple of those designs up and people can just order right there. They don't have to contact me, ask me how much they are what designs do I have? It's all right there. They pay right there online and then they just schedule a pickup.

David Crabill: [00:35:38] Though it did look like most stuff on your website was out of stock. Well, I said it did look like most of your stuff on your website was out of stock.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:35:47] Well, I had to shut it down. I had to shut the orders down because I had people messaging me Christmas Eve for hot cocoa bombs. Like no, I had nothing done this year for Christmas for myself and my family, nothing. I went out and did the rest of my Christmas shopping Christmas Eve. I hit the store at 7:00 AM.

Like it was bad. My Christmas tree, I didn't even decorate this year, like everything that is all that I do. I didn't do this year because I was literally standing at my table 12 to 18 hours a day making mostly, like I said over 3000 hot cocoa bombs. That's ridiculous. I'm like what? It was nuts. It was nuts. And I said, this year, like this year coming up, I will not do that. I can't, it really bothered me. But you gotta do what you gotta do when you need the money.

David Crabill: [00:36:40] Yeah, well, that is, that is an interesting thing is sometimes you have to learn when to say no, right?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:36:46] And I'm one of those people that I have a hard time saying no. And I'll be like, Oh yeah, okay. Yeah, you need 10 hot cocoa bombs, you need 15 hot cocoa bombs? Sure. Sure! And I'm doing them and doing them. And like I said, at some point I just had to shut everything down. Oh, it was brutal, brutal, and I mean, people who I don't even know were asking me for stuff like, you know, do you have any they're messaging me? I'm like, no sorry, sold out. It was nuts.

David Crabill: [00:37:11] Well, I know some people said just that their orders. Went bonkers due to the whole pandemic thing. Do you think that was true for you and your business?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:37:22] Yes. As a matter of fact, when everything happened, I was about to do a big Easter pop up that my cousin has a store up on the North shore, big fruit stand at deli stand I was going to do an event. So I started making a bunch of Easter treats and then it started getting really bad. then I was starting to get a little wiggled out and then he called me, he's like, Lisa, he goes, the board of health is down my back.

He goes, I can only have like 10 people in the store, including the workers. And you know, so we were talking, I was like, that's okay, no problem. And then I started putting them out online, you know, up online just through Facebook. And Instagram and I had people coming from North shore to buy Easter stuff.

I was mailing stuff out. And then when everything really went it was actually was Easter somebody asked me her sister was a nurse and asked me if I could do some kind of an arrangement. So I said, sure. So I did this huge, what I was calling first responder bouquets. Yeah, I did this big arrangement and I did cake pops that look like nurses and doctors and scrubs and hearts with heartbeats. And then I put in like pretzels and devil dogs. I just did these huge gift sets. And once again, once I started putting them out as first responder to bouquets, they people were going crazy.

I was sending them out, people picking them up, dropping them off. I'm delivering to different nursing homes and stuff. It was nuts. And then one of the gentlemen in Taunton reached out to me. He wanted a chocolate covered Oreo for every worker at Morton hospital.

So I had this great Oreo that had had an edible image on it that said the real heroes, are the health care workers. And I did over 500 of those and delivered them to Morton hospital. It was crazy everybody just wanted things to be different or special. So they were going above and beyond. And then after that mother's day kind of crept in, but then it was graduations everybody was adopting senior here.

Um, I was doing graduation, bouquets and gift sets. And people were buying them and dropping them off to seniors, you know, I would deliver them or whatever. Um, So graduation was big and then father's day was big. Like it, it just kept going. I never got a break.

David Crabill: [00:39:46] Well, fortunately we're into 2021.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:39:50] I know,

David Crabill: [00:39:52] You can refresh and reset and maybe enjoy a break. Although Valentine's day is just around the corner.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:40:00] I know, no, I actually, I did after um, after Christmas I posted, I'm taking the rest of the year off and I did like, I didn't, I have so much to just clean up and organize and put the holiday stuff away as far as work stuff. And I just needed to be compressed and scrub the candy off my kitchen floor.

It was brutal again, like I said, it was just nuts, but I mean, I have orders for the week. I'm already banging out my orders. So back to it.

David Crabill: [00:40:34] Well, I did want to ask about your pricing, although you sell so many different types of things. I mean, it's a little hard to like, Kind of figure out like a pricing structure. You got your cake pops, you got cake pop sets. You've got Oreos. You got oreo sets. So maybe it would be helpful just to understand how your pricing has perhaps changed over time and, what you've learned, if you've increased the prices or what you've discovered as you've sold at events and gotten that feedback from customers, like how, how is your pricing been affected?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:41:07] Well, definitely. So with my cake pops, they start at \$3 each and then they're going to go up by design. So the more intricate the design, the more they're going to be. If there's sprinkles on them, if it's just like one sprinkle or for just fancy sprinkle mix, that's going to contribute to the cost because that costs me money to do and time.

so it would be, \$36 a dozen. As far as cookies again, everything, it really does like a decorated cookie. It really does depend on the size of the cookie and how detailed it is.

The Oreo sets I do like a little two pack, those start at \$6. The set of six that's at \$16. And then I also have the, a dozen that starts at \$30, again, if there's a lot of edible images on them, cause I, a lot of corporate that would get factored in to the price.

So it could go up a couple of dollars depending on the design. Pretzels start \$2 chocolate covered pretzels, marshmallows at like \$3. I don't think I'm really very expensive. And I try to keep my costs low. But right now it's kind of difficult because all right, now there's a shortage on getting chocolates.

So trying to find chocolate or a lot of the supplies have been out. And not carrying it. So the past couple of weeks has been a little rough or I had to um, go and pick up chocolate and kind of like really stock up, like instead of just getting 50 or a hundred pounds at a time I'm coming home with a couple of hundred pounds. So a lot of out-of-pocket expense.

David Crabill: [00:42:48] Yeah, your pricing might sound a little high to somebody depending on where they live in the U S but I know having lived there that Massachusetts is just high prices everywhere. Right. So I know that your prices are actually quite reasonable for your area.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:43:02] No. Thank you. Yeah, I think so.

David Crabill: [00:43:04] So what are like, if you could break it down into in a non COVID year, how much of your business is through pop-up events and how much of your events or how much of the revenue is from orders like corporate orders or party orders or whatever?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:43:23] I'm gonna say it's about or it was at least 60, 40, 60% was my pop-up events and 40% were custom orders.

David Crabill: [00:43:33] Yeah. And I did see that you have done some really large orders, custom orders. I saw an 1800 cake pop order on your Instagram feed and is that the largest order you've had.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:43:47] Yes. they had seen me, the girls had seen me at the Christmas festival the first year I did it. So, yeah. Then, then they reached out to me um, the, person in charge and they, you know, started off with, it was, Oh, it's only going to be a couple of hundred.

And then they were like, upping it each week. They kept upping it. It turned out they, they were doing a um, Dr. Seuss theme. And because of, you know, copyright you, I didn't really want to do anything. That was Dr. Seuss. There's a lot of those. They wanted like, Say like the cat in the hat hat. I'm like, you really can't do that for a corporate event.

And not only that it would have been just a ridiculous price to do so many of them, even if it was one for each table, but they um, so we went with the colors, colors, and designs that would bring out kind of adopted theme and they had the cake pops as their centerpieces for each table.

David Crabill: [00:44:42] So how long did it take you to prepare for that event and make all those cake pops.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:44:47] It was probably within, within two weeks.

David Crabill: [00:44:51] So you're just popping these out, like nobody's business.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:44:55] Oh yeah. Right. Exactly. Exactly. I tell people, my house looks like Willy Wonka gone wrong.

David Crabill: [00:45:02] Yeah, I can imagine. Well, now you have talked about, you've done large corporate orders like that. You prepared for the Christmas uh, the Boston Christmas festival and. that's a huge amount of product. Do you feel like your home kitchen and home has limited your business and prevented it from moving forward in some ways?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:45:25] Yes. As a matter of fact. Yes. Um, I'm getting to that point where. You know, I'm busting at the seams. I need help and I can't bring in help. So it's very, it's frustrating. And at one point about who actually was going to be in 2019, my best friend who um, had a full-time job that does have a full-time job and had a home-based business as well.

We were going to open up a bakery together. We were going to. Go into this together. Then we had a location and everything right in Dighton, right down the street from me. But everything fell apart. It fell through and kind of thank God because then COVID hit. So things work out for a reason. And then now I am trying to find something where I could move into for two reasons, one, it would enable me to grow the business two it has taken over my house.

So it's always here and I think a lot of home bakers find that. So when you always have a table with sprinkles on it, or you have a Baker's rack with all kinds of treats in your kitchen, 24 seven. Bins of chocolate, It's always there that you never get away from it.

And that starts to wear and tear on you emotionally as well. As, as much as I love being able to roll out of bed and come down and do whatever, if I'm really dizzy. It can be exhausting too, because I can be in the middle of everything and like, Oh, I gotta clean it all up to make dinner and put it back on the table, So getting it out of the house would be a blessing, a scary blessing, but I have been looking, trying to search for something. I don't want to do a full fledged bakery. I don't want to be open seven days a week. I would probably do something more limited like Thursday through Saturday with a lot of customer pickups and be able to have it as a production facility

David Crabill: [00:47:28] So maybe when the pandemic lets up, then you'll, uh, you'll move in that direction.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:47:34] Half the problem is really finding a spot that would work because believe me, I've been looking at the years. And I've even looked into the commercial kitchens, like the um, Hope and Main, and that was in Rhode Island and Commonwealth kitchen. That's in Boston Dorchester.

And those places don't work either because You have to commit to 12 hours a month. And that costs like five to eight, \$900. By the time you have to do their storage and their this and their that, and that's only 12 hours. I can do 12 hours a day in the busy season, like in the decorating takes so long.

It's the decorating part. If it's like just drop cookies, that's one thing, like that's a different scenario. But when you're doing detailed decorating things, Not worth it, even though they even said it to me, it's not worth it.

David Crabill: [00:48:19] Well, hopefully you'll find something and, you know, be able to take your business to the next level. It's I mean, it's a good problem to have, right.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:48:27] It is, it's an it, like I said, it's, it's good. And it's scary because it's a, it's a different world because now you have, you know, rent and payroll and it's just a different experience. But again, like I said, it's hard to grow when you can only do so much as one person.

David Crabill: [00:48:45] Well, as you think back on the last six, seven years or so, are there any memorable stories that stand out to you as you've run this business?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:48:56] I think really doing the first couple of my first few events. Getting my feet wet. Um, I really learned a lot then. And what kind of events to do and what kind of events not to do. And again, that's a learning process. And then a lot of my, my memorable events or really seeing, you know, people that actually people get excited to see a cake pop or a cake a couple of weeks ago, I did some gift sets and they had Oreos and a decorated cookie and it was just in a sleeve they were in a sleeve. They were doing a drive by a bat mitzvah and the young girl was into soccer and volleyball. So I did those as Oreos and then the sugar cookie had her name and the date of the event with.

A soccer ball and a volleyball on it. It was really like a logo. put the logo and I put some um, silver sprinkles, sanding sugar around them, and then tied them up with silver ribbon. when her mother picked them up, when my customer picked them up, she burst into tears when she saw them to the point that I started crying, like right there.

The late nights and, Oh my God, am I, is this going to be okay? Cause I like most people, you second guess yourself, is this what they're looking for? And she was just so overwhelmed. She just loved them. That stuff like that warms my heart. And I think that's the best feeling about doing all of this is seeing somebody excited over something that most people would just take for granted.

David Crabill: [00:50:32] Well, thank you so much, Lisa, for jumping on here and sharing a little bit about your story with us. Now, if somebody wanted to reach out to you, how could they find you?

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:50:44] Um, they could always reach out on Facebook, which is [facebook.com/lisapopculture](https://www.facebook.com/lisapopculture). The same for Instagram. I'm under lisapopculture. My website is www.popculturecakepops.com. You could email me at lisa@popculturecakepops.com. Or, they could always call me at 781-929-7605.

David Crabill: [00:51:22] Yeah, it's been great talking to you and thanks again for jumping on here and sharing a little bit about your business with us.

Lisa Petrizzi-Geller: [00:51:29] Perfect. Awesome. Thank you.

David Crabill: [00:51:35] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. It's cool to see how something that started for Lisa as a therapeutic hobby has really flourished into a nice and sizable business.

Now, if you are thinking about starting a cottage food business of your own, head on over to forrager.com to check out your state's cottage food law.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/26. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.