

Bold Branding & Even Bolder Spice Blends with Jennifer Knox

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 Jennifer Knox, Jennifer lives in the town of Nevada, Iowa, and sells unique spice blends with her business, Saltlickers.

Jennifer started this journey back in 2011. And after using her home kitchen for many years, she finally upgraded by building a commercial kitchen in her home so that she could sell in stores and ship nationwide. Jennifer is actually a published poet. And her love for creative writing really shines through in her business' brand messaging.

Her brand is very bold and memorable. And shall we say flavorful? It's definitely not boring. Let's put it that way. And I certainly don't expect this interview to be boring either. So with that, welcome to the show, Jennifer. Nice to have you here.

Jennifer Knox: [00:00:59] Thank you David for having me, I'm very excited to talk to you today.

David Crabill: [00:01:03] Well, I'm excited to have you here. Now, Jennifer, can you take us all the way back to 2011 when you got this started? I know you started it in New York, in Brooklyn. Can you share with us what that journey was like?

Jennifer Knox: [00:01:15] I did, but I'm going to take you back. Even further to the time when I was in about third grade I've always loved to cook and we're from outside of Los Angeles. And we would go to Los Angeles and go to Chinese grocery stores and Asian food markets. And I fell in love instantly with the spices and the sauces and it really did change my life. So I've always been a big spice nut Fast forward to 2011. And I'm thinking about what to give friends as Christmas gifts.

And there was this lovely little, horribly expensive shop on the corner from where I lived. And they had a blend with sea salt and Juniper berries.

And I'd cooked with Juniper berries a couple of times. And I thought, Hmm. I'm going to try and get some Juniper berries and see what I can do. And back then I thought you take fresh ingredients and then you dry them.

And in my case, I would dry them in these little camping dehydrators that I just happened to have, because I was also. Hot for camping at the time. I didn't even think, you know, you could buy these already dried that didn't even enter the equation for me. I was drying celery onions carrots. One of our most popular blends now is called Peter rabbit.

And we dry the radishes for that because you cannot get, and if anyone out there knows where you can please prove me wrong, you cannot get a high quality dried radish. So we dry our own and we dry our own because I came up with this recipe when I was living in this tiny apartment. And I think I made about four flavors on the first round but two of the flavors

that I made that very first holiday we're selling today, and I happened to be working with a very smart copywriter and an entrepreneur. And she said, you have to start selling these. I said, no, I don't want to, I don't want to save receipts.

And she said, don't be a baby. You could actually do something with this. And she was very firm, in her assertion that this must be done. And I did a little holiday market the following year in Brooklyn, and I made \$6,000 in a weekend.

David Crabill: [00:03:52] In one weekend?

Jennifer Knox: [00:03:53] In one weekend. So I don't know about you, David, but for me, I don't find a lot of things I'm good at all the time. I don't walk down the street and trip over things that I'm good at or things that make me \$6,000 in a weekend that, that had never happened to me before. Certainly being a poet one isn't in it for the money.

So I had been working in marketing and advertising for 20 years at that point. So being able to bring my love of spices and my marketing and advertising skills together and that it worked, I thought, okay, I better pay attention to this.

David Crabill: [00:04:32] Okay. So let's take us through that \$6,000 weekend. How did that happen?

Jennifer Knox: [00:04:37] Well, the spices that I sold then were probably twice as expensive as the ones I'm selling now because it was Brooklyn and it was a holiday and people were turning their pockets inside out, and money was just flowing all over the place.

So. I didn't have any input from anyone on how much to charge for this stuff. So I charged a lot and despite the high cost of it, people bought a ton of it.

David Crabill: [00:05:06] How long had you run your business before this market happened.

Jennifer Knox: [00:05:10] so I started it holiday before as Christmas gifts and the following year I was at the market.

David Crabill: [00:05:19] Cause I was just thinking how would you even know to prepare \$6,000 worth of spices? Like how did you have that much on hand?

Jennifer Knox: [00:05:28] You know, I ran out, I ran out about a quarter of a way through the second day, so I could have made more Uh, Then I met my husband after that first \$6,000 market.

And he lives, lived in Iowa at the time where I live now And he came to visit me in Brooklyn and was looking around the apartment at all the jars and the labels and the drying celery and the dehydrator and the drying radishes. And he is the one who streamlines our processes.

Because I'm a, I'm a very additive person. I don't mind making mistakes. I like taking risks. I like bringing new things into the business. He does not, he doesn't like any of that stuff. So together we balance each other out. So he's looking at all this stuff in my Brooklyn

apartment and he said, this'll be a lot easier to do in Iowa. And he was right. and I moved here in August and I filled out a little form on the de Moines farmer's market website saying, would you like to be a vendor? And I thought, heck yeah, I'm going to roll the dice. This is the second biggest farmer's market in the country.

And yes. So We went from holiday gifts to one holiday sale to the second biggest farmer's market in the country.

David Crabill: [00:06:52] That's amazing to me that the second largest farmer's market would be near Nevada, Iowa.

Jennifer Knox: [00:06:58] It's about 45 minutes away. And Des Moines is I think it's the second biggest in the country

David Crabill: [00:07:05] Interesting. Is that the biggest in terms of the number of people who are attending? I mean also the number of vendors there.

Jennifer Knox: [00:07:13] I'm not sure how they arrive at the designation of biggest?

David Crabill: [00:07:17] Maybe it's the most spread out

Jennifer Knox: [00:07:20] Oh, you mean you mean square foot

David Crabill: [00:07:22] I'm joking. I'm joking. Yeah.

Yeah. There's plenty of space in Iowa. Right. So,

Jennifer Knox: [00:07:28] Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

David Crabill: [00:07:30] um, Okay. So when, what year did you move to Iowa?

Jennifer Knox: [00:07:34] 2013.

David Crabill: [00:07:37] So you had a little experience running the business in New York. Now, what were some of the differences that you noticed between New York and selling in Iowa?

Jennifer Knox: [00:07:47] Well immediately we cut the price in half. So we took a good look and we said, okay, we're going to have to cut this in half. And we have not raised the price yet from that original cut in 2013

David Crabill: [00:08:03] And what is the price?

Jennifer Knox: [00:08:04] The price is we sell four ounces in a big, beautiful glass jar, which is the best way to keep the blends in glass. We sell that for \$11. We sell one in plastic for \$10, four ounces, and then two ounces for \$8 in glass. Whenever we go to a farmer's market, we post on social media, a secret word.

And if you say the secret word, you get a discount. A dollar off, let's say, or three jars for a deeper discount. Sometimes we'll do double discounts. On the weekend. That is where I was

state plays a university of Iowa. We do a two for one herky perky, which is for the university of Iowa of which Colin and I are both graduates.

Yet we live in the town that is. Closer to Iowa state university, and that's where I teach. So Iowa state university's mascot is Cy. Who's a Cardinal and that's where we get Cy salt. And the university of Iowa's mascot is herky the Hawk, and that's where we get herky perky. So we do a two for one herky perky and Cy salt discount.

David Crabill: [00:09:21] It looked to me just from checking out your website, that those are two of your most popular flavors.

Jennifer Knox: [00:09:26] Yes, Cy salt is our most popular flavor.

David Crabill: [00:09:29] Do you think that they're the most popular because they're connected to the popular mascots where you live.

Jennifer Knox: [00:09:36] We've been asked that thousands of times because uh, people love Cy around here. I think it's got something to do with people wanting to try it, but it doesn't explain the repeat purchases of Cy. When we conclude our interview, I'm going down to our commercial kitchen and I'm going to make up orders. And there are three out of five of them that have ordered one pound of Cy salt. That's a lot of Cy salt. If you were on a restricted diet or a keto diet or Oh, no soy, no silicone dioxide, no preservatives, anything like that. Cy will make all of your food taste good. So I think it's probably, it gets Cy, the name gets people to try it, but what keeps them buying it is the blend itself.

David Crabill: [00:10:32] So if we go back to that time, when you moved to Iowa, what were some of the differences that you can recall from being in New York to be in an Iowa?

Jennifer Knox: [00:10:44] Well, definitely the, the level of risk that a customer would be comfortable with. When a new customer approaches our booth their level of risk taking. We can assume it's lower than somebody in that first holiday sale that I went to

um, Spiciness the heat of the blend. What people in New York are more comfortable with heat wise, is very different than Iowa. You have a lot of people a lot of our neighbors love fresh horseradish and fresh horseradish. I've made it, that stuff will blind you. It is so hot, but in a completely different way than a chili is hot.

David Crabill: [00:11:37] So, is it safe to say that Iowans have a lower spice threshold than New Yorkers?

Jennifer Knox: [00:11:43] Yes. Except when it comes to horseradish, horseradish, I'm talking, it would knock you off your chair and they'll spoon it out onto put a big glop right on a burger. And the fumes, even the fumes coming off of that stuff now, not every Iowan is spice adverse. We have a new flavor called rooster shake that Colin grows the Chili's for and it's just chilies and sea salt.

And it is definitely our, our best new selling flavor. But it doesn't have any of those ghost peppers in it, or genetically modified chilies that were created just to blow your face off. It has the old school, hot peppers in it like jalapenos and Serranos.

David Crabill: [00:12:29] Now, what did you mean referred to risk tolerance? Like uh, Iowans are just like more concerned about it coming from a home kitchen. Is that what you're referring to?

Jennifer Knox: [00:12:39] No. And you can tell that that isn't really a concern by the amount of home kitchen vendors. There are, they are concerned about trying something that they don't know what it is. So I'll think of another term for it, but it's comfort with risk

David Crabill: [00:12:59] I totally understand. I mean, I lived in the Midwest. They're used to tradition or they're used. And whereas in places like New York, you have people who are much more interested in trying new things.

Jennifer Knox: [00:13:12] and that's why they go to New York if you hate trying new things, don't move to New York because you will be made to try new things all the time. However, I, I think one of the fun things about.

Having this business has been Watching people figure out, okay. Out of all these flavors, these are the ones that speak to me. They take them home and they say, Oh my God, I cooked for my family. They couldn't believe it. I, I made broccoli on the grill.

Or I sauteed carrots, you could tell it was a dish that they have been wanting to make. They've been wanting to share with their people. And it's a real honor to have a place at a family table.

David Crabill: [00:14:03] So Was there anything that you did to try to combat that? I guess risk averseness from the Iowans, like obviously you could let them try stuff at the market, but was there anything else you needed to do to get them to even pay attention to your booth?

Jennifer Knox: [00:14:20] Yes. And that's where at. And that's why we invented two flavors that automatically have that Iowa connotation Cy salt and herky perky. After the university mascots, we also have a sugar called Iowa nice spice. So having those as the anchor frames, the rest of the products in something more familiar, We use the word Iowa, wherever we can on our products, on our website, because we want, we want our brand to be associated with that.

David Crabill: [00:14:55] So I do want to ask you about your product names. Cause they, they completely stand out. They're very creative. What, what are some of your product names and how do you come up with these product names? Cause a lot of them are very off the wall.

Jennifer Knox: [00:15:08] Well, one thing, if you want to learn more about our product names, We have the origin of the name. Every, every flavor has that on our website. So if you want to know how in the heck did they come up with this? It's in the body copy for the flavor. So alliyum, that's a good one.

Allium is the onion genus. And we have a flavor that is four kinds of onions. Allium is spelled A L L I U M ours is spelled A L L I Y U M.

So it's Alli. Yum, because it's yummy now that's very esoteric. I was just working with a Store in Des Moines, the Des Moines mercantile, the owner said, wow, we sold out of Cy salt and we sold out of herky perky, but we have all these jars of alliyum left.

And I thought, Oh, it's because people don't know what it is. They don't know that allium means onion. Because people go. Crazy for alliyum, there's something about that, that blend.

So she said we've got all these jars of alliyum left. I put a post up on Instagram and said that they've got 12 jars of this over at Des Moines, Mercantile. If anyone's looking for Christmas gifts. And then I started to make up a little sign for her that she could print out.

And by the time I had emailed her, the sign, the jars were sold out. So they remember the name even though they don't know what it is at first, that, that lowans have embraced alliyum. I think is a real Testament to the quality of our blends. If that makes sense, because this is not a word that people understand what it is. However, there's a huge food science program at Iowa state.

So we have people strolling by the booth, laughing at the pun of alliyum, which is real food science-y stuff.

David Crabill: [00:17:10] So what's it like when, when somebody new comes up to your booth, what's the. Experience like, you know, w what do they typically try first? And what's their reaction?

Jennifer Knox: [00:17:20] Well, we usually have a couple of samples out. The standard is Cy salt crackers. So we toss Oyster crackers with olive oil and Cy salt. And you dry them off in an oven at about 250. We can make a lot of them They keep your electrolytes up so we can say, you know, Oh, you got to keep your electrolytes up.

This is a big market. So they try the staple. And then usually I've got something a little more risky, like an Apple or a pear slice with Das Bigfoot on top. Which is our German blend that has salt mustard, caraway, anise, fennel. And I forget the other one. But it is like the incredible Hulk of spices.

It just so happens to taste great on sliced fruit, especially apples and pears. it also happens to be a great fall seasoning. So when the weather's getting colder, We can say, well, if you're buying apples, get a jar of Das Bigfoot.

When the weather is getting hotter, we have different samples that go with the produce and the fruit around us. So we offer, we offer them a couple of spices if they've never met us before they like to hang back and talk amongst themselves. We encourage them. We have sample jars up top and we encourage them open taste.

They never do. So Colin used to be a bartender and he figured out, Oh, we're going to bring these little cups, little tiny Dixie cups. And we're going to put a couple of shakes in there for them to taste with a Dixie cup. So actually a shot, that's why our blends have to taste good out of the jar.

David Crabill: [00:19:08] are you like a food connoisseur? Like how, how do you come up with these blends and how do you find blends? That tastes so good.

Jennifer Knox: [00:19:16] They're almost all of our own recipes. I'm not a food snob and I'm not really that interested in chefs. I liken what we do to a perfumier or someone who makes a perfume it's a completely different skill set. I think creating that balance. So my interest in a blend starts in it's either the ingredient or the cuisine our new blend, rooster shake. I told Colin you've got hundreds of pounds of dried chilies. Let's do something with this stuff. So that was that one started in ingredients. To find the ratio.

We had to do a lot of experimentation. So I've played around with that salt a little bit and just to find balance and get as much, if this makes any sense, spread a distance from the other ingredients. So I like a blend that. Touches way over here and way over here on the tongue. So that there's enough distance to keep it interesting.

If you open up something like Lawry's seasoning, salt, you don't taste any one ingredient in that. It just sort of paves your tongue. And when you put it on your food, you taste the Lawry's seasoning salt. You don't taste the chicken underneath or any of the individual ingredients in the blend. I like to do the opposite.

I want them to come together in a way that's unique, which is ratio and make people want to eat things that they don't. Wouldn't normally cook like a salad with great Iowa cheese and fresh pears. And you don't need any dressing at all. You just sprinkle the Das Bigfoot on top, maybe with a lemon.

And they feel great when they accomplish something like that. That's the fun part too.

David Crabill: [00:21:18] What's the process of actually dehydrating these ingredients. Like for somebody who might be interested in starting to make their own spice blends, like what, what sort of equipment do you use? How labor-intensive is it? You know, what what's that like?

Jennifer Knox: [00:21:36] It's very labor intensive because we're doing it wrong. Most spice companies. Have they outsourced this process. I would be surprised to learn that anybody else who does the amount of business that we do does not outsource. And we don't because the times when we've tried to outsource.

The sample blends that we get back are exactly like the ones you find in the grocery store they use the cheapest ingredients possible, of course. And it all tastes like mud, all tastes like one thing. So one of our new flavors is a rhubarb, sugar, and we call it the queen of tarts. So rhubarb is I think 97% water. So if we start with 40 pounds of rhubarb and we put it through, we have some. Enormous Cuisinarts. If we put that through the dicer in a Cuisinart 40 pounds, We have two huge dehydrators and in about two days, we can turn over 40 pounds and what's left. When we grind. It is about three cups of rhubarb, sugar, rhubarb dust. Radishes. Now, if you're thinking there's gotta be a better way to do this. I couldn't, I couldn't agree with you more. Radishes. We buy 80 pounds a week for about three months during the summer. 80 pounds of radishes. Well, 20 pounds reduces to three cups of dust. So, uh, 80 pounds is, uh, 12 cups of dust

David Crabill: [00:23:23] Now for somebody who's starting at home and maybe isn't processing 80 pounds of, of radishes. What are the sorts of things that you started with in terms of equipment for dehydrating your produce?

Jennifer Knox: [00:23:36] I had a Nesco 10 tray. Nesco is, is the cheapest most ubiquitous dehydrator you can get. I had, I think two of them,

David Crabill: [00:23:49] Do you remember about how much those cost.

Jennifer Knox: [00:23:52] they are not expensive. They're about under \$50.

David Crabill: [00:24:00] And I was just wondering, just curious, like what the, the commercial equipment you have, what is that dehydrator cost?

Jennifer Knox: [00:24:07] That's about \$500.

David Crabill: [00:24:09] Oh, okay. So it's not super expensive.

Jennifer Knox: [00:24:12] No, we've looked into. Freeze drying now that's expensive freeze drying versus air dehydrating and the composition of the vegetable or the herb or whatever you're drying is very different than it would be with air dehydrating, but freeze drying is incredibly expensive. And if we were ever to do something like that, we would have to outsource it.

David Crabill: [00:24:42] Now with radishes, you're not able to outsource them you're not able to buy them from someone else. You have to process them. It's super, super duper labor-intensive. and I think that's the primary ingredient in your Peter rabbit blend. So is Peter rabbit a lot more expensive than the other? Then the other spices that you sell.

Jennifer Knox: [00:25:00] They are all the same price. And. if we were savvier at the business end of this, it wouldn't be, but we don't know how we don't know how to turn it around at this point. And now it's just become something that we do.

David Crabill: [00:25:16] So does that leads me to believe that you might not be making any money on Peter rabbit.

Jennifer Knox: [00:25:22] We are still making money on Peter rabbit, the profit margin just isn't as wide.

David Crabill: [00:25:29] And are you purchasing most of your ingredients or are you processing most of your ingredients that go into your spice blends?

Jennifer Knox: [00:25:38] We're purchasing probably 85%. The things that we process are rhubarb radishes leaks, ramps Oh herbs, for instance um, we grow our own Thai Basil for a flavor we make called big Bangkok because there is not enough Thai basil in all of Iowa to give us enough for some solid batches, a big Bangkok. Tarragon. We have a tarragon bush out in the garden that we call the Muppet and the Muppet supplies us all the tarragon we need for our flavor called French Tickler, which is an homage to herbs de Provence.

David Crabill: [00:26:22] I saw the French tickler product name. tell me about the story on that one.

Jennifer Knox: [00:26:27] Okay. we get a lot of ideas from our customers, and I think that shows that they feel a certain ownership of the product, I don't know if you understand what I'm talking about. When I say it is a joy to make something and people say that's mine and they want the brand to thrive.

They want to share it with their friends. They want to share it with their family. So this wonderful couple from Ames It came up several times to the booth and said, we tried herbs de Provence on red meat and we couldn't believe how good it was. You should make, you should make an herbs, Provence blend.

And normally we don't make blends that already exist, but they intrigued me. So without. Even trying herbs de Provence on red meat. We started to make our own, and I asked Colin, what should we call it? And he said, French tickler. I said, come on, no way. We'll get arrested. And he just shrugged because he's used to me, poo-pooing his ideas. Later, when we were getting closer to launching the blend, I had a cooking class at Wheatsfield, which is a wonderful market in Ames.

at the end of class, somebody raised their hand and said, do you have any new flavors you're working on? And I said, yes, actually we do. It's a herbs de Provence blend. and they were all drinking beer, so it seemed like a casual atmosphere. And I said, but my husband wants to call it French tickler.

And I looked out to gauge the shock or horror, or what is it exactly these people are feeling when I say that, and they were all smiles, just beaming. And I said, we can't. Call it that can we, and he said, not only can you call it French tickler, you must call it French tickler. And it was like a scene out of Lord of the rings.

And I went home that night and I told Colin, we're calling it French tickler.

David Crabill: [00:28:40] you're referring to how much ownership people have over your products. And I had noticed that just from kind of browsing your Facebook page. And I was realizing that you are fairly unique in terms of the cottage food businesses that I see. And I know you're not a cottage food business anymore because you're using the commercial kitchen, but just these smaller home businesses.

You have so many diehard fans, like you have fans for life. And I wanted to ask you about that because that's not something I typically see with a food business where, you know, co competition, you can go to someone else to get a cake or something like

Jennifer Knox: [00:29:25] Yep. You bet. first of all, we really pride ourselves in service. This happened a couple of months ago, somebody emailed me and said, we're doing a popcorn party tonight. Can I get this, this and this?

And you leave it in your mailbox? And I said, sure. And we have weights in our mailbox so people can put a check down on the bottom of it and put a weight on top of it. So they can,

they come over at nine o'clock at night for a jar herky, perky. They give us hell if I've let say, got the market schedule wrong.

And then I send out an apology. I always tell them, send us pictures of what you're cooking. We have, we have chefs who are customers. Real real gourmet people. they make magnificent dishes and they send us the pictures alongside of somebody who says, I put this on my oatmeal today at work. And everyone said, wow, that smells like really good oatmeal. So both of those things to me are equally valuable. and I don't know if that accounts for. The level of customer loyalty? I think also it's the lack of stuff in our blends that don't need to be there.

David Crabill: [00:30:41] Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that? Cause I noticed, I think you don't have any MSG and stuff you would often find in other, other spices. What's the, what's the difference between the store-bought spices and your spices?

Jennifer Knox: [00:30:54] Well the store-bought spices will live and thrive on those shelves. long after a nuclear apocalypse, because they've got so much stuff in they're. Usually they're about 80%, very cheap garlic and onions. If any blend you're buying has garlic and onions in it, it is going to be mostly that.

And then there are the preservatives that fill up the rest of the space. We buy whole dried spices whenever we can. So we don't buy a bag of ground oregano. We buy a bag of dried oregano, and then we crush it or grind it. And that makes a huge difference in the flavor that you get out of it.

Uh, And we don't put any preservatives in it because we're not a lab. We would have to get breaking bad suits and a whole hazmat lab of equipment. If we were going to use the chemicals that are in most spice blends, if we were going to handle those.

David Crabill: [00:32:02] And so do your spices not last as long as store bought because of the lack of preservatives.

Jennifer Knox: [00:32:09] Most of them do the Cy salt, for example, lasts, as long as any commercial spice blend. And here's why, salt is a great preservative and anywhere that salt is, air and water cannot go. So our very top heavy salt blends will last as long as any commercial blend um, under the fluorescent lights in a store, it may change colors that happens to alliyum a lot.

There are some of our blends such as Peter rabbit with the dried radishes in them. I don't know if you knew this David, but radishes are the zombie. ReAnimator of the vegetable kingdom, if I dried a slice of radish for 24 hours and I took it out in a humid garage, it would re animate itself. So if you, once you open that jar, it is pulling moisture out of the air and trying to reanimate itself So If you leave a juror, Peter rabbit open for say six months, it will be a different color and it will be skunky. Uh, Some of them you could keep in the refrigerator or the freezer, and that stops that process even when you open it.

David Crabill: [00:33:23] And are most of your blends. Based on salt. Like what are some of your spice blends just spices or do they all have salt?

Jennifer Knox: [00:33:33] We have salt blends and salt based blends and we have sugar based blends. We also make salt free versions of all of our. Spices by the pound. So we don't have any that are pure spice.

David Crabill: [00:33:49] I'd imagine that those are more expensive to make.

Jennifer Knox: [00:33:53] Oh, the salt-free ones. Absolutely.

David Crabill: [00:33:57] They're the same price.

Jennifer Knox: [00:33:58] No, no, we got it on this one.

David Crabill: [00:34:00] Well, we were talking about the customer loyalty and your business. Is particularly good for email marketing, because I feel like email marketing is like the marketing tool for loyal customers. And I noticed that you do email marketing a lot. Can you talk a little bit about your newsletter and what you've learned about email marketing over time?

Jennifer Knox: [00:34:27] Sure. we have grown our email list to about 800 people, and I'd say 95% of those are people who sign the little sheet at the farmer's market. we keep a list out. We don't do it as much As I would like to if Colin and I do everything for the business. So if I decide, okay, it's time to put out a newsletter.

That means about two days for me.

David Crabill: [00:34:58] Well, you put a lot into your newsletter.

Jennifer Knox: [00:35:00] We do?

David Crabill: [00:35:01] I feel like, yeah, your newsletter. I read a few of them and they're very detailed.

Jennifer Knox: [00:35:06] Cool. Oh, great. Thanks.

David Crabill: [00:35:09] I don't know, most of the emails I get her just quick emails. I mean, you have, like, it looks like an actual newspaper.

Jennifer Knox: [00:35:15] Oh, wow. Yeah, and you're making me think maybe we shouldn't be doing that. this is probably residual information from when I was a copywriter. That if you sit down to write a newsletter for a client, you have at least six or seven stories in it. Yeah. Maybe we should rethink that.

David Crabill: [00:35:39] Well, do you notice that customers respond to the newsletters, like, do you see a pickup of sales when you send out an email?

Jennifer Knox: [00:35:47] Yeah, absolutely. The newsletter was the thing that got us through 2020 uh, with the lack of farmer's markets, which was our biggest sales tool. I mean, we, we made it through it. Certainly not we certainly didn't clear the same amount. In 2020 that we did in 2019, but it was sending out the newsletter was a way to connect with people.

David Crabill: [00:36:15] I can believe it. I was actually thinking when the whole pandemic hit, people were shut down from their farmer's markets they were emailing me. What do I do? Like. I can't reach my customers. And I was thinking you really need, need an email list. And I, I'm hoping that when the markets get back into play, that people can and learn to start to get people onto their email lists so that they're not so reliant on that market or, or really any external thing.

Like you need to own your list. You need to, you need to have a way to contact your customers right. And have a direct connection with them. And email is typically the most affordable and easiest way to do that at a mass scale.

Jennifer Knox: [00:37:00] Yes, absolutely. we also had some luck trying to connect with. Our local customers within probably a 40 50 mile radius. So we started a delivery train that I would throw something up on Instagram saying the delivery train is going to Des Moines, Ankeny, and Ames on Tuesday. Get your orders in here's the code and we'll drive it.

And We did that all last year. connecting with the people who were closest to us and we didn't need a list for that. However we were able to tell our core customers through the list that we were doing that, and they would tell their friends in that area, get on the delivery train.

David Crabill: [00:37:47] And what are people typically buying? Are they buying like just individual jars. Are they buying packages? do you do sets or like a subscription service or any kind of model like that where you're giving people flavors of the month? what's your business model looking like for the direct sales?

Jennifer Knox: [00:38:05] We have sets and gift boxes that are available at a discount price of all three sizes. So normally a small jar is \$8. The large plastic jar is \$10 and the larger glass jar is \$11 and a set would be one for \$8, three for \$20. The plastic is one for \$10, three for \$25 and the glass is. One for \$11 three for \$30.

So there's a discount for the box set. We wrap and we have different themes for the gift boxes coming up it's Valentine's day. So we were going to push the love box, which is everything you need to get your Valentine to cook you a meal. We sell by the pound as well. And our savviest customers buy by the pound and the half pound. So once they get one of those jars and they go on and I love these people so much, they get a jar once and they say, wow, that went really quick. Let me go to that website. And they're like, Hmm, half a pound is the same amount as four ounces.

I'm going for half a pound. And then they start ordering entirely in half pounds. And then in pounds, And they, they share it with their friends. The mayor of Ames told us that he bought some Cy salt and he was splitting it up with his family members.

David Crabill: [00:39:39] And you also are selling to stores. And how much of your business is indirectly through stores?

Jennifer Knox: [00:39:46] Well since the pandemic hit, a lot, and we knew at the end of 2019, that. Retail was a big opportunity for us because people were ordering the stores that

we had had since 2014 were ordering more and more. So we've expanded into several areas of Iowa. We have a store in Kansas that carries a lot of our blends and we think that's going to be a lot of opportunity for us coming up too.

David Crabill: [00:40:19] And what were some of the things you had to learn in order to get your product into stores.

Jennifer Knox: [00:40:26] Well immediately A grocery manager told us Our label was not organized in a user-friendly way. we didn't have things in panels, so somebody had to scroll, twist it, and apparently people don't want to do that. That's. Counterintuitive they didn't know what it was. So there was no, it's actually amazing. We sold anything at all because what is, what is herky perky? What is that? Is it confetti? Is it a sink cleaner?

Who knows what it is? Because you have to read this tiny type that actually tells you what it is. So our new labels. Are designed in panels and they clarify what it is you're holding in your hand that it's a seasoned salt with no preservatives. So I think the feedback that the stores give us we should be looking to them more and asking them more questions about what we can do, because they know that they know before we do they know before the customers do, because they deal with so much product.

David Crabill: [00:41:34] So I wanted to talk to you a little bit about. You setting up the commercial kitchen. Now you worked out of your home kitchen for a long time. I think. When did you finally decide to try to go the commercial route? And I think you said you built a commercial kitchen in your home, right?

Jennifer Knox: [00:41:54] We have a, a huge basement with a kitchen in it. And my husband and father-in-law flip houses my husband's also a community counselor. And aside from doing that. He flips houses. So making that kitchen was actually very easy for them. I lucked out in that regard and when our state inspector Kurt came down to the kitchen, I was of course, very nervous, but Kurt was elated and he came downstairs and he said, who did the redesign? And Collin said right over here. So they got to. They got to talk shop because Kurt has seen a lot of commercial kitchens built in people's homes and he liked ours very much.

David Crabill: [00:42:45] Hm. So it was actually really smooth and seamless to set up the commercial kitchen?

Jennifer Knox: [00:42:50] Can you believe that?

David Crabill: [00:42:52] No, I can't. I've never heard of anybody saying that it was smooth and seamless to set up a commercial kitchen.

Jennifer Knox: [00:42:58] So once we found out what we had to do, which Iowa state extension was. Uh, Incredibly helpful in telling us this is what you need to have. You need to have another, another sink. This is what it's got to measure.

You've got to have the door. And once we had the specs there was nothing I could do to screw it up. And Colin and his dad took over.

David Crabill: [00:43:19] Like how many requirements did they have to keep in mind? And do you remember what some of those requirements were.

Jennifer Knox: [00:43:26] Well install yet. Another sink on top of we had to put in two sinks, we have more sinks than people. And then this house actually twice as much, three times as many sinks as people you need a door that locks and for us, we don't have anything that requires refrigeration.

So if we had another product, our kitchen requirements would be different, but we're dry goods.

David Crabill: [00:43:54] Do you remember what it cost you? Obviously, you had the benefit of having a couple people who were, I don't know if they were doing the work or if they just had the connections to get, they were building it themselves.

Jennifer Knox: [00:44:06] Uh, Yeah, my husband Collin, and uh, his father built it.

David Crabill: [00:44:11] So obviously saved a ton on labor costs. So do you remember what it actually cost you to build, to build that commercial kitchen?

Jennifer Knox: [00:44:18] I'll say about a thousand dollars.

David Crabill: [00:44:22] Oh wow. So if you have the knowledge to, to build it yourself,

Jennifer Knox: [00:44:28] Do it.

David Crabill: [00:44:28] You can do it pretty cheap. That is the cheapest and. Most stress-free story of building a commercial kitchen. I have ever heard.

Jennifer Knox: [00:44:38] I love it. And I'm very excited to play this for Colin when it comes out, because he's going to be thrilled to hear that.

David Crabill: [00:44:46] In fact, I feel like I read something somewhere on your website or on your Facebook page where you said that. Your commercial kitchen was not easy to build.

Jennifer Knox: [00:44:58] You're thinking of the lot tracking that we're trying, that we're implementing. So in order to be compliant with FISMA, we have to track the lots of all our spices that we buy. So this Tarragon, or let's say this oregano that comes in, I have to be able to show it went into all these jars of Roxy taco and all these jars of Cy salt.

And I had to start putting numbers on the jars so that we can show the range so that if anyone says this jar of Roxy taco is tainted, I can go back by that number, show all the ingredients and the certificates of analysis that come from the producers. Now do you see when I said this shaved like six years off my life, I know I'm not, there's going to be six years that I don't get back because it's still makes me

But I'm again, very lucky in that my stepbrother, has created very basic lot tracking software for us. I tried, Oh, crafty base. I tried so many. Platforms to track ingredients. And they were all far too expensive, so I didn't even bother or so rigid that they didn't serve our purposes.

So if anybody out there is listening to this and they want super simple. Ingredient tracking software, a lot tracking software email me. And David, my stepbrother would like to give this as a gift to the world. So if anybody needs to use it, we can hook you up.

David Crabill: [00:46:49] Yeah, no, I, that was what I was definitely thinking about the, the line about shaving six years off your life. And I just assumed that had to do with setting up a commercial kitchen, but.

Jennifer Knox: [00:47:00] Nope. We're lucky. That the product chose me spices. Um, That I had this very meaningful relationship with spices since I was a kid really determined the product that I was going to sell and how much I love it and how much I can engage with it and be creative with it.

But if I had done all the research on every possible food item, I don't, I still don't think I would have arrived at spices, but for us, for our purposes, the fact that we could build the kitchen in the house, the fact that it doesn't require refrigeration. The fact that we can grow some of our ingredients, the fact that we have a garage that we can. Have our dehydrators in all that stuff worked out just great.

David Crabill: [00:47:50] And so you feel like if you had been more intentional about starting a food business and maybe you didn't yeah. You just, it just happened to work out.

Do you find that you have to, to educate your customers because you're selling, as you said, unique spice blends that you don't try to do what everybody else is doing. and I saw the recipe section on your website. Do you feel like you constantly have to educate your customers about how to use the product that you're selling?

Jennifer Knox: [00:48:22] Initially. People will ask us, well, what do you do with it? then if Colin's there, he'll say no rules and I'll shake my head. No, they don't like to hear that they want rules. So We have a list for every flavor and If someone says, can you use it for this?

And it's not usable for that. Like, we wouldn't recommend it. We might say something like, well, never tried it on that before, but let us know how that works out. If you're looking to make a salad, we recommend this and this, or steer them towards a good pairing with whatever ingredient they're looking to cook.

David Crabill: [00:49:02] Do people's tendencies to buy certain spices change over the course of the year.

Jennifer Knox: [00:49:10] Yup. once they trust us and usually the gateway of trust is Cy salt. If they're, if they're thinking like, wow, this stuff, comparatively is it's expensive for people. So if they're going to take the risk and buy this comparatively expensive spice. Will there be a payoff and once they get it home and they see, Oh yes, there is indeed a payoff.

This makes my cooking taste better. Then they're more apt to try different flavors And they're more apt to go for the more seasonal blends as the season progresses.

David Crabill: [00:49:51] And how do you source the ingredients that, I mean, you said 85% of your ingredients are ingredients you buy, and I assume you're buying them at wholesale. What was the process like for figuring that out. And where do you source your products?

Jennifer Knox: [00:50:07] We have to buy from suppliers that provide certificates of analysis. and there's, there's lots of suppliers that don't funny enough. I don't know how they get away with that. so those are, I guess, bigger suppliers. They don't have Amazon shops. They will sell in um, little baggies, but for the most part, if you could go up to 50 pounds, then we're, you're talking to us.

So if they can meet, if their supply can meet our demand, that's how we found them. And These are old spice houses are old businesses.

David Crabill: [00:50:44] Shifting gears a little bit. I, I know that you're a published poet and I just wanted to ask you a little bit about that

Jennifer Knox: [00:50:50] Yes, I'm in it for the money. That's my joke.

David Crabill: [00:50:53] What, um, can you share a little bit about what your background is in poetry and maybe how it ties into the business. If it ties in at all.

Jennifer Knox: [00:51:05] well, m y sixth book has just come out on copper Canyon press . I started off writing poems and performing in slams when I was about 18. So this was all pre jobs. And I graduated with an English degree from the university of Iowa, And I don't think I knew the degree to which a love of poetry made you unemployable, but I learned it very quickly that, you know, don't put this on a resume.

People aren't going to want to talk to you. And I was okay with that. So right from the start, I kept those things separate. There are many of our customers who know about that. Some will talk to me about it. Some do not want to talk to me about it. I think they're afraid I'm going to flick poetry at them or something or smear a poem on them.

Uh, I fell in love with poetry because I love. Writing and I love language and I love the effect that it has on people. And I have always loved marketing and advertising. Even when I was a little kid, I didn't want to watch TV. I wanted to watch commercials and that. Inspired me to look for work in the marketing and advertising fields, which I maintain has improved my poetry a lot.

if you can get somebody to read to the end, which is the goal of marketing and advertising then you've done your job.

David Crabill: [00:52:37] I personally, when I was reading through your website, your newsletter or Facebook page, it was very compelling to me, the, all of the writing, it was compelling and in a very unique way. And I can't really place my finger on it because most of the marketing that I see is very in your face and your writing style, isn't really in your face.

It's subtle. But it still was very compelling to me. And I don't know how long you spend crafting words, but I definitely wanted it to read until the end.

Jennifer Knox: [00:53:12] Awesome.

David Crabill: [00:53:13] Well, I just would like to know where, what, what your vision is for this business. Where would you like to take it in the future?

Jennifer Knox: [00:53:23] Well, in, in typical me form, I would like to branch out with new products. I would love to make freeze, dried camping food. I'm getting very interested in sodas mixers, tonic, waters, shrubs. So I'll, I think of new opportunities Or tones, which is an Iowa spice company could come in and buy us out.

David Crabill: [00:53:52] So you're more interested in expanding into new opportunities and trying new things. You're not. So, or selling your business. You're not so interested in trying to get into more stores and ramp up production and get into a bigger commercial space. And that kind of thing.

Jennifer Knox: [00:54:09] We're definitely going to be in more stores. It is that production ramping up production angle outsourcing all of those things feel. They're just not the reason why either one of us want to do this, though. It is the natural progression. So I'd be happy to talk to somebody. it just hasn't dazzled us in the past the results that we've gotten.

David Crabill: [00:54:34] Well, if you, are running this business and making decent money from it and are happy where you are, I don't think there's anything wrong with keeping it where it is.

Jennifer Knox: [00:54:45] Thank you, David. That makes me feel good.

David Crabill: [00:54:49] I mean, there's no real reason for you to grow if you don't

Jennifer Knox: [00:54:54] Oh, isn't everyone supposed to grow? Aren't we, isn't it natural?

David Crabill: [00:54:57] Well, they do say you're either growing or you're dying. You're doing one or two things, But if, if the business is sustainable and I know that you, you, it's a side business, right? It's not your full-time thing.

Jennifer Knox: [00:55:10] Yes. Yes. We both have two side hustles. we are people made of side hustles? Both my husband and I, we both have full-time jobs. I'm a writer and that's probably my biggest priority and then Saltlickers, which is fun.

David Crabill: [00:55:25] So how much time does Saltlickers take you?

Jennifer Knox: [00:55:29] 180 hours a week. It depends on the season. Christmas a lot. I could be in the kitchen for 12 hours a day, and then Colin comes home at night and he'll, he'll help me until midnight

David Crabill: [00:55:48] that's an addition to a full-time job.

Jennifer Knox: [00:55:50] Full-time job.

David Crabill: [00:55:53] Yeah. Well, thank you very much for jumping on this show. And uh, if people want to reach out, where can they find you?

Jennifer Knox: [00:56:00] They can find me at salt-lickers.com. The dash is very important and we found that out. Like we find everything out the hard way. Um, Or they can email me at hihosaltlickers@gmail.com.

David Crabill: [00:56:15] All right. Perfect. Well, thank you very much, Jennifer, for jumping on the show today.

Jennifer Knox: [00:56:21] Thank you David. This was fun.

David Crabill: [00:56:23] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. What most stands out to me is how Jennifer has managed to combine a strong brand with a high quality product resulting in a customer base of raving fans that return again and again.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/27. And if you enjoyed this episode, please head over to Apple podcasts and leave me a review. A review is the best way to support the show and will help others find it as well. I'd also really appreciate if you could share this show with any bakers or home cooks that you know, who might be interested in it.

And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground. To get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.