

From Sugar Geek to Online Influencer – Part 1 – Liz Marek

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

But before we jump in just a quick reminder that we are only one week away from the first ever national cottage food conference. You can still buy tickets for only \$20 so check it out at cottagefoodconference.com.

All right, now you might already be familiar with my podcast guest today. Liz is well-known in the cake decorating world. She teaches beginner and advanced bakers, how to craft amazing cakes. And she now has over a quarter million followers. Liz has seemingly done it all.

She is an expert cake maker. She has run a successful brick and mortar bakery. She's won many cake competitions. She's appeared on television and the food network many times. She's written a book she's traveled around the world as a professional speaker. She's a mom to two young children, and now she is an online influencer and teacher through her business, the Sugar Geek Show.

Wow, that is a lot. But did you know that just 13 years ago, Liz started all of this with a little tiny business based in her home kitchen. So clearly we have a lot of ground to cover today. Welcome to the show, Liz. Nice to have you here.

Liz Marek: [00:01:21] Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

David Crabill: [00:01:25] Liz, take us back to the beginning of this journey. How did it get started?

Liz Marek: [00:01:30] First of all, I love that introduction and kind of like wrap up of the last 13 years. It's kind of like, wow, that's it all happened

David Crabill: [00:01:38] Yeah, that's a lot.

Liz Marek: [00:01:39] It's it is a lot, and it is funny to think that it all started in a little tiny kitchen. Um, at the time, uh, back in 2007, I had just graduated from graphic design school and I was, you know, working my first adult job and trying to, you know, kind of start my career in what I thought was going to be the thing I was going to do forever.

And I just was not enjoying it very much. I felt really stressed out. I didn't feel very fulfilled artistically and to be honest, kind of depressed and kind of like wondering if I had made the right decision in my life with going with graphic design. And so while I was going through this sort of like pre-life crisis like I hadn't even started my life yet, and I was already like, I don't know what I'm doing.

I started watching just, you know, like food network shows and cake decorating shows were really big back then. And I really enjoyed watching this one show called ACE of cakes with Duff Goldman. If you're in the cake industry, you definitely know who that is. And he was making these really artistic and very elaborate cakes, things that were in the shape.

Of of, you know, they weren't just stacked cakes. They were like in the shape of things, sometimes they moved and I was like, wow, I've never even seen cakes like this. I don't even, I didn't even know. I don't know what fondant is or spring. I had no knowledge of baking at all, like none. And without telling anybody, I just thought maybe I would just try to make a cake like just a little small stacked, six inch cake with some fondant and sprinkles for my friend's daughter's birthday, who she was just turning one.

I didn't tell her I was getting into this at all. I just, she just was like, Oh, I need, I need a cake. And I was like, Oh, I'll make it. You know, I'm sure she just thought I was just gonna make like a regular old cake and looking back on it, it was a regular old cake, but, you know, I thought it was very fancy.

I used fondant cutters for the first time to, you know, cut out fondant and I'll never forget, like reading the directions on the back of the box to learn how to use fondant, you know, having to knead it and to roll it out. And I had no idea how to make colors or anything. I used a lemon box mix with canned lemon buttercream that was very, very runny and put that underneath the fondant. You can imagine how well that worked out. But when I gave the cake to my friend, she absolutely loved it and was so excited about it. I had never had a reaction like that from somebody. You know, and especially in my graphic design career, whenever you design something for somebody, usually their response is, Oh, could you change it or make it a little bit this way or that way.

And it doesn't feel like the work that you put into it is very appreciated. And I, here I am with this like really terrible cake, honestly, that looks really awful. And she had so much appreciation and loved it so much. I was immediately, you know, Oh my gosh, this is going to be my new hobby. So I started just baking cakes for all of my friends, special occasions, whether it was like they just got engaged or it was a birthday, And I really did not have an intention of making that into a career, but soon enough, just to friends of friends, of friends, people you don't know would ask me for cakes. And that is literally how I kind of accidentally started a side business of being a cake decorator. So that's kind of how it got started.

It was, it was really purely by accident and just because I kind of enjoyed it so much.

David Crabill: [00:05:22] Yeah I did see that you wrote somewhere that you call yourself an accidental entrepreneur.

Liz Marek: [00:05:28] Yes, that's definitely truthful in, in the matter that I, I didn't really plan to start a business. And I actually think a lot of cake decorators do that too. They just kind of start it as a hobby or they want to make kids cakes for their kids. And then they discover that they have like this artistic knack for it, even, especially I think people who have jobs as accountants or lawyers, even doctors, I hear a lot of that, where they have really quite

technical jobs and then they decide one day they want to make a cake as just a fun little thing.

And they're like, wow, I'm really good at this. So who knew so many kind of technically you know, minded people actually are very good cake decorators. So once I discovered. Making cakes. though I really that's all I wanted to do all the time. In fact, I got written up once at work because I was printing out a contract for an order.

And like, my boss like walked in right as it was printing out and she was like, what's this for thinking it was for a job or something that we were working on. And I was like, Oh, I hope it's okay. I was just printing out this contract. You know, it wasn't like it was full color is literally just a black and white piece of paper, but she just happened to see it.

And then I was like, Oh, I've been decorating cakes on the side. And I didn't think it would be that big of a deal, but she got like really upset at me that I was doing creative work on the side. And which if you think that's a very odd response, it is, you know, it is, it was a really weird response, but at the time I was like, Oh, you know, I guess I shouldn't be, you know, like stretching myself too thin.

I need to be focusing on work. And it's kind of what she, how she put it. But I literally could not stop. I could not stop thinking about cakes. I couldn't stop wanting to make them. And so after a couple more. Projects. And I think I had made, made maybe seven cakes and my job was getting very, even more and more stressful.

I just basically I quit my job, it just quit. I just quit. And I tried to, I tried to put in my two weeks notice, but my boss was really, did not want me to quit at all. She kind of badgered me for like an hour in her office kind of, you know, telling me that I was throwing my career away. which made me honestly, even more determined to quit because of how she was talking to me.

So that's how I accidentally started my cake business. Um,

David Crabill: [00:08:00] Well, now you went to school for four years, or at least, I don't know. How

Liz Marek: [00:08:04] for years, for years,

David Crabill: [00:08:06] three years to get graphic design degree. And then you got this job. You thought that was going to be your career. So, how did you know that it was the right time to quit your job and move in a totally different direction and leave that all behind?

Liz Marek: [00:08:22] I didn't know. And at the time I don't think, I really thought that I was going to quit graphic design altogether. I just know I didn't want that job. And I was like, okay, I'm just going to do cakes on the side until I find another job. But then some of your listeners might remember that there was a very big recession in 2008.

So a lot of people, including my husband got laid off from his graphic design job. And he bounced from job to job, to job for, I think, two or three years before he even found a,

another steady graphic design job that was like not making t-shirts or, you know, kind of doing some work that wasn't very fulfilling.

Um, So I couldn't even find another job as a graphic designer. And I think that. I probably didn't want to secretly, you know, I didn't try very hard that's for sure. And, um, because it was just my husband and I, we didn't have kids yet, so I just kind of threw myself into cake decorating and I thought, well, you know, maybe someday soon I'll have kids and then I'll be able to do this and to be at home with them.

And this is a lot more fun than graphic design. And I was still using a lot of my graphic design skills. I was able to, you know, use graphic design programs like Photoshop and InDesign to make contracts. I was able to edit all of my own photos. Um, I started uploading videos of me making cakes to YouTube.

So that doesn't seem like a big deal, but that was actually a very large reason why I think that our school and my name took off later because I was just constantly putting everything I did on to the internet and subconsciously building a following without even really realizing it

David Crabill: [00:10:12] So when did you start that process of throwing things up online for free?

Liz Marek: [00:10:17] almost immediately. I do remember the very first video I made it wasn't the first, you know, cake or anything that I made, but one of the very first videos I made, I got an order for. I think it was like a hundred mini cakes. It was something insane. And a much bigger order than I was I had ever taken.

I've never done a hundred at anything. Up until that point and mini cakes are literally like the worst they're so hard to, to do because you have to frost this tiny, tiny little piece of cake and it moves around a lot. And I, it was the first time I really had to like, do a ton of my own figuring out of how to make something work.

I had no idea how to make them. So I was so proud of, of figuring it out.

That was the first time I made a video to like put onto YouTube because I, I don't know. I just thought in my mind, somebody else would want to see this or figure out how to do this. So I was I think I was just excited. I think I was just excited to just share information that I didn't think anybody else knew, and I just kept on doing that every time I would make something, I would put it up on YouTube or Facebook.

David Crabill: [00:11:29] Now your business is called the Sugar Geek Show. And the word geek kind of comes with its connotation of being an introvert. Although maybe you're just passionate. Would you say that you're an introverted or. Extroverted person.

Liz Marek: [00:11:43] So the, we, my first business was actually called artisan cake company. So I guess I should mention that for the first, you know, seven years of me baking, I was always artisan cake company. And That was sort of me and who I associated myself. And that was the name that I built up. And then as I started making this content and putting it online, I don't remember who, who was the first person to call me this.

But somebody mentioned that I was a real sugar geek because I was really passionate about the science behind how things worked. And I really liked that name. I liked being called that it made me feel proud. And my husband and I are just like really big comic book nerds. We love going to comic con I love to cause play.

At least I used to, I don't have time to do it anymore. Um, We were, you know, always drawing and, and into kind of geeky stuff. And I think I looked up the definition and there is a definition that's like, you know, one who's socially awkward. Uh, That's definitely me, someone who is doesn't exactly understand social cues.

Oh, that's definitely me. but the, the third definition was like someone who is deeply passionate about a particular project or, um, a particular subject. And I was like, yeah, that is definitely me. So it seemed kind of obvious to change when I, when I stopped baking uh, as a cottage Baker and moved into building this sort of like.

Brand of just teaching. I changed it to sugar geek and sugar geek show is what I called my YouTube channel of putting, you know, that content out there.

David Crabill: [00:13:22] I was just wondering if, if it was just natural for you to put yourself out there, like that's, something, an extroverted person would typically do is, you know, throw them their videos up online and start teaching. Was that uncomfortable for you to do or was it just very easy or natural for you to start putting yourself out online publicly?

Liz Marek: [00:13:42] Yeah. You know, that's a really interesting question because I've wondered that myself, why it seems so easy to talk to the camera, but it feels very uncomfortable to talk to someone in person. And it makes me feel very nervous and I'm not exactly sure why I just don't like to be perceived, you know, I don't, I don't like people looking at me. I don't know. It's just kind of a weird in person, but when you're talking to a camera, it's like not a person. So the camera does not bother me to talk to, I don't think of it as talking to people. And so I feel like it's very easy for me personally, to make videos because I'm not around anybody. I'm just speaking almost just to myself to the point now, even when I'm not filming, I will literally say out loud, okay, now we're going to take the flour and put it into the bowl.

I'm just like Liz, You're literally talking to yourself. There's nobody here. Like the camera's not on, you don't have to narrate. But I ha I do have a friend who my best friend is very ex extroverted. She needs people in her life. She needs face to face contact. And she has a really hard time filming herself because, and I, you know, I didn't understand why.

And she said it was because she sees the lens and gets freaked out because she is, she would feel more comfortable if she was just talking to a person, but to just see the camera, it like freaks her out.

David Crabill: [00:15:12] I was going to say, I think you're like the opposite of most people. I think most people have a really hard time on camera.

Liz Marek: [00:15:18] Yeah. Yeah. Like when you, you see the lens and you just freeze. yeah. I don't know. I guess maybe it's just because I've never really looked at the camera. It's the

camera is mostly just kind of over my shoulder. It's only recently that I've started doing front-facing videos for YouTube and for our tutorials, but it used to be literally, I would just be working on the cake and the camera was over my shoulder.

Just kind of watching me as I was doing whatever I was doing. And also practice, you know, I think you just get kind of used to talking to a camera. I'm sure. The first time you did a podcast, it was a little awkward or you felt clumsy, but you get used to it and you get a flow going.

David Crabill: [00:15:57] I want to go back to the beginning of your cake business. How were the first few years of running that? Did it take off?

Liz Marek: [00:16:05] Oh my goodness. What, what a time the cake business was. It did take off pretty quickly. I'm not exactly sure why. And, um, Probably because I was undercharging, you know, so I was definitely one of those cheap cake decorators. And because I'm an artistic person, I was probably doing pretty good work, you know, pretty okay work for the amount of money that was charging. And nowadays it's such common conversation to talk about undercharging and what you should be charging and how much you're worth. But back then, I just didn't have any concept whatsoever of what people charge. And I even called up, I know people are going to be shocked to hear this, but I called another bakery and did a fake consultation over the phone.

Cause I wanted to know how much they charge for a cake because how else would, I know, you know, and people didn't have their prices listed online like they do now. So And then of course I also thought, well, I'm not very good. So if this person charges \$3 a serving and I'm only gonna charge \$2 so I was making wedding cakes for, you know, a hundred dollars, \$150, and it's just cringe-worthy now.

But it's the truth, you know, I think a lot of people start out that way, thinking that, well, the, the, the flour only costs \$10 and the eggs only cost \$2. And You forget to kind of add in the part where your experience and the actual time it takes to make the cake all should be costing something.

And then even if it's not the world's best cake, it's still it's, you know, it's still of value. So I started off very much undercharging and kind of doing just basic stuff. I knew that I wasn't very good, but I would constantly be on this website called Flickr where a lot of cake decorators at the time would upload their work.

and I would kind of look at it and get inspiration and try to recreate designs that I thought were trendy or were getting a lot of attention. So that's kind of how I started was just sort of trying to recreate other cakes. And I probably had maybe two or three cakes a week pretty, pretty quickly.

I should also mention that, you know, my husband built me a website pretty much immediately, which is a big plus. Um, Back then we didn't have social media for people to order through. So if you didn't have a website, you didn't get orders. So I had a website pretty quickly with all seven cakes that I had made so far up on there.

And that may have been actually a contributor to getting orders pretty quickly because we just had a website, so people were able to find us it wasn't until I started. Doing local, like bridal shows and I started meeting other people in the industry that I actually started to create cakes that were more of my own style because they would ask me, so I'd go to a bridal show and they say, you know, bring three display cakes that are your, that represent your style.

And I was like uh, like a what's that, you know, I don't know if I have a style um, or I would get asked to do a inspiration shoot by a photographer that I met at the bridal show. And she'd say, okay, we're going to do a fake photography shoot to promote all of our businesses. So you need to bring the cake and the theme of the fake photo shoot and inspiration shoot is like spring, spring love.

And you're like, okay, well, what do you want the cake to look like? And they're like, it's up to you. You can interpret that. However you want. I was like, what I get to decide, you know, how the cake looks. So it was really uncomfortable and very challenging to start creating my own designs. But I think that is really when I started taking off a lot is um, I wouldn't say that they were beautiful looking back on them, but they they definitely set myself apart and I invented, I don't want to say invented, but I made popular a couple of really big trends back then.

One of them was the rustic Birch cake and the chalkboard cake, and they just went crazy and I started getting like, you know, calls to be on covers of magazines and um, be published in blogs. And, and that really changed sort of my perception of my own work. And also kind of was like, wait, there's more to life than just making cakes that a bride asked me to make.

I could, you know, do my own designs. And I kind of, from then on, I kind of stopped making cakes based off of what the picture was that somebody brought in. And I would, you know, kindly just like, yeah, I love this theme. I'm going to kind of tweak it and make it my own. I'll send you a sketch and you tell me what you think.

So to kind of ease people into the idea that I wasn't really going to copy designs anymore, but I would make something even better. So, but that, that those few beginning years were literally just like pumping out tons of cakes and kind of getting as much work as I could. I could. And uh, just trying to make a name for myself and lots of dishes. Oh my gosh. So many dishes.

David Crabill: [00:21:14] Now you talked a little bit about marketing in there. You, you said that publications were just calling you up and asking you to be on the front of magazines. What do you remember doing in the early days to try to market your business? Or was it really just, just creating good designs and putting them up on, on the internet?

Liz Marek: [00:21:31] as far as marketing myself and actually being noticed, I'm trying to remember what social media platforms were really even out back then. And I don't want to accidentally say it was something when it wasn't, but I feel like one of the first ones I was using was Instagram. And I know that social media is much more difficult now than it was back then. But everything I made, I would just post to social media to, to Instagram and to

flickr. But I think that probably the in-person connections I made with other vendors in the industry probably propelled me the furthest because they were more experienced than I was and had more connections.

so when they would decide that they wanted to do a shoot for like a magazine, and they say, Hey, do you know anybody who does cakes?

And that person met me at the bridal show and, and they liked the kind of stuff that I was doing. And they say, yeah, I do have someone that might be interested. And that's literally how I got my first photo shoot was, was through like someone who saw me at a bridal show and liked the cakes that I had on display.

And you know, I think that was probably the thing. And so then I got, you know, published in a magazine. And they liked the cake so much. They put it on the cover and then as soon as that happens, other magazines notice you and then they start asking you for things. So it was definitely kind of a snowball from, from that point publicity wise, and then um, just continuing to put things on my website.

So I would just, it was always updating my website, taking down the ugly pictures, the older ones as I was getting better, I was always just keeping my website fresh. Um, I think something that I see a lot of people do is they keep every picture of every cake they've ever made, you know, on their website.

And not only is it a lot to sift through, but you should always be keeping the best of the best in front of people. So as you get better, the pictures get better and you should be charging more with the more experience that you're getting and you don't want them to see those old pictures that aren't very good.

You know, you only need about 10 pictures for someone to get the gist of what your quality level is. And then they'll either order or not order based off of what they see, but sifting through a hundred pictures is not going to convince them, you know, it's in fact, it's probably just going to be a little bit overwhelming for them to look through all that.

David Crabill: [00:24:04] So, yeah. So you didn't reach out to any of the publications you just kind of let your work speak for itself, I guess. But I'm thinking about it's just, it's, it's a lot to start a cake business, right? Like just running a business. There's so many moving parts, making the cakes, decorating the cakes, delivering the cakes. And then on top of that, you're managing this content. And on top of that, you're going to bridal shows, like how did you balance all of those things? Um, Or how would you recommend that someone split their time or try to balance those things all at once.

Liz Marek: [00:24:39] It is a lot for sure. And I think the first thing is you have to have an understanding partner in your life because When I was making all of these wedding cakes every week um, we basically never had weekends. You know, you basically have to say, okay, every Saturday I'm going to be delivering cakes. Sometimes on Sundays too, every Friday, I'm going to be staying up until four in the morning, finishing the cakes that are going to be delivered on Saturday.

And actually I need help delivering the cake on Saturday. So that means my partner has to help me deliver the cake. And um, now I'm exhausted. So I need help doing the dishes, you know um, picking up, picking up ingredients when you're in the middle of baking and the other person needs to run to the store for you.

Now, I don't want to say that my husband, Dan ever really enjoyed that cause he didn't, but he definitely, you know, he, he supported me and I think he thought I was a bit crazy for wanting to be so busy all the time, but I really did enjoy it so much. So, you know, having support is definitely makes it a lot easier.

We didn't have any kids when I started. So I didn't have to worry about working around sleep schedules and you know, doing family activities during the daytime and then working. And I know a lot of, you know, home bakers who have kids, that's a huge, huge challenge, which I got to I figured that one out later, you know, after we did have kids.

So at the time. It didn't seem like a big deal to kind of jump full speed into opening up a business because it was all, it was all my time. You know, it was everything that I wanted to do. I could just do, but I did have to very quickly on um, sort of define certain days for certain tasks. Otherwise I would get overbooked and overwhelmed.

And especially when you're a beginner, you don't really know how long things are going to take. So you kind of have to just say, well, I don't know how long this is going to take, but I'm going to give myself a whole day to do this task and I might have to end up staying up all night. Um, And then next time I will know that this thing took much longer than I expected it to.

So as you schedule yourself, you kind of get a feel pretty quickly for how long things take. So I used to think that I could just wake up on Thursday and like bake the cakes and make the frosting and do all of these kind of prepping tasks and somehow get it done in time to have the cake finished the next day.

And it never would work out. I would just end up being so tired and the, and the kitchen would just get so messy and I would make mistakes because I was just trying to rush. So I started baking all of my cakes on Wednesdays and I would prep all of my buttercream. I would any, if I had any like toppers I needed to make, I would make those either on Tuesday or on Wednesday or sometimes even the week before if I had time.

And I would do all of my grocery shopping on Tuesday. So I would look at all of my contracts that I had for that day. And I would say, okay I got a lemon cake to make. I need to make sure I get lemons. I need to make this many cakes. I gotta make sure I have enough butter and sugar. And not leave that to the day that I was actually baking, because that cuts into the time of prep.

So Tuesday shopping, Wednesday, baking Thursday crumb coating and stacking because if you have five wedding cakes, like you think, Oh, I'm just crumb, coating and stacking. But doing that times five, you know, three tier cakes that's a lot. And sometimes they were even sculpted cakes like grooms, cakes, or something that even took more time.

And then all Friday would be spent decorating and putting on all of the final details. Hopefully any pre-made decorations were already made. All I had to do is just put them on. Even putting fondant on the outside of the cake takes much longer than you think it's going to take. Um, Then deliveries on Saturday, sometimes Sunday and Sunday was really the only day that we ever got any sort of rest because it was like all of the deliveries were over.

So maybe you'd have one, but that was very rare. So that was kind of the day to clean the kitchen, you know? Do anything else besides cake decorating, which hardly ever happened? And then Monday I would answer emails. I would send out quotes. I would do sketches. We would have tastings. So it was kind of like a administrative day.

And I did that. That I, I did it that way from, you know, 2008 until 2014. Like every single week we just repeated that process over and over. Um, The only thing that ever changed was during wedding season, we would block out a couple of weeks and just do tastings every hour. So somebody would say, I'm interested in a wedding cake, I would say, okay, come do a tasting.

We have these slots available. They would come to my house. We would do the tasting. They either put down a deposit or not. And then we would just go straight to the next one and we would block them altogether. And then once we were booked, we were booked and we wouldn't do any more tastings after that because um, tastings were actually really time-consuming and, you know, having people come to your house and make sure it looks really nice and prepping all of the cakes slices and all of that. So, um, but the rest of the time, it was mostly just production, like week after week.

David Crabill: [00:30:09] Did you feel overwhelmed?

Liz Marek: [00:30:11] Oh my gosh. I always, I think every weekend I would just ask myself why I was doing this because it was so tiring and so stressful. And actually I think the thing that stressed me out the most was deliveries and waiting to hear if the client liked the cake and sometimes they wouldn't, you know, sometimes.

I have a very vivid memory of this bride. I delivered this beautiful, beautiful, like dark blue cake with bright orange tiger Lily flowers, like with such a stunning unique looking cake to this gorgeous winery. I didn't have even a hint in my mind that she might be upset about it. And I got an email two days later after the wedding.

And she was really upset because of the color of the cake was not the right kind of blue. And I was like, what, what, what do you mean? And she said, you know, she sent me a picture and it was with the flash on. And when the flash was on the cake looked like purple for some reason. And, but, you know, I didn't put a flash on the cake when I was making it.

So I didn't think that, but she, her photographer who was taking pictures of everything I guess, you know, when his flash hit the cake, it just made it look like more of a purple color instead of a blue color. So, I mean, she was like really irate and demanding the, her money back. And that was the first time I had really experienced a really angry bride.

And at first I was just really trying to be apologetic and you know, asked her. What she wanted me to do to like, make it right. And she said, you know, I'm demanding a refund. And I said, well, I don't really feel like that's fair since you did eat the cake, you know? And I'm sorry that I didn't know that the photographer was going to use this flash or that would affect the color.

I don't think that's anything I did wrong. You know, it's just kind of something that just happened, but she was like, no, no, no. And that is when I kind of realized that I was going to have to sort of set boundaries like in a contract, which is great because I had that experience from graphic design school.

They teach you to write your contracts uh, just in case you ever want to be a freelancer and how you define what you're going to deliver, what they're going to pay and what happens if they don't like it. So even though I hadn't had that experience yet, I feel like I was a little bit prepared for it. So I kind of thought well, nothing's going to make this bride happy.

And I'm just going to have to stop responding to her. And, say that she wants to sue me. She can go ahead, you know, but I'm not going to refund her money because she, she did keep the cake. She ate the cake, you know, and um, I didn't do anything wrong. So of course she never did Sue me. People always say, they're going to sue you.

They don't um, she never left me any bad reviews, but even if she did, I would have responded and, you know, explained the situation. But I think sometimes bakers can get. Scared into thinking that they need to refund money, even though they didn't do anything wrong because they get worried about bad reviews or just angry clients, which I totally understand.

Cause they are scary, you know, but setting contracts in place is a big, big, big weight off your own shoulders because you've already thought of this situation. So when somebody does come along and accuse you of not fulfilling your end of the deal, you have it all in writing and you can say, well, actually, no, I did fulfill my end of the deal.

And this is something that falls outside of what we agreed upon. It's not anything that I did wrong. You know, it's very unfortunate. I'd like to, you know, make it right. Can we agree on something? But at the end of the day, if the client wants to be mad and irate that's not really anything you can do about it.

So, but that those feelings of nervousness that, that was going to happen again, pretty much never went away.

David Crabill: [00:34:02] Well, let's fast forward a little bit. Uh, You, I know, started to do cake competitions. What was the first cake competition you ever did?

Liz Marek: [00:34:13] Oh my goodness. Yeah. So I don't even know how I found out about them. I think as I started making friends in the cake industry, thanks to social media I started hearing about these cake shows that people would travel to with their cakes and they would win prizes and things like that.

But mostly I just wanted to meet other cake decorators and to kind of be a part of the club. Like I just, you know, I felt, Oh, everybody's there. I want to be there too. And so my first cake show was in 2014. So I was pregnant with my daughter Avalon and it was all the way in Austin, Texas. So just figuring out how to get my cake to the cake show was like the first challenge.

So that was another video that I made early on talking about how to pack a cake into a box and make sure it didn't flip over while we were traveling. Cause then, you know, they have to put it into the bottom of the plane to, to, to fly. And they're not very gentle with the boxes. So packaging the cake, getting it to where it needed to be.

And then once we got there, we arrived a couple days early, you know, finishing the cake, adding on all the details. All of that kind of stuff was its own experience as well. But I really didn't have high hopes for myself. I didn't, I didn't know what to compare myself to. Cause I had never been to a show and when I got there, Oh my gosh, there was so many amazing sculpted cakes, like such amazing artworks that were edible.

Some of them were bigger than me. Like, like height-wise, there was like full-size cakes that were like the size of people, you know, with big dresses and hats. And there was cakes that were moving So you would go to room to room, like going to all the different vendors, talking to all the different people that you, you knew of. Didn't you know, had never met in person. And it was just like, you know, that experience just by itself was really fun. But then I, and I didn't think about the fact that the show was over on Sunday.

So I had set myself to fly out Sunday morning, but I didn't know that they uh, do the awards Sunday night. So I had actually already left and had to go home. And I got a phone call when I got back home from my friend who I traveled. We, we shared a hotel room while we over there. And she says, you won first place for your sculpted cake and you won like grand prize, like best in show.

And I just couldn't believe it. I was absolutely stunned. I, I thought that there was definitely other cakes there that were better than mine. Um, Natalie Sideserf, some of your viewers might be familiar with her. She's a huge cake star now. Um, She, she had a piece there and I couldn't, I, it was so beautiful. I couldn't believe that it didn't win. That was the one that I thought should have won,

David Crabill: [00:37:13] This is the, I think I've seen this cake. It's the old lady looking into the mirror.

Liz Marek: [00:37:18] yes, that's, that's the one.

David Crabill: [00:37:20] I'll just say that is an unbelievable cake. And it's one of the only cakes I've seen. That's not just impressive, but also a real piece of art that has so much meaning inside of it.

Liz Marek: [00:37:34] Thank you. Yeah, I'm not sure I've ever done a better cake than that. One, to be honest, it just had a lot of emotion in it. Some people told me that, you know, they saw it and they cried and it was really moving for them. And I didn't realize I had put so

much emotion into it, but looking back on it, it was my first real piece that I created with a story in mind, you know, like a whole, I had this whole thing in my mind that there was cause the theme of the show was time.

And so for me specifically, the passing of time has always been something that has kind of brought a lot of emotions in me and wondering what my life was meant to be and who I am meant to be. And am I using my time wisely? And you know, it's kind of deep, but like, but my whole, literally my whole life I've thought about that.

So when they said that the theme was time, I don't know why this theme popped into my mind about, you know, someone who looks back into the mirror and sees themselves the way that they used to be, you know, young and beautiful. And you know, they're older now and maybe they've lost uh, their people that they love and they, you know, Can think back on all of these memories.

And I think a lot of people, they weren't sure if she was happy or if she was sad, you know? So I think it just brought a lot of, a lot of people can resonate with that type of feelings. So yeah, it it's actually still on display, believe it or not. Cause it's not a real cake just in case anybody's wondering um, it's rice cereal treats and foam, because you have to, you have to show in a competition that you are able to build a structure that supports cake, but then you don't use actual cake because they want the cake to survive for multiple days, you know, at a show without falling apart or melting or anything like that.

So the cake just kind of dried out and, you know, sugar is pretty self preserving and it's still on display at a bakery, I think in Louisiana, she ended up taking it home and it's, it's pretty, it's pretty faded, but yeah, it's still there. I might even be able to find you a picture of it.

David Crabill: [00:39:40] Wow that's crazy. Uh, Well, so you got the, the competition bug and that kick-started a ton of competitions, I guess.

Liz Marek: [00:39:50] Yeah. So as soon as I did that competition, I really was like, wow, this is really fun. And I was successfully able to travel with a cake. So I would start prepping months in advance, you know, coming up with my themes and my story and coming up with a design and then trying making, , a lot of pieces in advance getting them kind of packed up and then travel to wherever we were going.

And the other benefit of doing competitions is when you, win you get a lot of eyes from other people in the industry and other like companies. So suddenly I was getting contacted by companies who, you know, fondant companies wanted me to represent their brand or tool companies wanting me to use their tools.

And something like that I didn't realize was going to happen was that people were asking me to um, teach and teach, you know, like I haven't really done that. I've only, I mean, I've kind of taught how to do things on YouTube, but I haven't done any in-person classes or anything like that, but I just kinda jumped into it and said, okay.

And so in 2016, after competing and winning a few competitions and being asked to uh, teach, I think we traveled. To five different countries and one year just teaching. And one of

them was like a five week trip in Australia, just teaching literally and all different parts of Australia. Like every day we were just moving to a different place and teaching the same thing over and over again.

And it was I thought it was going to be very glamorous and just like, Oh, this is so amazing. But it was actually very exhausting, you know, to be on a plane and traveling so much. And we had our two year old with us, so it was definitely memorable and definitely a good experience, but I don't want to pretend like it wasn't also very difficult and you know, challenging, but I'm definitely glad that I did it and it was a great opportunity to be able to go so many places just purely because I was invited to teach,

David Crabill: [00:41:57] I was going to say in the back of my mind, you're talking about all this stuff, but You started the cake competition when you were pregnant. And so your business is really ramping up. You know, it seems like exponentially starting to skyrocket and you're starting a family at the same time. What was that like?

Liz Marek: [00:42:15] Oh my goodness. Not recommended. So I don't know what it is. in me that just says yes to things, but I just, you just never know what things are going to lead to. And I didn't, I had a great pregnancy. I didn't feel too tired after the first trimester. So I was feeling really good.

And then after I had my daughter I didn't realize that she was such a good baby, you know? So like some people give me a lot of credit for being a good mom and teaching her to be so quiet. And it's like, have you ever tried to teach a baby how to be quiet? Like they either are, or they aren't. And my daughter, Avalon is almost seven now and she is just always been very content to sit kind of next to me while I work.

So from a very young age, she would play with Play-Doh or sometimes even fondant. And she would know that, okay, mommy is about to hit the play button to record. I need you to be quiet for a minute. Sometimes she would talk and, and I would just let her be in the video. I would just, I would not try to hide the fact that I was not.

You know, trying to get something done with a kid, literally right there in, and she ha she is well loved by the cake community. They adore her. They love watching her grow up and seeing her turn into kind of her own person who is pretty artistic in to my, you know, much pride. And I hope that someday soon, when things open up again that she will want to go to cake competitions and start doing her own little, you know, cakes and things.

Because, I think She's pretty used to being around cakes, but I don't think she really realizes that she has a knack for it. And my son who is 17 months old, he's not so quiet. Yeah, He is a little bit of a, a handful. I have definitely had a much harder time trying to get things done if he's awake.

Yeah. And even though I'm not a cottage Baker now I still do have to bake almost every day because of my blog because of my business and creating content. And I have to meet certain deadlines. So even though the cakes are not going to a client, they still are a needing to be made and I can't be interrupted.

So I have had to sort of just get used to working later in the evenings when um, you know, he's already asleep or right now he's taking a nap and I'm um, you know, kind of scheduling everything around his schedule. Otherwise it just feels too hard and not fun. It feels very overwhelming and you feel really bad that you're ignoring your kids for work, even though it's something that, you know, might need to actually be done because, you know, maybe your family relies on your income.

I'm the main breadwinner in my home. So it's really hard for me to balance this thought of I need to work, but also I want to be with my family, but also we have to pay our bills, you know? So I try to give myself a break and just understand that I just can't work as much as I did back when I had only one kid and that kid was very quiet.

So I just have to adjust my expectations of what I can accomplish rather than just being miserable and trying to continuously create at the level that I was creating at.

David Crabill: [00:45:35] well, as someone who has two young kids at home, I definitely understand the challenge of trying to run a business with them distracting all the time. But uh, I actually was wondering if you, I know that you took many years to have Avalon, you were trying for a while and that you wanted to start a family sooner.

And just hypothetically, if you had started your family back, when you discovered you had this passion for cakes, where do you think your business would be today?

Liz Marek: [00:46:06] Hmm. That's a really good question because I try to be an optimistic person. And so for anybody who doesn't know, and I'm very open about this, you know, my husband and I were not able to get pregnant right away. I thought that when I started decorating cakes in 2008, that I would be pregnant, you know, in 2009, like I was just, we were just gonna get pregnant.

This is what you just did. And we ended up having to go through IVF and we had to do all these like fundraising to even afford all of them, the you know, medications and things. And the cake community really helped us achieve that. So I would say Avalon is the baby. You know, she has all these aunts and uncles that are in the cake community who, you know, contributed \$20 here, \$20 there, but they really did help us make it happen.

And it was really hard. And sometimes I felt very bitter about it, you know, because a lot of people, they can just go out and just have a baby whenever they want. And you know, why couldn't we do that? but the positivity in me would say if it wasn't for the fact that it took so long for us to get pregnant and I didn't pour myself into my business, I don't think that I would be here.

I think I would have just, enjoyed making cakes on the side. I probably never would have traveled and taught to the extent that I had because I was already bitten by the competition bug by the time Avalon arrived. But had she been there already? Would I have even had time to make those competition pieces?

What if I'd had the mental space or the energy? I'm not sure I would have. So in hindsight, I feel like even though it was a struggle and I didn't prefer things to go that way, it was

actually a blessing because I spent six years pouring myself into my business. I called my business my first baby. So I gave it all of my attention, all of my love and put everything I had into it.

And is a big reason why I was able to build it up to where it is now, because I did just, that's all I focused on for a very long time before even kids entered into the equation.

David Crabill: [00:48:09] That's the end of part one of my interview with Liz Marek. Be sure to keep an eye out for part two, which is coming in a couple of weeks.

If you haven't already seen Liz in action, I encourage you to head over to the [Sugar Geek Show](#) to watch some of her videos, many of which are completely free. She has content for every skill level and I'll include some links in the show notes so you can check out her stuff.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/31.

And remember that we're just one week away from the first ever national cottage food conference, which is happening from April 6th through 9th. Tickets only cost \$20. And I think it's going to be a lot of fun. Check it out at cottagefoodconference.com.

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 will 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.