

Forrager Podcast 032 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 continuing my conversation with Liz Marek of the Sugar Geek Show. In case you missed the first part of this interview, head back and listen to that episode before jumping into this one. All right, let's get back to my conversation with Liz.

You're in a unique position because you have not only run this very successful business, but you now have interacted with and helped thousands of people who have been trying to decorate cakes, start a cake business, and you see plenty of moms. I know stay-at-home moms and probably many single parents who have that ambition to get a business off the ground.

Do you have any advice for them? Uh, if somebody has kids what, what do you generally advise them when they say I really want to start this business so that I can build something for my family's future.

Liz Marek: [00:01:05] Yeah, I do have a lot of questions regarding that and it is a little bit personal of a question too, like regarding your own. Position in life. So I'm really trying to be upfront and say, my, my situation has, was really unique. I didn't have many kids. I have a husband who not only is supporting me, but he has a lot of technical skills that have helped me along the way, being able to make me a website and, you know he, he taught me how to edit my first video using iMovie.

And I didn't understand any of those things. So that was something that I probably wouldn't have had if it wasn't for him. And then my own, I I'm an artist at heart. I like, I'm an artist who loves to create. So if you're an artist or if you have a creative outlet, you know that there's not really much, you can do to stop it.

It's like you have to do it, even if it's in a small way. So if I wasn't baking and cake decorating, I would be doing something else. I'd be making necklaces or jewelry or something. So I kind of tell people that cake decorating just happened to be the thing that I landed on and was a way for me to be an artist.

I also didn't know I was a teacher. That's something that was a surprise, but, you know um, I guess I like that. I like being a teacher too. I really enjoy helping people. Get that aha moment. Like, Oh my gosh, I didn't know. I could do it that way. And it maybe it's because I know what it feels like to just be so confused about a technique and wanting to do it really well.

And then you finally get that thing, that piece of information. And you're just like, Oh my gosh, that helps me so much, you know, and just made my life easier so if you are trying to make a name for yourself, whether it is you want to eventually be an instructor that travels all over the world and you don't want to make cakes for people anymore, or maybe you want to open your own bakery and you uh, you know want to have a brick and mortar someday.

Whatever your end goal is, you really have to look at your own situation and say, okay, how much time am I willing to give to this. And is it the right time? You know if your kids are super young and you don't have the ability to have someone watch them or help you, maybe you don't have a mom or your significant other isn't, isn't able to help you, then don't be so hard on yourself.

You know, maybe it's not the right time to try and open up a bakery or something like that. And I'm a firm believer that things happen at the time that they're meant to happen. As long as you keep looking for the opportunity, right. Things don't happen magically, but you have to be open to them. So I, that's probably not the answer anybody's looking for, but it really is truthful. In that look for the opportunities that might come up and take a chance on yourself. You know, don't be afraid to try things and if they don't work, it's okay. Try something else. See, see what else has meant to come along.

Just, don't be afraid to go after things and don't think that you just because other people are doing it, that there's no room for you. Like there's room for everybody. Everybody has their own unique perspective. Everybody has their own unique take on things. It's just a matter of believing in yourself and just looking for that moment, you know, who knows what it might be, that that kind of brings it all together.

So I hope that makes sense.

David Crabill: [00:04:40] I think one of the challenges too, is that, especially today with social media, YouTube and your, your stuff that you put out, there's so much amazing stuff out there that I think someone who's starting out would go, like my stuff looks horrible and they might not feel like, I'm sure you get this all the time.

They don't feel like they're worthy of selling a cake or especially teaching someone else how to make a cake. What do you say to that? And when should somebody feel ready to start teaching or to start selling? Like how do you know that you're good enough?

Liz Marek: [00:05:21] That is something that I think every kind of creator uh, struggles with. And that's like a form of imposter syndrome uh, where you believe that you don't know enough, or you're not an expert enough to speak or create anything and be seen as an expert because you're, you're not the expert, right.

You're definitely not an expert when you're first starting out. And especially now with social media, you kind of see everybody who is at this top level and you just can't really see the pathway between where you're at and how to get to that. end goal. So first of all, we have to remember that the journey of creation and career is not a straight line.

It's a never ending spiral circle. You know, it's, there is no end. I have set many, many goals for myself that I thought were completely unreachable over the years and I've, reached them. And then what happens when you reach them? Well, you just get to them, you make another goal, and then you reach that.

Or maybe it takes you your whole life to reach one goal. That's okay too. But there is no end goal. And when you are heading towards that goal, whatever it is, whatever you set you'll

never stop learning. You will never, ever stop becoming better at what you're doing. So the only thing you can do is teach the people who are further behind on that journey than you are.

So someone gave me some really good advice when I was struggling on trying to think of content, to create what I've taught everything. What do people even want to know? Like, they're like, I feel like there's nothing new and I don't have anything to offer. And they said to me, you should teach what you would've wanted to know when you were a beginner or you when you were at a certain stage.

So no matter what phase you're at, you have something to offer. And that's why you can take things like beginner classes for cake decorating. It's not, not, everybody's going to need a beginners class, but there are plenty, plenty of people who do there are plenty of people who need to just be walked through how to make a basic buttercream or how to frost a cake, or how to cover it in fondant.

These are fundamental techniques that I've taught. Thousands of times. And there's never going to be a shortage of it. In fact, there's probably more people who need to know the basics of something. than people who need to be taught expert techniques, because I think once you get past a certain amount of experience, you start getting more and more comfortable teaching yourself.

But when you're a beginner beginner, it's like those basics are the things that really make all of the difference and give you the confidence to, to kind of keep moving forward. So my advice is to teach what you know, and not be worried about not knowing at all because none of us do

David Crabill: [00:08:20] You know, that's actually something that I really like about you Liz is that I see a lot of these big time cake makers, like Natalie's Sideserf is one you mentioned, and they of course make amazing cakes, but it seems like a lot of the tutorials they do are very advanced and you've done it all. You do a ton of advanced tutorials as well, but I like the fact that you also do really basic tutorials for beginners.

And I was just kind of curious about if it's challenging or boring for you to go all the way back to teaching basics, when you can do so much more with your business right now,

Liz Marek: [00:08:58] not at all. No, I don't. I think that. The imposter in me believes that people don't want that from me um, that they don't want to see the basic stuff because so many people teach the basics. So see it even happens to me um, because I want to make sure that I'm giving thing. I'm giving people stuff that they can't get other places like the more advanced tutorials, the sculpted cakes, the gravity defying structures, you know but really the things that do the best on my social media are so simple. I don't know if you saw recently, I posted a video of how to make water ganache to my um, social media, to Instagram, into TikTok mainly.

And this is a recipe I came up with years ago, long, long time ago, and it came purely from necessity. I needed to make a drip for a drip cake. I ran out of cream. I didn't want to go get

cream. I had to deliver the cake very soon. And I just thought, well, what is cream? It's mostly water and a little bit of fat.

So I had melted down some milk and added a little bit of butter to it, and I thought that's. Basically cream maybe. And, um, did a ratio of, I think, three to one with some melted chocolate and it was really, really watery. And then I added some re more chocolate to it. And I was like, well, this seems like a pretty good consistency.

And I tried it out and not only did it work, but I felt like it worked better than a regular ganache drip. And it was such a simple thing, but it was one of the first videos I posted to I think I did a Facebook live on it first, and then I downloaded the live and posted it to YouTube. And it's this 20 minute long, blah, blah, blah.

Like not a very good YouTube video at all, but it like took off and not like. Hundreds of thousands of views, which I'd never had before at the time, all because I put water on chocolate and I, you know, it was just like what this is blowing my mind. And, and so I recently reshared it because I do use that technique all the time.

So I just happened. I was like, I'm going to film this. You know, I haven't shared this in a long time. And again, it completely blew up. It completely resonated with so many people. And it's because it's just a basic technique. It's one of those things that a lot of people struggle with. A lot of people are not out there building gravity, defying, incredible structures.

Like that's more of a niche interest, but a lot of home bakers are struggling with a drip. A lot of home bakers want to know how to make a cake stay moist. And so I enjoy still teaching those basic basic things because I know that people resonate with them. And, and first and foremost, you have to give your followers what they need and not just what you think they need.

So analytics analyzing what people respond to is helpful with thinking about what to create for future projects.

David Crabill: [00:11:57] I know that you have the sugar geek show now, and that you have this membership community, which is an amazing community, but you started by publishing a ton of free content. How, how did you transition over to that and was it difficult for you to start charging for your content?

Liz Marek: [00:12:15] You know, it was difficult. And for anybody out there who might be starting a YouTube channel, it's very, you know, it's kind of a big thing right now to be starting a YouTube channel. Remember that once you start giving your information away for free, it is very difficult to make people start paying for it.

So, so that was my first sort of mistake is I never charged for anything. I always just had everything on YouTube and it was free. And I would also, I had a Facebook group where I just kind of posted free content and I never even thought to charge for things, but what happened was my tutorials that I was posting to YouTube were gradually getting longer and longer and longer.

Um, And somebody actually asked me one time, I actually, a few people asked me, but I remember once someone said, Hey, do you, do you like have any tutorials for sale? Because I would actually, you know, pay money to, uh, get like a materials list and, have you make specific projects that we could recreate?

And I was just like, what, like who would, who would want that? And, and this is before we had all of the cake schools that we have now and Craftsy and all of that. So I really didn't know why anybody would pay for that content when they could get it for free on YouTube. But I was running into a problem of they're just YouTube was just um, limiting how much you know, how long the videos could even be, that I was uploading.

And actually my, my wonderful husband, once again, He, uh, casually mentioned to me one day, this website called Patreon. And he said, you know, I know some artists that I follow who are, who have a Patreon account, where you upload kind of like tutorial style videos, and then they just tip you like a certain amount of money every month, just to, to have uh, the ability to see the video first.

And maybe you send them like a little, thank you, sticker or something in the mail for being uh, for being a patron. And I just thought he was out of his mind. I thought he was bonkers. I was like, nobody's going to pay for my, for my stuff. Like, nobody's going to sign up for a Patreon like that doesn't even sound like a good idea.

But uh, yeah, a lot of people did. A lot of people signed up for the Patreon and uh, we still have members of sugar geek show who started on the Patreon and they're very proud of it. And it makes me feel really happy that they've stuck with me over, over all of these years. So we went from YouTube. And then we went to Patreon and we did get a lot of flack.

Like don't, I kind of left that part out, but a lot of people complained about me being a sellout and saying that, you know, now I'm charging and I got greedy and I used to I used to just put stuff out for free, but it didn't last very long because I reminded them that I still do put free content on YouTube every week.

I put, you know, lots of videos out, lots of recipes out that are completely free and there is no pressure to sign up for more advanced tutorials. They're just merely there if, if you want them. So I think quickly that kind of died down, but I did have to deal with that for a little bit. So then on Patreon, we grew our, membership to a few hundred people, but the platform itself was not set up very well for organizing content.

And pretty soon people were complaining that they couldn't find old videos and If they ever stopped using Patreon and weren't members anymore, they didn't have access to the videos. And so then that led to basically our decision to start sugar geek show and stop with artisan cake company.

Because at this point I was still just artisan cake company, making cakes, making toppers and making content on the side, but because Patreon did so well, it kind of made me realize that I didn't have to do both. I could just be a content creator, which at the time seemed weird. You know, I was like, what?

I'm just going to make content for people to watch on line and not make actual cakes. That seems crazy. But now, you know, of course now that's not so crazy, but Dan built me a website and he made a whole section that members could sign up and, you know, have their own accounts and watch video content.

And everything was well organized. I could put all my recipes there in one spot. and then again, we had to, you know, convince everybody to move from Patreon over to this new platform. And we did lose some people, but you know, ultimately it was the best decision. And in hindsight, we should have just built a website, but because there wasn't really any example of.

What that looked like at the time. I didn't even really think it was going to work out to be honest, but yet again, just letting you guys know. I mean, w what's the harm in trying, right. I could have just said, no, I'm not gonna do a Patreon that's stupid, you know, but I took a chance and thought, sure, why not?

I'll, I'll try that. And it literally led to Dan being able to quit his job. And we work together now and we own our own company together. We get to be home with our kids and we're able to support our family and have a very, very unique career, which we're so, so grateful for every day. I'm so grateful for our followers and the people who continue to support us and are so loyal and, you know, use our recipes and, you know, they, they tag us on their social media and it always just makes me feel really good.

Not only because it allows us to work, you know, and support ourselves. But I feel like I'm going to be, like, I made a difference, you know, in, in the baking community that when I'm gone that people will still use my recipes or, you know, the, my buy books will still be around or maybe my website who knows what'll happen, but it kind of feels like I built a legacy for cake decorating, which is something that makes me feel really proud of, you know,

David Crabill: [00:18:19] No. Yeah, you should be very proud of what you've accomplished. I mean, it's, it's amazing to see what you've built and I know it's, it's continuing to grow. What was it like? Cause I know many years you were supported by Dan's income. What was it like to switch, you know, flip that around and become the breadwinner of the family.

Liz Marek: [00:18:43] Man. That was really weird. That was a really strange um, to go from maybe making a couple hundred dollars a month after paying you know, for all of the supplies and you know, all of that. I never, I never even paid myself. It was just, I, I think our arrangement early on was like my money that I made from cake decorating paid for groceries.

Like that was kind of the rationalization I had is like, we were literally able to eat now if I would've just taken the money that uh, I was spending on cake decorating and just bought groceries, you know, it probably would have been even more profitable, but for a long time, Dan's income. So really just supported, not only my business, but you know, our family and he is, he's really traditional husband in that way where he worries a lot about making sure that the family is taken care of and that, you know, he's being financially responsible and that's his responsibility solely.

And when the business started making enough money that I needed to hire someone to kind of help me manage the blog and the membership and the one that he built, I kind of approached him and said, you know, Dan, I'm really gonna need to hire someone to do the technical side of this business. And I, but I would really like for you to do it, but that would mean you'd have to quit your job.

And he was really against it at first. He says, you know, that's too risky. What if something happens and you know, we're going to lose everything. And I said, okay. And he said, well, if you can, if you can reach this number of income, then you know, I'll consider it. And I think we reached it like in a couple months, it was just growing so quickly.

And I think it surprised us both, you know, it wasn't anything I did on purpose. It was just naturally growing in that way. But I was able to kind of be like, well, see, you know, it really is taking off and I don't, I, I need some help. So. He, I think he gave his work like a six months notice because at this point he's a, a director of marketing.

So he's at the top of his field at his company. And, you know, he didn't really necessarily want to leave. He really liked his job. He really enjoyed his career. So I was kind of asking a lot for him to leave that and also take a financial risk. But you know, he did it and, and I'm forever grateful that he did do that because now we get to be together in this business and, you know, we're 50 50 on it.

And I try very hard to respect his side of the company, which is the technical side. I don't tell him how to make the website look. I mean, I give feedback on colors and pictures, of course, but he really handles all of that side of the thing. He manages the membership and I think that's and important for our business, because I don't think he would feel happy if it was just.

Him being an employee of me, you know? So my sacrifice was that I gave him ownership of what his part of the job is. So he, I defer to him on things and say, well, what do you think we should do? And what do you think is going to be best? And so that he feels still that he's contributing and he is responsible for the success of the business for the, for the part that he's in charge of. And um, he does a really good job with that.

David Crabill: [00:22:11] When did you start to get an idea that this might turn into something really big?

Liz Marek: [00:22:19] Oh, I think that Patreon, when we were doing Patreon and the numbers grew so quickly, and we discovered that there was a, a desire for online content where people didn't have to travel to take a class or They didn't have to pay a huge amount, you know, like a membership site, it was like \$20 a month, you know, and they could just get all of this content and watch it whenever they wanted to.

I didn't realize there was such a demand for that. And so that was one of the, one of the times that we really thought, Oh my gosh, this is special. And the other one was a couple of years ago. I, um, met up with a friend who was a wedding photographer, and we had worked together back when I was just a wedding cake maker and, she's like super, super smart, very like techie person. But she also was a photographer and I was just like, Hey, what

are you doing? Like, what are you up to? And she's like, well, I'm about to quit my job at Intel. And I'm going to go full time blogging.

And I was just like, blogging. What is that? Like, you know, you just like write an online journal or something. And she was just like, no, like blogging is a whole thing. Like, you know, you put up recipes and you write you know, everything that you know about them. And if you rank well enough on Google, you can actually make money off of it.

And I was like, well, like how much money? And she was like, there are people who are like millionaires who do this. And it's like, that's, I don't believe that that's not true, you know? And she was like, well, don't you have a blog? And I was like, well, yeah. I mean, I kind of, I kind of write recipes here and there, but like, they're not anything amazing.

And I think I had like 10 recipes or something, you know, on my website from that came from my book. And she was like, well, come to this blogging conference with me in Utah, it's called the everything food conference and you'll meet all these other bloggers and you'll kind of see. What the blogging community really is.

And so I went to the conference, I, you know, listened to what everybody had to say about blogging and met people who were bloggers. Oh I'm pretty sure like 99.9% of bloggers are women who are moms. You know, and they were, I mean, not everybody's a millionaire, but they were making crazy money and doing a lot less work than I was as far as content creation because they're making recipes.

So, you know, when I'm filming a cake, it might take a whole week to film the cake, the production, the editing, you know, especially if it's an elaborate cake. , they're like, Oh, I'm just going to make a recipe of on muffins or something and you just whip them up. It takes half an hour. You film it, you edit it, put the recipe up on the website and that's it.

And I just like, okay, well maybe I'll give this a try too. And so I did, that's when I started taking blogging a little bit more serious too. And that has surpassed our income for our membership site. We're not millionaires, but you know, like maybe someday um, but it, it has really opened my eyes to the learning really never stops.

You know, I really thought that I was just going to be a cake decorator, making cakes out of my kitchen. And that was going to be the calling that I was going to have for the rest of my life. And then that turned into teaching and I was like, Oh, I'm going to be a teacher. And that's going to be the thing that I do for the rest of my life.

Oh. And now that I'm teaching online and I'm going to have a membership school and that's the thing I'm going to do for the rest of my life. And now I'm blogging. So who knows what, what things will lead to in a couple of years. But I've definitely learned that the opportunities don't stop coming and as long as you continuously look for them and you're continuously working towards them, that you just never know, you know, what's going to be around the corner.

David Crabill: [00:26:11] How do you prevent a business that has over a quarter million followers? How do you prevent that from taking over your life and still managing to have a family and live a full balanced life?

Liz Marek: [00:26:28] What makes you think I have a balanced life? Oh my goodness. The struggle to find balance in life is never ending. Um, Somebody explained it to me once that life is like juggling five plates. You can only hold five plates at a time. And the only way to take on something else is to put down one of the other plates.

And, uh, that is the definition of balance. What's on those plates is what makes it feel unbalanced. So sometimes my plates are full of family and being at home and cooking dinner and making sure my house is clean and gardening outside. I love that traveling going on vacations, these are all things that, you know, you want to have and helps you to feel at peace in your life.

And then, but on the other hand, I have all my business plates, which I also enjoy. I love creating recipes. I love experimenting. I love teaching and, and I love social media. I love answering questions and being helpful to people, but to do that, I have to put down some of my family plates. So I try to just take turns.

You know, there are during the daytime, I um, tell myself that it is okay to not be playing with my kid all day long because I'm working. And that is something that every parent has to do. I should feel thankful that I at least get to see her multiple times during the day because I'm eating lunch or getting her ready for school or, you know, she's homeschooled right now.

So I see her even more, but I try not to feel guilty that, you know, she says, Oh, can you play a game with me? And I have to say, no, I can't. I have to go to work. And I, even, if she gets upset, I have to stay firm and say, I'm really sorry. I will play with you later. Or we can do something fun together this weekend, but I have to go to work.

And, and that's just part of being in an adult, you know? So we set those boundaries for herself or for, for us, and then also no working after five o'clock. So unless I have some crazy cake deadline that I have to finish in the evening time, but I used to work. all day and into the evening until the moment I fell into my bed, but it doesn't feel good and it is not good for my family to, to work that way.

So I have to just say, okay, five o'clock it's time to think about dinner. We're going to eat dinner together at the table. We talk about our day, then it's bath time and we play some video games together or play a game or something like that. And then before, you know, it's bedtime and it's eight o'clock.

And now it's important for me, for my self care to not go back to work, to not get back onto my computer and work on a blog post or, or do anything that needs to be done. I do what I want to do, whether that is to be hanging out on TikTok or maybe I I've been recently getting addicted to clubhouse.

So I'm like always on there listening to things or I want to like watch some TV catching up on some, one division you know, all of those things to keep me happy, you know, talk to my

husband, see how he's doing. So that I'm, I'm not overworking myself. Occasionally I do break those rules because of, like I said, deadlines and stuff, but I try to keep our work schedule as normal as possible.

So then if. Work becomes where it's like, I need to be working at night a lot, and I need to be sacrificing a lot of those family plates to be meeting my deadlines. Then that tells me I need to scale back on work, that, that things are not balanced. And I am expecting too much of myself. And I need to change what I'm expecting.

So it sounds very easy and just kind of like cut and dry. It's very difficult because it's very easy to over-schedule yourself as an entrepreneur. And then you make commitments that you cannot just bail on. So, you know, you get, you go through it and sometimes you overwork yourself and then you just try to correct the next time.

You're like, okay, I know that I cannot take on more than one cake a week or I will be sacrificing too much family time. So I'm going to make sure that I always only take on one cake a week until my kids are in school and it's different for every person, depending on, you know, how your, how many kids you've got at home.

I'm sure you go through the same thing. So whatever much time that is, I think it's different for everybody.

David Crabill: [00:31:03] Well, so you've obviously come a long way and I know you can't see into the future because obviously where you are now is probably somewhere. You never would have guessed. You would be five years ago, but where are you at now? And where do you see yourself going in the next few years?

Liz Marek: [00:31:22] Where I'm at now is I definitely feel a surge of creativity after a year of sort of like we just moved into a new house. I finally have a space that we converted into a kitchen into a filming space. That's downstairs in a basement and we renovated the whole space just to be used for cooking and baking and filming.

And so for the first time in my career, I, my, my filming and production is not in my kitchen, my actual house kitchen, or my garage. So that has been a big step and I feel a lot freer to. Be a little bit more ambitious in my production schedule. So I am ramping up a little bit more than I had been in the past because I have the space to do it.

And I brought on more people to help me. So I have a videographer, I have a really good friend who has helped me on cakes in the past. And she's, she's been helping me test recipes and create content. And I think I view for myself, I'm not sure how fast I'm going to get there, but I think my next goal for sugar geek show is to start bringing in other people besides myself, because while I love what I teach and I love being an expert in cake decorating, my interests are expanding exponentially.

And I find myself really interested in chocolate work and really interested in bread making and things that are not my expertise and sure I can learn them and teach what I find out. But I think what I want to move into more is just kind of relying on other people's expertise and saying, you know, today I'm going to bring in my friend Christophe, let's say, who was the He

was my teammate on Halloween Wars and he is my pastry chef teammate. And he is incredibly talented and say, okay, today I'm going to have Christophe do a video for sugar geek show, and he's going to show us how to make croissants. Now, Christophe is a French pastry chef and has been making croissants ever since he was 14 years old.

And he's from France. You think I'm ever going to be able to like understand croissants at that level? Probably not. So I'm excited about kind of moving in towards being a curator of knowledge, if you will. So, you know, for a long time, I've just relied on my own knowledge and share that freely. But now I think I'm moving towards relying on other experts in a related field and finding the best of their knowledge and sharing it with our audience.

So we'll see how that goes, but that's kind of where we're headed.

David Crabill: [00:34:02] Well, that makes sense. And it keeps it fresh too. You know, it, opens up new options. And you mentioned the Halloween Wars. We didn't even get into the competitions. Um, But yeah. What was it like to participate in the competitions on national television?

Liz Marek: [00:34:23] competing on TV was another goal of mine when I was. First starting out cake decorating. I would watch people like Mike McCarey and Lauren kitchens uh, compete on food network challenge. And that was like, you know, a goal like maybe someday all beyond food network challenge and I will get to compete.

maybe I would even win and like right around, you know, 2014 when I was just starting to make a name for myself and trying to get onto TV uh, they could network challenge. was no more, it wasn't a thing anymore. And they started doing these other shows that were like kind of dramatic drama based.

And I, I applied to several, but believe it or not, I used to be very awkward on camera and would vary. I would overact over act and didn't how to speak naturally. Um, So it was very cheesy on camera and so I would never get picked to be on TV. And I wasn't sure why. And in hindsight, it's because I'm talking like this and it's not very fun to listen to, you know?

Um, So when I finally did apply to be on Halloween Wars, I think that they thought we were the underdog and I was paired. They don't, you don't get to pick who you're paired up with. But, so I was paired up with Christophe who's pastry chef and my friend Mike Brown, who is a pumpkin Carver, and me, you know, little old me never been on TV.

I've done a couple that I had been on TV. I was on Duff till Dawn, and I'd done some like one-off shows like ridiculous cakes where they come to your house and you, you just make a cool cake for somebody and that's it. It's not really competition. And so the, really the only other competition I had done at that point was Duff till Dawn, which was even then it was a very casual competition.

It was like, let's all stay up late at Duff's place and make cakes and see who's is better. You know, it was very low-key and a Halloween Wars was not low key. It was very intense, multiple days of filming and very long days. And asking a lot of you in just five hours, you know, people ask me, is it really just five hours of filming?

Yes. It really was just five hours of filming. We did a lot of prep work. You know, you do prep work to kind of get ready for that day. But the actual competition really was just five hours. So it was very stressful and challenging because I'd never done anything to that level, but. With every challenge that we got through, we learned more about what we had to do, what the process was like.

And we also really, our team really got along. And that is a very, very important part of competing on any show. If you do not get along with your teammates, you're done for, if you're fighting with your teammates you're done for, you have to be able to communicate with each other and encourage each other and lift each other up when you're feeling stressed or you just can't do it.

You just can't emotionally get through it. And I think we probably would not have won, but our team was so strong and we got along so well and we communicated so well and talented too, for sure. But all the teams are talented. Like that's not really the, the, the issue. It really came down to being able to work through the stress.

And being a strong team is I think what helped us win Halloween Wars, which is probably why I'll never do it again, because unless I same team, I'm not risking it,

David Crabill: [00:38:00] Well, Halloween Wars was probably your biggest win. And what was the aftermath of that? Did you get a ton of publicity?

Liz Marek: [00:38:09] it was huge. It was, I. I really did. I don't regret going on Halloween Wars, even though it was one of the most challenging experiences of my life still to this day. Cause they play it every year. They replay our episode of our season. They replay season seven of Halloween Wars every year and you can watch it on YouTube too now.

And um, even though I look different people still, they recognize my name and they're like, Oh my gosh, I loved her season of Halloween Wars. even if we lost, I think people would still think it was amazing because being on TV tends to be one of those, like, Oh, you're more legit now. And I trust you more because somebody puts you on TV, you know?

So it was really good for our business. It was good for our school. And when we go to work with sponsors or big companies like Disney or something, we just recently did a sponsored post with Disney. And they ask you, you know, what are your achievements? What have, you know, have you written any books?

Have you been on any TV shows? uh, what are your accolades? So Halloween Wars has always been a really great. Feather in our cap to say I won that or that I was on it. And people might not know this, but it is food networks, like number one show. And it's only on once a year, but it is, people love, absolutely love that show.

And it's like, they're high. They get their most views like during Halloween Wars.

David Crabill: [00:39:37] Well, what about an aspiring Baker who sees all this stuff and would like to be there? Do you recommend that they apply or should they just hunker down

and focus on improving their skills and posting on social and hoping someone discovers them? Like how can someone get on TV like you did.

Liz Marek: [00:39:59] first of all, you have to want to be on TV. You know, don't go on TV.

If it's not a goal for you, don't get, you know, people love to tell you, you should be on TV. You should be on TV, but unless you want to be on TV, then you shouldn't go. And the only reason, or the reasons that you have for wanting to be on TV, it can be so different. You know, some people just want to go for the challenge.

Some people just want to go because they want to see what it's like. Some people are trying to just build their career and, you know, TV is just to kind of a stepping stone, whatever it is, you know, you should actually want to go do it. Secondly, you should understand that it is television. And it's not going to be all glamour there's is very long days.

Very, a lot of preparation before you even leave to go film, you have to like do sketches and you have to have meetings. And there's a lot of time commitment before you even go and you might not even win, you know? So. I think people have it in their minds that shows are rigged and they're not fair.

And they might have a bad experience. And I have not personally had any experiences with shows being rigged or being fake but they all, but they have asked me to specifically focus on a problem. So if we're having a problem say, well, what's happening. And they want me to talk about it in a way that is going to play up the drama because it's TV.

So I'm not necessarily lying, but I am kind of making a big deal out of something. That's not a big deal. and people get surprised by that. I was like, what? You know, like, they're going to have you fake it. And I was like, well, I'm not faking it. I'm just making good TV. Because at the end of the day, who wants to see people just building a cake that comes together perfectly and nothing, they didn't have to work through anything.

Cause that's not even realistic when we're making cakes at home, things go wrong and producers want to see you problem solve. They want to see you communicate with your, teammates to figure out a solution. They want to see your emotions as you try to work through the pressure of it, because everybody can relate to that.

You know, you can relate to having something go wrong and then what do you do? Right? And then they get worried. Well, I'm going to look bad. I'm going to look bad and. I dropped and broke so many things on Halloween Wars and a lot of people did not like my personality because I cried a lot, and it didn't hurt me though, because it's real and it's authentic and that's the way it really, it really was incredibly stressful.

So you just, I think it's important to, first of all, just understand that even though it can be really good for your career, it's not all it's work, just like anything else, you know, a lot of it. And if you want to compete and you want to be on TV uh, really what you should be doing is making sculpted cakes that are either Halloween related like if it's Halloween Wars, or if you want to go on holiday baking championship, be making the types of cakes that would be part

like, you know, you would see somebody makes something similar like that, because what happens is then if you want to apply, you can apply that you can just literally just.

Google, you know, apply to Halloween Wars and the information will pop up or you can go into any group like sugar geeks, which is my Facebook group. And just say, Hey, is any cake shows casting right now? Does anybody know? Cause somebody always knows, you know, who's casting. And um, they'll ask you what's your portfolio look like?

So if you haven't already built something and you haven't already built something at a large scale then they probably won't cast you. And also for yourself, you would, you need to like have those skills, you know take some classes on sugar geek show. I've got lots of gravity defying large structures.

Uh, If you want to learn stuff like that and get familiar with it and then make sure it's something that you really want to do, but it can be really good for you. And it's, it's really not that hard to get on TV. you just have to have a good portfolio of stuff to present. And they're always looking for people who have good personalities, you know, just being yourself. um,

David Crabill: [00:44:00] it also helps when you don't get nervous when staring into a camera.

Liz Marek: [00:44:05] Well, I mean, that does not, to be honest, that is. Very common. And my teammate, Mike Brown, he had such bad anxiety. The entire season we were filming. He'd have to take, you know, extra anxiety medication just to get through an episode because he was so nervous about, you know, he never wanted to talk like if they were on him.

So maybe a good, a good suggestion is if you do get really nervous, then, um, you can be a teammate. You don't have to be the team leader. Cause usually the team leader is the one who talks and sort of comes up with the ideas. And then the teammates are the ones who are obviously on the team and you, you get to be on the show and you get to contribute to the whole piece, but you don't have to like talk as much and you know, your personality isn't as much on display. So something to keep in mind.

David Crabill: [00:45:00] All right. Last question Liz. Uh, Somebody's starting out a cake business, or they want to start a cake business. There's so many things they could focus on improving their skills, starting to sell, building up social media, going to cake shows. What do you recommend to somebody who's just starting out and wants to get their business off the ground?

Liz Marek: [00:45:25] Mm gosh, you're right. There is a lot of moving pieces. I'm curious what other people have. Said, cause I'm sure I'm not the first cake decorator, but um, I have a group called cake newbs and I made it to, because after I created my group sugar geeks, I noticed there was a little bit of a disconnect between seasoned cake decorators and super beginner cake decorators.

And I made the groups so that people could ask very, very basic beginner questions and also get help on problems that they have. And I will tell you the most common problems that

people complain about in cake newbs. And one of them is their cake fell apart. They went to go deliver this beautiful cake and the cake did not make it.

And now they're in this weird position that they should, they give a refund what went wrong, you know, and most of the time it's a structural problem um, or a temperature problem. So fundamentals of building a cake, I have a whole series on sugar geek show. It's free the basics it's, it's called how to make your first cake.

And it literally talks about. Everything from the correct cake pans to tools making sure that you're stacking and leveling properly, how to, to, um, stack two cakes on top of each other, deliver them like literally how to make your first cake, like I'm standing right there with you. So that's fairly important.

Another one is the cake recipe itself. you don't have to make a cake from scratch. Like you can use a box mix, but in my experience, the only wedding cake I ever had fall over, it was made from a box mix because they are not really made to stack. They're very, very soft and very delicate.

So I use a doctored box mix Uh, I have a few recipes on my website, but there's, there's some all over the place, but basically you're adding a few extra ingredients to make them a little bit firmer or just learning the fundamentals of baking a scratch if you want to bake from scratch so that your recipes are on point, you're comfortable with them before you start trying to make them there's any, you should be able to ha you should have a basic vanilla cake and a basic chocolate cake.

Ready to go under your belt before you sell, because you can tweak a chocolate cake to become a mocha or chocolate chip peanut butter, you know, or you can take your vanilla, turn it into a spice cake, or you turn it into a champagne cake or any, you can, you can tweak it, but until you have that basic baking knowledge, it's good.

You don't want to be struggling through that on somebody's wedding cake. Like I, like I was please learn from me, you know, so that's just like the, kind of the, the main, main basics you need for even just starting your business is being comfortable with the basics of building a cake and baking one.

And then please, please, please, please, please make yourself a contract. You know, you and I have a lot to say on contracts and why you should protect yourself, but mostly it is. Think of it this way. When you go into uh, an agreement with anybody, think about it from your perspective, if you were the client, if you are about to spend, let's say a thousand dollars on something.

And you and somebody is going to provide a service for you. It's going to make them feel better. Like the client, you will feel better if you know exactly what to expect, you know exactly what the flavors are, you know exactly what the cake is going to look like. You know exactly when it's going to be coming, what happens if something goes wrong?

These are all things that help the client feel more at ease and they portray you as an expert, you know, that they, they don't ha they don't harass you with a million questions and email

you at all hours of the night, or try and text you because you've already covered it. You've already got it all outlined in the contract and establishing communication from the beginning through emails so that you can go back and like, see what you had talked about instead of trying to keep up with text messages and social media, you know, DMs and stuff like that.

I personally don't do that ever because it's very hard to keep track of what you were talking about. so when it comes down to it and it's in, you're ready to deliver the cake, everybody knows what to expect. And this is my last one, my last one, very, very important, never, never, ever, ever, ever deliver a cake that has not been paid for.

Don't ever do it. It might have worked for you just fine all the way up until now, but I see. Time and time and time again, of people saying the client never paid for this cake. What do I do with it now? Or they try to sell it on their page. And if they, if it's a last minute order, if they ordered it this morning and it's due this afternoon, first of all, I would not take that order.

But if you do, they pay for it right away and you don't even turn your oven on or lift a spatula until the cake is paid for. that is just common business practice, not even just for cake decorators, but for most businesses, they don't do anything until you pay for it. So you're not a restaurant get your stuff paid for, first. Those are my tips.

David Crabill: [00:50:54] And yet you put out all that content for free for so many years.

Liz Marek: [00:51:00] I know, I know. Oh my goodness. That's different. That's brand building.

David Crabill: [00:51:08] Well clearly It worked very well for you and is still working well for you. And it's so cool to hear your story and how you've grown to the point you're at now. And I'm looking forward to seeing where it's going in the future. I know it's very easy to find you online, but just how can people find you and reach out?

Liz Marek: [00:51:27] Yeah definitely. So if you want to follow me on Instagram, my username is sugargeekshow. I absolutely love it when people try my recipes and tag me in their stories so that I can reshare them. That's really a great way to kind of directly contact me or for me to see your work. Uh, Secondly I'm on TikTok a lot.

I post a lot of videos on there, just kind of behind the scenes and um, the funnier side of the business. And that's a username sugargeekshow as well. I post new YouTube videos every Tuesday, [youtube.com/sugargeekshow](https://www.youtube.com/sugargeekshow) where I post a lot of my recipes and our tutorials come out on the first and the 15th on our membership site, [sugargeekshow.com](https://www.sugargeekshow.com).

So we've got something for everybody on all platforms.

David Crabill: [00:52:15] You certainly do well, thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show today. I really appreciated it.

Liz Marek: [00:52:21] Thank you so much for having me. I had a great time.

David Crabill: [00:52:24] That wraps up part two of my interview with Liz Marek. Liz has an incredible story, and although she has a very large following, it was cool to see how it all came from humble beginnings. Remember to head over to the sugar geek show and watch some of Liz's great tutorials.

She really does have something for everyone, and I'll include links in the show notes so that you can check out her stuff.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/32.

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 product, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps that 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.