

The Resilient Baker with Justina Rucinski

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager podcast, where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs, about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill. And today I am thrilled to be talking with Justina Rucinski.

Now, if you have been in the cottage food industry for a while, you've likely, already heard of Justina before. She is an amazing woman who has overcome an absolutely horrific situation. To put it very briefly, she was sexually assaulted in her home when a supposed client came to pay for a cookie order. It's by far the worst news story I've heard or seen since I started following this industry about 10 years ago.

So that happened back in 2019. I clearly remember when I first heard the news and I must admit at the time I wondered if that would be the end of Justina's custom cookie business. Well, not only was it not the end, but in the past two years, Justina's business has actually flourished like never before.

Her business, which is called SweetEms, started in Iowa back in 2014, but it is now based in San Antonio, Texas, and not only is her business thriving, but from what I can see on our social media accounts, it looks like Justina herself is once again, thriving as well.

So I'm really looking forward to talking to her today to better understand her story and how she has overcome unbelievable odds. And with that, welcome to the show Justina. Nice to have you here

Justina Rucinski: [00:01:25] Hi.

David Crabill: [00:01:26] So Justina, I want to go back to the beginning of your business back to 2014. What got you into this baking business in the first place?

Justina Rucinski: [00:01:37] Um, so basically growing up, I had a very large family there. Seven, seven well, not seven, six siblings, cause I would be the seven, but my mom was a single mother to all of us and we didn't have a lot of money. She, you know, she worked as hard as she could for, for us, but basically she couldn't afford like bakery items, like just go to the store and buy it.

Always. She would always have to make it. And I actually remember that being a really like a highlight of, you know, my childhood, because it was also, it was rough because. My dad um, was actually abusive to her. And so my childhood was really rough, but it was one of the happier moments of my childhood was, you know, watching her bake and baking with her.

So basically I kinda just, I love to bake. I kind of just, it became like a really therapeutic, happy thing for me. And basically it was my sister's sweet 16 where she and I was like, well, I'll let me bake your cake, which I usually baked anyways. But then I was like, all right, well, how about I like, try to like decorate this. So I like decided to make like this super extravagant two tiered cake that looking back now, it honestly looks awful. Like it's not good. It's really bad. But it like. It just made me feel so good. Like, I felt like, wow, like I love

this. I want to learn. I want to learn more. I want to keep doing it. And basically I did like cakes and I didn't actually did not do cookies at this time.

I just started with cakes and I did cakes for like fans and like friends and family. And then finally, you know, I started having people asking me, what would you charge for this? What would you charge for that? So it kind of became a business without meaning to become a business. It was mostly like a hobby of mine.

And then people like wanted, you know, to buy for me. So I was like, oh, you know, I'm just, you know, at the time when I started it I had my daughter, Emiliana and she was, she was like, I want to say she was like one, probably almost two. She was one. You know, I was just, you know, I, I wasn't working, I was a stay at home mom and it was nice because it was just like something that I could do to kinda like, you know, cause when you're a mom and it's just, you just get so consumed with being a mom.

And I felt like I needed something to kind of be mine as well. And something that made me feel accomplished, which of course motherhood is the most accomplished. Like you feel amazing, but I wanted just like something to kind of get away from that and then basically I was like, all right, let's do it. So I've just made like a side business. just to make like a little extra money and to be able to do something that I loved.

David Crabill: [00:04:19] So that like officially kicked off, you started selling in 2014?

Justina Rucinski: [00:04:26] Yeah, it wasn't, I mean, it was shortly after I did my sister's sweet 16. It was like probably like a month or two after. Cause like I did I did that and then people were like, oh my goodness. You're like, this is, this is awesome. Like did like, do you didn't even know you were this good? And like I said, looking back, it's not great, but yeah.

So basically it was like uh, like a month after I did my sister's sweet 16 that I actually started officially um, selling to the public.

David Crabill: [00:04:57] So what was the first year of your business? Like? Uh, It sounds like things were growing by word of mouth. What, what were you doing to grow the business?

Justina Rucinski: [00:05:07] Yeah. I mean, it was, it was slow, but it was, yeah, it was just word of mouth. Most of it was like, honestly, I did a lot of work for people I already knew, like from Facebook, like people that were friends with me on Facebook and then it kind of grew. And then I did people, I didn't know, which was really exciting.

Like getting my first client that I didn't like, you know, and I did um, to advertise, I just, it was basically word of mouth. I, it was like, like I said, it was a very, just a side business situation. So I wasn't really like stressed about trying to make um, you know, money or for it to become successful at that point in time.

I just thought it would just be a side thing. I never once imagined, well, I mean, of course I'm jumping ahead, but at the time I was just, I was like, oh, you know, I'm just going to do

something I love and make a little extra money. So it wasn't some, I didn't take it very seriously if that makes sense. I just did it because I love to do it.

And it was enjoyable to me.

David Crabill: [00:06:01] Yeah, totally makes sense. And so when did it start to become. Of uh, like serious business for you.

Justina Rucinski: [00:06:06] Yeah. So it was a side business. It was a side business for awhile because I was with at the time the father and my children, and he was, you know, the main person that made money. So it basically was a side business and I didn't make any money. I actually spent more money cause I had to buy a bunch of tools up until.

I want to say like three years in is when I started to really like get traction and get really known and started to really grow. And where it actually starting to become like, oh, maybe I, maybe I can actually make this into something. of course the, you know, the relationship with my father and my children didn't work.

We were not good for each other. so when I left him, you know, we, you know, we did need a little bit of extra money. So I did get like an actual job. I worked at target for a time being, I worked there for like two years while I was doing my business.

But at the time my business was growing like exponentially where I could not focus on you know, either it was, I had to make a decision, whether I was going to stay at target or let it go because it was getting too much. And then when I left father of my children, I had to make a choice.

I had to be like, okay, well, I can't do both. Like, I can't do this. It's just, it's just too much. It was getting way too overwhelming for me. I had too many people wanting all these orders and then I had to get up and work and then come home. And then I was a single mom with two kids. So it was, it was a lot, so I actually made it full-time.

I made the decision to leave target. I've only been so full time. I think.

it's only been like two years since I've two or almost three years since I've been full-time

David Crabill: [00:07:46] I mean, I feel like being a single mom of two kids, two young kids is a full-time job in and of itself. how did you, how did you add in the business or

Justina Rucinski: [00:07:58] Yeah, no, it was crazy. You know, I I'm so grateful that the biggest thing and, and I truly mean this when I say it. I think the biggest reason why I, you know, I was able to be successful was the support system I had with my family. Like my mom, she was the biggest help to me.

Um, She would drop everything And just come help me with the kids so I could get an order out my door or she would run to the store for me if I needed something. You know, she was my, honestly, the, probably the reason why I was able to actually have a business with two kids by myself.

David Crabill: [00:08:35] And at this time, were you just doing all custom orders where you weren't doing any markets or anything like that?

Justina Rucinski: [00:08:41] No. I was just, you know, that's the funny thing. I've actually never really done markets. Uh, it was all custom. I've been known for custom and I just kept growing and growing. And then what really happened and what really set me apart was I started to do cookies. I actually, like I said, I didn't do cookies until really, like I did cake.

I focused on cake for the longest time in my career, and then it kind of switched. And and it's really, it's kind of funny because I hated cookies. I attempted it one time and it was just a disaster. Like I cried. It was literally the worst thing ever. remember like cussing at them and crying and I'm like, I'm never doing cookies again.

Um, So I did them for an order and then I was like, oh, you know, I can do this. And I was like, no, not doing this. So I stayed away from them. And then I revisited them one more time. Or I actually was, I was asked to do like a very complex, like character work toy story, cookie set. And I, mind you, I, I was not a well-known cookier. I wasn't like, I've only had done it like twice before for very little orders.

But I was like, all right, you know what? I can do this. I'll revisit it. I'll try. And I did it and they didn't turn out horrible actually. Looking back there. It's always funny when you look back at your work, you know, and when you get certain levels, you're like, oh my gosh, it's so bad. But at the time I was proud of them.

Um, So then I kind of went full force with that. And once I started doing sugar cookies my business, like it went from like, you know, just being steady to making, you know, enough money to survive, to like pretty successful. Once I started offering sugar cookies,

David Crabill: [00:10:26] So what are we talking about in terms of busyness you're getting into maybe the 2018 range? Like how many orders per week were you trying to juggle on top of your mom duties?

Justina Rucinski: [00:10:37] it was a lot, I would say I was probably, I was juggling easily, like 10, 12 orders in the week on top of being a mom. Which is a lot.

David Crabill: [00:10:47] Yeah, that's definitely,

Justina Rucinski: [00:10:49] Yeah, yeah,

David Crabill: [00:10:50] that's actually a lot for someone doing it full time.

Justina Rucinski: [00:10:54] it is. Yeah. So it was crazy, but, you know, and like I said, I'm grateful, I'm grateful for my, my support system. My mother, especially.

David Crabill: [00:11:04] And do you remember what, what were you pricing things at. You know, maybe what you initially, can you remember what you initially priced your cakes at way back when, and then initially priced your cookies at and how that changed.

Justina Rucinski: [00:11:16] Yes. It changed because I learned the amount of work I had to do to put into this. Like when I first started, I had no idea. I kinda, it was kinda like fly by the seat of my pants. I just love to do this. Okay. Fine. Like I wasn't, I didn't really focus on really trying to make any kind of income.

I was just basically doing it cause I loved it. Right. It was just like a side thing, a little bit extra money. And so, no, I didn't charge very much in the beginning at all. I went from when I first did my first sugar cookies, I think I charged. Twenty-five dollars a dozen, which is if you knew it, like the amount of work you have to do with sugar cookies.

Like you're basically working on them a good eight hours, minimum, minimum, and I charged \$25 a dozen. Um, Which is just nuts, so now I will not even turn my oven on for less than \$80. So, you know, I I've absolutely like my prices have changed.

but also it's because like I realized the amount of work I was doing and I was like, okay, I have to value myself in order to, you know, really make this something. So

David Crabill: [00:12:24] Yeah, we're jumping way ahead here. Cause I know your business is super super successful now. I mean, obviously it was, it was very successful before, but I saw on your website that you have \$145 for a dozen cookies. That's like, that's like your highest price point.

Justina Rucinski: [00:12:41] That is my highest. Yeah. That's, well, like for cookies. Yeah. That's the high, and it can, it can get higher. It just depends on what you're wanting, I guess, but it can get higher

David Crabill: [00:12:53] Have you actually had an order where someone paid that much for a dozen cookies

Justina Rucinski: [00:12:58] Absolutely. Yeah. I just got one actually like a couple hours ago.

David Crabill: [00:13:04] that is extraordinarily high, so they must be super complex. Well, I will say I remember when I saw that news story come in, I checked out your Facebook page and obviously you were a very skilled cookie artist at that point. And then I just recently, because this podcast checkout checked out your Facebook page again.

And you're very good before, but oh my goodness. Your skill set now is just phenomenal. I mean, it went from good to great, to amazing. I mean, it's, you're definitely have improved your skills a lot over the, those the past two years or so.

Justina Rucinski: [00:13:42] That is the beauty of what I do. And I love that. I love that you say that because it's true. I think anyone with a skilled craft, you're always going to grow in your craft. And I love when people say that because it's true, I've really grown. And, and that's what I love to do. And I'm really big on that actually is like showing people like, look, it takes so much work, but you can get there.

And, you know, I look at my work today and I'm very proud of it, of course. But like I know in a couple of years I'm going to look back at this work and I'm going to be like, oh my gosh, you know, like I, there's always going to be room for me to grow. And I love that. I love that

about this. It's like one of the biggest, I think it's the main, one of the main reasons why I do what I do, because I just know that there's so much you can do and you can just grow so much. You can keep growing and it's like, it's never ending.

David Crabill: [00:14:31] Yeah, well, your work is really impressive so I can understand why people are paying a ton of money for your cookies. Um, Well, let's go back a little bit, you know, we jumped ahead to the current day, but um, I read that news story that leading up to that traumatic event, you were considering starting a storefront. Is that correct?

Justina Rucinski: [00:14:52] I was, I actually had the building. I had a nice little set up that we were going to do and things were slowly getting there. And it was, it was happening. I was painting the, so basically it was going to be below me. And so I lived in like an apartment area, but the lady who owned the building was like, let's do this, let's make this into an actual, like, place where people can come in and grab their cookies and we can have like a separate area kind of situation. And yeah, it was all planned and everything. So yeah, that was, that was definitely in the works.

David Crabill: [00:15:27] Well, obviously you had an extremely successful business at that time, obviously you still do. And we're kind of leading up into this traumatic event in your life. And I, I remember. Back. When Courtney who wrote the big news article, she actually called me first to talk about the history of the cottage food industry, whether anything like this has happened before.

I wasn't aware of anything like it happening, but I feel like she did a really fantastic job of laying out the story, but of course, you know, it's her words. Um, I'm talking to you today. I want, I want this to be your story. Um, I'm happy just directing people to that news story to let people read up on, on what happened if they want to familiarize themselves.

Is there anything that you would like to add or talk about in the context of what happened?

Justina Rucinski: [00:16:17] Not really you know, the, the thing about with what happened. I don't mind, you know, talking about it, but I, I absolutely don't want to go into detail with anything Cause it is, it's one of those things, you know, it's, it's a part of my life now and I can't give it too much power, if that makes sense.

David Crabill: [00:16:36] Totally makes sense. I am going to include the link to that news story in the show notes, and people can go there if they want to check it out and read up on that. But um, let's skip ahead to after that happened obviously there was a recovery period in there, but I remember starting to see your name, keep popping up in terms of you becoming a very popular baker.

Um, what was the response of the community like and, and how have they supported you since that happened?

Justina Rucinski: [00:17:07] Yeah. I mean, I can, I can say this, like, I don't like to talk about my trauma in like detail and she did, she, Courtney did write a very, it is very detail oriented and it is, it is accurate that, you know, when she, when she came to me, that was that

literally was, I want to say a couple of days or, yeah, it was like a week after it happened to me.

Um, So it's not something that I want to talk about, but I can say this. I can say that, you know, I, I just remember I was, I was very hurt. Because I I've grown this business from the ground up. Um, And when, I mean the ground up, literally from the ground up, like I didn't have, you know, I'm a hundred percent you know, a self-starting business.

I, you know, I didn't get any money to start it. It was all just me, you know? and it was something I loved and it was like, it was like my other child, you know, like I have my two beautiful kids, but my business was like my third baby that I had been growing. And I just remember like laying on the bed completely, just like, just not even wanting to even think about my work.

And I actually remember I had orders and I just, I was ready to give it all up. I just, I couldn't imagine at that time, being able to Keep doing something that hurt me the worst I've ever been in my entire, like, I couldn't imagine doing that. I couldn't imagine that I could get to a place where I could do it and feel happy and feel that joy again, like what it gave me, because my business was used in the worst possible way to hurt me. And I just, I never thought that I could get to a place where I would be able to really, you know, love it as much as I did before. I felt like that part, that piece of me was taken away from me. And honestly, I didn't think I was gonna, I thought I was gonna quit. And I, I, I genuinely was like, I can't do this anymore.

And I told my family, I said, I can't like, I am destroyed. I am beyond hurt. And I was just trying to come to terms with that. Even being real, I didn't believe it was real. I thought it was, I thought I was in like this messed up nightmare. It didn't, none of it felt real to me. I felt like I was in this, like just messed up.

Just, just, it was crazy. Like, I, it was very, it was just one of the, honestly, like looking back now where I'm at in my mental state. Like, I, it, I was just, I couldn't believe I was in a place where I was like, I just, I was in complete and utter shock that, you know, that happened to me. Cause like, you know, and I've said this before to people, but like, you know, you see things like that.

You see. You see documentaries, you see movies that are like awful. You see these things that and you're like, but it's fake. Right? Like it scares you, it, it, you know, you're like maybe you can't sleep for a couple of days kind of situation. Um, But then when you have something very real, that is probably something that could be in a movie happen to you like that, or in a mess, like in a documentary like that.

Your whole view uh, changes. It's, it's crazy. Like, I, I just never, I never, I never thought, you know, it's just, you can't fathom that you can't even think to, you know, so I was just in a really dark place. I was, it was the worst time of my life. And, but I do remember there was so much support. Um, and that's where I was getting at, the whole community, like just.

Even though I was in a super dark place. Not even, just, not even my local community. Right. Not, not even my local community, but my actual like, baking, like cookiers all across the

world. And I mean, the world, they all like, you know, like, held hands and like, basically like, and locked forces and spread their love across.

And I just remember that I remember, you know, the, the support that was given to me and that I saw it, even though I couldn't fully like, understand what was happening at that time you know, once I got to a better place, I fully saw it and it definitely helped me see, you know, a light in such a dark place.

I was. And I just remember like, thinking, like, I can't give this up. Like if I give this up, not only do I destroy like what I've worked so hard at building for myself, but I also let that person, that monster who, who did that win. I let him destroy such a vital part of me and I can't allow that. So I ultimately decided that I wasn't going to do that. And I, and I wasn't going to let him destroy my happiness and destroy that the joy that this business gives me every single day. Like, I, I didn't let that happen.

David Crabill: [00:22:26] Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that. Very honest recollection there. I know it's not easy. But I mean, you're clearly in a better place now. And if you could, you know, with the past two years of experience of going through this, if you could go back and tell someone like yourself, who's just been through that, like, what, what would you tell yourself back then when you were in a dark place and you couldn't necessarily see See the light.

Justina Rucinski: [00:22:56] Like, what would I encourage myself?

David Crabill: [00:23:00] Well, I just got the sense that you were hopeless and you

Justina Rucinski: [00:23:05] I was. Yeah.

David Crabill: [00:23:06] didn't have any kind of positive outlook. And I just didn't know if, if you've learned something over the past two years that you would want to share with uh, someone who is in your position.

Justina Rucinski: [00:23:18] Um, No. And, and I know that's a weird response, but let me explain to you why I say that when you're in a place like that, I had plenty of people reach out to me and tell me, you know, you're, you're loved, you're beautiful, you know, this, this isn't, you know, and it doesn't matter when you're, when you're surrounded in a dark place like that, like, that's all you see is dark.

Right? You don't see any kind of glimmer of hope. You don't see it. You're not going to see it. You're in this, you're just in this, like, essentially like a black hole. And that's what you see. So when you're surrounded by something, that's where you're. Um, I think the most important thing, like I said, if I, if I could go back would just be, like I said, the support just in anyone, anyone who's going through trauma, you know, you can say all you want to them, but just continue to love them and be there for them and anything they do just be there because you cannot, you can't fathom to understand where they're at.

Cause you don't, you don't understand. So the most important thing I would say is don't try to understand where they're at, but just be there for them unconditionally. And, and it will, it will show eventually, but it just has to be on their terms. If that makes sense.

David Crabill: [00:24:32] totally makes sense. Um, So when did you start to feel? Some glimmer of hope?

Justina Rucinski: [00:24:38] You know, it's interesting because. I didn't really feel any glimmer of hope for a while, because it was, it was really hard for me cause I had, I had that happen to me. And then quickly after that horrific thing happened to me, I then had to go, I then had to go to trial for it.

I had to put him in jail. Right. So I, on top, on top of that, I, I had to stand on this podium and here just be completely dehumanized and you know, tell everyone what happened to me, but then have a lawyer be like, well, you didn't say this or you didn't say that. And when you have something so personal and so awful, you know, happened to you, like, like happened to me.

I didn't really have, I don't think I ever looked at it like a glimmer of hope. What I looked at it is like, I, I was, I was resilient. And maybe hope wasn't there, but I was going to keep going.

David Crabill: [00:25:41] Yeah, very well said. um, So about, when did you start picking up the baking business again?

Justina Rucinski: [00:25:49] I was away from it for a while and people were very kind and super considerate of even the orders that I had to cancel everyone, everyone. I mean, everyone, none of them asked for their money back. Like I said, the support I had was amazing. The, the understanding, the kindness, like that was my biggest thing.

I was terrified that people were going to destroy me because like that my reputation is as a business like your reputation is very important, right? And that was one of the scariest things for me at the time I was like, people are gonna, like, this is gonna be bad. You know, I have to, cancel thousands of dollars with our orders and I don't have thousands of dollars to give them back like that.

Like, it was, it was awful. It was completely awful, but no one, everyone was super understanding and also people were very kind and letting me take my time to really heal. Because like, not like heal physically because, you know, he hurt me very badly, but also heal mentally. Like I had to like kinda just step away and kind of find my footing again?

It was almost like I had to. Basically like a new me, right. Cause Yeah. I'm me, but something. So life-changing like that you kind of just have to step away. You have to, you have to find who you are again. So I did, I remember it wasn't, you know, the crazy thing is it wasn't like a gear. I didn't take like a year.

It was a couple months I took a couple months off and then I was like, you know what I want to work. And, and that's kinda like my personality. I think, I think that's the biggest thing about me is I'm a very independent person. And I, I grew independence because I was a

single mom for, you know, I'll say like four years, you know, I was, I've been I've, I learned how to become very independent and I didn't want to lose that part of me.

I didn't want to lose my independency and I didn't want to just not do anything or not feel like I'm bringing anything to the world. So. I was like, I have to work. And so, yeah, like it was, I want to say, like, after it was a couple months after that happened, I think that actually we're, we're coming up on the two year.

I don't like to say anniversary because it's obviously not an anniversary, but almost two years ago that happened to me. It was actually in August. I want to say I, I started work back up in like the end of September, beginning of November, or It was like, the beginning of October is when I, I started like middle beginning is when I got another order.

And it was actually for toy story, which I felt like was kind of a sign for me because the toy story cookies were kind of the thing that got me started with cookies. Right. So it felt good. So that's when I kind of started back up again.

David Crabill: [00:28:39] So what was that next few months? Like, I mean, this is just a few months before the pandemic hit. What was that period like as you started to get back into the baking world.

Justina Rucinski: [00:28:51] You know, it was slow going. I had a ton of support, a ton of people wanting to support me and. order for me and, you know, I was just grateful for, for the support truly. I had so many people, thousands and thousands of people truly support me through such a horrific time in my life. And now that I'm in a good place, I really, I really recognize that at the time.

I couldn't recognize it cause I was just in such a dark place. I just, I didn't, you know, but now, like I know, and I can fully say this, that, that support truly did bring me back um, to, to who I am today and my business.

David Crabill: [00:29:32] Yeah. I mean, you've also been very open about it, just talking on social media, sharing things. I think a lot of people really respect you for how open you've been. Um,

Justina Rucinski: [00:29:43] Yeah. I mean, the one thing is, is it's, there's such a stigma behind what happened to me and I don't think there should be, I don't think a woman should be afraid to speak about something like that. Like I feel the more, more women speak up like maybe the less it will happen because it is so it was so disheartening for me because when that happened to me, I had thousands of women reach out to me and tell me, this happened to me.

This happened to me. I've never told anyone, but you know, the, the amount of people just personally that I've heard. It's just awful. It's beyond awful. And I feel like if, if women had, if we had more of a voice than we stood up, I feel like it would help. And I truly do believe that I don't believe there should be a stigma behind it because I didn't ask for any of that.

That was, that was put upon me that that's not something that I, I asked for. You know, that was something that happened to me and I didn't ask for any of it. So why do I have to be quiet about something? Or why do I have to feel shame over something that, you know, I didn't ask for?

David Crabill: [00:30:49] As I said, I do feel like people look up to you as a great example of how to deal with a situation like this. Um, So as you started regrowing your business how long did it take for it to get back to being as busy as, I mean, I feel like it's, even way busier now than it ever was before. So was it just like an exponential growth uh, bringing your business back?

Justina Rucinski: [00:31:18] Yeah. Um, Like I said, I had so much support, so actually it was pretty quick. And actually what happened was, people who didn't know me uh, knew me because it became like, it became, it was a big story. You know, and it grew and, but the thing that happened was it wasn't because like, but they continue to say because they saw, they loved my work.

They, they saw that I was talented, you know, do you see what I'm saying? So like, it, it actually grew my business.

Um, I didn't expect that I didn't want that. That's not something obviously that I would ever want. Right. But that did happen because people, you know, the support and then people who actually didn't know me, it was like, they had then heard of me. And then it kind of just spread like wildfire basically.

David Crabill: [00:32:05] Yeah. I mean, that totally makes sense. I have noticed, I feel like you've won some awards or you've been even in the running for some of the big online cookie competitions.

Justina Rucinski: [00:32:16] Yeah. I know. Um, So I won the best of the best in Southeast Iowa. A couple of years back, I want to say a year ago it was a year or two ago. Um, And then I was also a runner up in like an online thing. Yeah, yeah, I've done. I haven't done that many, but, and I also hopefully I don't know if that's going to happen, but I did get contacted from food network as well. so that's, that's definitely a goal of mine to be on like food network for my, for baking.

David Crabill: [00:32:45] I was going to ask about that. I feel like it's only a matter of time before you're going to be on one of those TV shows.

Justina Rucinski: [00:32:51] It's a goal of mine. I would absolutely love to do it. You know, I think it would just, just even, I mean, if I win, I don't win fine, but I just think the experience would be amazing

David Crabill: [00:33:01] Oh, yeah. And you know, you have the skill set to do it for sure. You know, you're easily talented enough. And then you're also, you know, very communicative and social. I mean, your Facebook page and Instagram feed are just I feel like they just blew up in terms of the number of followers that you have and um, you post on, on social.

Like, I feel like every day, I mean, you're super active on social media. Has that always been the case throughout your business?

Justina Rucinski: [00:33:30] Yeah. I'm a very, like, I think that's my personality though. Right? Like, you know, and I always say this when you make, like, when you become a business owner, when you start a business, people don't, yeah they want your products, but they also buy into who you are. And I do feel like because I've always been such a social person, I've always been very like friendly.

I've always been very like easy going. I think people have really loved that also too, about my business is because I'm a person and I've made that very clear. Like I'm, I'm not just like a robot, I'm a person. And I've been, I've kind of like been kind of a blogger slash business owner. If that makes sense.

Like, people feel like they know me and they love that. They, you know, I get it all the time. All, I just love this and this and this. And, and I think that absolutely, it's just a part, it's my personality. That's just how I am. I'm just a very social person and I'm open. I'm a very open individual. There's I don't really keep anything hidden. It's all like in the front,

David Crabill: [00:34:32] So now that your business has grown substantially, are you still working out of the home or are you going out of a commercial kitchen?

Justina Rucinski: [00:34:40] Currently well I just moved. And so currently I'm just trying to get my footing here, to be honest, like I was known very well in Iowa and I grew like crazy and I, you know, I had orders upon orders and I had to turn people down. And when I decided to move from Iowa to Texas San Antonio I'm slowly kind of building myself back up.

So I haven't even looked into doing commercial stuff right now. Right now. I'm just trying to get my name out there as much as possible. And just kind of like, I kind of had to start from scratch a little, but it's actually going well Um, people seem to really like my stuff here, so hopefully we can, you know, I kind of peddled back a little because I went from everyone knowing me in Iowa and all my work to Texas where I did have a few people know me, which was awesome to see, but it's definitely, I definitely have to get my name out there.

David Crabill: [00:35:33] Yeah, I did see that you, got into a relationship and you said it and a meinge or something where, you've moved, not away from something bad, but towards something good. So that's, that was a really nice way of putting.

Justina Rucinski: [00:35:46] Yeah. Yeah. Cause like I, can't a big reason why I moved well, you know, to start my life with my boyfriend and we're very happy together, but also too, you can't heal where you were broken and I think it's going to help me heal more to be away from where I was hurt so bad.

And it has, I felt so good since I've been here and it's been fantastic and I'm so much happier. I am so much more present. I'm so much. And honestly, I feel like my work is also becoming more elevated because of, I can see it. Like for me, like I can see my happiness being shined, like shown through like with my work and with everything. So yeah,

David Crabill: [00:36:26] um, And you've not only been selling your cookies, but I noticed you've also been doing some classes as well.

Justina Rucinski: [00:36:36] Yeah. I actually offered my first class in San Antonio And I definitely, you know, it's like halfway full, so that's exciting. I can't wait to do that. So yeah, I'm gonna, my hope is to be able to offer more classes in the future. And I would really love to like go different states and like, I want to grow that much.

I want to grow where I can like teach all over and experience that. So that's definitely something I'd love to do,

David Crabill: [00:37:02] And I noticed you have obviously the custom orders, the custom cookies, custom cakes, but then I saw like mystery boxes, cookie kits. Um, Can you describe those a little.

Justina Rucinski: [00:37:17] they're fun. So people really love. My work. I think the biggest thing is people just love what I do. And I actually design like 85% of my work. Right. So when people message me or when they go to order, they'll just say like, I have this theme I have, you know, so for instance, I just got an order for, they want like a Texas slash friends theme.

And that's it. She's like, I love your work. I want you. And then I, I design it. I get, they tell me this stuff, any kind of specific details they want, but I design most of my work. So the mystery box is fun because it's like they get my work, but they don't know what they're going to get. And people love it.

Um, It's actually very successful.

David Crabill: [00:38:01] I imagine that no one has been disappointed.

Justina Rucinski: [00:38:04] No, not, not yet. Fingers crossed.

David Crabill: [00:38:08] And, and what are the cookie kits?

Justina Rucinski: [00:38:11] Cookie kits are fun. it's very budget friendly. It's where you can like, so they're my cookies. And so the thing about my cookies is like, yeah, they're artistic and I'm so proud of them, but they also taste really good.

I've had people tell me that they're the best cookies I've ever had. Like, these are amazing, like, yeah, your stuff is amazing, but like, those cookies are so addicting. They're like crack. So you're able to have my cookies and then you can decorate them yourself. So I give you all the tools and I give you like, icing

and you get like sprinkles for the theme, and then you, they get to like have memories or enjoy memories with their families or friends and, you know, do be their own little SweetEms, you know, they get to decorate and uh, their own my cookies, but they get to decorate them.

David Crabill: [00:38:54] And then also I noticed that every order comes with a logo cookie, why do you do that?

Justina Rucinski: [00:39:00] Yes. Yeah. so I've gone through, gosh, I've gone through like three different logos for my business. When I started, I started off with like this generic, really silly one that I found like a clip art of. And then I started and then I actually hired somebody to do this other logo that just wasn't quite me.

It didn't fit. I didn't like it. So I got rid of it. Uh, Then I actually remember I was with my cousin in, we were in Chicago and she's like, Justina,. She said, I don't understand why you don't do something like penguin related. She's like, you love penguins. You've always loved them. They're a huge part of who you are.

Like, why don't you just do that? Like, and she was actually talking about like getting a tattoo. Cause she was trying to convince me to get a tattoo. She's like, get a tattoo with like a, like a decorator, like a little, you know, what is it? A decorating bag. You know how cute that would be on you? It's just so funny because it was like a light bulb in my head.

And I was like, oh my gosh, what am I doing? Why don't I like make this my actual logo? Like, this makes so much sense. Like I'm obsessed with penguins. This is like anyone who knows me, knows this about me. And like, why don't I incorporate that into this business and really make this brand me. you

know, this is really going to make me, so uh, I hired somebody to do my logo and I'm very proud of it.

It's fantastic. So then I was like trying to think of fun ways to incorporate my logo and I would always put a logo. Cause you like, when you do work, like when any, when anyone like any cookier and cake artist. They're always going to put like their logo on the cookie or the cake first off, so someone doesn't try to like say it's their work and also like a watermark.

And I was trying to think of something that could be a little bit more unique and different. And I kind of stumbled upon that where I was like, what if I like cookied my logo? And it became a big thing and yes, now I offer every single order, every custom order, not every order. I shouldn't say that because not every order gets it.

It has to be a custom order, but every custom order, they get an extra cookie. So not only do they get, you know, they get a dozen cookies, but they also get 13. So they get 13 cookies. And one of them is my, my logo cookie, which, and I also, I have fun with it. It's actually probably my favorite cookie to uh, design because I get to do whatever, right?

Like I, I get to find fun, unique ways to make it match to the, to the theme that I'm doing. And people love it. They enjoy it.

David Crabill: [00:41:26] Yeah, I did see some posts where you said that you do your best work when you have the reins on the design front.

Justina Rucinski: [00:41:34] I really Do Yeah. And I think that's what I think that's like anyone really like any cookier like, anytime you get, you get to do your own thing, like you just, you know, you do, at least for me, I do much, much better. Like I don't, I don't mind getting work

where they're like, I want it to look like this, you know, of course, you know, you're paying for it.

You get what you want. Of course. But yes, I absolutely do my best work when I design my own, my own sets.

David Crabill: [00:41:58] Do you ever turn away an order because the client is super specific on what they want.

Justina Rucinski: [00:42:05] A couple of times uh, I won't lie. beauty of what I do is I can be selective and, and what I want for my portfolio, what I want to build, what I want to, you know, and there have been a couple of different things where it's like, you know, you should just go to someone else because I feel like this is something that um, I don't particularly, you know?

Yeah. So there's been a couple of times, but most of the time like I said, 85% of the time, people are more than happy to let me design their stuff. And I don't like force it upon them. They actually, they want.

me to design. They will specifically say, I love your work. I want you to do this. Like, I, I do what you want go crazy.

So that is like the consent. That's what I always get.

David Crabill: [00:42:50] As you think back on. The many years you've been running this business. Are there any stories that stick out to you that are memorable in terms, like, you know, positive stories of custom orders or deliveries or something like that?

Justina Rucinski: [00:43:05] Um, Yeah. I mean, there's, gosh, there's so many stories. I actually heard a story where this woman, I mean, this really touched me beyond touched me, was like a big fan of mine, I guess. And uh, apparently she had passed away and the, the girl reached out to me and told me, like, I, I really want to order from you.

you know, because it's kind of in memorandum of my mom because she was huge fan of yours. She'd always show me your stuff. She would always freak out about your, what you do. And she just loved you. so, you know, can I order this? And it really touched me because like, I love what I do.

You know, I do it because of the art and because of being able to push myself in ways, I've never been pushed with what I do in my artistic freedom. And, but like to see that I really impacted people in that way. Gosh, like how do you, you know, how do you respond to that? Like, I'm just, I look at me and I'm just like, I'm, I'm just, Justina, you know, like I don't, I don't see myself how other people see me. So to hear that someone had looked up to me so much in that way.

It's just, it's, it's beyond amazing. Like, and I've gotten that a couple of different times and it makes me, makes me feel so good. Cause like I don't look at myself like that, you know? So when I hear people uh, look up to me, like in such an amazing way, like that You know, it just makes you feel really good.

David Crabill: [00:44:26] I feel like that's just a common theme in your story is, is that you've impacted so many people without knowing about it?

Justina Rucinski: [00:44:33] Yeah, I guess that's true. Yeah. I've never tried to either. I just, you know, I just create, cause I love to do it?

David Crabill: [00:44:40] Well, it seems like it's because you're, you're not afraid to put yourself out there. You know, you're not afraid to let people see who you really are. And, and then that's where the opportunity comes in to really touch people in an impactful way.

Justina Rucinski: [00:44:54] it's weird. I, I, I can't put myself on a pedestal because I feel weird doing that. I really don't like, I, I love what I do. I enjoy it. You know, I love to create but I'm just me. I'm just, you know, I just, I, I think that's like, my biggest thing is I'm just a girl who loves penguins and decorating and, you know, I just think it's great.

It's great that people look at me, like look up to me like that. Cause you know, and that's the crazy thing. You know, I've had jobs, I worked at target, I worked at subway. I've worked all these different places and you know, I can never, I never felt any sense of like accomplishment.

With those places. And there are a lot of times I would get fired for silly things and then I'd feel low on myself. And you know, this business has really given me that sense of accomplishment. I feel so good. Like, I feel like amazing because I truly feel like I'm in a place where I'm doing Well, Like I'm actually, like, I feel valued and that, and you know when you feel valued, it's, you can't really put a price tag on that.

Right? Like you just, it's a great feeling.

David Crabill: [00:45:55] Well, I know that you don't want to put yourself on a pedestal, but one thing that's definitely

Justina Rucinski: [00:46:00] I really don't.

David Crabill: [00:46:02] One thing that's definitely true is that you and your story has caused quite a bit of change in the cottage food community. I know is important for you to get the labeling laws changed so that, you know, people are not required to put a home address on a label and that change has been happening in a lot.

What have you seen in, in regards to what's happened in the last couple of years?

Justina Rucinski: [00:46:26] ah, gosh, There's a ton of states that now do not have to put their address on the labels and I've found it's all because of my story and that to me, That's beautiful. You know, I can say this now back then. I wouldn't be able to say this because I was in so much pain, but when, when I'm able to help people like that, when I'm able to make my community who I love, I've grown close to these women, you know, they've become my friends.

They've become my mentors. Like yeah, people look up to me, but there are so many cookie artists out there that I am beyond amazed by that I look up to. And so when I see that, when

I see like, you know, that I've made that impact to make these, you know, keep these women safe and you know, men too, there are men that also do what we do, but keep these people that I truly love.

And I love that community safe like that to me, you know, that's, I hate what happened to me, but what beauty, you know, like that's so beautiful that came out of that. You know, at least there was something good that actually came out of that. And it makes me, it makes me happy. Like I was able to. Take such a horrible thing and really make change and not only change in you know, a lot, a lot of ways, but also keep a community that I truly care about and love and value safe like that, you know? That's beautiful.

David Crabill: [00:47:46] Yeah, that change has been happening in a big way. I've noticed it, especially in the last year. that's like the only amendment sometimes is just changing the label labeling requirements. And I feel like it's just the start of almost all the states doing that.

Justina Rucinski: [00:48:02] Yeah. It's, it's crazy. Um, and I truly hope it just becomes uh, across the U S that it's not required because it shouldn't be required.

There's no one should have access to anyone's home that easily, because unfortunately there are horrible people in this world and no one should have access. We shouldn't be giving them any kind of easy way to hurt, you know, anyone like that. So it's, that's a great thing. It's very great to hear

David Crabill: [00:48:29] Well, and I can just, you know, speak on behalf of so many people. I just having been in this industry for 10 years, I have heard consistently over and over again, women, especially who are, this is like one of the biggest questions in the industry. Like do I really have to put my home address on the label?

Like, why do I have to put the home address on the label? So I've fielded those questions for 10 years. and so, yeah, it's, it's only been just in the last couple of years that we've actually had uh, some major changes happen. And so yeah, and I think that that wouldn't have happened if you had just been silent about what happened to you.

And, and I know. Obviously many people are silent and that's understandable. But I think that's why a lot of people look up to you is just because you chose not to be silent about that. And obviously there's been some silver lining to a very dark cloud.

Justina Rucinski: [00:49:27] I'm very grateful that they're like, there's, there was beauty that came out of. Came out of that. It's it's, it's great seeing it now.

David Crabill: [00:49:36] So as you look forward in your business, I know you're kind of getting yourself reestablished in San Antonio, but where do you see this business going? You've touched on it a little bit in the episode so far, but where do you see this business going into the future? Where would you like it to go?

Justina Rucinski: [00:49:53] I just want to continue to do what I love to do, which is, you know, create, but I would truly, like I said, I would truly love to teach a little bit more

because there are so many people. I didn't realize this, but there's so many people that want to learn what I do. And of course I can't teach them exactly what I do, but I would just love to teach them, you know, what I can, and I think that'd be fantastic.

I'd love to get more into teaching. I also eventually, and I'm actually looking into it. I want to be able to offer like a brand where people know me across the U S I want to be able, I really want to grow this into something truly remarkable, where I'm really known and, and really known for, for the hard work I've put in all these years.

So I hope I hope that can happen, but yeah, that's right now, it's, I'm in a phase of restarting over, but I'm hoping things will go well.

David Crabill: [00:50:47] So for someone whose kind of newer and starting out in this industry. What sort of things do you think they should know when they're, they're jumping in

Justina Rucinski: [00:50:57] You know, I always say this and I've been a huge advocate on it. Anything you do, do it with passion. If you do it with passion, you do this with true passion, you will succeed because passion is what is going to drive you when, when it gets hard, passion is going to drive you when, when things aren't going well, you know, It's going to push you to do more, to keep going, to, try new things. You know, that is the most important, in my opinion, the most important thing is to do anything like, you know, with passion. And then of course, you know, never, and I'm also big on this. And like I said, I don't, and this is why I don't like to put myself on a pedestal.

I refuse to do that because life is a learning experience. I will never, there's always going to be someone out there that's better than me. There's always gonna be someone out there that is more talented or can do things better. And all I can do is continue to focus on you, focus on what you love to do and grow, and don't worry about anyone else and just grow you, you know, like don't.

Cause I remember it, it gets discouraging. When you, when I first started, I remember seeing all this and I was like, oh my gosh, I'm never going to get there. And now it's crazy to see all these cookiers messaged me because I get messaged every day. By cookiers like, I'm just starting out and I look up to you and I love what you do.

And it's just Very humbling because I was in there. I was in their shoes when I started out I a hundred percent, like I would look up to these like, oh my gosh, how do you do that? How do you do that? Like, there's always gonna be things that I can push myself and there's always going to be someone better than me and that's okay because they're going to make me better. Cause I'm going to be inspired by them.

David Crabill: [00:52:38] Very well said. Thanks so much for, for sharing that. I think that's a really nice way of capping off this conversation. So Justina, if people want to reach out to contact you, where can they find you and get in touch?

Justina Rucinski: [00:52:52] I mean, I'm very active on social media, so I'm active on Instagram, but not as much as Facebook. So Facebook is going to be the biggest one to get

ahold of me on. And also I have a website for my business too. And so you can email me. So yeah, so I have my email on my website and then Facebook.

David Crabill: [00:53:09] Well, I'll put links to all those things down in the show notes and um, yeah, once again, thanks so much for coming on, being very open and transparent and sharing with us. I know it wasn't always easy to share, but I certainly appreciate everything that you shared and I'm certain that anyone else is going to love this episode.

So thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today.

Justina Rucinski: [00:53:31] Absolutely. Thank you for having me. It was fun.

David Crabill: [00:53:35] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. Wow. I am so grateful to Justina for coming on the show and being so open about sharing her story. I know that she has earned the love and respect of so many people in our industry, and as she settles into her new home in Texas, I am quite confident that her business is once again, going to take off in a big way

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Thanks for listening. And I'll see you in the next episode.