

# Small Is Beautiful with Eric Sorensen

**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'm talking with Eric Sorensen, Eric lives in Pullman, Washington, and sells sourdough bread with his cottage food business, clumsy Crow baking Eric is very passionate about sourdough bread and not just in baking it, but in educating others about it as well.

He started selling his homemade loaves in 2017 at his local farmer's market. And also from his driveway through a bread subscription service. A couple of years ago, Eric retired from his day job and uses his baking business to fund his passion for sailing. It sounds like quite the life. So today I'm looking forward to hearing how he turned one of his passions into a real business.

And with that, welcome to the show, Eric. Nice to have you here.

[00:00:52] **Eric Sorensen:** Thank you, David. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:00:54] **David Crabill:** Uh, so Eric, can you take me back to when you actually got into this sourdough hobby?

[00:01:02] **Eric Sorensen:** Yeah. It's 10, 11 years ago. I was a writer for the Washington state university magazine and pulled an assignment to go out and attend this thing called the grain gathering. It was put on by the Washington state university bread lab. That's run by Steven Jones, a wheat breeder.

And along the way, I attended a workshop on the science of bread. Co-taught by an Oregon state university serial chemist named Andrew Ross and at the end of the workshop, I said, Hey, you know, I'd like to make some of this bread. How do I go about doing that? And he said, you should get, he's got a New Zealand accent he says you should get this book Tartine. it's the methodical method of making a sourdough loaf of bread. It's, it's quite overwrought 38 page recipe for something that really is just a few steps, but in enough detail to make you pretty good at it, right from the start.

And the recipe makes two loaves of bread. So I would have one loaf of bread to eat. And then I'm sitting, looking at this other loaf. I'm wondering what to do with it. And I gave that loaf away. And I started giving it away to just anybody I met. If for my job, I went to interview somebody, I'd bring them a loaf of bread.

then I got intrigued by the, the thought of, well, what if I scale this up? It seems simple enough. All that would change is the amount of flour and water I'm using. uh, so I started making four loaves at a time and six loaves at a time and figuring out how much I could fit into my home oven.

And went up to Spokane, which is 70 miles from Pullman here. And picked up Mason tiles and lined my oven with them started making three loaves at a time. it started me thinking like, well, maybe I should get a license and a brand. And it kind of went from there.

[00:02:51] **David Crabill:** Okay. And that book Tartine. I know that's a really popular book. Do you feel like that's like one of the best ways to get started in the sourdough world?

[00:03:00] **Eric Sorensen:** You know, Tartine, the Tartine recipe is, is boiled down and available online. The New York times' profile Chad Robertson. So they include a recipe for the bread. Martha Stewart picked up a recipe for the bread. And so you don't really need to get the book. You can read about that online. there are also instructions all over the place online on how to get a sourdough starter started.

Frankly, I think that's kind of a pain and I don't have the patience for it. I would just find a friend who's got some sourdough starter or not go to a bakery with a cup in your hand and say, please give me a tablespoon of your mother as they call it, or your starter. And just start adding water and flour to that.

the starter itself is probably the most quote difficult thing. It's really, really a habit. You just have to cultivate. So that once a day you refresh your starter or you learned to refresh it and then pop it in the fridge. And this stuff is pretty much indestructible, I'm using a starter.

I got from a bakery that I volunteered at, and I think that was five years ago that I picked up this starter and it's still running just fine.

[00:04:14] **David Crabill:** Oh, yeah. And I know that some people have starters that are decades old, if not hundreds of years.

[00:04:19] **Eric Sorensen:** Yeah, there's a lot of romance to that. Some people name their starters. So though, I think if you were to name a starter, you really should name it after a city because it's got billions of individuals in it and it's not just one individual. I also don't think you really need to be overly attached to your starter.

if you killed it by some method, I'm not sure what that would take. It's simple enough to get another one going or go find one and not be particularly sentimental about it. And I think it also would ease some of the pressure people feel like, oh, I don't want to kill my starter, you know, it's go ahead and let it die. You can get another one.

[00:04:56] **David Crabill:** So when you're baking out of your oven, I know that's not as easy to do with sourdough, which usually requires a high heat oven. I think over 500 degrees. So how did you get around that?

[00:05:11] **Eric Sorensen:** You start at 500 and then drop it to 475, 465. It really depends on how it's looking, you know, if you're burning the bottoms, turn it down. At first, you use uh, a Dutch oven and you're cooking the bread in this. Cast iron pot with a lid and the lid traps steam that keeps the dough surface moist.

So when it has that initial expansion called the oven spring, it is soft enough that it can keep growing. And then after about 20 minutes, the yeast has been killed off. It stops growing. You take off the lid and then you brown it. I did have to do some messing around with my home oven. I lined it with masonry tile.

I put a pan in the bottom and into which I could boil, throw some boiling water and that created the steam. And then an added challenge was that it's a gas oven and gas ovens vent. So you create steam and it just flies out of the oven. So I rolled up a towel and stuffed the vent with the towel, and I also turned the oven off, right.

When I right after loading it and just let it coast on, on the heat that it had in it. And it wouldn't lose the steam. All of this then changed as I, I realized, okay, I want to make more bread. I want to do farmer's markets. And that's when I invested in a Rofco, which is a Belgian made three deck oven. It costs about.

\$2,500, \$3,000. And I put it outside, which was the best thing I did because we get hot summers here. The farmer's market season hits and it's now it's going to be 80 and 90 degrees. I didn't want to be cooking in my um, kitchen that way. I did have a work around.

for that where I actually could put a towel draped over the oven, run a fan, and I could bake a few things, but by and large, the breakthrough was getting hold of one of these ovens, putting it out on my back deck and then running it in and out of there.

And that the Rofco there, there is a, a large community of bakers with Rofcos. They call themselves team Rofco. Uh, Humble Bakehouse down in California has got a crowdsource cheat sheet that has lots of advice on what to do from loading it to Timing it, setting the temperatures, reading the temperatures.

and in that I can make, I can put 12 batards. There's sort of a pound and a half loaf of bread. I can get 12 per bake out of that. at a rate of about one bake per hour uh, and that, that really helped a lot an alternative if somebody wanted to bake with some amount of volume, and this is something I considered before I realized I could get the Rofco you can buy old electric ovens on Craigslist, set a price for yourself, max a hundred dollars and, um, run a series of them.

there's a, a great bakery in Seattle called Sea Wolf. Two brothers started this way. I think they had six Kenmore ovens and a bunch of, Dutch ovens to go in them and they did a really good job. Sort of demonstrated to themselves in the world that they could make great bread. and now they've got a full brick and mortar oven that I think just expanded again And um, they're going gangbusters,

[00:08:44] **David Crabill:** And is it to is the reason why it's important to get an old one just for the price, or is there something special about old electric ovens?

[00:08:54] **Eric Sorensen:** no, it's the price. So you feel like you're not investing a whole lot of money, you're just yeah, for 600 bucks, you now have the means to make you know, a lot of bread. Another way to look at this is the cottage baking laws in general, and in this kind of low scale approach, let you just go enter the business, you know, a few inches at a time.

and see if you like it make a little money or even get a kind of a customer base going make a few mistakes that aren't super expensive. Another way to look at it is I was so smitten by this baking thing that, that I actually thought, wow, what if instead of you know, having a career as a writer, I was a baker instead.

What if I chucked everything and really just tried to have a bakery and, and I read a few books on starting a bakery and thought about it. Well I'm obviously retirement age. I don't need to work that much, but also. Back issues. there have been times where my back Springs out and it's I'm in bed for a week and you do not want to have a hundred thousand dollar investment in a new business with loans to pay and then suddenly be disabled.

So that was a big incentive for me was like, no just see what you and there have been times where people will ask, oh, do you want to expand? Would you like to have your own bakery and a huge benefit of this is, no this is kind of where I can actually live. The Schumacher principle of small is beautiful.

I don't have to expand. You don't have to conform to society's expectations that you're going to grow all the time and then ultimately be the next Tate's bakeshop you can just say, no, I want to bake in the summer for one week and just get enough scratch to pay my mortgage and then go back out on the boat.

And then when the winter comes, I'll bake every week. it's very scalable, very adaptable. If you have good customer relations, they understand, and they appreciate, okay, he's not doing it this month, but he's going to be doing it next month. So that's sort of implicit in the idea of getting six cheap Craigslist ovens.

There's other shortcuts I've done. Instead of spending money on a banneton. These are these Willow baskets, they're very beautiful, they make nice stripes on your bread. They're really good for letting the dough breathe. And so it's kind of dry when you want to score it and put it in the oven?

Those costs about 20 bucks each.

And if you want to have 40 or 50 of them, that ends up being some scratch. so what I have is these plastic chip baskets. You get them at a store out here called cash and carry. Those are five, six bucks each. And then I buy linen. Linen doesn't absorb moisture, the same way that a cotton dish towel does sort of repels it, doesn't stick.

And, uh, you can buy that by the yard for, I dunno, 10 bucks a yard and get six, 12 small liners out of it. so I've got a, a little shelf here full of those and. You know, the, the expense and overhead can be quite low compared to most other businesses.

[00:12:12] **David Crabill:** So how long did you spend just giving away your bread? How many years was that?

[00:12:19] **Eric Sorensen:** Boy, that, that might've been five years of that. and it was a good practice for making the loaves, And then when it was obvious that I was just really into this. I mean, I am a serial hobbyist. I have had many things that I've been smitten by over the years and this just became the latest.

But at one point I had met a baker over in Moscow, Idaho. It's only eight miles away. They have a huge farmer's market. And I, I just chatted up this baker who had an artisan bakery

over there. And this is very early on in my habit. And he said, if you ever want to come by, just, you know, let me know and come on by, and

I just didn't even think about it. But then one day my wife said, Hey, why don't you go over and talk to that guy? so I called him or wrote him. I forget how he said, sure, come on. By, went over on a, on a weeknight, brought him a loaf of bread. His name was Nells Peterson. It was called panhandle artisan baking. Nells unfortunately has passed away at a young age.

It was very sad, but while he was with us I walked into his bakery and he handed me four sheets of paper. They were the formulas for all the bread he makes and the customer orders. It was a remarkable thing. Because if you talk to a lot of other bakers or cooks kind of, one of the foibles of having a recipe for something, oh, it's a family secret.

Oh, you know, I would never tell you how I make this. And here's a guy gives me on paper, how he makes everything. And then he tells me, and I use this book called Hamelman's bread. It's really good. we talked, I gave him a loaf of bread and he had the classic remark. He says, you know what? Bakers will tell you, this is a really nice loaf of bread.

Can you make a hundred of them? we talked for an hour and a half, two hours at the end of it. I said, you know, I'd really like to come watch you mix some bread and see how you put this all together. And he said, well, what you really want to do is get your hands in some dough. and this might've been Sage advice from a future mentor, or it was a smart move from a guy who needs to get a lot of bread shaped.

But what it meant was that for the next half year, every Friday, before the Saturday farmer's market, I'd go over there and we would go through a lot of bread. We'd go through a lot of dough. And it really is one of the great challenges of baking is that moment where the bread's ready to get shaped.

You have to make it look good and perform well in the oven. And you do that by giving it just the right tension, just the right amount of folds setting it up in a basket. so it was, it was a huge, and then while we're shaping, we're talking, so I hear certain things about them. starter or fermentation. And I get to see here's how we, times things he would put in the basket and then he would let it sit for an hour or so. And then when it had risen a little bit, he would say, all right, now we're going to put it in the refrigerator. And they'd put it in a big cooler and it would cool overnight, and then some would bake it or I'd see that these, we put these things on boards and we'd put them on racks and we'd cover them with plastic.

And, it was basically an education and, and what I call the moving spreadsheet of a bake where you, you know, you need to start something at a certain hour and then you do another thing at a certain hour. And then you're going to start another batch and you end up having like four different things going at one time and hope they don't all collide.

and I could at the same time, see, all right, I need the following equipment. I need to get some baskets. I need these boards, which you can buy Or you can go to. A home Depot and buy some plywood. my Rofco oven showed up in a box with really nice wood on the outside that I then cut up and made into baking boards they're about 18 by 24 inches.

They fit in a refrigerator so you can cool things that way. And uh, it was a good, it was a good mentorship. It's not available to anybody, to everybody. Uh, although I recommend if you have an artisan bakery in your neighborhood, go by and say, Hey, can I just volunteer or can I do a few things to figure out what you do?

Otherwise I think there's a lot to be learned from YouTube.

Look at proof baking's videos, they run you through the entire process. Full Proof Baking has a really good video, several really good videos on making the most out of that dough and getting a really attractive loaf. So there's lots of ways to learn about it. And in the end, it, the hard part of baking is being on your feet and just standing for eight to 12 hours, it?

it's pretty exhausting. It's a definite physical activity.

[00:17:01] **David Crabill:** So if you hadn't had a mentor, like Nell's uh, how do you think that would have affected the trajectory of this hobby or, you know maybe even affected when or how you started the business?

[00:17:15] **Eric Sorensen:** I might've actually started the business sooner because I had this kind of paranoia about competing with Nells. So that was really misplaced. at one point he, uh, there was another bakery that came up for sale and he actually told me about it. So I don't think that was really a concern.

I think I would have figured it out by one way or another way in which I did do some learning. Was the king Arthur classes that, are held both in Norwich, Vermont and over at the bread lab on the west side of Washington state. so I took one of those classes was a five day class, lot of baking going on the bread Baker's Guild also had a weekend workshop on cottage baking, Don Guerra of Barrio bread down in Tucson.

He taught it and to look back on it, I think that two day class alone would have set me up for this process because he ran through pretty much all the details. We also did the dance. You know, he talked for maybe an hour about what's involved in a cottage bakery, but then we just went at it and we had a table groaning with bread after two days.

And I don't know what, how many different types we might've made five, six types of bread. And in that challenging sequence of, okay, while this is rising, we're now going to mix something else while this is baking, we're going to shape something. So that set me up pretty well.

[00:18:47] **David Crabill:** And what types of bread do you make in your business?

[00:18:50] **Eric Sorensen:** so the core is some type of sourdough. there's the, the fundamental Tartine style loaf of bread, which is about 10%, whole wheat for flavor and a little bit of fermentation and nutrition. Um, The rest is white bread. And then I really admire efforts. People are making to make, get more whole wheat into the world's diet.

so probably as much as I put into figuring out sourdough, I put, as much effort into figuring out whole wheat, which is super challenging. You've got those little bran particles that want

to act like razorblades and cut into the bubbles. You're so, you know, trying so hard to nurture in your loaf to make it rise.

And then I make another innovation of the Washington state university bread lab, which is called the approachable loaf. a loaf of artisan bread to some people is a really foreign object. It's round it's crusty.

It can be a little hard to slice if you haven't sliced a lot of bread, you can, you know, the blade can wander all over the place and then you get this lopsided thing and you don't know what to do with it. How do you make a slice out of that? How do you make a sandwich out of it? And the approachable loaf is basically a reverse engineered loaf of wonder bread.

with certain guiding principles, one is that it should be affordable. Uh, We there's a coalition uh, a consortium of people, bakeries that are producing it in a pledge to not charge more than \$6 for a loaf. It should have at least 60%, whole wheat. It should have a minimum of ingredients. So you don't put any extra gluten into it.

You don't put any preservatives in it. However it does have honey, which sweetens it a little bit. It has oil, which softens it. It has sourdough starter, but not so much that it's strong, but more just there to act as a preservative and keep the bread fresh for several more days. and it's baked in a pan.

So it looks like a regular loaf of bread. It slices well. It makes an incredible sandwich. So I like to make that. and I, I make about 50 loaves of that once a month and donate them to a food pantry. this is a program I call neighbor loaves. My customers will help subsidize it.

I can ask them now and then. To pay extra for their loaf of bread. and then it helps me make good amounts of it. And then the other thing I try to do is make, is use local grain as much as possible. I live in a region called the Palouse. It's a, a massive million acre region of steeply rolling Hills, and it is incredible wheat country.

and it is the most productive wheat region in America. For the most part, they make a soft white wheat it's used in noodles overseas. Some 90% of this wheat gets exported and precious. Little of it is used or eaten by people and on the Palouse and what in Whitman county? So I try to find local wheats because I just like the idea of local food. And I like the idea in some small way of helping farmers. Although, I mean, frankly, the way a farmer makes money through me is they can sell me a bag of milled flour for \$15, \$30, \$60.

compared to their overall budget. It's not a lot. But I think it is the start of potentially a different type of grain economy. that would be nice. And then I, and I'm sorry to run on about this, but I also make bagels pretzels. Some, I've got a nice chocolate chip cookie and I'm sure your listeners and other cottage people have figured this out that the smaller, the thing you make, the more money you can make, because you can turn around in your system faster. So where it takes me an hour to make 12 loaves of bread. I can be baking off 24 cookies, 36 cookies that I charge three bucks a piece for um, bagels are similar and pretzels are a really good profit center. I can sell those for \$3. Each that amounts to a dollar, an ounce in my regular bread, you know, it's, it's much less than that.

[00:23:29] **David Crabill:** How much do you sell your sourdough loaves for?

[00:23:33] **Eric Sorensen:** I'm selling those for, I sell one that's I think a pound and 10 ounces. It's kind of a standard size loaf. That's the oval loaf. I'll sell that for seven. And then a boule which is bigger and rounder I'll sell for 10. I have a Danish seeded rye, which is a dense European bread obviously with rye and sourdough and stout and malted, barley, and that I'll sell, the big ones of those I'll sell for 10 bagels for \$2 each or 10 for a half dozen pretzels for \$3.

[00:24:15] **David Crabill:** So when you started this business, I mean, it was obviously a long-time hobby. And you eventually decided to turn it into business. What was that process like? How did you go about getting your cottage food permit and how difficult was it?

[00:24:31] **Eric Sorensen:** You know, I looked at getting the permit as kind of an adventure in bureaucracy, not, not something I would recommend because I mean, it's just sort of like a thing to do, but I just said, let's just see what this is like. My first step actually was to get something like a brand. And I like crows.

I think they're fascinating. so I thought, well, black Crow would be cool, but there's a place there's a bakery already in Litchfield, Maine with that name. But then I thought of a Theodore Roethke poem called Night Crow, which refers to a clumsy Crow. And I thought, well, that's kinda cool.

I like Roethke, he's very Northwestern. and I was playing in a band and the drummer in the band is a very good graphic artist. And I said, Dave, can you just make me a logo for Clumsy Crow Baking? and he did and it's kind of this Crow with glasses and looking kind of like it's stumbling and very nice lettering.

He did a great job and he charged me nothing for it. I made him four loaves of bread, one Christmas, and that was it. And then I you know, if you Google Cottage baking or cottage food operation, you get right away, you get the, the form to be filled out by Washington state. And, the hard part of that.

Well, there's, there's a couple hard parts. One is the process is a bit like writing a book. I mean, I wanted a lot of recipes and at the time they wanted to know the entire process you used in making it all the ingredients and then you had to demonstrate your ability to print out a late an ingredients label. So I think I made 32 recipes and uh, since scaled that back where you just need to show them the label and not explain how you make the watch.

So that was, that was a big breakthrough for them. But once I got that done, the only remaining hurdle was to be inspected and the inspector, just this, this was almost a sideline. They, they have bigger fish to fry, bigger operations to look at the inspector was up looking at the cheese making operation at Washington state university.

And she gave me a call and said can I come by? And I said, well, give me a half an hour. And I ran back home and kind of scurried around and put things in their place. And it turned out to be really simple process. I think the only thing she asked me to do was, I had some cushioned mats on the floor and she said that needs to be a wipeable surface.



They had kind of a texture to them. So I had to buy mats that could be mopped. And there's also a thing in the application where if you have a pet in the house, you need to have a pet plan. At the time we had a dog. So I said, I'll put up a, a child gate and keep the dog out of the kitchen when I'm baking and now it's just a matter of once a year, if I want to renew my permit I need to just tell them if there's anything new I'm making and give them a new label for that. And when the time comes around, I'm usually a little too rushed. So I don't revamp my offerings.

And if I were to look for a way to improve the system, it'd be nice. If, if there were a little more flexibility in what I can make, I mean, I, I know how to make a baguette. Well, there's also a thing called the black baguette. You use charcoal. if I wanted to do that and sell it, I would have to wait a year. I'd have to resubmit an ingredient list with this one ingredient on it, and of course they'd approve it, but that's kind of a hassle

[00:28:06] **David Crabill:** yeah, unfortunately, Washington is definitely one of the hardest states in terms of getting yourself set up. I think it's also quite expensive as well, relative to other states to get a permit. How much does it cost?

[00:28:18] **Eric Sorensen:** I think it's \$225 a year.

[00:28:21] **David Crabill:** so it's more expensive than most. Um, so when you started selling you got your cottage food permit in 2017, and once you had that permit, well, where did you start selling your bread?

[00:28:36] **Eric Sorensen:** So I mostly did a community supported baking model of people paying in advance say they paid \$30 and at the time, the loaf for \$6 each. So that would have been five bakes. then they could pick them up at the house at some time. I'm actually kind of forgetting exactly how I did that, but it was sort of a subscription model.

then I did uh, a market. this was a winter market. It was a little more low, key, smaller but we just jammed a lot of stuff. Uh, and there's sort of a timing sequence where I can make my Danish seeded rye a day ahead of time. They're very dense. They're very hydrated. So they really do well to just sit for a day before they're sliced.

And then I could start the bread the day before as well and refrigerate the loaves overnight and bake them off in the morning. And then on the day of I could make pretzels and bagels and even the bagels I could make I could have shaped the day before and sit in the fridge overnight. They develop a little more flavor that way and then boil them and bake them the next day.

And that was a great success. It was good amount of money. The bread was gone in half an hour. and you know, the bagels and pretzels were gone soon after. so then I thought I'd really like to do this in a somewhat bigger way. And I um, frankly, wasn't all that thrilled with my job anymore.

I've been doing it a long time and was interested in other things. So I asked my employer to let me go on four-fifths time. And for the summer farmer's market, I would take Wednesdays off and I would go through that same drill of the Danish seeded rye, and then

the bagels and the breads and, Slam to get down to the market when we'd start setting up at three in the afternoon, which is a great time because it gave me all day, I could get up at five and get started and make a ton of bread?

And I did 12 of those markets really enjoyed it and obviously made some pretty good money. And uh, that became the model. And I think I did another summer of markets. Yeah, cause I retired, officially retired the following year and did a mix of markets and sailing and then COVID hit and it was like, well now I don't know what I'm going to do.

and I, I lay low for a month or two and then realized, oh, I can do this in my front yard. I can have people pay on the honor system. I can put out hand sanitizer. I can ask people to wear masks, to keep their distance from each other. and so for the past year and a half on Saturday mornings from 10 to two or 10 to noon people have been coming by and picking up their loaves and that I didn't have to go outside.

There was one day where I loaded up the table and then just lay on the couch for two hours. And almost all the bread got picked up without a hitch. The basket was full of money. My Venmo account was full of money. and that's worked so well that I haven't gone back to the farmers market.

[00:31:52] **David Crabill:** I did see that you had a basket out there, uh, the honor system where people are just leaving their money. And that's not caused any issues, I assume?

[00:32:01] **Eric Sorensen:** No. And I, I realized that was a possibility when I visited a friend in Vermont and we were driving around and he needed to, he wanted to pick up something at a farm and a lot of farms in Vermont, they have just a small stand in which they put out some eggs, maybe some berries, something from their garden, or even some meat that they have in a freezer.

And they just count on people to come in when they want take what they want, do the math themselves. And uh, I, I have precious few occasions where somebody has simply forgotten. Like they would say they are going to pay me by Venmo. And I would notice like I don't think I got that.

So, you know, three or four days later, I just sent him a reminder. Pay up, it's been a great way to do it.

[00:32:49] **David Crabill:** And in terms of managing orders, are you using any kind of software to manage your subscription service or how do you collect these orders?

[00:32:58] **Eric Sorensen:** I want to keep this as simple as possible and basically do as little work as possible. So, the orders come in by email. the night before I just go through the emails and write down, make a little note pad or something, have something on the side that says, who's asking for what, what they're getting.

I can keep a total of what I'm going to have to make. So it's very old school pen and paper kind of thing. And it actually does occasionally slip up. I will write back to somebody and say, I've got your order. That's great. And then I'll forget to put it on the sheet. once in a while I'll

have two different sized loaves of bread out front, and someone will send a family member to pick something up.

They aren't really familiar with what the bigger loaf is or the smaller. And so at the, at, at noon, someone will come by And there won't be a loaf of bread for them. Um, We'll just find a way to make good on that, or I'll make I try to now at this point have, have one extra, two extra loaves of, of everything for slip-ups and then if, it doesn't get picked up, I can just sort of sell it on the sly or freeze it and eat it later.

[00:34:12] **David Crabill:** And with these markets or with these driveway pickups, how much are you actually making on a weekly basis?

[00:34:21] **Eric Sorensen:** I think each bake I'll get about 300 to \$500 So that'll depend on how much I feel like working that week. I do three let's imagine three loads of \$6 bread that, that it gets up around \$300 at a minimum. And if, if I want a little extra, I could on the front end say, make some Danish seeded rye and make that offering that batch would probably be worth about a hundred dollars or on the day of I could have.

And, and I do this quite often what I call the a la carte, unreserved product. And that will be something like focaccia, which I can make the morning of or chocolate chip cookies. And just some little thing. And I put that on a separate table and that can be worth another hundred dollars or so.

[00:35:14] **David Crabill:** You talked a little bit about sourcing your grains from the local area. And I was wondering has it been difficult to buy the flour in small quantities from these uh, local farms or local mills? I usually feel like they have a minimum order quantity.

[00:35:35] **Eric Sorensen:** Well, minimum order. Yeah. Uh, I have several sources. There is a really nice flour company called Karen spring mills. and I was picking up their bread over on the west side, but then with COVID they said you could get the flour from through a distributor and the distributor, if it's going to deliver to my house, I think they have a minimum of, of a, a hundred dollars or something like that.

I'm getting 50 pound bags. So that's not too hard to buy. I can get another brand called Shepherd's grain. This is a farmer based cooperative. All the farmers use a system of farming called no till farming where we're seed is planted directly into untilled soil.

And it's a huge Type of conservation farming that is really important here. I actually think it's more important than for the Palouse than organic farming. The Palouse is so steep. It is one of the most erosive places in the country. huge amounts of top soil on average, probably eight tons of soil per acre per year get washed away and on a no-till farm, hardly any soil goes off.

I mean, it's just, it's locked up in root systems and, so I really like buying this flour and that's pretty available cash and carry all care bags of it. They'll let me order it through them. And then there's uh, a few farmers here who have. who are sort of tinkering with the value added process of, making their own flour.

And they don't seem to care. There's a guy named Joseph's or his actual name is bill, but it's called Joseph's grain. And uh, they'll mill a 20 pound bag for me. some farmers will just give me grain. I have, I have a farmer who's just given me a bucket of grain Um, It's kind of dirty. So I have to set up a system where I. Put a fan on a table and pour the grain out through the fan and watch the chaff go flying and, and then even picks pick it by hand. and then I mill that in a Mockmill. So that's a pretty inefficient process. I'd rather not be doing that.

And, um, what I'm hoping to do more in the future is get Joseph's Grain. And I found that if it's milled a second time, it performs really well as, as a whole wheat bread. I mean, phenomenally well

[00:38:06] **David Crabill:** When you say you make a Mockmill what, that sounds like some kind of homemade milling process. What are you doing?

[00:38:14] **Eric Sorensen:** Yeah, that is a countertop mill developed by a guy named Wolfgang Mock. And he's been working on this for decades and has really developed a good inexpensive home-based mill. I think I paid \$300 for my Mockmill 200, and there might even be a \$200 version of it out there. it is just got a high speed, powerful motor and two grinding surfaces.

the 200 is called that because it will mill 200 grams per minute. That's really good for somebody who's going to, you know, the Tartine recipe is a thousand grams of in five minutes. You could have all the flour you need for two loaves of bread. It's a little more challenging.

If I'm looking to have 4,000 grams for a full Rofco, 12 loaf load I've done it, but um, risks overheating. There's an actually now a Mockmill professional for that kind of process. But it's a bit much to spend an hour milling grain. When, you know, I am looking for sort of efficiencies in this operation.

One way I sometimes look at it as I estimate how many hours I went to work on this process and how much money did I make? my take home, I, I estimated somewhere around 20 to \$25 an hour. You aren't going to get rich that way, but it's a good way to make some extra money. And I'm sure as your other cottage food operators have found it.

So it's a really good way to figure out, well, what direction do you want to go in? I can keep doing this as a hobby or as a small side business, a gig. But it's also a really good way for someone to figure out, all right, do I want to be brick and mortar? Do I want to go whole hog? You're going to demonstrate to a banker that you can get the job done.

Qualify for a loan, hopefully build a customer base, build a brand, build a story which is often a huge part of a brand's appeal. if you look at Don Guerra down at Barrio Bread, A big part of his story as he started in his garage. what's left out of that story is the actually had 10, 20 years ago, he had a whole other bakery operation going and it was huge.

He had multiple locations and then just got to be so big. He sort of burned out on it and went to teaching. And it was only later he said, you know, I'm going to go back to that. And he started doing stuff in his garage but it's a captivating story and he's now hugely

successful. Uh, He has not only got his bakery operation, but he's got a grain operation where he sells grain that's organically grown. And, So you know that the, the cottage model has the flexibility that you can go off and go in that, those kinds of directions.

[00:40:59] **David Crabill:** And I think I saw on your Instagram feed that you actually experimented with growing your own wheat?

[00:41:06] **Eric Sorensen:** Yes. I recommend that for anybody. Cause it's cool. It looks cool. And it's literally is easy to do as growing grass. Maybe easier because you don't have to water and you can let it dry out at the end of the summer. so that started started at, at that first grain gathering. The first seminar I went to was a farmer from Oregon who.

Kind of opened up with this concept of the scalable business. And he said, you know, if you want, you can grow grain in your backyard. You can harvest it yourself. You can clean it yourself. You can mill it yourself. You can bake a loaf of bread and you could sell it at a farmer's market. I got back here and I asked Steve Jones for a variety. I think it was called Bauermeister. He gave me a pound of that. at the end of the summer, I, I just sprinkled it over my garden plot in the backyard. and uh, barley breeder, Kevin Murphy, he helped me Clean it up at WSU and I milled it and probably added it at 10% per loaf. And I also did it in the front yard and had a little sign that said coming to a bakery near you.

[00:42:16] **David Crabill:** How much are you actually getting out of your wheat that you're growing?

[00:42:23] **Eric Sorensen:** Oh, it's not a commercial viable amount. I think I got 10 pounds out of my one of my larger plots, like a 10 by 10 foot plot, probably yielded 10 pounds. And if you put that in a 10%, that would be then a hundred pounds of bread that, that got into.

[00:42:44] **David Crabill:** Switching gears a little bit. I was just thinking about, as you're growing this business, obviously you've got the market or the markets that you're selling at, and that gets your name out there. You've also got word of mouth. Did you do any other kind of marketing efforts to grow the business?

[00:43:02] **Eric Sorensen:** You know, I think I've twice used a Facebook ad and didn't see a whole lot from it. I do quite a bit on Instagram. I made shirts and I deducted the cost of the shirts as advertising. But word of mouth and a few articles in the newspaper, That's been pretty much it some of my success is probably because Nells' bakery was closed for a few years, right.

When I got started. So there was suddenly no source of bread and I was it. so people kind of found me that way. I use a mailing list so that that's currently about 225 people in the quote bread club. And they're the ones who are notified say a Wednesday or Thursday that, Hey, this Saturday, I'm going to have this type of bread.

Let me know what you'd like. And then I have other about once a week, somebody will find me and ask to be put on that mailing list,

[00:44:06] **David Crabill:** Out of those 225, about what percentage actually buy on a weekly basis.

[00:44:13] **Eric Sorensen:** 10 to 15% maybe even 20% For better or worse. They've been conditioned into knowing that if they don't respond to my email within about five hours, I will be sold out. So I noticed that on the next day, the orders hardly come in at all. And they're usually preceded by, Hey, if there's any bread left, I'd like one,

[00:44:36] **David Crabill:** And you have no interest in scaling up or getting another Rofco or something.

[00:44:42] **Eric Sorensen:** not really. You know, again, I think the limit on this is how much physical work do I want to do. And I call it a heavy lift. it really is remarkable how much work goes into say a farmer's market. And I probably would be doing the farmer's markets if I wasn't off half a month, throughout the summer.

but when I was doing those markets I was getting up at five or six and I wasn't lying back down on the couch at the end of the day till seven o'clock. And in the course of baking all that time, I would manage to take about two breaks of five minutes each I would go and intentionally lie down on the couch to get off my feet.

And uh, it's tiring. My, your back starts to hurt your shoulders hurt, your feet hurt, I will say though, that at the same time, one of the big appeals of baking in general is that it is a physical and very honest process. I was a writer for years in writing, you kind of get a product of this, you know, completed written thing of 600 to 1,000 to 3,000 words. You've obviously worked on it, but in many ways it's an abstraction.

it's a set of symbols that you've assembled and a loaf of bread is something that's physical, it's undeniably present it has a very clear process that you can't work around you, you know, that that sourdough bread has got to have this amount of water in it. it's going to take 24 hours to make it's going to proof this amount of time.

And it's really satisfying to have a table full of really beautiful looking stuff. And that that's a lot different than the kind of abstract world of being a knowledge worker.

[00:46:48] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I know it's a super intense process to create that table of bread. And I was, you know, you started out by just making two loaves at a time. You had one for yourself, you gave one away and that's where this clear passion for bread started. So it's one thing to do that. It's a whole nother thing to run a business. Did you find that turning this into a business, took out some of the fun out of the whole process?

[00:47:16] **Eric Sorensen:** Yeah, it could kill the fun. I mean, and that was true when I started writing even is I would write for fun and then I became a freelancer for a business and fortunately, when I was in journalism, it was still fun about 70% of the time, which in most jobs is a really good percentage. But thinking of my business as a quote business is kind of the least thrilling part of it.

I like the brand that's kinda fun. but uh, I like that I can tailor how much I do. And when I do it to basically how I feel about doing it and, that's one of the chief benefits of it, of this line of work.

[00:47:59] **David Crabill:** Well, clearly there's demand in your area for this bread and more demand than you can supply. Is it just really hard to find this kind of bread in your area?

[00:48:10] **Eric Sorensen:** Yeah. and even the bakery that took over Nells' operation. It was the Moscow co-op took it over. And I'm not sure, but they don't really have the same range of stuff that Nells had been making.

[00:48:24] **David Crabill:** So, what was it like when you were at the markets and people tried your bread for the first time?

[00:48:31] **Eric Sorensen:** the bread they would have had by other means. So they knew that that was going to be good bread. What they hadn't tried was the Danish seeded rye. So I would, I would have a, the, the large, what I call the doorstep, That's a two pound loaf of bread. Um, And you slice it really thinly and, and they were willing to buy that from the get-go, but I also have a version.

That's like I call it the trial loaf. And it's just on a little small, what are those two by four inch pans. And I could upsell somebody into trying one of those easily, especially if I was sold out of the other stuff. And then they come back the next week and they'd get a new one. They'd get the bigger one.

The other bread that had phenomenal, like the real response is the authentic German pretzel, these are lye dipped. the lye on the surface uh, frees proteins that, are then when they bake go through the Maillard process, get very brown and, the lye also, while it all evaporates, it leaves behind a, a different kind of salt.

So it has a different salty flavor to it. anybody will buy a pretzel, especially a really good looking one. And when they come to a farmer's market, by the way, there's, that's a different buying process entirely people don't go to farmer's markets saying, oh, I hope I can get a bargain. Here they go.

And say, I hope I can, they're going for an experience of kind of looking, seeing people in their community, maybe running into some friends, buying something kind of nice, but they come with cash burning in their pocket and they're willing to spend it. so a \$3 pretzel is not a problem. They get it.

When they eat those, they get a look on their face. Like it's a revelation. It's just like, cause you don't where in, in America. Do you get anything as good as an authentic German pretzel? They're just not to be found even like at a movie theater pretzel or a mall pretzel, those don't compare they're shipped frozen or they aren't even lye dipped.

They're just not that good. So it it's kind of a principle if it's, if it's really good, once people have had it, they'll come back for more.

[00:50:48] **David Crabill:** So I was just thinking about your um, kind of your business trajectory. You started your business in 2017 after making bread for many years, and then you quit your job two years later to work on this full-time along with your sailing passion. do you think you would have quit your job at the same time if you hadn't started this baking business?

[00:51:11] **Eric Sorensen:** Oh yeah. I had, I mean, that was a simple matter of talking to my financial advisor and saying, how quickly can I quit my job? there's a lot more to the world than work. And I realize that even more. Two years into my retirement. I mean there's a whole different way of looking at the world and what really matters to you.

obviously I am a person of privilege. It's phenomenal that I could retire at 62. I'm really grateful for it. So bakery was not a major factor in that, except that I know I'm a person who can easily fill his time doing other stuff besides working. and I really looked forward to that of, you know, having the time to do stuff on the boat or play guitar or study language or read about Dunkirk. And, and I'm very happy for that.

[00:52:06] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I was thinking your lifestyle seems like the ideal life. Like, it doesn't seem like it needs to change at all. Do you just want to keep moving forward into the future doing this exact same thing, or do you have any plans for the future?

[00:52:23] **Eric Sorensen:** you know, I'm perfectly willing at some point to say, all right, I'm, I've done this enough. and sell off the Rofco and, you know, liquidate my assets. that time hasn't come just yet. But when it does, I will. I'm not going to have a seriously long mourning process. I'll because I'll probably be on to something else. I hope I am.

[00:52:43] **David Crabill:** Why do you love running your business? Right now?

[00:52:48] **Eric Sorensen:** I like having a little bit of structure so I don't just lounge around all the time. you know, if you don't have to work, you really can lie down and just do nothing. And I don't want to be doing that. I'm not necessarily married to having to work or be doing something all the time, but I like how, right now, the structure of my month is built around the Albion food pantry.

I know that on that they distribute their bread on the fourth Thursday of every month. I'm going to be baking that bread on the fourth, Wednesday of each month. I do need to come back from the boat or be back in Pullman for that to happen, but that's okay. You know, it's a nice thing. And then uh, I happen to, I can do a pop-up a couple days after it, maybe a second pop-up a week later or not. But it's good to have to know what I'm doing. And when in some small way,

[00:53:46] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I did want to ask a little bit more about the bread that you donate. How did you come up with that idea?

[00:53:53] **Eric Sorensen:** there's a woman named Katherine Kehrli. She got home bakers to make a few loaves of bread a week, donate them to a food pantry. And she's organized a system of, in which people could drop off their bread or have it picked up, brought to a central location, then distributed to food banks around the Seattle area.



That thing is a huge success thousands of loaves of bread. I had the problem where I don't really want to corral a bunch of home bakers, but I did want to just get a lot of bread for at least somebody. so I did my own version and it was a matter of telling my customers here. I want to make for this bake for this food pantry.

so once a month or so I will bake this loaf of bread. It'll be \$6. If you pay another four or \$10 for the whole thing, you will be sponsoring a loaf for the pantry. it's worked out nicely. And the Palouse Has a lot of poor people hidden out in different corners of it. There's parts of it that are a food desert, which I think is bitterly ironic that one of the most productive wheat baskets in America has people who can't get a good loaf of bread. so this is just a small way I can address that in my own way.

[00:55:13] **David Crabill:** Well, I can tell that you are helping support the whole movement towards more wholesome bread in your own way. Maybe a small way, but definitely not an insignificant way. So uh, it's been great to talk to you today and if people want to reach out to you or find your business, how can they get in touch?

[00:55:35] **Eric Sorensen:** If you search Clumsy Crow in Google, I am the top result. And my email is in that page, it's just basic my bare bones webpage of saying here's what I make. And I am also @clumsycrowbaking on Instagram. Which is the place where I am most easily and most often found.

[00:55:56] **David Crabill:** Well, Eric, I can tell you're super passionate about the sourdough project. And I'm impressed at how it kind of keeps you busy and it helps uh, fuel your other passion for sailing. So it's been great to talk to you today and thanks so much for coming on and sharing with us.

[00:56:14] **Eric Sorensen:** Thank you, David. It's been a pleasure.

[00:56:18] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. Clearly, Eric is very passionate about the growing sourdough movement in the U S and it's cool to see how his small business adapts to his lifestyle. I also liked all the tips he shared for starting at home without expensive equipment. And I think he showed that starting a home bakery like this is something that just about anybody can do.

For more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/41](http://forrager.com/podcast/41).

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And finally, if you're thinking about starting your own home bakery, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course, go to [cottagefoodcourse.com](http://cottagefoodcourse.com).

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