

If You Don't Like Your Law, Change It with Shelley Erickson

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 talking with Shelley Erickson. Now this episode is going to be a little bit different. I usually have my guests talk about how they have built their cottage food businesses.

And Shelley does have a small cottage food business of her own, but most of her time in the cottage food realm has been spent advocating for the cottage food community in Minnesota. She started advocating for Minnesota's first cottage food law back in 2010, which was a massive effort that took many years to achieve.

And then after the law passed in 2015, she created an association for the college who producers in Minnesota, which for many years was the only cottage food association in the country. And this year in 2021, she started a cottage food bill that amended Minnesota's cottage food law by increasing the sales limit and allowing cottage food businesses to operate as LLCs.

this year I also started a cottage food bill in California, which will increase the sales limit and allow cottage food businesses to ship their products within the state.

This year was really the first time that I got directly involved in legislative work. Whereas Shelley has about a decade of experience in the political realm. So I wanted to bring her on to compare notes about our experiences and hopefully help give you some insight into what it takes to get a cottage food law in place.

For some reason, the ag department in Minnesota continues to be very opposed to cottage food businesses. And I think you'll be amazed to hear all that Shelley has gone through to support the cottage food producers in her state. So with that, let's jump right into this episode.

Welcome to the show, Shelley. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:39] **Shelley Erickson:** It's nice to be here.

[00:01:41] **David Crabill:** So, Shelley, can you tell us how you got into this whole cottage food realm in the first place?

[00:01:48] **Shelley Erickson:** I've always loved to bake and about 11 years ago. I was working at Kmart as a supervisor, and I looked out the window and a little office space had opened up and I thought, huh, that would be a really cool place?

for me to rent and sell some of my baked goods and meet with people who I make wedding cakes for.

And I could set it up really nice, really cute . So I thought, okay, I'll check in on what kind of a license I would need to do that because I assume a business needs a license. So I go to check into it and I discover that not only could I not do this grand dream that I had, but that I was illegally selling baked foods from my house, which I had no clue.

And I was just totally crushed. And my husband who has always been in politics and I never was involved with politics, but my husband always was, I called him up and I said, honey, I can't, bake anymore.

And I was very sad. And he said, well, I guess you're just going to have to change the law. And that's how it began.

[00:03:00] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I did. I did know that. And it's funny cause I feel like we're pretty similar. I am very unpolitical in every way. I mean, politics had just never been. Interest for me But getting into this cottage food realm has sort of pushed me into it a little bit.

Um, So what was the first step for you in terms of learning about the whole political process?

[00:03:24] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, the first thing I did was find out who my district representatives were, my Senator and my house representative in my district. And I wrote letters to them asking for their support. And I did a lot of research. And So, I, you know, I started looking up, how do you sell baked goods?

And that's when I discovered that Michigan had actually just passed a law, like I think the year before called the cottage food law. And that's, when I discovered that Christie Stefanick had actually started a petition to get the law changed in Minnesota. And through that, I contacted her and we started working together.

We wrote letters to every single Senator in Minnesota. We wrote letters to every single representative in Minnesota, and we started trying to get the word out through Facebook. Hey, did you know that it's illegal to do what you're doing? We need to change this law. my husband happened to be working with a young man who had never run for office, but he saw a need That would be representative James Neuberger. my husband worked on his campaign to help him get elected. And I spoke with him and I said, Hey um, if you get elected, can you help me get This law changed. And he said, if I win, I will definitely help you. And he did.

[00:04:59] **David Crabill:** You know, it's funny that you mentioned Michigan, cause I feel like we got into the cottage food realm at the exact same time. Probably about 2011 or so Michigan was actually the first date that I found that's, that's how I discovered the whole cottage food realm.

so I feel like we've been in the industry for kind of the same amount of time, but in different ways. So you're doing all this work to get people, to be aware that they need to change the law. But I know it took a long time to change Minnesota's law.

What was the process like? In those first few years,

[00:05:34] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, it was very difficult. For some reason, A lot of people have this idea that if they're buying home-baked goods, that there's some kind of poison involved or something. There's a negative outlook on it. in the, in the government, So the first time that representative Newberger brought the bill to the floor, first of all, we had a representative who was one of the chief authors of the bill and the day of the vote. She voted against it, even though she said she was in support of it.

and the different representatives they basically accused us of poisoning people. If we were to sell home made foods from our homes. and mostly, I think that it has more to do with that. They don't want the competition for the grocery stores and they don't want the competition. And actually one of the representatives even said that

[00:06:32] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I I've noticed over the years that the opposition always comes in one of two forms. It either comes in competition. That's probably mostly where it comes from bakers, associations, groceries, associations, et cetera. Or it comes from health officials who are legitimately concerned about the safety of food, even though, the cottage food industry has proven itself extremely safe over the years.

and I think it also depends on what state you live in, because for some reason, Minnesota Um, this is actually true of the whole band, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois. For some reason, those three states have some very serious opposition coming from the health and ag departments But then there are other states that they don't have that kind of feeling or opposition at all. So I think it partly is just based on the state that you live in.

[00:07:26] **Shelley Erickson:** definitely. And, and Minnesota is very much about staying in control of everything. It's kind of frustrating because you're doing everything you can to follow the law. The whole reason why I did this was because I didn't want to do something illegal. here, am I, and about 5,000 other registered cottage food producers in Minnesota.

Now we're trying to do the right thing. We're trying to do it. We're supposed to do. And yet there's thousands of people still out there doing it illegally. And the department of agriculture doesn't do anything about them, but they're always hassling.

And I was going to tell you, do you realize that there's only one documented case of foodborne illness from a cottage food producer in the entire United States?

[00:08:19] **David Crabill:** No. I thought there were zero.

[00:08:22] **Shelley Erickson:** No, there's one in Minnesota.

You know what?

[00:08:25] **David Crabill:** Why?

[00:08:26] **Shelley Erickson:** Because this lady made sugar cookies, It was a little league baseball game and they had a party afterwards. And there was coleslaw, and there was potato salad and there was fried chicken. And then there was sugar cookies. 20 some people got sick and the department of health did a investigation and determined that it was a 50, 50 toss up between the chicken and her cookies. And because her children have been sick with the flu the week before, not even during, but the week before. They decided to blame it on her cookies.

[00:09:05] **David Crabill:** That's pretty crazy.

[00:09:08] **Shelley Erickson:** Yeah. That's what we're up against.

[00:09:10] **David Crabill:** It's crazy. It's crazy Shelley. What you have to go through, but you've been just on the front lines and I mean, your state is pretty much indebted to you because you've been leading the way forward for all this time. So what was the year that Newberger initially?

put forth the first.

[00:09:31] **Shelley Erickson:** It was 20 13,

[00:09:34] **David Crabill:** how many years was that after you first started campaigning for it?

[00:09:39] **Shelley Erickson:** That would have been a couple of years.

[00:09:41] **David Crabill:** Right. So you were working on this for two years before you were even able to get a bill into the session.

[00:09:48] **Shelley Erickson:** Yeah. It's been a long process. It's been, it's been about 11 years since I first started

[00:09:54] **David Crabill:** And I know, you know, you got the first bill out, didn't pass. What was that process like?

[00:10:01] **Shelley Erickson:** the first time I honestly was surprised that we even got as much support as. Because like I said, it's not, it wasn't something that people were even aware of. I went to the county fair and handed out handouts to people and I tried to engage them in conversation. literally, nobody even knew that it was illegal to sell baked goods from your home. just getting the awareness was a huge part of it.

[00:10:35] **David Crabill:** It's so much easier now to put forth the cottage food amendment and people probably don't even realize fully how hard it was back in the day, because people didn't even know it was an issue that should be addressed. Um, Yeah, I appreciate you sharing that a little bit because it just gives people a sense of how, what you had to go up against and you know, what allowed you to persist even after you'd spent multiple years on this and it failed. Why did you keep going?

[00:11:10] **Shelley Erickson:** I had a dream for one thing. I always wanted to have my own coffee house, but I couldn't afford to have my own coffee house so this was the next best thing. beyond that, I just had a feeling that this was

what I was supposed to be doing, like a calling and every year I'm just like, okay, that's it.

I'm going to give up. I've had it. And then something would happen to just show me that I wasn't supposed to stop. And I don't know how to explain it. It was just a feeling that this was what I was supposed to be.

[00:11:47] **David Crabill:** Yeah, we're going to get into a little bit about all that you've done. I mean, it's really quite remarkable with the association and everything, and obviously the new bill this year. it's funny because you talked about having this dream of opening up a baked goods shop, and what's ironic about that, that that dream caused you to, you know, embark on this mission to get the law changed and the law improved.

But it's ironic because today I feel like you're so busy with your legislative work that you don't actually do a lot of baking. Is that, is that accurate?

[00:12:22] **Shelley Erickson:** That is 100% accurate. It's funny because people will always ask me, so what have you sold? What do you do? What Are you selling? And I'm like, well um, I did one wedding cake last year.

It just takes up so much time the meetings and trying to do the blogs and trying to keep up with the legislation and now the association and everything takes a lot of work and we do everything voluntarily. You know, we don't make any money off of this, so we also all have real jobs.

And so everything takes time.

[00:13:01] **David Crabill:** Are you disappointed that you haven't been able to get your bakery off the ground in the way you initially dreamed of?

[00:13:10] **Shelley Erickson:** Sometimes, sometimes I, I sit down and I'm just like, I just want to bake. I just want to bake. I bought just before. And let's see, the year before COVID hit, I bought a tent, one of those tent awning things so that I could finally start. Selling baked goods at our local farmer's market.

I have not used it one time. There's just never time.

[00:13:36] **David Crabill:** Well, I think listeners will understand when they hear about all you're doing with the association Um, So going back to, you know, this process of getting a law in Minnesota and, you know, the 2013 bill

came up, it failed. And then I know there is a lawsuit that came up were you involved in.

[00:13:58] **Shelley Erickson:** No, I had been approached by the Institute for justice, but I thanked them for their offer and I just didn't want to go that route. I wanted to try it first with legislation So it didn't seem like I was like barging it and saying, okay, I want this.

And I want it now. I wanted to be able to work with these people because I knew that once the bill passed, we were going to have to continue to have a relationship, that it wasn't going to be the end of it. So I didn't want to bulldoze my way into getting what I wanted and then end up having it backfire afterwards.

So that's why it was more important to me that it took a few years to get it done. Persistence sometimes is more important.

So what we did is myself and Christy Stefanick and three other ladies who worked with me, we got busy writing letters to all the different people that we thought could back us up. We talked to Denay Davis that's when I found you we talked to the Harvard people. We wrote to all of our representatives.

We found out that. The reason why we weren't really getting any place with legislation is because they don't talk to you if you're not one of their constituents. So we had to try and rally as many Minnesotans that wanted to be cottage, food producers as possible. A lot of people didn't want to hear about it. and the ones who did were interested, but they didn't really want to help because they didn't have time. They had lives, you know, I think what really made the major turnaround was when the Minnesota farmer's market association got involved, and that's when I think we started really gaining traction.

[00:16:03] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I would say that was one of the big things I noticed when um, you know, we, we put this bill through in California this year. That was just how. Much. We had to find people who were constituents of the policymakers that had the power to shut down our bill. It just seemed like we're constantly going from one stage to the next, and okay, who's the board of this chair who are their constituents. And I mean, we had a big leg up over what you dealt with, you know, back in the day, since we had a Facebook group to reach out to, and, you know, it has over 4,000 members in California just in this Facebook group alone. But even still, it just, like you said, it was.

Very difficult to get people to take the time to, uh, even though, you know, they wanted the bill to pass it just was difficult to get people's attention and get people to take a little bit of time out of their day, even just to forward an email, And they just, you know, I understand it. People are busy and they got a lot of things on their plate and it's just one more thing and it, it is hard to get people to take action sometimes.

[00:17:13] **Shelley Erickson:** That is correct. we sent out a, a form you know, on Facebook and said, if you're interested in helping out, send us an email and we got 20 people who said that they wanted to help. And in the end, one person came forward and actually helped. And that was Karen Peterson who is on our board now.

[00:17:38] **David Crabill:** So I'm sure someone's listening to this and going, wow. This sounds like a lot of work. Why would they ever want to get involved in legislative action

[00:17:48] **Shelley Erickson:** If it's something that you really believe in and it's the only way you can get it changed. And you're passionate about it. And, Julia child says that take something you're passionate about and make it wonderful. and this is always been something I've been passionate about, which is baking and everybody should be allowed the joy of sharing their baked goods with people. I haven't met a cottage food producer yet that doesn't do it because it's just a business to them. It's the whole experience it's making it. And. Sharing it with people you love and going to the farmer's market and meeting new people and everything you do, it's done with love and just a sense of togetherness a sense of community.

And I think that that is a good definition of what a cottage food producer.

[00:18:46] **David Crabill:** I think, you know, it's essential for you to have that kind of passion in Minnesota, cause you just faced so many barriers and obstacles even still this year to getting things improved. But I don't think it's that way in all states. I do think it is a lot easier in a lot of states.

And now we have a lot of organizations as the cottage food movement has become more known uh, the Institute for Justice certainly stepped up in a big way in many states. And then, you know, a lot of times they're just been organizations that have been active in the past. Um, you know, with your state, you've got The Minnesota farmers market association that's involved there's a nonprofit in Illinois. That's very involved in many states. There are these

organizations that have uh, played a big part in policy changes in the past. So it's not as difficult to get policies changed in the future.

if somebody wanted to see something be changed obviously in a state like Minnesota, it seems to be extremely difficult, but fortunately we have people like you on the front lines to, to carry things forward and, and to make a difference.

[00:19:54] **Shelley Erickson:** I think representative Newberger was a big help in that area too, because there were a few times when I would get pretty discouraged and he'd say, no, Shell we got. We're going to do it. We're going to make it happen. and he would bolster my confidence and we just get back to work.

[00:20:12] **David Crabill:** So I know you finally got the bill passed in 2015. That was after what? Five years or so of trying to make it happen? What was it like when you finally achieved that victory?

[00:20:27] **Shelley Erickson:** Oh my goodness. I, first of all, I thought I was dreaming. I could not believe it had actually finally happened. B but we were on pins and needles because, you know, you hold your breath through every single part of it. It's gotta go through the Senate and it's got to go through the house vote and then it's got to go through the house of representatives.

And then it's got to go through that vote and then we get all the way to the end and the governor has to sign it. Oh. But it goes to a special session. And then we have to wait and wait and wait. And then finally he signed it and we were just ecstatic, but also a little bit shocked that it had finally happened.

[00:21:11] **David Crabill:** Yeah. It's. I mean, I understand what you're saying, because with the process in California, it was a long process, but you held your breath every step of the way. Cause at any point, you know, the bill could get shut down, you know, just even if the chair of some committee didn't like it, you know, they could essentially just keep it from moving forward.

And Peter Ruddock, who was kind of our California legislative expert, you know, supporting and helping answer questions throughout the process, he just said, never make any assumptions uh, or think that you're, you know, you've passed the hard part, you know, anything can trip you up during the process.

So you got to do everything you can to um, you know, give

yourself the best chance of success. so you finally got this passed in 2015, and I know, you know, thousands of businesses have come from that, but I want to step forward to this year because you passed an amendment this year and you know, now you have, you know, the support you've got the association, you've got, you know, number of people that are cottage food businesses in your state. What was the process like this year for getting the bill off the ground?

[00:22:29] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, this year was also very unique because of the whole COVID thing. So I think that in a way it kind of worked in our favor because we had to do everything virtually, we weren't allowed to go to the Capitol. So we were able to meet with each individual representative on the committee.

and we made sure we had one of their constituents on every meeting.

[00:22:53] **David Crabill:** Wow. You did a lot more than we did for our bill in California.

[00:22:59] **Shelley Erickson:** Yes. Because that's always the key is that these representatives, these senators, they want to talk to somebody from their district. So we always made sure that we had somebody from each one of these people's district to be there to advocate.

[00:23:16] **David Crabill:** Yeah, in California, we made a strong effort to get constituents to message their representative if they were on the board of some committee. But we definitely did not go to the effort of setting up meetings, zoom meetings with connecting these people together.

[00:23:34] **Shelley Erickson:** Yeah. And we had um, Meagan Forbes was from the Institute for justice um, she did we have annual conference every year cottage food conference. And so she was able to speak at one of our sessions and she answered questions and she told people what they needed to do and how to, get in touch with their representatives and what to say and how to write their letters.

So that was a big help. And then the secretary of our board Jennifer Carriveau, she made sure that we knew who every legislature was going to be, and that we were in touch with every single one of them.

[00:24:14] **David Crabill:** Did you know, in advance who your sponsor was going to be, or do you have to find the sponsor for this?

[00:24:21] **Shelley Erickson:** Oh no. I knew from the beginning that my Senator Andrew Matthews was going to help with the bill.

[00:24:28] **David Crabill:** I feel like, you know, there, there were difficult things in both of our cases um, you know, things going for us in both of our cases, for you, you know, you already had your foot in the door with a lot in, in new, quite a number of people. So it probably wasn't as hard to get the bill started uh, you did have a lot of opposition to deal with and, or to get it passed.

I know it was not easy to get that passed. Whereas for me with AB 144 in California, It was very difficult to get the bill started because our bill hadn't been amended into since 2013. So, we just didn't have known senators or assembly members who were, in favor of cottage food stuff and were willing to help.

So had to kind of augment the process of trying to find that sponsor in the first place. but then once it got into the session there were some close calls, but for the most part, it received unanimous support and kind of slid right on through fairly easily.

I'm not saying it was totally seamless, but certainly much more easily than what I think you had to go with. Is that correct?

[00:25:44] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, we, our major opposition this time was the MDA the Minnesota department of agriculture. We actually had Unanimous bipartisan support on both the Senate and the house representatives. our biggest hurdle was the Minnesota department of agriculture.

And they finally agreed to um, come to terms, the chair of the Senate committee said, look, you guys have to work this out, get together, talk about it and come to a conclusion because there's no reason why these people can't be LLCs. And there's no reason why they shouldn't be making a livable wage And So they kind of didn't have a choice. We had to have a lot of um, meetings with department of agriculture. Finally came to an agreement And everything was, seemed to be onboard. Everything was great, everything was looking good. And then they put our bill into an omnibus bill, an omnibus

bill.

is one big bill made up of a whole bunch of little bills. And so what. happens is if there's one controversial bill, The whole bill gets voted against. So the bill passed and then we had to wait for the governor to sign it and it went to special

session. So we weren't really sure if it was going to happen. And then it finally did.

[00:27:12] **David Crabill:** And Why did they need to group it into the omnibus bill

[00:27:17] **Shelley Erickson:** Um, I don't know, that's a political thing that they do. I think it's supposed to be a time saver, but I don't think it's really fair to people who work so hard on a bill and then to have it fall apart just because of one other bill, but that's the way the government.

[00:27:34] **David Crabill:** And when you were coming up with the bill, how did you decide on what you felt like was reasonable to accomplish with the amendment?

Because you could have mean tried to go for in-state shipping like I did in California. But you didn't. You just focused on the sales limit and the LLC. So what was the process of determining what issues were the most pressing.

[00:27:59] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, we knew that the most important part was the amount of money that a person could make because COVID. I think pushed that issue forward into the public's eyes so many people were going to you know, their local cottage food producers for bread And things like that.

When, there wasn't anything that you could buy in the stores, because we ran out of bread and stuff, and people hit that cat really fast.

[00:28:29] **David Crabill:** And what did you raise the cap? You know, from 18,000.

[00:28:33] **Shelley Erickson:** Um, Now it's \$78,000 gross, which is considered a livable wage. We knew that we would never get any higher than that in Minnesota because it's Minnesota, so we needed, we had to pick our battles and we had to have a reasonable argument and say, every person. Should be allowed to at least make a livable wage is a reasonable argument.

[00:29:05] **David Crabill:** So I know that the initial bill passed in 2015. Why do you think it took six years to pass the first.

[00:29:15] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, I think a lot of it had to do with awareness. Once the awareness became known, then there's always the everybody's using food safety as a crutch. So we had to counter that by saying, okay, well,

according to the FDA, the majority of, food poisoning cases come from grocery stores. Um, So I got into arguments with the few health people about that. we had to come up with facts and we had to come up with legitimate arguments for every single roadblock that they put up. And because of that, it took time and we had to get enough people to contact their, their representatives to make it known that, there were so many people in Minnesota that actually wanted this bill to pass. And so together we were able to. To get enough people to make the legislature to stand up and pay attention.

[00:30:18] **David Crabill:** I don't know what it is about Minnesota's ag department. That's so opposed to these laws, Do you think it's just that they're trying to be difficult because they just don't want there to be cottage food producers?

[00:30:31] **Shelley Erickson:** It seems that way. I mean, I don't know what their beef is against cottage food producers, because like I said, there are thousands of people who illegally sell. I mean, all you have to do is go to Facebook marketplace and you see people selling chicken, pot pies and everything thing you could imagine. And. They put so much time and effort into making up all these policies and rules and things for the few people who want to follow the law and they put no effort into stopping the people who are actually breaking the law.

[00:31:04] **David Crabill:** Well, one thing I will say about that you know, I've never been a health official or an ag department official, but when it comes to the illegal home producers out there you know, they can say it's not happening under our watch. they're not responsible for that, but with the cottage food producers, they more or less are responsible for that.

You know, if somebody complains about a cottage food producer, they have to take the effort to go out and, you know, deal with the problem, you know, cause it's illegal business. So I kind of can understand why they don't put any effort or care about illegal home producers. But still their opposition to the legal ones is pretty, I'll just say I don't envy your position.

but I do want to switch gears a little bit and talk about the association that you helped create.

It is the only association in the country for cottage food producers. Tell me a little bit about how that got started and when it got started.

[00:32:07] **Shelley Erickson:** So after the bill passed in 2015, we were invited to quarterly meetings with the MDA and um, department of health. And. Anybody that had anything really to do with cottage food so I would go to these meetings and it was me and sometimes, maybe Jennifer, Karen went with me, but it was usually just, you know, me and I felt like I wasn't being taken legitimately because here I am speaking for all these cottage food producers who really have no clue who I am or that I'm speaking for them. And I talked with Kathy Zeman and I say, Kathy, and I've been um, just feeling like. I'm just not legit here. And Kathy says, well, why don't you make an association? And I thought, huh, that's a good idea. Why not said, what do I have to do? She said, it's not that hard. So, I did some research and talked to my friends, Jennifer, Karen, and a few other friends, and we set up an association and in 2020 it became official

[00:33:18] **David Crabill:** So, what did you actually have to do to get the association formed.

[00:33:23] **Shelley Erickson:** It wasn't that hard. Um, We had to make some bylaws talk to a lawyer, made sure everything was legitimate. Decided what we want. We, we set up as a nonprofit. Nobody takes a salary or anything. It's just very easy, very simple. It's really just so that we have the legitimacy of an association that we can say we represent the cottage food producers of Minnesota.

[00:33:53] **David Crabill:** Now you said that you're working a full-time job, right?

[00:33:58] **Shelley Erickson:** I work from home. I'm a project manager.

[00:34:01] **David Crabill:** Okay, so you're working and then you also are doing the policy stuff. Plus you are wanting to sell your baked goods. How do you justify the decision to take on this new project of creating and sustaining an association?

[00:34:19] **Shelley Erickson:** I don't know, it's my baby, you know, I started it. I have to keep nurturing it. I can't just walk away. That's kind of how.

[00:34:33] **David Crabill:** So what I know that people can become a member of the association. How does someone become a member of the association and what did they get?

[00:34:43] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, we're still working on that. Like I said, we all have full-time jobs, so we've been um, trying to set up, make it more beneficial to people. But we're in the process of setting up a directory so that people who are members of our association will have a place to advertise their business all in one place.

We have conferences, we try to do monthly classes. We have a monthly happy hour, so we can get together and talk about, you know, share stories and advice. We are looking into making our own cookbook with approved recipes. I'm thinking I want to check into seeing what it would involve to get?

our own, to set up our own commercial kitchen, which would be something That would be offered along with the association membership, you know, like a discounted use of a commercial kitchen, but that's a dream.

So

[00:35:55] **David Crabill:** That sounds very complicated.

[00:35:58] **Shelley Erickson:** yeah, I have to figure out exactly. I, I know the perfect spot. I just have to figure out what I need to accomplish.

[00:36:07] **David Crabill:** So what does it cost someone to become a member and how did you come up with that price?

[00:36:12] **Shelley Erickson:** We charge \$35 a year We came up with that price just because it seemed like a pretty well rounded. sum. I think most associations charge about that much.

[00:36:27] **David Crabill:** And what happens to that money?

[00:36:29] **Shelley Erickson:** And that's the money that we use for our conferences and things like that. we just did a um, actual get together and Brainerd. In July we did celebration and we invited everybody in Minnesota to come and we had um, some of our legislatures were there to talk and Meagan Forbes from the Institute for justice and we had a really nice time.

So it goes to pay for things like that. It pays for insurance because we have to have a lot of insurance because when you're giving advice, you have to, you know, have insurance any bills that we have to pay. And of course, now we have an upcoming, another upcoming conference. So it's going to pay for that.

[00:37:13] **David Crabill:** Uh, Aside from the national cottage food conference that happened this year, you're really the only conference that I know of that's happening on a regular basis. And it's you know, just for Minnesotan cottage food producers in Minnesota. But what has it been like to run those conferences?

[00:37:32] **Shelley Erickson:** Oh, it's, it's been great. The very first one we did was actually in accordance with the Minnesota farmers market association. Um, That's because we didn't have our own association, so they actually set it up and hosted. It made us a part of it. And for two years, I think, Yeah. two years we, we did it in accordance with uh, farmer's market association.

They have an annual. then in 2020, when we had that one, that was the first time that it was just cottage foods. but we had a lot of help from the university of Minnesota extension, the ladies that work with us with food safety, they helped us a lot with that. And then the farmer's market association is they're always wonderful to us. And then last year we did it all online and we had some sponsors and I think it went really well. We had two days and one evening We had at least 50 people to every. Little session that we had. So it went really well.

[00:38:48] **David Crabill:** Yeah. 50 is a solid number. And when you were doing them in person, how many people were you getting to actually come in person?

[00:38:55] **Shelley Erickson:** Um, So in 2020, I think, well that was funny because we had about 150 people that we knew were coming for. Sure. And then they just kept coming through the door. So I'm pretty sure we had probably about 230 people, if not

more. it was pretty cool. All the tables.

[00:39:24] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, I really commend you for setting that up. I mean, you definitely have one of the greatest communities of any state, you know, cottage, food communities of any state. There is in large part, thanks to all that you've done. And I mean, I personally hear from a lot of people in Minnesota who are cottage food businesses, and there are a ton of success stories that have come out of Minnesota as well.

Um, Some really successful businesses. So it's just funny how, the cottage food movement has been suppressed for a while. Maybe by the department of ag or competition, but there's clearly a really strong demand for home food producers and um, from consumers as well for homemade goods.

[00:40:09] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, yeah, it's, it's fabulous. We have a lot of support. Now we have a Facebook group page. That's only for registered cottage food producers in Minnesota and the cottage food producers on there. They get together and they share advice and they share tips. And it's such a nice um, very rarely any negativity at all.

Everybody's just so helpful. And a new cottage food producer coming in gets so much advice, so much help where to buy things, how to do things, what you can and can't do. It's a really great community.

[00:40:50] **David Crabill:** You're in a pretty unique position, just because, you're sort of the leader of the movement in your state. And so I know you interact with new. Food producers all the time. So you're in a pretty good position to see what they're doing. Well, what may be mistakes they're doing?

What are some of the biggest mistakes that you see people doing when they start their businesses?

[00:41:14] **Shelley Erickson:** I think probably the biggest mistake that people make when they're first starting out is that they don't charge enough for their product. They're so afraid that people won't buy their stuff, that they undercut themselves. and that's a hard thing to teach people cause they're like, well, but people won't pay that much, I've tried to charge that much and, I don't get any customers. And I always have to say, look, if this is something that you're going to do to make money, then you have to charge the proper amount of money. But if it's just something you're doing, because you enjoy doing it and you want to give it away, go for it.

But if you want a profit, you have to charge the right amount of money.

[00:42:02] **David Crabill:** How does someone know how much they should be charging?

[00:42:06] **Shelley Erickson:** We've had a lot of marketing classes about that, but what I usually tell people I kind of do it in thirds. A third of it is the amount of time I'm making, that it takes me to make it. Third of it is how much it, the ingredients and packaging and everything cost. And a third of it is profit.

That's basically how I tend to come to my prices.

[00:42:29] **David Crabill:** I saw something that you wrote where you said that you wished that you knew what to spend money on at first, when starting a business,

[00:42:39] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, for one thing, you don't have to go out and spend a lot of money on labels and, packaging and things like that. You can actually just print out your labels on the Avery templates as you need them. Cause a lot of people go and they'll print out hundreds of labels at one time and then they don't need them or they don't use them or something changes.

And. That is a big waste of money.

[00:43:09] **David Crabill:** So, I know you started this, you know, 11 years ago with just the ambition to have your own storefront selling your baked goods. And now you're seen as kind of the leader of the cottage food movement in Minnesota. did you ever think that you would be in this position

[00:43:31] **Shelley Erickson:** No, definitely not. And I am not that kind of a person. And so I always tell people, Christy started this. It wasn't me. It was Christy Stefanick. That's that's kinda how I get out of it.

[00:43:49] **David Crabill:** and now Christy started it, but you took it over a short timeframe from when you learned about.

[00:43:55] **Shelley Erickson:** I don't know. I, I'm not one to toot my own horn, but on the other hand, I do know that I've spent a lot of time and hours doing this, but I don't regret it. It's something that I, I felt that needed to be done. And I've met so many amazing people along the way. I've made friends that I would never have made otherwise I got involved with politics, which I never would have dreamed I would ever do that in a million years. I have made lifelong friends and it's been pretty, it's been a pretty amazing.

[00:44:34] **David Crabill:** Well, you may not want to toot your own horn, but I can toot it for. And I'll just say this, that Minnesota is cottage food community would definitely not be where it is today, if it weren't for all the stuff that you have done to support it. So they're definitely indebted to you, and I know you might not like to be in the limelight, but everything you've done has tremendously supported the cottage food community in Minnesota.

And Minnesota is now, you know, setting the standard for other states. So other states are looking to your state to see what is possible in terms of setting up a cottage food community in their state. So I thank you for all the work that

you've done and, and sort of the leadership that you've provided in showing us what's possible as uh, the cottage food movement keeps expanding and growing and just becoming more of a known thing for the general population.

[00:45:31] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that. And you have no idea how much you helped me. Every time I was stumped or needed an answer, I just went to forrager.com. It was a big help.

[00:45:44] **David Crabill:** Uh, Well, thanks for that. Um, So where do you see yourself in three to five years? Are you still gotta be involved and embedded in the cottage food industry.

[00:45:55] **Shelley Erickson:** Oh, Well, I don't know. I guess it kinda depends on where things go with the next year or two. I keep saying I'm going to just stop and let somebody else take over, but something always comes up and, and I don't feel that it's the right time yet. you know, you, you can't put on a pot of soup and then just walk out the door and not look back.

You, you have to keep stirring it. And so I'm still stirring the pot.

[00:46:26] **David Crabill:** Well, and I encourage you to keep going I don't know how you do it all. I know you do so much for free and you're volunteering your time. Um,

[00:46:36] **Shelley Erickson:** I have some really amazing people who work with me. I could not do it without.

[00:46:43] **David Crabill:** Yeah. And I would say the same, you know, even though I started the, the bill to allow shipping in California and increased the sales limit, I did not pass that bill. I mean, there were just so many people that came together to make that bill. put that into place. And a lot of stuff happened behind the scenes and, you know, I didn't even know all the people who are working on it. So it's quite the process to see um, the law get passed. And it's humbling at the same time.

You know, it it's something that we can start as individuals, but it takes a massive amount of people and effort to get a law passed. And uh, you know, you know, that better than almost anyone,

[00:47:27] **Shelley Erickson:** That's right. And it takes everybody you can't do it on your own.

[00:47:32] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you very much, Shelley, for coming on. you know, you're such a leader in the cottage food movement, I'm sure there are people that would like to reach out and contact you. Um, Where can they find you or how can they reach out and get in touch?

[00:47:46] **Shelley Erickson:** Well, our website is mncfpa.org. All our contact information for our entire. Is on there. There is a link to my email on there as well.

[00:48:01] **David Crabill:** Okay. Wonderful. Well, thank you very much for coming on and sharing with us today.

[00:48:06] **Shelley Erickson:** Thank you for having me.

[00:48:07] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/45.

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And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

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