

When Demand Exceeds Supply with Jen Holmer El-Azzi & Danny El-Azzi

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 Jen Holmer El-Azzi and Danny El-Azzi. Jen and Danny live in Austin, Texas, and sells sourdough crackers with their food business, The Sourdough Project, they have a very unique product and that uniqueness combined with the quality of their crackers has propelled their business forward in a big way. They started from home under Texas' cottage food law in 2018, and almost immediately started getting requests from wholesalers who wanted to carry their products.

Within months, they were producing from a commercial kitchen and now they're building out their own production facility. Today. They have over 50 wholesale accounts and they still have trouble keeping up with all of the demand. But in addition to having an amazing product, they also do a great job at marketing their business.

Their branding and packaging really stands out on the store shelves. And they're also always so excited to talk to people at their local farmer's markets about why their crackers are so special.

They say that their business started quite by accident, but as you'll see this couple had all the ingredients they needed to build a successful food business. And with that, let's jump right into this episode.

Welcome to the show, Jen and Danny. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:20] **Danny El-Azzi:** Hi, thanks for having us.

[00:01:22] **David Crabill:** So can you guys uh, tell me a little bit about how you got this business off the ground. How did it all get started?

[00:01:29] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Well, I uh, started making sourdough at home. I had an allergic reaction to wheat and I didn't eat any wheat for about five years. That is kind of a pretty sad existence. I heard research about sourdough and I thought I'd give it a shot. So I started making sourdough bread at home. Cookies brownies, all sorts of things.

I made crackers and people tasted them and they absolutely loved them. So it kind of seemed like there was nobody selling sourdough crackers at the farmer's market or in our local groceries. So we thought we would start a little side business

[00:02:14] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I saw that you said that you never expected this passion project turn into a real business. So this all kind of happened by accident.

[00:02:23] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** completely by accident. I assumed that I would be able to keep my regular job just bake on the weekends, sell at the farmer's market. And I quickly found out that that was not going to work. The demand was kind of unbelievable.

[00:02:42] **Danny El-Azzi:** It just kind of snowballed and kind of got out ahead of us because we were hoping and trying to just have it as a side gig and do it at the weekend at the farmer's market.

And then we had our first commercial um, wholesale account. They were contacting us and reaching out to us and really just wanted our product just as it is. And we didn't really have to make any changes, so it was easy to get in with them. And then once that happened, it kind of just, snowballed uh, it was farmhouse delivery, which is um, kind of a small CSA here in Austin.

So that was kind of the catalyst.

[00:03:24] **David Crabill:** Now I saw that Jen has like culinary experience in the past. So I don't know where you were working Jen at the time, but you know, do you think that came into play and kind of wanting to start this as a business?

[00:03:38] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yes. So I worked for a local grocery store chain here in Texas called central market. They are a gourmet kind of high-end grocery store so just all the gourmet food from around the world. I worked as a foodie, so my main job was just to talk to people about food all day.

I would do cooking demonstrations. We had a cooking school that was associated with the grocery store as well. So I worked there for the nine years before and during the beginning of the sourdough project,

[00:04:19] **Danny El-Azzi:** but we had also been doing a lot of stuff at the house for a while. I mean, Jen had a small cookie business for awhile.

Before that, and we had been doing. All sorts of like small adventures here at the house on our own for a while, we were doing our own kombucha and just experimenting with a lot of different things. And you know, it just by chance when we were on sourdough, it just kinda took off. we also received a lot of encouragement from the community from central market and you know, friends and people just saying, you gotta do this.

[00:04:55] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** we had other friends who were vendors at the farmer's market um, doing a variety of things and we felt like it was just a great. Opportunity to, try an idea out. Out, nothing to lose. And we figured if all of these other people around us were doing it, we should give it a shot.

[00:05:17] **David Crabill:** So it was actually these vendors, like other people had to kind of convince you to start selling your products.

[00:05:24] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. Honestly, like, I have always made food and given it to people and, I didn't think that it was something that I would be able to sell or anything like that. I didn't have that idea in my head, but I was just pushed by, you know, friends. And family to give it a shot and starting at the farmer's market and starting as a cottage food business, there's very little initial costs to just try.

[00:05:54] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it's interesting to hear that you worked at the grocery store as a foodie and, you know, you're, you know, talking to people about food all day. feel like that would very easily translate into just jumping into the farmer's market. Cause that's what you're doing all day, right? Talking about your food products.

[00:06:08] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. It was definitely something we thought about it for about six months before we took the plunge and actually did it.

[00:06:18] **Danny El-Azzi:** We didn't even take a full plunge. We did it as a side gig for quite a while. I can't really remember exactly, but

[00:06:23] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** it was less than a month.

[00:06:24] **Danny El-Azzi:** Was it really, was it that fast? Yeah, we tried. And then it just took over our whole life.

[00:06:32] **David Crabill:** And you said you had a cookie business before this, so you'd actually tried to sell other things before that didn't work out as well.

[00:06:40] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yes. So before the Texas cottage food laws passed I had had a small cookie business, like wholesale cookie business in Austin. But at that time you could not bake things in your home and sell them. Like it was illegal. You had to go to a commercial kitchen. And the cost of being in a commercial kitchen was too much for the amount of cookies that I was selling. So I kind of did it for a few months and then it just wasn't worth it.

[00:07:11] **Danny El-Azzi:** Plus cookies is a tough cookie because everybody's doing cookies. The big part of how this all happened was that nobody really wanted to mess around with crackers. And even to this day, there are bakeries that do all sorts of sourdough and stuff like that, that just like buy our crackers and sell them at their store.

And just think that we're just crazy that we're doing this because it is like really specialized. But we, I mean, we didn't really find it that difficult. Even though, I mean, it is especially when. Having to do everything by hand. It is still very much a handmade product, but we have the luxury of a dough sheeter, which we did not have for the longest time.

So Jen definitely built up some serious triceps over that period.

[00:07:56] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it's a pretty unique product, right? I mean like sourdough crackers. I don't know if I've seen that before from. Cottage food business. And so you think that that's why it took off so quickly? It's just because people just instantly recognized that it was unique product and they wanted it in their stores?

[00:08:14] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah, I think the uniqueness of the product the way that the product looks our crackers have kind of a very unique shape to them. We use all local wheat from our local stone mill their heirloom varieties of wheat. Two of the oldest varieties of wheat found in north America. So the ingredients that we use are the very, very best ingredients that we can get.

And we just make them with love. I mean, they're very simple ingredients and they make a very tasty cracker,

[00:08:48] **Danny El-Azzi:** looking back at things don't know if this really would have happened. Had it been something other than crackers because I've seen a lot of other, you know, Kind of come and go from the farmer's market, trying to do, cottage businesses, whether it's, you know, sourdough, breads and other things. And there's just so much out there already that they struggled to kind of stand out and differentiate. But we were kind of lucky in that aspect

[00:09:14] **David Crabill:** Well, it is interesting. I mean your business name, right? It's a sourdough project and that's a very broad name. And so it's interesting that you have that name and yet you're specialized in just selling crackers.

[00:09:26] **Danny El-Azzi:** We are specialized because our hands are tied. we have so many plans and so many ideas for things that we want to do. And even though we our main flagship product is the crackers. We do have cookies and cookie dough and brownies and other stuff that we do, but just not sourdough starters, all of them sour dough, but just not bread because we just don't have the capacity for that or the equipment.

And the market's just already flooded with it. So we still have all these ideas and big plans, but we're stuck where we are until our new production facility is open. our fridges are completely packed with dough for the crackers and our equipment for the crackers.

Take up all the floor space that we have. So we don't really have the ability or capacity to do much more right now.

[00:10:20] **David Crabill:** You know, I did see that you use like this organic olive oil, organic wheat um, heirloom wheat, wheat. So do you think that's what makes your crackers so special?

[00:10:31] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** yeah, I think the wheat has a big flavor role in the cracker. one of the wheats that we use is Sonora, which is a. Winter like soft wheat. And one of the aspects of Sonora is it has a nutty kind of buttery taste to it. So our crackers taste kind of cheesy buttery because of the Sonora, but also because of the fermentation.

So it gives it a very kind of Cheez-It vibe, but it's all organic and just a few simple ingredients

[00:11:09] **Danny El-Azzi:** and it fits the clientele like if we're going to go through the trouble of, fermenting this stuff for days and sheeting it by hand and taking the care, you might as well have the best of ingredients.

Cause you're doing the best of the process. It would just kind of be silly to go through all that trouble and not have, best ingredients that you can find be the base of the product, because it just wouldn't really be worth it. And the customer wouldn't really be interested in either. I don't think,

[00:11:37] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** you know, Austin is a very savvy market as far as food products go. There's lots of CPGs that start in Austin. Austin really knows its food. I mean, it's the home of whole foods. you know, we have huge, huge. Farmer's markets all over town every weekend. People, know food and they have really high expectations.

So you want to make a product that you can really stand behind because if not people will call you on it,

[00:12:11] **Danny El-Azzi:** it wasn't even entirely honestly, our idea to do this. I mean, it was kind of the environment that shaped us. And in order to even qualify as a vendor at the market, you have to be using local ingredients. So it just all kind of fell in place like that.

[00:12:29] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, and you do a really good job of like educating customers about how unique your products are you know, you have a very special fermentation process you go through and it results in this cheesy flavor, but it doesn't actually contain cheese. Can you expand a little bit more about what makes your fermentation process special?

[00:12:49] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** our fermentation process, we decided in the beginning to slow it down so that we could ferment it for as long as we possibly could before the dough starts to break down. The benefit of doing that is you get more of the nutritional benefits of fermentation the sourdough culture breaks down the gluten structure in the wheat, and it kind of.

Basically pre-digests it for your body. So it's really easy to digest. Plus all of the nutrients in the wheat are available for your body to absorb. So it was really out of the nutritional digestibility aspect that we started doing that. And then we found that it makes it taste really good the longer you ferment it.

So we make our dough stick it in the fridge. We let it ferment for about 24 to 48 hours, depending on the type of dough, sometimes a little bit longer. And it makes a huge difference in the taste of the product.

[00:13:51] **Danny El-Azzi:** Technically it is possible to make the sourdough crackers without the cold fermentation process, but it is exceedingly difficult and tricky without the kind of temperature control that you get from Having it in the fridge, if you were to have it out on the counter or just in general environment in the kitchen, if the temperature is different, if the humidity's different you could easily over ferment or under ferment and find yourself with a chewy or bubbly dough.

[00:14:19] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Especially in Austin, it's very hard. Like our temperatures are really high, really fast. Um, it's hard to do a non temperature controlled fermentation here because it can go from zero to. Way over fermented in just like,

[00:14:39] **David Crabill:** so you have this, you know, very unique product, uniquely made unique result. But then you also have flavors of the crackers, right? What are some of the flavors you've come up with?

[00:14:51] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. So we started with the sea salt. Our next flavor was , which is a middle Eastern spice blend. My husband Danny is Lebanese and it's one of the spice blends that they use almost every day.

[00:15:06] **Danny El-Azzi:** We literally put it in everything. So it had to go in the crackers.

[00:15:10] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. That definitely was our second cracker. Um, Then we just kind of went from there to see what people like. So everything like an everything, bagel uh, sun dried tomato and herb, which to me tastes like pizza. It's delicious. It's one of my favorites. Um, beet and thyme

[00:15:31] **Danny El-Azzi:** there's so many more that are not actually regulars. So at the farmer's market, we uh, pretty much every week, if not every couple of weeks, depending on how pressed we are, we try to bring in just a limited supply of whatever herbs we could get our hands on. we did dill recently. We did a Rosemary and herbs.

[00:15:50] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** whatever's in season, we try to do seasonal varieties of crackers. Also fun crackers, like we do a verde and black cracker,

[00:16:00] **Danny El-Azzi:** In honor of Austin FC, our local soccer team.

[00:16:05] **David Crabill:** I actually wanted to ask you, you know, I noticed that, you know, you have a variety of different flavors, but they're all kind of like self descriptive names you know, like beet and thyme or sea salt. Did you ever experiment with using like more creative made up names um, and trying to brand each flavor in that way?

[00:16:25] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** So our sun dried tomato cracker used to be called pizza and nobody bought it. Yeah.

And then we renamed the cracker sun dried tomato and herb, and people immediately loved it. They thought that we changed the recipe, which we didn't.

[00:16:43] **Danny El-Azzi:** Yeah, it went from being the least popular to one of the more popular ones without actually doing anything other than just stop naming it, pizza cracker, which we thought was really awesome and funny and cool. And then realized that that was not working.

[00:16:56] **David Crabill:** Wow. That's really fascinating. So you just decided to abandon the creative names after.

[00:17:02] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. The only other thing that we kind of have a creative name for is our dill cracker, which is one of our seasonal varieties. And we call that one dilly. And I mean, that's still pretty self-explanatory, but I don't know. from my experience people just didn't go for that.

[00:17:20] **Danny El-Azzi:** It seemed to create confusion and people were like, what do you mean pizza? And it doesn't taste like pizza. And we're like, dude, it's just, we're just playing around here. It's not actually pizza cracker. It's just so we just decided to stick with sun-dried tomato.

[00:17:36] **David Crabill:** That's pretty funny. other than that one, have you had any flavors that like kind of failed.

[00:17:43] **Danny El-Azzi:** We didn't do, what was it? We were trying to get the green. Right. And it was just way too strong. What, what was the powder we had used.

[00:17:52] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** That was broccoli. Broccoli does not make a good cracker

[00:17:55] **Danny El-Azzi:** It just smelled like asparagus. Yeah.

[00:17:58] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Um, As far as anything that we've brought to the market I think that all of our seasonal flavors people have loved actually every time we bring a seasonal flavor to the market, people like for weeks and months after ask for that particular flavor.

But I kind of refuse at this point to bring any more full-time flavors on having six full-time flavors already.

[00:18:22] **Danny El-Azzi:** Yeah, it's already difficult enough to keep them all in inventory.

[00:18:27] **David Crabill:** I did notice that, you know, you have some pretty unique flavors but you also like are very good about educating customers about what they pair with. Like what cheeses they pair with is that something that customers really appreciate knowing, or like, is that just based on your own experience

[00:18:43] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. So we chose our pairings based on what we like to eat the crackers with, but then we also. Paired up with a local cheese shop and did a series of zoom classes pairing each of our cracker varieties with a different kind of cheese. So we've worked with cheese professionals and based on our own personal preferences on how we like to enjoy the crackers.

[00:19:14] **David Crabill:** So do you have cheeses on hand at the market? You know, to, to let people taste the crackers.

[00:19:21] **Danny El-Azzi:** Right now it's even difficult to do tastings in general because of COVID and masking and stuff like that. And all the restrictions. I don't know if we actually did cheese. We usually just go to our partner vendors or whoever's at the market and just team up with them either give them our crackers or just take some of their products. So it's basically what we can find at the market is what we try to pair with and sample with.

[00:19:45] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** And we don't sample them. Crackers at our booth, we give sample crackers to the other vendors to use at their booth to sample.

[00:19:55] **Danny El-Azzi:** It just really. makes customers even aware of us. There's so many people at the farmer's market. There's so many booths. There's like hundreds of different farmer's markets here. It's really big and crowded and kind of confusing and easy to get lost. People can't find you. So having our products being used to sample with at other people just kind of make some aware that we're even there and

[00:20:17] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** they can see our products at lots of different tents throughout the market and then will seek us out to find us.

[00:20:25] **David Crabill:** So you started this business basically by starting at the farmer's market. You offered your crackers at the farmer's market. When was that?

[00:20:34] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Uh, so that was in April of 2018. We started at the farmer's market.

[00:20:39] **David Crabill:** And so take me forward from there. how did your business progress and how quickly did it scale?

[00:20:46] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** after basically the first week we started getting emails from people who wanted to wholesale the crackers. We held them off. it's always been our idea to grow at our own pace. We didn't want to pressure ourselves to do more than we thought we could. We wanted to stay cottage as long as we possibly could because it's definitely a less expensive way to grow.

You can control a lot of things. by. August or September of 2018, we had moved into our first commercial kitchen and started doing wholesale for a few small, small places around Austin.

[00:21:27] **Danny El-Azzi:** The way it's grown has been really. Dictated by what we've been constricted by uh, production wise.

So we were baking from the house under the cottage food law. a few accounts wanted the crackers wholesale. So we kind of had one foot at the house, one foot at the commercial kitchen. We were leasing on an hourly basis. We quickly learned that that was not really sustainable. Um, We kept. Kind of part-timing at the commercial kitchen and then working from the house for the farmer's market stuff.

And we had to like keep our products separate because like he can't sell the cottage made products wholesale And we were kind of stuck like that for the longest time having to lease hourly and telling people that we're larger accounts know that we can't do wholesale for you.

Unfortunately, until we found the small commercial kitchen that we were working at currently. from there we added a bunch of wholesales account just so we could afford the rent and equipment. And then quickly realized that we had reached capacity because there was only so much room for refrigeration and all the other good stuff.

And then we kind of found ourselves in that spot again the last year or so where we're constantly telling people. No, we can't sorry, just because we're already baking five days a week and. Just don't have the inventory or the ability to produce that much. And we won't be able to take on any of these larger distributors or accounts until we have our new facility ready.

So fingers crossed. That'll be ready in the next, I don't know. I'm kind of tired of giving out numbers, but maybe three to six months,

[00:23:14] **David Crabill:** Yeah, we'll get to the production facility in a little bit. I know that you're working on that. But this is a pretty unique situation, right? Like it sounds like you didn't have to do much of anything to get wholesale accounts. Like did you say within the first week they started coming to you?

[00:23:29] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yes. We were incredibly lucky. I think that just making something that nobody else was really making kind of put us in the spotlight for a lot of people to approach us, wanting to sell our product. I never had an ambition of selling outside of the farmer's market. So I kind of put people off for quite a bit.

[00:23:53] **Danny El-Azzi:** I mean, don't get me wrong. We still had to go and get some accounts, the old fashioned way, send them some emails, knock on the door, bring them some samples. But those are really small accounts where we were like, they're just not even aware of us, but we would really like to be in this like boutique groceries.

So let's hit them up and sure enough, they're interested. But

[00:24:13] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** All of the big accounts actually came to us. Whole foods has a great uh, local program where they go to farmer's markets and seek out new products. Uh, Central market does the same thing. They go and seek out local products to bring into their stores.

[00:24:31] **Danny El-Azzi:** the farmers market has been key. I can't stress enough how important it is that just being there, our presence there, that's a big part of people finding us, knowing about us. You know, hitting us up for wholesale. The farmer's market is just awesome.

[00:24:49] **David Crabill:** How many wholesale accounts do you have right now?

[00:24:51] **Danny El-Azzi:** Um, Big and small altogether, somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 or something like that.

[00:24:58] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** so, I mean, it's close to 75 stores. But we haven't been able to take on any more accounts, so we're kind of sitting idle.

[00:25:10] **Danny El-Azzi:** And there's some Accounts that we just can't take on because they need distribution has been the hiccup lately.

And we just can't get in with some of the larger distributors in our current kitchen, because they want stuff on pallets. Well, I don't even, I don't even have a pallet jack. I don't even have a door that's wide enough to get a pallet through. and we're just like, okay, let's just hold off until we're in the new space.

And we know we can, actually produce these like several pallets worth of orders that are like, just the amount just boggles the mind when we first got in with central market and realized just how big of an undertaking it was. And just like, oh, like, this is what several thousand crackers look like.

I have no, you know, we didn't even have the slightest idea of what we were getting into.

[00:25:54] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. there's nine central market stores. And then we're only. Austin area, whole foods until we can have a bigger production space. So yeah, some of those bigger accounts, a lot, And currently we have just two employees, so we're, we're doing everything ourselves.

[00:26:16] **David Crabill:** yeah. I mean, I, it sounds like a ton and. You have all these wholesale accounts, I'm curious, like why? I think you're still doing two farmer's markets. Like why are you still at the farmer's markets? Right.

[00:26:29] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. Well, honestly for me, it's one of the only times that I'm able to socialize during the week spending, pretty much every day in the kitchen. Don't get out much.

[00:26:42] **Danny El-Azzi:** yeah, it's kind of our socializing.

[00:26:47] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** It's also connecting with customers. our particular farmer's markets bring in thousands of people, every market new people people who may not have ever seen you before. Lots of tourists. I like to be able to. Share my product, talk to people about it. And it's still like a really good source of revenue for us.

I mean, we go to the market, we sell the crackers, but we also sell sourdough chocolate chip cookies, sourdough starters uh, sourdough brownies. We introduce all of our seasonal flavors there. So it's, a place where we can experiment. And it's also a place that we get to connect with our local food community.

[00:27:29] **Danny El-Azzi:** It's really fun. And our decision to be at the farmer's market's not really tied to what else is going on production wise or how many accounts we have. I wouldn't want to stop going to the farmer's market. I mean, even if it wasn't making any money or didn't have an impact on the bottom line, it's just an awesome experience.

We get to see a lot. We get to hear a lot. We get to talk to a lot of interesting people. This is worth it on its own.

[00:27:57] **David Crabill:** I mean, it sounds like there is a huge market, right? You said there were hundreds of different booths and it sounds like there's quite a farmer's market culture in your area. So. how much do you actually sell at a given market?

[00:28:11] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I dunno. I mean, we'll sell anywhere from 50 boxes of crackers to 120 boxes of crackers, but then we're also selling, a dozen or two sourdough starters.

it's good. I mean, we do sell quite a bit of product at each market and a lot of local Austin people who would buy our product at the store when they come to the farmer's market, they get a dollar discount if they buy two boxes of crackers.

And then they also, we have like a loyalty punch card where they can earn a free box after 10 boxes.

[00:28:46] **Danny El-Azzi:** Yeah. We definitely make sure that it's a better deal buying at the farmer's market And honestly, we don't make enough.

Brownies and cookies and stuff like that to really try to go and do anything wholesale with them. Like, it just wouldn't be enough, but, you know, with the farmer's market, you could just show up with whatever you want, whatever you made that week, it's easy I guess.

[00:29:09] **David Crabill:** would you say that your wholesale accounts are. like the biggest chunk of the product that you make is for your wholesale accounts.

[00:29:18] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yes, definitely. we actually are at a point where we don't have any inventory ever because we're constantly making to order because we can't catch up. So we still deliver all of our orders on time.

[00:29:35] **Danny El-Azzi:** Tell them. You're like, okay, we'll have that in like 10 days or something. That's what I usually tell people, just not to get their hopes up. And if they get it early, then they're happy.

[00:29:47] **David Crabill:** know you're building this production facility. Why did you decide to move into your own bigger production facility to produce more instead of, you know, considering the extreme demand for your product? Looking into a co-packer.

[00:30:02] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I don't know. I, I like making my product. It is like a little bit difficult, but I feel like making simple products like sauces, salsas things like that work well with co-packers. I'm not sure how. Fermented products would work with a co-packer, but I also, I don't necessarily want to give up that control over the quality.

[00:30:29] **Danny El-Azzi:** I wouldn't even know where to start.

[00:30:31] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** It seemed like a good idea to build a bigger production facility, continue making the product ourselves. If we are able to have space for other bakers to come in and use our facility, when they're starting out, we wanted to have that option available.

You know, maybe someday we wanted to open up a storefront or something like that. it made more sense. The idea of paying hourly at a commercial kitchen is terrible. It really hurts. Like it hurts a lot. we saved up for two years before we started building this kitchen out, we looked at locations, we just saved and saved and saved.

We've tried to grow as we can afford to. So that's, that's one of our main

[00:31:24] **Danny El-Azzi:** plus we actually enjoy, we enjoy the making of it. Like that's, that's the whole reason we're doing this is because we were doing it. We were already making this stuff before we were even selling this stuff. it's been fun. And if we can do it, we should do it.

[00:31:40] **David Crabill:** You know, it's one thing to be making products at home for yourself, for friends, giving them away. It's a whole nother thing to be producing for a whole bunch of wholesale accounts. Like you still feel like it's fun or do you feel like some of the fun has been sapped out of it and it's becoming a factory?

[00:32:00] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I actually.

[00:32:01] **Danny El-Azzi:** Certainly don't like the drive up there and all the traffic. That's not fun.

[00:32:06] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Well, commute to our current kitchen is not fun, but I like the challenge of it. It's exciting to me that we fill up the kitchen with all of these crackers and they're just gone. It's exciting. It's, We kind of make a game out of it in the kitchen to try to break our personal bests as far as like production.

[00:32:26] **Danny El-Azzi:** plus we have a lot more that we want to do that we just haven't had a chance to do. We're not really ready to move on to any kind of like, stage like that because, we still want to tackle pretzels.

We still wanna tackle Graham crackers. We've been thinking about Graham crackers for a while now, but we are afraid to jump into it because we anticipate a lot of demand from it. there's still a lot of ideas that we want to explore. And we kind of need our own space to do that.

We don't really have the time to continue doing anything like that from the house. So we kind of have all our eggs in this new kitchen basket right now

[00:33:03] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** it would be one thing if we like. To like actually make the product, but I still have fun doing it.

It's still enjoyable. I still get a lot of satisfaction out of creating a product and literally having a hand in every single box of crackers that we make

[00:33:21] **Danny El-Azzi:** But yeah, don't get us wrong. I mean, there have been difficulties and times where we're like, this is terrible. This could be the end. you know, having like the dough sheeter break, having a mixer break when we just have one piece of equipment that we rely on is just like terrifying. there certainly are difficulties, but it's totally worth it.

[00:33:43] **David Crabill:** what did you do when, like your mixer broke?

[00:33:46] **Danny El-Azzi:** Oh, man. It turns out it wasn't broken. There's a fuse in the back that we didn't know about. Yeah. That's what happened there. The dough sheeter broke. I literally went around all the different used equipment places trying to find the parts. Couldn't find them went online. They were all sold out in different places.

Ended up buying a part that was entirely from a different piece of equipment on the hopes that it would work. In the meantime, everybody's just sheeting crackers by hand with the roller which is just a tremendous amount of work. how long did it take us two weeks with like everybody with like wholesale accounts.

You know, what's going on, what's going on. We're like, we're trying our best, just bear with us. And honestly, I still feel really lucky that we found the parts that we needed and We had to fix it ourselves. I mean, we just, we called one of the repair places out and the guy was just basically like buying a new one. We're like, that's just ridiculous. we're going to fix this.

[00:34:50] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Even when we're still in our home. Our oven stopped working and we had to wait for a new igniter for it. So we were out of the markets for like two weeks.

[00:35:01] **Danny El-Azzi:** And at that point we still hadn't got the igniter and we'd literally bought another oven and put it right next to the kitchen. And we had two ovens in the kitchen for awhile.

[00:35:09] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. That was fun. Yeah.

[00:35:12] **David Crabill:** Well, it definitely sounds challenging. Um, it also sounds like it's been a little challenging to build out this facility. I mean, you alluded to there being delays. What have been some of the challenges.

[00:35:24] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** The city of Austin has a lot of codes and permits and things that make it very challenging. So even though we, don't have any. grease, We had to put in a huge in-floor grease trap. The permitting has been very difficult because the city offices are still closed. Everything is done online. The wait times are enormous.

[00:35:54] **Danny El-Azzi:** We're even having to literally build out the gas lines for this place. Like it, it was so hard to even find the place that, I mean, forget about just finding a place that's already equipped. That's that was just like, we looked so hard and for so long to find something uh, we found a lot of restaurants, but those were in areas where there was high traffic and as a result, high rent we had to build it out ourselves.

We didn't really want to do that. We were forced to do that. We went in there in the hopes that. It was going to be an easy, quick build. We are bootstrapping our way through this. And so a lot of the options that other people like hiring an

engineer to design this stuff and an architect to do this and do that we did without.

And I even had to go so far as to become a general contractor and registered with the city. So I could do that stuff myself. And since we're doing it ourselves, we learn the hard way all sorts. Yeah, exactly. Um, You know, so the money that we ended up saving from not having to hire professionals, we just end up, wasting on mistakes.

Maybe. I don't know, we're probably still better off, but yeah, the biggest hiccup really was. Being forced to put in a enormous grease trap. We were really surprised and floored by the requirement that they made us have to abide by. We originally had planned on like a small system that is the same system that's currently we use at our current production facility and they just wouldn't go for it.

And uh, they said that we needed like a four or 500 gallon system. And I just had to learn from scratch how to go about doing something like that. And it was a pretty big cost.

[00:37:43] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I've heard similar stories about, you know, having to abide by all these requirements and there being no wiggle room. I know you haven't finished it yet, but do you have a sense for like, even though you've become a general contractor, you've built a lot of this stuff out yourself, like what is it actually taking money-wise to get this place built?

[00:38:02] **Danny El-Azzi:** Um, in the neighborhood of the actual figure with equipment and stuff like the, the equipment that we're going to have to buy. That's not related to construction. Man, that's a very big number. I want to say that the construction alone is probably in the neighborhood. 30 to 50,000. Once you include all the equipment, most of which we're probably going to have to take out a loan, we're pushing a hundred easy.

[00:38:29] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** That'll be the first loan

[00:38:31] **Danny El-Azzi:** that would literally be the equipment loan is going to be the first one.

[00:38:34] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. we've definitely like to this point grown as we could afford,

[00:38:39] **David Crabill:** Well, yeah, and it's pretty easy to justify, right. Especially if you have wholesalers that you're turning down, cause you can't, you can't their orders. And you know that this place is going to probably increase your production capacity by a ton.

[00:38:53] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. So that's the light at the end of the tunnel, but we're just trying to be patient and,

work as much as we can and we already have. a bunch of new wholesale accounts lined up for when we finish production. So that's pretty exciting.

[00:39:11] **Danny El-Azzi:** It's also very frustrating. I mean, I just like every day goes by and I'm like paying two rents at the same time. And it's so frustrating to just be paying rent on something that you can't use yet.

[00:39:25] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** but that was the compromise that we had to make because affording a commercial kitchen, like an hourly commercial kitchen, our rent each month would have been at least double what our rent would be in the kitchen that we're building.

So you have to kind of weigh out Those things when you're making that decision. I mean, honestly,

I always tell people to try to stay cottage as long as you possibly can so that you can kind of save up to grow to the next phase,

[00:40:00] **Danny El-Azzi:** especially if like the alternative to like, if you have to move out and you have to like pay a commercial kitchen hourly, that is really, really risky and can get out of hand very quickly.

And we did that for a short period of time and just like got away as fast as possible. And that's how we ended up in the production facility that we currently use. And it was, it was a very difficult choice. We were like, we live in central Austin and there's already traffic everywhere. And the idea of having to go north to the outskirts and Cedar park we didn't want to do that, but we, we had to, we had to rent a small, tiny place and sit in traffic for hours every day, just because we couldn't keep renting a commercial space on an hourly basis that was too difficult.

[00:40:47] **David Crabill:** So that's all on the expense side of things. What about on the income side of things? You know, you priced these out. I mean, it seems like a very, very high quality and in demand item you know, it looks like

customers are really impressed right off the bat when they try your product. So I assume you have some premium pricing.

How, how have you landed on your pricing and has it changed over time?

[00:41:08] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** So our, crackers, like the price that we sell them for at the farmer's market is \$8 a box. That's our suggested retail. Some of our wholesale accounts will sell them for \$8 box, some sell them for \$10.50 a box. We don't determine the price that they sell them at. but people still buy them.

They appreciate that it's a quality product. Um, Our boxes are six ounces. Most crackers are four ounces. So price per ounce, it's still a pretty good deal.

[00:41:44] **Danny El-Azzi:** I certainly tried to figure out the pricing by calculating, you know, every little bit of what went in and the overhead and all of that.

But the way we really went about it actually honestly, was just looked at what the closest competition to us was doing. And we were like, what can the market bear based on what we saw others charging? And that was really kind of where we started.

[00:42:10] **David Crabill:** Do you face any resistance to the pricing or are customers just happy to pay the.

[00:42:16] **Danny El-Azzi:** Sometimes we do, but often it's because they just aren't really aware of the quality of the product that they're looking at.

[00:42:25] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Once we explain that are, we goes from the small family farm to the stone mill to us directly that we are directly supporting these small family farms that we use all organic ingredients that everything's handmade. Explain the several day process that it takes to make the product.

People are less resistant once they are educated on what the product actually is. And a lot of people, even if they're resistant towards the price, they just really enjoy the taste so much that they

[00:43:02] **Danny El-Azzi:** I feel like those worries go away once they know. what the product is like when you realize that the flour we buy costs at least 10 times more than the off the shelf flour that you typically would get. Once you

realize that organic extra virgin olive oil costs upwards of like \$15 a liter, you know, that stuff all adds up.

That's where all the money's going. It's not like we priced it at this because we were going to make a fortune or something. the question reminds me of Tom's the local grocery store here. We were like, man, we would be like a really good product for this place.

That's like full of local stuff. And uh, the buyer was just like, dude, there's no way somebody's going to buy these crackers for this much. And we're like, well, you know, Give it a try, whatever, and sure enough, like they fly off the shelves. So even like they're floored by the fact that it works. I guess

[00:43:54] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I think that savvy customers are looking at the ingredients, looking at what they want to put in their bodies. They're buying food based on their values, I think people are willing to pay more for a quality product. I think that the kind of grocery store landscape is, is changing quite a bit people are reading ingredients more and care more about what they put in their body and where their food comes from.

[00:44:21] **David Crabill:** Well, the product itself. Impressive and is obviously super high quality. Also I would say your packaging looks extremely good and your labels your logo. It looks very professional. Impressive. Um, Did you hire that out? Did you do it yourself?

[00:44:40] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Actually um, we have really great creative friends. it was really a collaborative effort from a little bit of input from us. And then our friends kind of took over and uh, they do not have jobs doing that. and, uh, designed really amazing stuff for us.

[00:45:00] **Danny El-Azzi:** That's really the, you mentioning that it's professional is like the biggest, thank you so much because it was definitely not professional and done. In-house

[00:45:08] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, well, it's impressive. You know, also your, your photography is impressive. Is that something that you had hired?

[00:45:16] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yes, we had a local food photographer uh, help us out. She does work for lots of national accounts, but uh, she has a total soft spot for local Austin companies. So she worked with us and we were able to, because I was afraid to get professional photography done. I was afraid that I

wasn't going to be able to afford it. And yeah, it was, it was a really great experience.

[00:45:45] **David Crabill:** Well, I can tell you the investment paid off. Cause it's definitely like very impressive. Um, your packaging, your photos, they really convey the quality of the product that's there. In terms of your packaging you know, what do you use now and is that what you've used? Um, from the.

[00:46:02] **Danny El-Azzi:** And that is what we've used from the beginning more or less. I've been losing sleep over the packaging, quite frankly. The price on the packaging that we use has increased since we started using it from about somewhere in the range of like 40 bucks a case to like over a hundred recently we are constantly facing.

Supply issues. Uh, We were getting them from a local paper company and they couldn't get their hands on it anymore. So we have to go back to buying them online and paying shipping, and it seems like it just keeps getting harder to find and more expensive. We do want to move away from it generally speaking, but just haven't been able, we just don't have the bandwidth right now.

Um, I'm just so bogged down at the build and Jen's bogged down in production. And,

[00:46:56] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** um, We would like to move to something more eco-friendly and sustainable. We're looking at different options right now. Trying to be creative. like. The fact that our product kind of stands out on the grocery store shelf.

It doesn't look like the rest of the boxes so I want something that's still going to look really nice and distinctive, but I do want something that's more eco-friendly.

[00:47:23] **David Crabill:** do you know like what the per package cost is for each one of these, like a plastic, clam shell type boxes.

[00:47:31] **Danny El-Azzi:** So that's, I think it's over 50 cents just for the plastic container itself. per unit. And then you got to, add the label add the casing. Yeah.

[00:47:42] **David Crabill:** Yeah. that's that is quite expensive. you're getting your labels professionally printed

[00:47:47] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. We, we get our labels from blue label. They are out of Ohio and they do an excellent job. They have great customer service. We've tried a couple of other companies been burned pretty bad.

[00:48:01] **Danny El-Azzi:** It's one of those things where there's always a price when you first start. And that price is just like increasing every time you order. You're like, well, This isn't how you do business. It's like, could you imagine if I sold somebody crackers? And every time they came back, I raised the price. Like, how do you think this is acceptable? But blue label has been awesome.

[00:48:22] **David Crabill:** But when you put your product on a store shelf, you have to have good packaging, you have to have good labels. Right. Cause that's the only thing speaking for your product.

[00:48:31] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** That is very true. That's something that you really have to kind of tell your story, have it be visually appealing, right off the bat, because people are looking at a sea of boxes and colors and you want to stick out. You want people to be able to see the quality in your product, especially if you have a higher end product, if your product costs more than all the other ones on the shelf, people need to pretty immediately see why it costs.

[00:49:04] **David Crabill:** What stands out to me when I look at your packaging, it, it looks kind of colorful and simple as well.

[00:49:12] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah, we want the flavor name to be very prominent. On the back of the packaging, it tells our whole story about, our wheat and the organic products and, just kind of how everything is made and the quality, but on the front of the label, it's pretty simple what it is.

You can see the product. And then on the side of the label, it's basically just the flavor name. wanted it to be. Very easily recognizable.

[00:49:43] **Danny El-Azzi:** It didn't look like that off the bat. I mean, this has been a constant evolution. It literally changes every time we decide add something or do something we're constantly changing it. Yeah,

[00:49:54] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** but I mean, you want it to be able to stick out on the shelf. You want it to be able to tell a story to anybody who walks by, especially when you move outside of selling it directly to somebody.

[00:50:07] **David Crabill:** Also I noticed, you know, the shape of the cracker itself is very unique and I don't know if I've seen that shape in a cracker before.

And also it's all the same for, you know, it's the only shape that you use. What was the process like for deciding on the shape? Finding it?

[00:50:26] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** So I wanted nice little edges on the cracker and when we were still making them at home, I ordered just about every pastry cutter I could possibly find. I just kept ordering them and trying them and looking and seeing some of them were really had sharp, pointy edges. And I didn't like that. I felt that it was like a little aggressive, sharp.

I found this particular pastry cutter and we. Made it into a multi cutter. It has the cutter that we use in the kitchen in the production facility has four of those pastry wheels on it. And uh, cuts like a whole tray of crackers

[00:51:10] **Danny El-Azzi:** That was a custom build we bought the multi cutter tool and then bought a bunch of the uh, cutter wheels that we liked and had it milled and put together so that we could actually have, you know, make more than one cut at a time because it was okay to use a handheld cutter one at a time at the house.

But uh, we really needed to scale that up. So we, we literally had to just make that ourselves.

[00:51:39] **David Crabill:** And you haven't experimented with selling any like fun shapes at markets.

[00:51:44] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** basically we cut the crackers and they, bake on what we cut them on. So if we were to do other shapes, we would have to kind of remove dough.

[00:51:56] **Danny El-Azzi:** Or have a bunch of excess toss out, which is unacceptable. to get those weird custom shapes, you'd have to use like a cookie cutter kind of set up which is not the way to go.

We use like a wheeled cutter. And that way there's no way there's no waste. There's no having to go back and peel the dough out from around it. it would just be way too time consuming to go about like doing a custom cookie cutter shape. I don't see how that would be feasible.

[00:52:23] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. I don't know how we would do that.

[00:52:25] **Danny El-Azzi:** I mean, you could, but it would take forever and it already takes forever.

[00:52:28] **David Crabill:** So, yeah, obviously you're a husband and wife team. How do you uh, split the duties with this business between the two.

[00:52:39] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** So I do all of the recipe development, all of the production and Danny takes care of all of the books and the construction and the majority of the emails I do most public facing,

[00:52:55] **Danny El-Azzi:** I guess I'm like, I make sure the operation can actually happen and then she makes it happen. Honestly, it's hard to even delineate where it all starts and ends because there's a lot of overlap. I don't think we could, either of us could do this on our own.

[00:53:10] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** No, definitely not. We are really lucky that we. Both kind of chose to do this together we have very different minds. So I am terrified by numbers. He's much more of an analytical thinker.

[00:53:26] **Danny El-Azzi:** I just don't show how terrified I am of the numbers.

[00:53:31] **David Crabill:** I did notice in a picture that Danny uses a wheelchair and I was just wondering, has that presented any challenges and um, if so, how have you overcome.

[00:53:42] **Danny El-Azzi:** I don't know that it's presented any particular challenges. I mean, Jen has to haul all the stuff to the market herself. Unfortunately, I do the honor of driving us there. I'm sure she wishes I could help with that, but Uh, It keeps me out of the kitchen for sure, because there's not a lot of room in there.

[00:54:02] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** but he does like all sorts of deliveries for us all the time.

[00:54:07] **Danny El-Azzi:** I just do what I can and often or most of the time it's behind the desk. Really.

[00:54:12] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. But that, that stuff really needs to be done. it actually, it really works out perfectly. I would not ever be able to do this without him. And um, that's pretty much a perfect partnership

[00:54:26] **Danny El-Azzi:** and with Jen, like knowing her stuff in the kitchen and knowing what to do. And, I don't really have to be there or have any input or get involved in it

[00:54:35] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** But he orders all of the product. He makes sure that the kitchen is fully stocked. He pays everybody make sure that everything is taken care of.

[00:54:46] **David Crabill:** So I know you're working on this production facility, that's obviously a ramp up things quite a bit. Once you get that and operation. But what's your vision for this business? I mean, where are you taking this or where do you want to take it over the next few years?

[00:55:01] **Danny El-Azzi:** I'm not calling it done until we got Graham crackers. That's all I got to say on that front.

[00:55:05] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** We have lots of other products that we want to experiment with and try. It's always been our goal to make it a project and do lots of things. Everything that we possibly can out of sourdough. So. I want to be able to explore that more.

I want to do

[00:55:25] **Danny El-Azzi:** pretzels. That's online

[00:55:27] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Graham crackers. Pizza crust.

[00:55:31] **Danny El-Azzi:** I can't wait until we're in the kitchen and are all settled in and have our operation nice and tidy. I would love to offer the resources that we will have to other up and coming people And I've seen a lot of people come to the market. they're where we were when we first started and I see them hit that wall of just like not being able to afford it.

And I feel like if we could just provide people with just that one little first step that they need to have access to whatever it is, storage ovens, you know, even just the knowledge and experience and just being able to share ideas. You know, we, we still have a lot to learn and I'm sure we could learn a lot.

From a lot of these people. There was these, a couple that came to us to the farmer's market. Not that long ago. they were really hoping to was it sourdough bread or something like that? Yeah. And like they were doing the numbers and like their numbers were all astronomical and I'm like, yeah.

I mean, you know, renting on an hourly basis and buying good stuff. And they were just like, I don't know who the hell is going to buy a loaf of bread for 15

bucks. And I'm like, just, don't worry about that. That's what it costs you. That's what you need to charge. And, I wish it wasn't like that.

I wish there was an outlet for these guys, but

[00:56:45] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I mean, in Austin, people are. More willing to pay a little bit more for things like that.

A \$14, \$15 loaf of bread. Isn't unheard of.

[00:56:57] **Danny El-Azzi:** Nobody's making money off this. Just go to the parking lot and look at all the farmers, booth people, all that we all got beat up cars and are barely making it all the money that we've made so far as all gone into building the new kitchen. Literally

[00:57:11] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** But we have been able to support ourselves, we take care of ourselves. We don't have any other jobs. This is, this is our full-time job. So we're able to, maintain our lifestyle. We're just not, it's not a get rich quick scheme. Definitely not.

[00:57:31] **David Crabill:** So uh, what keeps you going? why are You driven to uh, continue the business? Or why do you love this business? So,

[00:57:39] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** it's the people like, I wouldn't be doing it. I don't, I don't think it would be satisfying if I did not get customer feedback or if there wasn't a demand for it. The constant demand is just exciting and thrilling. It, every time we get orders, I it's,

[00:57:55] **Danny El-Azzi:** I've invested not like literally money or anything, but we've just personally invested so much it that we have a stake at this point. Like a huge stake of just like, you know, this is what we've been working on for so long. I want to see where it's got to go.

[00:58:11] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** I think we can go a lot further. I have no expectations, but I'm just going to keep going. And the more people who reach out to us and want to carry our product, that's completely exciting.

[00:58:23] **David Crabill:** Well, if people do want to reach out um, you know, where can they find you or how can they contact.

[00:58:30] **Danny El-Azzi:** Uh, Through the website or email uh, sourdoughproject.org. Of course, if you're anywhere around Austin hit us up at the farmer's markets. Email, Instagram, all that good stuff.

[00:58:42] **David Crabill:** well, I mean, I could tell, you know, the demands there. I know you're going places with this new production facility and it's just cool to see how your business has taken off in a pretty short timeframe. And I'm definitely looking forward to seeing where it goes in the future. So thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us.

[00:59:01] **Jen Holmer El-Azzi:** Yeah. Thank you so much.

[00:59:02] **Danny El-Azzi:** Thank you.

[00:59:03] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of The Forrager Podcast.

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