

Cupcakes In Full Bloom with Sarah Thongnopneua

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 Sarah Thongnopneua

Sarah lives in San Anselmo, California, and sells very unique and amazing cupcakes with her cottage food business Baked Blooms.

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All right. So today I have Sarah on the show and she creates some of the most incredible cupcakes you have ever seen. She calls them "bouCAKES", meaning cupcakes.

That look just like a bouquet of flowers. I strongly encourage you to head over to her Instagram account right now and check them out because as you will see, they really do look like real bouquets of flowers.

You can not tell their cupcakes Sarah's incredible. Talent has landed her on TV twice, including a food network competition that she won. She also now has over 23,000 Instagram followers, but what's especially interesting to me about Sarah's story. Is that when she decided to start her business back in 2016, she knew absolutely nothing about decorating cupcakes like this.

She took a decorating class. Practice for a couple of months and then started her bakery from home. And now she has expanded out of her home, into her own commercial kitchen. And with that, let's hear how it all happened and jump right into this episode.

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

[00:01:53] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Hi, nice to be here. Thank you.

[00:01:56] **David Crabill:** So Sarah, can you take me back to how this business got?

[00:02:00] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Sure. Yeah. It was back in 2016 I had a corporate job. I actually worked for eBay I was commuting quite a long way. just had my second child and I didn't want to really go back to the you know, office job with the long commute and stuff like that.

So I was trying to think of something else to do that was more flexible for my schedule, so I could spend more time with my family and my kids and I'm British. And so well, you know, when I was in England, I'd seen the idea of the cupcake bouquets and it was quite a new idea back then.

so I thought, huh, that's something that I could try doing. And you know, see if it takes off. I had no idea when I first started that it will be quite so successful as it has been, but starting off was quite hard and there was not a lot of information around about how to start a CFO.

So it was you know, all the pieces that you have to do and what order you have to do them in and all the licenses and things you have to get. And so I basically started researching that probably in like March, 2016 and then started my business a couple of months later. And the may of that year.

[00:03:10] **David Crabill:** yeah, I mean, your business has really bloomed quite a lot since then. So when did you move over from England?

[00:03:17] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Oh, I've been in the U S for like 20 years or so. I moved over just after I finished university in England. Actually I have no culinary background. I actually did computer science at university. but I was always interested in the culinary world and cooking and bacon you know a high school job.

I worked in a local pub in England? and so I always really liked being in the kitchen and kind of that environment. So, um, but I did a computer science degree and I was a project manager for eBay for five years or so. Before I decided to get back into, know, using baking as a career move.

[00:03:55] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I was going to say that's quite a big move from a Silicon valley job to this cottage food operation. although you said that

you're a project manager. So do you feel like some of that management or organization experience helps you start the business?

[00:04:09] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Definitely. Yeah. Yeah. It definitely takes a lot of organization. You know, I ran the business?

of five and a half years out of my house. And I just moved six months ago into a commercial space, but I have one employee now. Who's part-time but a lot of the stuff I still do myself a lot of scheduling and planning and figuring out what, what needs to happen so that we can get all the orders out for the week and stuff,

it's definitely a lot of project management for sure.

[00:04:35] **David Crabill:** So you said that you saw these floral cupcake bouCAKES in England. And so that's where you got the inspiration, but you, you don't have any culinary backgrounds. How did you actually go about learning how to create these.

[00:04:49] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, there was a baker in England that did a class on how to make them, so I did her class and then just a lot of practice, you know, until I could get them to the point where I thought they were good enough to start selling as a product. And since then I've kind of iterated on the design a little bit and the way that I do things to make things more streamlined. But yeah, that's how I originally started.

[00:05:13] **David Crabill:** So, were you making these for a long time before you started the business? Or were you picking up this skill, like back in 2016 when you actually started the business?

[00:05:23] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, no, I just started making them in 2016 and then practice for a couple months and then got to the point where I thought that they were good enough to start online. so then I posted an announcement on Facebook saying, Hey, I'm starting a new business, whatever. And actually that was six years ago, yesterday, is the anniversary of one actually posted on Facebook that I was you know, announcing my business? name and what I was going to do.

So it's actually exactly six years ago. So, kind of fun.

[00:05:51] **David Crabill:** So, did you, did you take the course because you wanted to start the business or did you just want to.

[00:05:57] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, no, I was looking for some thing. I had some other ideas too, of what I wanted to do and and this was one of them. And so then I did the, the class and practice a little bit to see if I enjoyed it as well, you know, and just to really bring other people joy too, because the reaction I get from people with this product is like, that's what makes it all worth it?

You know? All the feedback that I get and just being a part of everybody's special memories and stuff is really why I carry on doing it, you know, and cause I enjoy it too. Most of the time.

[00:06:31] **David Crabill:** So you never started a business before. So your first business, I mean, did you have any kind of inclination as to why you thought this business would work other than the other ideas you had?

[00:06:41] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, not really, but I just thought it was a cool concept, you know, that I could bring to the, bay area market and that, that might take off quite well. Well, it certainly has taken off. So when you put out that Facebook message to start selling them, what was the reception like?

Great. I mean, it just went out to my friends and family, you know, because I only just set up my business page and stuff at that point, but word spread pretty quickly. And, and even now I don't do any marketing or anything like that. All my business is just from referrals and word of mouth. So I really just post pictures on Instagram and Facebook and people ordering and people go to other people's parties and seeing them there, and then they want to order and stuff like that.

It's just organically grown like? that. I haven't had to do any marketing.

[00:07:33] **David Crabill:** your Instagram account has over 23,000 followers. It's huge. Are you trying to follow a social media strategy or is that just, what's kind of happened based on the quality of your photos?

[00:07:45] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, I, to be honest, I've given up on that the last year or So I've had really no growth in my Instagram account because I don't have the energy to figure out the algorithms and stuff. Instagram's changed a lot, you know, it used to be just post pretty pictures and, people like it and stuff. And I need to start using hashtags and stuff again, because I just for the reels and stuff. Like I I should be doing more reels, but you know, like when it's a business account, you can't put music on them and stuff. And I just, I don't know, I'm just kind of lost with the Instagram thing at the moment. so yeah,

[00:08:18] **David Crabill:** You must've been kind of a pioneer of this style of cupcake back when you started the business, has it kind of kickstarted a trend? Is it more common now in the United States to have these types of cupcakes?

[00:08:33] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, I've seen some people pop up around and I follow other people on Instagram that also have similar businesses around the U S but definitely I was one of the first ones and I'm still one of the only ones in the bay area. I think there's a couple, a little further a field that started in last year or so, but I don't think there's anybody else in the bay area that is making

[00:08:56] **David Crabill:** And, going back to 2016, when you felt like they were good enough to sell you know, I know what your stuff looks like today, but looking back on those. were? They actually very good at that time?

Or do you look back on those and think they're not so.

[00:09:12] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. Yeah. I look on that back on them and think they weren't so great. But at that point in time, they were good for me. And I think everybody you know, improves and with practice and stuff like that, you know, learn how to do new things all the time. even if somebody asks me for design that I've done before, I always try to iterate on it, you know, make it better than I did last time.

You know, because I always think there's room for improvement, So. definitely when I look back six years ago and see the stuff that. Doing at first, yeah, it's kind of cringy, but, At that time they were good. And I just get better with practice, you know, over the years.

[00:09:45] **David Crabill:** So, did you have like any marketing plan? Like, were you trying to get your name out there in a ways other than Facebook where you go into events or doing anything like that?

[00:09:54] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, not really, because to start off with, well, I did some like bridal shows and things like that. You know, like bridal fairs, I did a couple of bridal fairs and stuff. And even though I can't, I couldn't sell at the local supermarket because I only had a class a when I first died off. But they would have one on display there.

And I do like, it did like a couple of tasting things, you know, to kind of get the word out. But apart from that, I was just, I just wanted it as a kind of part-time

thing on the side. So I could earn a little bit money while I was looking after the kids and stuff is how I originally started.

And then it just got too big to just run out of my house anymore. You know what I mean? Running a business like that, with that much volume and having three kids and a husband in the house my kitchen just wasn't big enough and, couldn't cook dinner and things like that?

So definitely needed to move out into my own space and kind of get some separation from work and home and stuff, which is working out.

[00:10:50] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I definitely understand about that. And we'll get into the, expansion into this commercial space. But when you started your business, how old are your kids?

[00:11:01] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Let's see. When I started my business, my youngest one was five and my oldest one was like, nine, I guess.

[00:11:10] **David Crabill:** Okay, so they were already in school. So you had some time to allocate to the business.

[00:11:15] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. That's actually why I started because my youngest one was going to kindergarten. And so I was like, okay, my kids are kind of going back to school now. So I need to, think of something to do, you know,

[00:11:27] **David Crabill:** interesting that you said that you did bridal shows, that's pretty typical but you also put this display in the store. Did you pay the store something? Cause you obviously weren't selling.

[00:11:38] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, no, no. It's just a local, really local supermarket owned by local people. And so they were just like, Hey, if you want to put one on display there so people can see it and then just leave your telephone card with your telephone number. And then people got directly in touch with me, you know, because I wasn't allowed to sell them through the supermarket.

So it was just more of an advertising things that people would walk past and see it, and then contact me to order, you know, so it was still a direct sale.

[00:12:02] **David Crabill:** So we're most years sales just, you know, people doing custom orders, one-off orders, or were you like, having sales where you had so many to offer and then let people buy.

[00:12:15] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, I can't remember. I mean, it was a long time back, I'm trying to think back, but mostly just people ordering like either calling me or ordering through the website just individual orders for like birthdays and, thank you. Get, well, those kinds of, gifting things and also for events, like I do a lot of bridal showers, wedding showers, things like that.

So people would just order directly. I didn't really do any pop-ups or anything like that back then, you know? Just really like just people ordering individual stuff and yeah.

[00:12:46] **David Crabill:** And this is a pretty new type product. So how did you decide what the pricing was going to be like?

[00:12:52] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Basically you just got to work out the cost of you know, what it costs to buy the materials and stuff. My packaging costs are quite high because that's the whole concept, I mean, other people can put floral cupcakes in a regular cupcake box. The whole concept is to have them wrapped as a bouquet.

because all the package has to be food safe and everything, you know my cost of packaging is quite high. So I have to factor in the cost of all that. Plus the time it takes me to, make the product and I kind of worked out like?

[00:13:23] **David Crabill:** Do you remember what you were charging back then?

[00:13:26] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** I mean, almost the same prices as I'm charging now. Really. I only just put my prices up a little bit when I moved into my commercial space, because obviously I have more overhead now.

[00:13:36] **David Crabill:** So you're charging a pretty good price back.

[00:13:39] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah.

[00:13:41] **David Crabill:** Yeah. What was the progression of your business slow at first or did it really take off?

[00:13:47] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** it was at the level that I wanted it to be at that point in time, you know, because I was wanting to spend time with my family and stuff too, as well as doing this. as a project in my time when I wasn't with the kids. So was a perfect amount of time and a perfect amount of orders at that point in time.

But then obviously as the word spread and I got more orders than you know, just get busier and busier, you know?

[00:14:09] **David Crabill:** So what is your pricing right now?

[00:14:12] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** My product starts at \$45 for a small bouquet. And then goes upwards from there depending on if you want a custom design or not,

[00:14:21] **David Crabill:** How big is a small bouquet,

[00:14:23] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Seven cupcakes.

[00:14:25] **David Crabill:** seven cupcakes. So it's like a six and a half dollars per cupcake?

[00:14:31] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** For a small one. Yeah. But then the once you get to a large one, it's like one 20 for 24. So the cost goes down like the bigger, the bouquet, just because like the small one is still the same amount of work as a large one. An extra large one. I still have all the overhead, you know, the piping bags, the coloring, the butter cream, and

you know, baking and everything, you know, I bake to order, so everything's fresh and you know, the overhead of making a small is almost the same as making a big one, you know,

[00:15:02] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, of course, you're going to have your highest per unit pricing be for the smallest amount.

[00:15:07] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Right. And I still think that like 45, if you like, for example, if you're giving somebody a birthday gift or something, and it comes in a nice box and it's all packaged up or whatever. It's not just seven cupcakes, you know what I mean? it's a gift. It comes in a box it's wrapped up nicely, like to spend \$45 on a gift for somebody. I think that's still a good price point, you know?

[00:15:29] **David Crabill:** Yeah, absolutely. I was going to say, you know, your pricing you're really pricing everything as gifts in your business is kind of a very unique model. Cause I guess is that pretty much all that people are doing are giving gifts and then maybe you're doing events as well. I assume.

[00:15:45] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. There's two facets to the business. Really? It's it's like gifting. So people buying gifts for like birthdays or get well soon I'll thank you. I'll congratulations. Or, you know, anything really that you would buy regular flowers for people buying the bouquets and like gifting them and delivering them, picking them up, whatever.

And then also there's the event side of the business. So I do weddings and bridal showers and baby showers. And, you know, other big events like that. And that's kind of the bigger orders for events. but the, only ingredient that's gone down in cost is vanilla.

Cause at one point the cost of vanilla was super high. The cost of vanilla has gone down, but I mean the cost of butter is like well, let's see, like about a month ago, a case of butter was about \$75 and now it's about \$103. Eggs are like crazy expensive right now. Like basically everything that I bake with has gone up in price. So I'm actually, you know, I might actually have to put my prices up because right now I'm just eating those costs. I'm not passing those onto the customer.

[00:16:47] **David Crabill:** So what part of the year do you feel like is the busiest for you.

[00:16:53] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Oh definitely Valentine's day is one of the busiest days of the whole year mother's day. It's another crazy busy day. And then actually right now at this time of year may with all the graduations and stuff, I get super busy with graduations. Pretty much every weekend is super busy, especially if I have a wedding.

And then around the holidays when people are giving out client gifts and things like that, you know, anytime between Thanksgiving and Christmas is super busy cause I do a lot of, you know, real estate agents giving out client gifts and things like that. I was just thinking of the day to, I'm actually doing some client gifts this week for a dental office.

And I was thinking that's such a good idea. Like not necessarily giving client gifts around the holidays, doing it at a different time of year is actually more

impactful almost because those businesses are not getting tons of client gifts from lots of other people. you.

know what I mean? It's kind of yours stands out cause you give them a different time of year, you know?

[00:17:47] **David Crabill:** Yeah. It makes sense that your busiest times are the times of the year when people are most likely to be giving flowers to people.

[00:17:54] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes.

[00:17:56] **David Crabill:** And I noticed that, you know, you have so many different types of flowers that you can do. They're all amazing, but you you're charging the same price regardless of the design. Is that correct?

[00:18:10] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes. so the recent change that I made was before all my orders were custom, but obviously if every different order that I do is custom, it takes a lot longer because I have to plan that design in my head as well. And then it takes a lot more effort to pipe 10, you know, like 10 or 15 bouquets, if they're all different, versus if they're some of the same design, like, like I was talking about before, you know, that's why the small was priced high because it's only seven cupcakes and it still takes you, still the same amount of overhead to decorate seven versus 12 versus however many, you know, If it's a different design.

So more recently I started selling my product through um, Shopify and so I gave people some options. So now I have like a spring collection of summer collection, et cetera. So I have a few options to choose from which streamlines things a little bit, because if I give us the amount of options to choose from, then you know, allows me to do more volume.

When some of them are the same, but I still offer the custom option where people can choose any different colors or flowers or anything, you know, it's just for small fee extra.

[00:19:20] **David Crabill:** So are you offering shipping? Like Do people buy a bouquet to send to somebody

[00:19:28] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, I do local delivery, but I don't. I think they're too delicate to ship, yeah, I don't do shipping, but I do local delivery.

[00:19:36] **David Crabill:** and do you deliver them yourself?

[00:19:38] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** I used to deliver them myself. Now I use a courier service to do that.

[00:19:44] **David Crabill:** And I noticed that your cupcakes are, you have a very limited selection of options in terms of flavors and, frosting flavors. What do you currently offer?

[00:19:56] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** so for the seasonal options, then I just offer like chocolate and vanilla and then a couple of seasonal flavors. Unless it's a custom order, then I have other options, but a lot of people don't really care about the flavor of cupcake is more about, well, they look like, and the design, really, to be honest, a lot of people forget to ask what flavor cupcakes I have.

Well, things like that. They're just more concerned about the design, you know?

[00:20:22] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it makes sense. It's just so unique compared to other bakeries.

[00:20:26] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. Yeah. So I, try and keep, it would be too complicated to have different frosting flavors because there would just be too much wastage, When I'm designing, when I'm making bouquets, you do, you know, I start off with the lights, you can use like white and then I tint it like a different color.

And then I can use that to tint it for a darker color. You know what I mean? If all the frosting was different flavors, then I'd have to remember what, flavor each frosting was. And then, you know, I mean, you can't mix them together or There just be a lot of wastage if the frosting was all different flavors.

So like I said, it's mostly about the design really and what it looks like. and what colors and flowers and things.

[00:21:02] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, it's, it makes sense, but it's just interesting, you only have one frosting option and just a few cake flavors.

[00:21:10] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** know, there's, if you want, like a cake flavor with like a fill in and the a different flavor frosting with a drizzle on top, you know, then that's likethat's like those are the bakeries that do of thing. Right. That's not my niche. it's not about the crazy cake flavors and the drizzles and the fillings and all that stuff. It's about you know, the concept, that it's meant to look like that you've given a bouquet of flowers, you know?

[00:21:33] **David Crabill:** Is your goal with the bouCAKES? Is it to make them as realistic as possible? Is that what you're trying to achieve?

[00:21:41] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes, definitely. Yes.

[00:21:44] **David Crabill:** Well, you're doing a good job because they definitely look, just like flowers, you would not be able to tell that they're cakes from the top down, for

[00:21:53] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Thank you so much. Thank you.

[00:21:55] **David Crabill:** Um, yeah, I know. I was thinking about how niched your business is. I mean, you literally offer one product, right. You know, floral cupcake. And I guess they're probably all the same size of cupcakes.

[00:22:08] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes. I don't do anything. I don't do mini cupcakes. I don't do, regular cakes. I mean maybe in the future, but right now it's taking all my time and energy Just to fulfill the orders just for the floral cupcake bouquets, you know?

[00:22:21] **David Crabill:** Yeah, no. And, you obviously have very limited flavor options for the frosting and the cake. So, Did you use to offer more in the past and have just niched down?

[00:22:33] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** no, no, because also with the cottage food rules and stuff, you know, a lot of people ask for red velvet flavor or something like that, Um, Because I can't do cream cheese frosting you know, I can now because I'm in the commercial space, it's different rules. But before, when I was doing them home business and I couldn't use like cream cheese and things like that, you know, so I just wanted to keep it simple so that things don't have to be refrigerated and stuff, you know, and actually I moved to my new space and all, I kept everything the same.

I haven't added any menu options because I can. I just still do what I did before. So it's still, following all the rules, CFO really. I haven't added anything else, even though I can now.

[00:23:10] **David Crabill:** Well, I mean, clearly you're plenty busy enough as it is, and you don't need to add or change anything to it. I did notice that customers say that obviously your cupcakes look amazing, but they also taste amazing on the inside.

[00:23:26] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, I want every product to be perfect. My chocolate cake recipe is a devil's food recipe. the other flavors are based on a British sponge cake recipe that I've adapted. I use that as a base and then add the flavors to it and um, yeah. Seems to like it. So I don't change it. if it's not broken, don't fix, it

[00:23:48] **David Crabill:** so as your business started to ramp up when did you start to feel like it was a full time job?

[00:23:56] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** I can't really remember the exact time uh, you probably need to ask my husband that from when it started getting too crazy. But it definitely was a lot with all the family around and stuff, you know, trying to do it from my house. That was, it was a lot looking back, I'm not sure how I managed to do.

[00:24:13] **David Crabill:** so, I mean, you started in 2016 and five years later, you moved into the commercial space. So what were some of the major milestones that happened along the way?

[00:24:24] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** let's see. Well, I won a food network competition, I think it was July, 2019, I was asked to go on the food network to, to this new show that was called cupcake championship and I was on the first season, the first episode of that. And I won. So that was definitely a big milestone, a lot of visibility.

And then I also Right. before the pandemic. I filmed a segment for ABC Localish, which I think they have the same version of that all over the country.

But they did a cool little segment on my business and that just went wild. It actually was put on hold because I literally filmed it the first week of March and then everything went into lockdown and so it never got produced our anything done with the footage. And then about a year later they put it together and it aired on TV and then just local business, just went, you know, just skyrocketed with that from people traveling all over the bay area to pick them up.

So that was really great for my business. So those are a couple of big things.

[00:25:24] **David Crabill:** So let's go back to 2019. You talked about, you got on the food network and you know, you won that, episode. So How did you get on the show?

[00:25:35] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** So they, call to ask if I was interested, I think they come across my Instagram account and just asked if I was interested. But then I still had to go through an interview process and stuff like that. And actually when they first contacted me, I was like, no, I don't want to be on TV no way. And then my husband was like, Sarah, you got to do it.

You know, like it's a once in a lifetime chance to go on TV or whatever. And I'm like, ah, so I went through the interview process and stuff like that. and then I was selected to be on.

[00:26:02] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it was interesting. Cause this competition was specifically for floral cupcakes, so I, I know why they found you because it seemed like they designed the competition just for you. And I must say as seemed a little bit unfair because some of the other were having some issues with the floral aspect of their cupcakes and it's like your full-time job.

[00:26:24] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. Yeah, for sure.

[00:26:26] **David Crabill:** I mean, how did you feel when you're recording and on the show, were you very confident that you're going to win.

[00:26:32] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, I mean, there was some of the great bakers on that episode and they were doing great things but it was a fun experience. and then just to say, you know, just have that experience and to say that I won, was great for my business too, to say, as seen on the food network or whatever, or food network winner or whatever. So pretty cool.

[00:26:49] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I just meant sort of like, you know, how you felt in the moment, like, what did you feel super pressured or stressed

[00:26:56] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. I mean, definitely. Yeah, I was super nervous, but also there's only so many people in the room at that time filming it. So as long as I just didn't think about like, how many people were going to watch it. Yeah. I tried to put that on my mind and just concentrate on what I was doing. It was definitely nerve wracking though.

[00:27:13] **David Crabill:** So I'm sure you, you know, filmed it and then it was a while before they eventually aired it. So what was it like when you actually watched the episode?

[00:27:22] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Oh, it was great. I had like a few friends over and we watched all the episodes together and they didn't know whether I

won or not, because I wasn't allowed to tell anybody. So you know, it was pretty neat for them to see the final result and stuff and know that I'd won and yeah, it was pretty cool.

[00:27:36] **David Crabill:** Was it weird watching yourself on the TV?

[00:27:39] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Oh yeah. I only watched it that once, I haven't watched it again, but some of my friends were like, it's still on demand. We watched it again yesterday and I'm like, you guys have watched it more than what I have. I watched it that one time when I watched it, like for the first time. And then I haven't watched it again.

I can't watch myself on TV? I probably won't even listen to this podcast. I don't like hearing my voice either.

[00:28:00] **David Crabill:** So, you know, you've been on TV. Do you want to um, try out for another competition in the future?

[00:28:06] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, no, no, no. Once is enough.

[00:28:11] **David Crabill:** well, you were on TV again, though for this, this news spot.

[00:28:14] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. It's for the Localish thing for the Localish thing. Yeah. And each time I get asked to do stuff like that, you know, I really don't like having the limelight, you know, my cupcakes can be in the limelight. I like them getting attention and stuff. I don't really like the attention.

I mean, after I'd won the food network thing, I couldn't go to the supermarket and stuff, without everybody coming up to me and congratulating me and stuff. And I was just, for like a month afterwards. And I was like, oh, I don't like, like it at all.

[00:28:41] **David Crabill:** but so when you, when you got on the ABC local ish program, like, did they find you as well in that case?

[00:28:49] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes.

[00:28:49] **David Crabill:** And was that probably from your Instagram?

[00:28:52] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, I think so.

[00:28:54] **David Crabill:** Yeah, cause I mean your pictures online, obviously just, they just stand out. They're so incredible so I can see why they, they find you and, and spotlight your story. So that happened right before the pandemic, they record it.

And then I guess it was a year later that they aired it. So how did the pandemic affect your business?

[00:29:12] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Well to start the very beginning, I closed my business? Cause at that point, it wasn't clear whether COVID could be spread food, food or not. And I had a lot of anxiety about carrying on when there wasn't, when it wasn't clear, you know, what was going on.

And so I closed for a couple of months and then Once we started to get more information, you know, and they were saying that it couldn't be spread through food and, other local restaurants were still doing takeout and delivery and stuff like that.

I decided to open up again and just do porch pickup. So I was still in my house right then. So I would do orders and put them on my front doorstep and people would pick them up like contactless pickups and stuff. So I did that for awhile. and then I closed again for a little bit because it just got too stressful because people were placing larger orders that I didn't want them to place,

you know, I, I was happy doing small orders for people to gift to people, you know, and things like that, you know, cause it to help them through the pandemic and stuff. But I didn't want to do any large orders, because people weren't meant to be gathering and stuff and things like that I put orders on hold a little bit for a gain just until things calm down a little bit. and then I got back up and running again.

The rule at that point was like, I think 12 people maximum or whatever at one point in time. So I was just catering to the, small gatherings of households and then when the rules changed and um, gatherings were allowed and stuff again, then I was, people were still doing some drive-by things too, I think going around to people's houses and handing things out individually, you know, and then meeting on zoom and things like that.

So it was definitely a different, you know, I started offering like individually wrapped or breaking orders up into smaller batches so they could be delivered in that way, you know, so people could still celebrate like online and stuff. So definitely had to adapt a little bit to kind of the current needs of what was going.

[00:30:57] **David Crabill:** I mean, were people traveling from a long way to come get your cupcakes?

[00:31:02] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. Yeah. they traveled a couple of hours or so, you know, like drive to come and pick up. I also during the pandemic too. Didn't want that either people driving a long way. Cause the people weren't meant to be, traveling a long way and stuff like that.

So I was definitely cognizant of that too. But then when things lifted and you know, a lot of the rules and mandates and stuff were dropped then. Yeah. I had a lot of people driving from All over the bay area and beyond to come and pick up.

[00:31:30] **David Crabill:** so last year, you know, your business had grown to the point where you're moving to commercial space, So What was the impetus for making that jump? When did you know, you know

[00:31:41] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Um, well I like to follow the rules. I know that the, gross sales limit has been put up now, but at the point in time, one of the big decisions, the why I decided to move into a commercial space was because the CFO cottage food limit was only \$50,000.

And I was exceeding that, so that's one of the reasons I moved into my commercial space, as Well, as the volume I was doing, I just couldn't do it anymore from my home kitchen, without my family, without it being, it was being unfair to my family, you know just not being able to use the kitchen when, when they wanted to, and having, one whole room of the house full of boxes and packaging and things like that.

so those are the two main reasons why I had to move my business into the commercial space,

and then also like I needed help too. And it's very hard to like, if you hire help, I was only allowed to hire one person with the cottage food rules, and then they'd have to be in my house, you know,

And just with, like I said, just with the family and stuff, you know, having somebody come to your house and stuff to help it just wouldn't work, so those were the reasons why I decided that if I was going to, take this to the next step, that I'd need to get a commercial space and then the, the space that I found was like, literally three minute drive from my house. I can even walk there in like 10, 15 minutes. So I felt like it was the next step.

Cause it's almost in my house, it's just around the corner. So I feel like I'm still, I can be, run home and like be home in like two, three minutes if I need to be. And perfect size space, had a kitchen in it that worked for my need. It needed to be brought up to code. So I did have to go through and, you know, installing a grease trap and stuff like that to bring it the kitchen up to code which involved a lot of permits and work and stuff like that.

So it took me about five or six months to get it ready to move in there. and I I've been in there since September. So I've been in there about eight months or so.

[00:33:38] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, I know it's super complicated to try to get a space and bring it up to code. So how did you find the space what did it used to be and how are you looking for a commercial space?

[00:33:50] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Well, I'd been looking for a while before. Casually looking not seriously. I mean, I'd looked at a few places and then when the pandemic hit, I was like, oh, thank goodness. I didn't do that then, because I would've had all the stress of paying rent and stuff and, being in the pandemic.

So like I said, it's really the space? that I rented is really close to my house. So I just happened to be driving past and saw the sign. I was like, oh, that's interesting. It's close by, should go by and have a look around. They actually used to be a subway sandwich shop. And then another caterer had been in there for four or five years, but obviously their business had dwindled because of the pandemic.

Cause they didn't have, people were not in the offices and stuff anymore. And so I went to look around and had to decide whether I wanted to make that move or not, so I decided to try.

I didn't know whether it was the right decision to make or not, you know, cause I had to factor in, the loss of the biggest thing for me was the loss of flexibility because the whole reason I started this business in the first place was to be flexible.

So I could be around for my family and stuff, you know? So the thought of opening a commercial space? and kind of losing that flexibility a little bit because when you have rent and stuff to pay, it's not as if. you know, there's more things to worry about, you know? So definitely that was the biggest struggle for me deciding whether to actually do it or not, you know, cause I didn't want to lose the flexibility that I had.

cause now I have to work weekends and stuff like that. And I do miss some of my kids' baseball games and things like that, you know? And I have family in England that I want to go visit. That's super important to me, And I've still been able to do that so far. So it's working out. Okay.

But I didn't want any regrets. I wanted to, take that leap and see how it worked out. I don't want to feel like, few years down the line thinking what would happen if I'd have tried that, you know, so I'm trying it.

[00:35:38] **David Crabill:** you consider just renting a kitchen hourly instead of, you know, getting a space for a whole month?

[00:35:45] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes, I did. I did rent a kitchen hourly, like I said, because I exceeded my cottage food limit. So I was doing some baking out of a commercial kitchen, but just the nature of my product. I can't work in an hourly deadline. You know what I mean? I can't work hour by hour.

Like it's a creative, artistic thing, you know, it's not like going into commercial kitchen where people are making dips or cookies or brownies are, you know what I mean? And then you make them, you package them up. Get out of that kind of thing. You know, it's kind of, it was very hard because you know, I need time and space to be creative and stuff like that, and doing that from a commercial kitchen where the people around you, like working on another things and stuff and not having the space to myself and stuff like that, it just didn't work. so under the cottage food law I was really forced to make the decision on either I have to take less business and continue working from home or just not do it all, or take the leap to do the commercial space because renting out the commercial kitchen hourly, just wasn't.

[00:36:47] **David Crabill:** So I know, you know, moving into the commercial kitchen, you know, obviously dropping the cottage food permit and you're getting all these other permits to get the kitchen up to code and all that, and that's expensive and paperwork. And, but what about just for the health department's perspective in terms of switching over to a commercial permit? how complicated or non-complicated was.

[00:37:09] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah, it was pretty complicated. I had to get like a bakery permit and they came to do a couple of inspections. They've been through an inspection since I opened. And then they just do, you know, they come back from inspections, you know, whenever I had for my cottage food uh, license, I had a food handler's card, but I needed to take the exam for a food

manager card when I moved into my space. So yeah, definitely some more things that are involved.

[00:37:35] **David Crabill:** So when you moved into the commercial space, did you also increase your equipment so that you could do things in bulk or more efficiently.

[00:37:48] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. I bought a bigger oven and I've obviously got bigger fridges and things there and stuff, so yeah. And then I could hire an employee to help me I'm just on the path of scaling and growing right now, which is super hard. for anybody out there that needs help doing that, I I do have a business coach, the small business development center.

I think there's chapters all around the country you can reach out to them for like free help and they assign a business coach to you and they help keep you on track and, set goals for you and stuff. You know, I even spoke to them when I was a home business, a CFO, they, would help me like you know, give advice and things like.

[00:38:25] **David Crabill:** Yeah, the SBA is great. Definitely people want to check that out. So you mentioned there that it's kind of a challenge right now for you to grow the business. What what's making it challenging?

[00:38:36] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Having enough time, one of the things is having enough time to do everything, you know, there's so many things on my list that I have to do and I can't get to all of them, so definitely time. And just I think being in the new space, just getting into the rhythm of things and working out like how things are going and working out where I need help and, if I can afford help and Know, I've taken, like I said, I've taken some steps towards that. I've hired one, one employee to help me. And I've streamlined the ordering process a little bit. So there's less paperwork on my end cause people just order through the website from set design. So that takes a lot of backwards and forward emails out of the equation And just learning how to change the processes to work and, yeah.

[00:39:22] **David Crabill:** And I know that you're not running it as. Storefront right now, but people still can come in to pick up orders and having the space as allowed you to have like pop-up sales, I guess.

[00:39:35] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** yeah, I'm not running it as a retail, location is such, just because I don't have, like I said before, I just don't have the bandwidth to do that right now. My product is so intricate. I feel like I don't

want to have a lot of wastage, you know, if I made extra and then nobody bought them, it would just be a lot of time and effort to have things going to waste.

uh, Right now I can only keep up with the orders that people are placed in, in advance. I don't have the capacity to do anything extra than that. So you know, that's what I'm working towards to eventually, hopefully. But yeah, right now it's a pickup location so that people don't have to come to my house like they were before.

So that's a big thing. and also I'm using the area as a workshop space too. So I started doing workshops right before the pandemic, and then when the pandemic happened, then everything stopped. And in my new space right now, I just did my first two workshops. they're just meant to be for fun.

So people that just want to have a fun night out, it's not meant to be for, a technical thing for other people to learn how do it and open their own business and competition with me or anything like that. This was meant to be just come with a friend and have some fun and learn how to, do something new

[00:40:43] **David Crabill:** and with the workshops how did you structure them? How long are they and how much did you charge?

[00:40:50] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** So I did a couple already I only take 12 participants so that I can really spend time with each one and, you know, to the groups, not too. And I showed them how to decorate some flowers in the first couple of workshops. I'll probably do a succulent one coming up. But each time I do the classes when I release the date. They sell out in under an hour.

[00:41:11] **David Crabill:** Wow. Yeah. So \$120 a person.

[00:41:16] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah.

[00:41:17] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So that's a, that's a pretty high ticket price. Although I do know that you live in Marin and so in the Marin area.

[00:41:24] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. It's a lot of work too. Like all the, prep before hand, I have to bake all the cakes. I have to prep all the buttercream. I have to prep all the piping bags. I have to buy all the piping tips in advance. You know, and then afterwards all the cleanup I have to clean all those piping tips.

Everybody used you know what I mean? When I make one bouCAKE, a whole bunch of piping tips. If I'm showing people how to do six flowers or something, I think it was like eight piping tips each times, 12 times, all those piping bags, and they use way more buttercream than me cause they're like scraping it off and putting it back on and, you know so it's definitely uses a lot of resources and all the cleanup and stuff afterwards.

And obviously my time to actually do the workshop, which is usually on an evening. You know, so yeah.

[00:42:11] **David Crabill:** Oh, yeah. And there's clearly the demand there, right? I mean, people are buying this, you know, within minutes

[00:42:16] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. People put a little reminder on the calendar to remind them to go on straightaway and, and buy tickets. So

[00:42:23] **David Crabill:** So like, how did you come up with the pricing? Were you just trying to figure out what people would pay or were you just trying to figure out what it would be worth it, you know, to charge, to make it worth your time?

[00:42:34] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, both charging what it's worth for my time. And for all the resources all the prep work that it takes and all the things that I have to buy upfront. But also looking at other classes in the area, you know, and like what they charge for like flower decorating class just to compare.

[00:42:50] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I will clarify, you do live in one of the, probably the highest income areas in the country, I would say. So, it's probably a higher ticket price just for that reason alone as well. So now that you have the commercial space, I noticed that you, you say you have to have at least 48 hours of notice for an order. And that seemed really short to me. Is it just because you're working in there every day.

[00:43:18] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes, I'm working in there every day. I try to bake every morning. I was obviously the volume goes up. That's not always possible. Sometimes I have to bake the night before. But I'm baking fresh all the time. So I say 48 hours notice, but I always have people, you know, last minute, like, can I have one tomorrow?

And I will Do that. if I can, you know, I have a certain capacity as to how many cupcakes I can decorate. You know, there's only a certain amount of hours in a

day. I have a set amount of batches that I like to make this a comfortable amount to make and decorate in a day. So if I can accommodate an extra one without taking me over the, you know, into having to bake another batch of cake.

So, if I think I'm going to have extras. If I can tell that I'm going to have a few extra, then I will take on those last minute things. But just like I said I usually require 48 hours notice just because I have to prep all the packaging and things like that too, that's very time-intensive.

So I have to calculate like, at the beginning of the week, like how much packaging I need for the whole week and get working on that. Have my employee help me with that, you know, work on that. So when we get last minute stuff, it's like, you know, then we have to make extra and you know, things like that.

It's just kind of the 48 hours just as a cutoff, it helps to just plan for the next couple of days, you know, so we kinda know where, what we need and what we need to bake and what packaging we need and things like that.

[00:44:39] **David Crabill:** do you ever feel overwhelmed by your business?

[00:44:43] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yes. Frequently. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I mean, it's very hard to find that balance of just balancing everything, I guess, you know? And sometimes I think like, oh shoot, like, yeah, I took on too much this week or something, but you know, always get it done and you know, the thing is I want everything that leaves my kitchen to be perfect.

You know, I want it to be high quality. I don't want The quality or anything to suffer because of, you know, doing more volume. I don't want the quality of the product to suffer. So it's super important for me to take on an amount where I can still ensure that the quality's there, but obviously I'm still running a business?

Right. And I have all the overhead as well. So it's a very fine balance of doing as many orders as I can. But also not taking on too much, you know, so I still have time to go to my kid's baseball games and hang out with my family and spend time with my husband and look after myself, which is the last on the list.

Unfortunately, that's the one that always gets cut off. So yeah, it's definitely hard balancing all of that stuff.

[00:45:44] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean finding the balance is always a challenge when you're ramping up a business as always.

So as you're moving forward in this business, I mean, you're trying to find the balance as you grow, but you're obviously led to open up this commercial space.

So it seems like you'd like to grow. what's your vision for the future? Where are you moving forward?

[00:46:04] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** I want to uh, just see where I can take the business I guess, and let it, let it you know, really fulfill its potential and, just seeing where it goes, you know, like I said, in the, you know, short-term maybe getting to the point where we can offer like more popups and things like that, you know, get to the point where we.

increase the capacity a little bit to do that. Cause I know people do you want to do walk-ins and things like that and just we can't accommodate that right now. And in the future, I don't know um, maybe opening another location or something or who knows

[00:46:39] **David Crabill:** So you don't have this grand vision of. You're eventually going to have this be.

[00:46:45] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** not really no.

[00:46:46] **David Crabill:** So what, drives you to keep running the business? Why do you love it so much?

[00:46:53] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Like I said, I think just bringing joy to people, I work super hard, but when I get those emails coming in of like people sending me text messages, or calling me just to say that. Oh, my gosh, I just received a gift and that my friend sent me and I can't believe it. These are amazing account, you know all that, you know, when I do a wedding or a bridal shower or whatever, and saying, you know, like they were just the hit of the party. Nobody could believe that.

And they were the talking point of the whole night, you know, like just things like that, you know, and just making people happy and bringing people joy and stuff is the main reason I do it, you know, and also bringing me joy too. Cause I do like doing it, I like being creative. I like coming up with all the different designs and stuff.

Just showing my kids what's possible, you know? it's kinda like my fourth child almost just building something that I can be proud of.

[00:47:42] **David Crabill:** So I'm thinking about, this business you know, you started it just, I guess, to have a little side hobby that paid some money maybe, but it's just taken off. And mean, as you look back on, what's transpired over the last few years. And did you ever imagine it would be where it is today?

[00:48:03] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** No, no, no, no, no clue. And like I said, I'm, I'm proud of what I've achieved, you know, like even if it ends tomorrow, it's like that I accomplished that, But yeah, I never, thought that it would get the attention and stuff that it, that it has

done so far. So yeah, really humbled by that, You know, and everybody just really supported me and, you know, it's just.

[00:48:30] **David Crabill:** Well Sarah, thank you so much for coming on the show and If people want to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach.

[00:48:40] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Yeah. So I have a Facebook page Baked Blooms. I also have an Instagram account. My handle is bakedblooms. both my, my email or contact information is on those pages too. If anybody wants to reach out directly.

[00:48:54] **David Crabill:** Great. Well, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us.

[00:48:58] **Sarah Thongnopneua:** Thank you for having me.

[00:49:01] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

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