

Forrager Podcast 064 Cassie Menchhofer

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 Cassie Menchhofer. Cassie lives in Celina, Ohio, and sells dried soup, baking and spice mixes with her business.

Cassie's Country Cupboard. Now I must say I am excited to have Cassie on the show today because she is the first person I've found who has built a successful cottage, food business, selling dried mixes. She started her cottage food business back in 2011, shortly after the birth of her second child.

So not only was she selling something unconventional, but she also did it while raising two very young kids and working a full-time job. And a few years into her business and ag department inspector came to her market and told her that her products that sold the best were not allowed under Ohio's cottage, food, law, and undeterred.

She worked to change the law to allow them, which happened in 2016. Cassie ended up selling under Ohio's cottage food law for eight years, which limited her to only selling directly to customers. So in 2019, she and her husband decided to invest in building an FDA approved manufacturing facility on their property, which is a step above building a commercial kitchen.

Now she sells her mixes to stores and online ships or products nationwide, and even operates as a co-packer for other small food businesses. She has quite the unique business journey. So with that, let's jump right into this episode and hear all about it.

Welcome to the show, Cassie. Nice to have you.

[00:01:39] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Thanks, David. It's good to be here.

[00:01:41] **David Crabill:** So Cassie, take me back to when this whole business journey got started.

[00:01:45] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure. I grew up on Betty crocker, potatoes and hamburger helper and you know, mashed potato flakes. That is what we actually

ate a lot of when I was growing up. And I thought that it was the best thing ever little did we know just how terrible some of those ingredients were for us? And I didn't know, until I started making my own

Probably it was 2011 and I'd just had my second child and we live out in the country about 20 minutes from any store. And it just was obvious that taking two young kids to the grocery store was not something I was keen on doing. And so if I needed pancake mix or if I needed some hamburger helper or any of those things that I was normally making, I realized I did not want to just have to go to the grocery store and I was going to make it myself.

And I realized as I made these different convenience mixes, that I was making them with a lot of different ingredients that weren't in those same boxed items that I'd been used to purchasing. And then I did some research and found all these recipes that I could make these convenience items myself that well, maybe somebody else would be interested in this too.

And so I just gave it a shot, looked up some of the cottage food laws for Ohio and found the different mixes like that were available to create under the Ohio cottage food laws, and just went with it and looked to see if friends and family would purchase and they would, and we did the farmer's market and that's really how it all got started.

[00:03:07] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So it's back in 2011 that you started and how old were your kids at that time?

[00:03:13] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Three and newborn.

[00:03:15] **David Crabill:** Wow. So you really started this business with no time on your hands.

[00:03:20] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah, I work full time. I still do work full time on top of having a family. We also have a homestead where we do, we raise our own vegetables. We raise some different meats.

[00:03:32] **David Crabill:** So you had a full-time job. You're running a farm. You've got two young kids. I mean, how did you have time to start this business?

[00:03:42] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Nights and weekends, like most entrepreneurs,

[00:03:44] **David Crabill:** And I know that this is not the first time you've been working in the food industry.

[00:03:50] **Cassie Menchhofer:** That's right. I've been in the kitchen since I can remember my mom, thankfully let me just play in the kitchen while she was making food. And she would let me try and make my own creations. Sometimes they turned out. Sometimes they didn't. As long as I cleaned up the dishes, she was fine with it. And just as a kid, I was always making meals for friends and family.

I was even selling food out of my locker in high school, I would leave my locker unlocked. And I was selling food that way, which I'm sure the principal would not be impressed to hear. Food has just always been a piece of who I am, which surprises me that I decided to go to school for business, but it all worked out because that piece of business has really helped with the food knowledge as well.

I did work at a camp in a commercial kitchen. I worked in R&D for a rice cake factory. So food has just been always there.

[00:04:39] **David Crabill:** And what has been your job or is your job now, or, or was your job when you started the business?

[00:04:46] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I was actually a legal secretary for a forklift company when I started the business. And now I am a purchasing coordinator for a local farm machinery.

[00:04:58] **David Crabill:** I guess the most recent ones helped you with.

[00:05:01] **Cassie Menchhofer:** For sure, because of all the different things that I'm doing with purchasing has really led me to understand pricing and cost of goods. All of those things that I really didn't have words to put to, I knew they were important, and I've done a lot of book keeping with this job as well to use the different bookkeeping softwares, quick books and things like that. Inventory software management. So it's, it's been a big help with the business the last few years.

[00:05:28] **David Crabill:** So did you launch your business by selling at the farmer's market or were you selling your mixes before that?

[00:05:34] **Cassie Menchhofer:** the farmer's market was the biggest grand opening. I suppose I did a couple of small festivals ahead of the farmer's market, but the farmer's market was really the big introduction to the business.

[00:05:46] **David Crabill:** So how much did you invest into this business to get it ready for that first farmer's market?

[00:05:52] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Very little. I did not do amazing labels. I didn't have a logo. I had the business name of course, but craft bags or Ziploc bags. And just Avery labels that you can purchase at Walmart and using my own printer. So just very simple from day one.

[00:06:10] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So you started this very simple and um, went to the farmer's market. I mean, did you have expectations? Like how did that first farmer's market day go?

[00:06:19] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Oh, I was so nervous. I'm like, what if nobody wants any of this stuff? And I've wasted all of these months preparing and being so excited and maybe this is dumb. Maybe this isn't something that anybody else will want, but I was very surprised at how excited everybody was about the product, because it was so different from anything that the other farmer's market vendors had.

They had vegetables, they had baked goods, but nothing that was shelf stable and something that they could take home and use it, their convenience.

[00:06:46] **David Crabill:** It is really unique. I mean, it's on the list of most states laws. They allow you to sell baking mixes and such, but honestly, like, I don't know, cottage food businesses that are running a baking mix company. And I've always thought that was because the cost of baking mixes are so low at the store. There's it's not really lucrative enough to be able to run a cottage food business selling mixes. But when you went to the first farmer's market, did you bring a variety of different mixes?

[00:07:15] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah, just a few pancake mixes were a big thing at the start. I also did some different spice blends and trying to think I also make my own granola, which is a baked good, but it still has more shelf stable time than something that you bake like a traditional zucchini bread or a cake or cupcakes. . That was the majority of the items, maybe a couple of bread mixes as well,

[00:07:39] **David Crabill:** brought the mixes, but why didn't you also test out baked goods as well?

[00:07:43] **Cassie Menchhofer:** because I am not a risk taker. And I thought, well, what if I have to come home with all sorts of baked goods, that doesn't sound like a great plan either. And I thought, well, if I don't sell it the first week, maybe I can sell it the second week or the third week,

[00:07:57] **David Crabill:** Yeah, definitely. the shelf life is a big advantage to this type of business. So what ended up selling well at that first farmers?

[00:08:05] **Cassie Menchhofer:** the spice blends were the biggest hit. And they're just little packets of half ounce to one ounce, different blends, like a dill vegetable mix or a Fiesta that would be used for a taco dip or a taco seasoning. Those were the big sellers.

[00:08:21] **David Crabill:** That's interesting. Cause I feel like that's not what's your big seller today, correct?

[00:08:25] **Cassie Menchhofer:** That's correct, but it was cheap, It was something lower cost than larger cost item that somebody who doesn't know anything about Cassie's country cupboard would want to purchase. They're taking a risk on me because they don't know me. I'm new to the market. it was only two or \$3 that they had to spend and they could afford that if they didn't like it, it would be okay.

[00:08:47] **David Crabill:** I got it. So maybe they're just trying you out at first and clearly they did.

[00:08:52] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. Many of those customers that I had that first day have continued with me still.

[00:08:58] **David Crabill:** Wow. Now, I also noticed that you kind of also, in addition to having the mixes, you're kind of having a unique value proposition of these being healthier mixes. Can you talk a little bit about.

[00:09:10] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure everybody has a difference of opinion on what is a natural food product or a healthy food product. So I tell people that my items do not contain anything that I wouldn't feed my own family. And that would include MSG artificial flavors or colors different preservatives. I do not include in my ingredients.

So if someone is looking for that sort of health item, then that is what I can provide for.

[00:09:36] **David Crabill:** Yeah. Obviously getting mixes at the store is very easy, very inexpensive. I mean, do you feel like having those things out of it, do your mixes actually taste better or is it just healthier.

[00:09:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It's hard to say, people get used to the taste of what they get from the grocery store. And they think that that is what tastes good, because that's what they're used to. But a lot of times after you've used something else, long enough, your palate changes and you realize that, wow, this is way better because you can use less and it's more flavorful without all of the fillers.

And you just, your mind can tell you this does taste better because it's better for you. And it doesn't contain things that I wouldn't want to put in my body after.

[00:10:18] **David Crabill:** So you started at the market, it went better than you expected. So were you just ramping up your business throughout that first year through.

[00:10:28] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah. I only sold from may through September and then a couple of extra festivals during the holiday time. And then from December through April, I was really not doing much because I didn't have an outlet being that we live so far out of town. Nobody was going to come to our house to buy things like they do for other cottage food bakers People aren't going to drive out into Timbuktu to pick up different spice mixes.

[00:10:56] **David Crabill:** Yeah. And of course that's the whole reason why this business even started. Right. Because you live so far away from stores.

[00:11:02] **Cassie Menchhofer:** that's correct.

[00:11:03] **David Crabill:** So with this business going better than you expected, I mean, did that put a lot of pressure on your family with everything going on and having a, a newborn baby and another young child?

[00:11:15] **Cassie Menchhofer:** My husband was very supportive and I have other family members that were happy to help and watch kids whenever I needed help with the market, especially, and the kids, they helped the three-year-old. He could help at the counter and stir things up for me. And when the

baby was sleeping, that's when it was convenient or he was really easy to take care of.

And he would just hang out in a pack and play when ever mom needed to be busy as you can baby wear. You make it work

[00:11:42] **David Crabill:** Yeah, well, you certainly did. So you're selling at the market that first year. Can you take me kind of through the high-level trajectory of where your business has gone since.

[00:11:53] **Cassie Menchhofer:** well, have things changed about eight years into it. Just pretty down about the whole thing. I'm like, there's so many places I can't sell different boutiques were asking me to be able to sell my products and I'd have to turn them down because legally, under Ohio cottage food laws, you can only sell in certain locations. And those were not included. And I complained about it enough that my husband said, look, either we build something or quit. And so we went ahead and built our own licensed facility that I could then sell anywhere I wanted to in the United States that could ship out of state.

I could sell it any store that had a certain level of food licensing, depending on what kind of store they were. And just things that really grown in the last couple of years after building that licensed facility on our property.

[00:12:39] **David Crabill:** Yeah, we're going to get into that facility in a little bit. That's, that's kind of an amazing thing. Um, But that first eight years, were you just selling directly only?

[00:12:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. I may be shipped a couple of things within state line. You could ship, it just had to be within Ohio state. I don't even remember what Ohio's law was like in 2011, I mean, was it really easy to get yourself set up under their law?

Absolutely. They are a great state to work with. As far as cottage food laws go, it's really the limiting w here you can sell. And there were some things that I found that I could not sell that I had been selling. I'd been trying to sell soup mixes, and an inspector came to a farmer's market one time and saw that I was selling those soup mixes.

And she said that is not able to be sold under the cottage food laws. And she made me take them off the table, which is very frustrating because in my mind they were non-hazardous, but they weren't specifically called out in the law. So

I lobbied for the state to allow us to add that to the list of things that were allowed.

And it took a couple of years, but we finally did get that to pass. I had a bunch of friends and letters to the government asking them to support that decision, to get things rolling with adding soup mixes back in.

[00:13:52] **David Crabill:** and is that your biggest seller now? The soup mixes.

[00:13:55] **Cassie Menchhofer:** And it was at that time too. That's why I was so frustrated. One of my top sellers were those soup mixes and the government was selling me. I couldn't sell them anymore, which I understand if it wasn't allowed, I couldn't do it, but it was, what do I do now? Is it really worth continuing? If my top sellers aren't able to be sold anymore.

[00:14:15] **David Crabill:** You also sell maple syrup I just thought that was kind of fascinating. Can you explain a little bit about that.

business?

[00:14:22] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure. That's part of our homestead. my father-in-law started.

The family at large does the project in February and March doing our own maple syrup. We see the SAP, drip from the trees. We boil it down and we've all chipped in. It's probably been about 20 years that we've been doing maple syrup now as a family. And That's why I started selling granola. It was because we had so much maple syrup on hand. It's not so expensive for me to buy on the grocery store shelf and we make it ourselves. I do figure that cost into it, but it doesn't feel like it's costing as much since we do make it ourselves. and I do sell it at the farmer's market as well as we sell it throughout the season until we sell out typically by the holiday.

[00:15:03] **David Crabill:** So, what was happening for the first few years of your business? I mean, were you growing a lot or were you just kind of stabilize with your farmer's market sales?

[00:15:16] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It was pretty stable, not making enough money to do anything more than just have some extra spending cash. I made the mistake of not separating business from personal funds. So it was really hard to see how much income was really being generated, because it was just cash that we would spend as we needed to.

And I would spend on the personal credit card and it was hard to see. And once I made that change, it was easier to see how much could be made if we would make some changes.

[00:15:45] **David Crabill:** So looking back, is that something that you would have changed? Would you have started a business bank account right away?

[00:15:52] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Absolutely. And that's something that I tell anybody who asked me, what's the biggest piece of advice. You can give it to a starting entrepreneur and it's always keep those funds separate so that you can tell if the business adventure is making money or not.

[00:16:05] **David Crabill:** Yeah. And a lot of people don't know this did not used to be the case, but these days it's really not.

difficult to start a business bank account for free. So there's not much reason not to do it.

[00:16:15] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Right?

[00:16:16] **David Crabill:** So I think the biggest problem with the baking mixes right, is just the perceived value of them. You know, people are used to what they pay at the store.

So what were you pricing your mixes at? Uh, When you started your business and through the first few years?

[00:16:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** A lot of them were about \$5 is where I was hovering around and it was so hard to raise prices. The first time I did. But I knew that I had to, and I thought, well, what are the customers going to think? And honestly, they didn't blink an eye.

[00:16:44] **David Crabill:** You're selling them for \$5, but do, you know, if you're actually making money? I mean, I know you had everything merged with your personal finances, so maybe you weren't even able to tell.

[00:16:54] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Well, I mean, I had to report tax wise when there was profit and that looked like there was, it was just hard to track. And throughout the whole season until tax time rolled around, I really had no idea because I wasn't tracking it in real time. It was just, oh, Hey, I better sort through all these receipts and figure out what exactly I made this year. So I can report, a loss, or a profit

[00:17:16] **David Crabill:** And were you like changing your recipes at this time or getting feedback and adjusting them based on customer's feedback?

[00:17:24] **Cassie Menchhofer:** every once in a while things would change. But I did a lot of testing with friends and family ahead of time. And things were pretty well-received once I put it out into the market flavors have come and gone throughout the years, but the main recipes have stayed the same.

[00:17:39] **David Crabill:** One of the nice things about mixes is that when you have someone who falls in love with a mix, right, like they Bisquick or something or Krusteaz, and that's like their thing to go to, to make whatever they're making. So is that what's happened with your business? Are people kinda like diehard fans, they come back over and over again.

[00:17:57] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Absolutely. and they tell all their friends and it's definitely word of mouth has been my biggest marketing.

[00:18:03] **David Crabill:** so I know there have not been many baking mix companies that I've seen at least cottage food businesses. Do you have an idea of why that might be based on your experience?

[00:18:16] **Cassie Menchhofer:** why would someone buy a five, six, \$7 baking mix for one bread when they can buy a whole box for several loaves or several servings of pancakes for two or \$3? If you go to the right store, maybe it's more than that. At this point.

[00:18:33] **David Crabill:** why do you think people are willing to pay that for your mixes?

[00:18:37] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It's a trust factor. I've asked that question and that's what they come back with. Because I know that you serve this to your family. You show us on social media, the different things that you're making. It's not just a one size fits all. You can fit many different types of families needs and they just it's trust.

It really does come down to that. And they know that what I'm putting in there is exactly what I put on that label. Cause I talk about it all the time.

[00:19:03] **David Crabill:** I did notice that you're really active on social media. Is that something that you started way back in the beginning?

[00:19:09] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. And I really don't know if the business really would have flourished without social media. Facebook has been a huge piece of my sales. Not because I'm selling on Facebook, but because people see what I'm doing with the different products and they see it's not simply just a taco seasoning, it can be used for so many different things.

It's not just a beer bread mix. I show. All sorts of variations to use the different products so that you don't either get bored with it or your family that says, oh, I don't like soup. Well, don't use it as a soup. Make it into a casserole instead.

[00:19:40] **David Crabill:** So you're really investing a lot in customer education, right? Not only at the market, teaching them how this is kind of different than other mixes that you could buy at the store, but also, teaching them how they can use your mixes in various ways.

and so what was your, Facebook strategy? I mean, what did you do in the beginning to get yourself noticed on Facebook?

[00:20:03] **Cassie Menchhofer:** mean, that was a long time ago. Just posted different pictures of the packaging. And it was, here's a gift basket I put together for this raffle. Here's potato soup mix. Isn't that cute? or here's my kids eating pancakes that you can buy at the next market.

[00:20:18] **David Crabill:** Well, I know you might not remember what happened way back then on social media, but I see what you're doing now it's kind of a unique strategy and uh, can you share what you're doing to post on social media today?

[00:20:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure. I have a theme most of the time, every day of the week, Sundays are typically a slow cooker or slow smoked Sunday. I have a couple of in-laws that like to smoke things. So they use my products for that. Mondays, a lot of times meatless Monday, Not because our family is vegetarian, but I do have relationships with a lot of vegetarians and most of my products are vegetarian or vegan. And so I can share that with a lot of people who appreciate that Tuesdays, a lot of times a tip of some sort, whether it's a recipe or another way to use my product. Wednesday is typically a funny wacky Wednesday, Thursdays, thirsty Thursday, or thankful Thursday, Friday is all about the farmer's market during farmer's market season.

And when it's not farmer's market season, it's all about freezer Friday, because as a busy mom, we're always looking for ways to use our freezer to make meals easier. Saturday is typically some sort of a sweet thing and that's the whole

week. And it makes it very simple to come up with different ideas because I have that theme every day.

They're like, well, I need something vegetarian today. Or I need something that involves alcohol for Thursday.

[00:21:33] **David Crabill:** Yeah, no, it's brilliant, though I feel like even still with that method, it would get overwhelming. do you have a hard time coming up with ideas?

[00:21:43] **Cassie Menchhofer:** no food is on my mind. 24 7, when I'm eating breakfast, I'm thinking about lunch. When I'm eating lunch, I'm thinking about what I'm doing for supper. It's just, it's been part of my life for so long that I have more ideas than I can put down onto paper or onto social.

[00:21:57] **David Crabill:** All right. Fair enough. Well are all of these things that you're posting on social media directly related to something that you sell?

[00:22:04] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Not always every once in a while, I'll throw in a recipe that has nothing to do with a product that I have just to be value added to my customers.

[00:22:13] **David Crabill:** Well, I mean, you've obviously done quite well on social. know you have thousands of followers on your social accounts. So has that just grown steadily over time or are there things that you've done to help boost that and gain followers?

[00:22:26] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It's really mostly organic. I did a couple of giveaways earlier, but I realized that those people typically are not going to be my customers. They're just in it for the giveaway. And then they become just a vanity metric at that point. So typically followers these days are just because they've seen someone share my product or share a post.

Or they've seen me at the farmer's market and want to make sure they know all the newest recipes or when I'm going to be at the farmer's market. So yep. All organic.

[00:22:53] **David Crabill:** So I guess you had social and you had the farmer's market. Was there anything else you were doing to get your name out?

[00:23:01] **Cassie Menchhofer:** just a couple of other festivals during the year, especially during the holidays and word of mouth, that's really all it's been.

[00:23:08] **David Crabill:** and so that was pretty steady for like eight years. And then I guess it got to the point where you felt like you needed to transition, what did you feel like I'm ready to make that switch?

[00:23:22] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Really, it was my husband giving me a kick in the butt that, Hey, if you're going to do this, do it big. And he was there to help me. And he was the driving force to get that next step made.

[00:23:34] **David Crabill:** Well, what was the status of your home at that time? Had the business taken over your house.

[00:23:40] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Oh yes, we have shelves still in different rooms that we were housing, some of the product and all the inventory of the raw product. It was getting a little out of hand and he had mentioned that as well. He's like, where did our house go? It's covered in Cassie's country cupboard really.

[00:23:56] **David Crabill:** and can you tell me a little bit about what type of facility this is that you created?

[00:24:01] **Cassie Menchhofer:** From the outside, it really just looks like another farm building. It's 24 by 24, so fairly small, but it's all that we needed. And white siding on the outside and concrete floor in the inside the building and just really stainless steel tables and plumbing to make the inspector happy. And there's no machinery, it's all done by hand.

So that was a nice piece of this, that it wasn't too terribly expensive to outfit the building

[00:24:28] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, I saw that this was an FDA approved facility, which you know, most people, if they're building something, they'd build just a regular commercial kitchen. Can you tell me what the difference is?

[00:24:42] **Cassie Menchhofer:** my products were considered a manufactured good rather than a baked good, because there are these dry mixes. And that just threw me into a different category. Whereas if I was just baking bread, then I could be simply a commercial kitchen. But because of that desire of doing across state lines and it wasn't a baked product, it just put me into a different category that needed special licensing.

[00:25:07] **David Crabill:** Interesting. Cause I feel like that would be even more complicated to do an FDA approved facility. was it pretty complex to get this all put together?

[00:25:17] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It was to an extent because it was such a simple process. It didn't require the grease traps and the. Overhead fire protection and things like that that would be required if there was different processes happening, the biggest problems were septic actually, because of not being on city septic. We had to go through the Ohio EPA to take care of that piece of it.

And that took the longest out of everything to do that licensing piece.

[00:25:46] **David Crabill:** And I, I saw that you said that building this building was a labor of love and tears.

[00:25:54] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Definitely all of the above, for sure. it was a great experience to have the family chip in and make it happen. But of course, There were setbacks with suppliers, you know, we couldn't get the things that we needed trying to find things that didn't cost a fortune.

There was weather delays. There was Like even the roof was the wrong size when it was delivered by the company that we were contracted through. getting answers from the government on what we were supposed to do with different pieces and frustrated that what they recommended was not necessarily the most cost effective way, so just different problems, but we worked through them and here we are.

[00:26:38] **David Crabill:** So can you remember like how much things cost? I mean, usually it's extremely expensive to build something like this.

[00:26:46] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure. We started construction in 2019 before all the craziness in the world happened. And we did a lot of the work ourselves that didn't require licensed professionals. We do a lot of our own dirt work here on the farm. And so we were able to get that done before any builders came. My husband is very handy with all different types of things.

So he was right in there with the builders right in there with the electricians and the plumbers. And we had a lot of family that, t hey are licensed plumbers. They are licensed electricians and engineers. So they all pitched in as best they could. And we approximate, it would have cost \$50,000 if we hadn't done a lot of the work ourselves.

So yeah, that's what we think it would have cost.

[00:27:30] **David Crabill:** Yeah, that's not surprising. I mean, it is not cheap to build one of these it sounds like it's nice that you got a lot of help and you're able to bring the cost down quite a bit. So, did it take long? I mean, obviously you had to build the place. Did it take long to actually get it inspected and approved after it was built.

[00:27:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** the worst part, it was, we had it scheduled for March 20, 20. And then the world fell apart and the inspector actually fell ill the day before she was supposed to come and inspect. So it took some time to get her there, to do that very first inspection. And it was all very well. She even come, is she allowed to come?

So it was pretty stressful in March, 2020 because of how things were going with COVID.

[00:28:15] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I can imagine. So when did this actually ended up getting approved?

[00:28:20] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It did actually, she signed the papers in March, 2020. It just wasn't the date in March, 2020 that I had hoped that it would be just later in the month.

[00:28:29] **David Crabill:** Well, that's, that's pretty good.

[00:28:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah, I was thrilled. I was afraid it was going to be six months at that point.

[00:28:34] **David Crabill:** All right. So you got this facility approved and what was the feeling like when you knew, like you had a place to move out of your home?

[00:28:43] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I was just ecstatic, jumping up and down with excitement.

[00:28:47] **David Crabill:** Is it something you wish you had done?

[00:28:51] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes, I do. because I would've been able to stop complaining about. All the things I couldn't do. And I could have then moved on to the things that I can today.

[00:29:01] **David Crabill:** So you started your business in 2011. What point in retrospect would you say you were ready to build this building?

[00:29:10] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I would say in five years I had a handle on the fact that this was an actual business. It was going to lead to something. If I wanted it to,

[00:29:19] **David Crabill:** So, really interesting and unique. You did this Right at the beginning of the pandemic. I mean, you really couldn't have timed it more perfectly coincide with the beginning of the pandemic. So how did that affect things as you moved your business forward?

[00:29:33] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Well, of course the supply chain became completely disrupted at that exact same time. So as I started selling again things were difficult to come by. You never knew if the product. Had always used before the same vendor, if they were going to have what you needed. So it was finding different vendors and we weren't sure if the farmer's market was going to start back up in may, we did have a little bit of a delay getting that nothing going so it was interesting to say the least

[00:29:59] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I know it was hard for pretty much everyone. So before the pandemic, how were you sourcing your ingredients?

[00:30:07] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I do most of it online, a lot of them are specialty ingredients. I can't find necessarily at our local stores, anything I can find locally, I do purchase there. But most of it's online and just doing a Google search on large quantity products. It's not just a 16 ounce container of anything at this point.

[00:30:26] **David Crabill:** Uh, so once you had this facility all set up, then you obviously now can ship interstate. You can sell indirectly. So what was your first step?

[00:30:38] **Cassie Menchhofer:** to change my website from only shipping in Ohio to shipping nationwide. That was an exciting moment when I could make that flip on the website.

[00:30:46] **David Crabill:** So did you get quite a bit of sales from.

[00:30:50] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Not to start. It took some time for that, and it still, isn't a big piece of the business. most of my customers are local, whether

it's within the county or surrounding counties, most of which I don't deliver to because it's just far enough.

And especially with gas prices, the way they are, it's still cheaper for me to ship things to them rather than make deliveries. Plus the time piece as well with me still working full time. but during the holidays, things do pick up for shipping because my local customers will want to ship gifts to their friends and family throughout the states.

[00:31:22] **David Crabill:** When did you start to sell in stores?

[00:31:25] **Cassie Menchhofer:** That was pretty quickly after. Things that settled down with the pandemic and people were allowed to go into these other shops and not just the grocery stores. And they were pretty excited that I was allowed to do that at that point, because people have been asking me for a couple of years, you know, can I sell your product and I'd have to tell them no. So as soon as I could say yes, I was contacting them,

[00:31:47] **David Crabill:** Yeah, so that's nice. You already had people wanting to get your product in their store and they maybe were already fans of the product themselves. And, you know, how well did the sales do once you started putting your product in stores?

[00:32:00] **Cassie Menchhofer:** it was good. I'd say people had always been asking me, where can I buy this when you're not at the farmer's market? And they were tickled when I could tell them. Hey, you can also purchase these at these different locations. And that was great because not everybody can go shopping on Saturday mornings.

they like to be able to go to the other shops in town or in the surrounding communities.

[00:32:22] **David Crabill:** do you feel like most of the people buying your products in stores were already, your customers already aware of your product or were A lot of people discovering your product for the first.

[00:32:32] **Cassie Menchhofer:** A lot of them in our super local community knew about my products already. But the ones in the extended communities maybe are trying them for the first time.

[00:32:42] **David Crabill:** And, you know, the difference when you put your product on shelves, right? It's they have to speak for themselves. Whereas at the

market you can speak for the product yourself. So did you have to revamp your packaging, revamp your labeling to get into the stores?

[00:32:56] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Definitely. And I noticed a jump in sales once I did do that. I did some investing in professional photography and professional labels, and it has been a game changer. People take me more seriously instead of the home printed Avery labels that I've been slapping on packages for years, and people are more likely to gift the product to when it has a professional label.

[00:33:20] **David Crabill:** I hadn't thought about that. You know, having professional photography for products. Cause obviously with a mix, you have to use the label to show them what's going to come out of this mix.

[00:33:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Right. It's hard to see when it's just a bunch of white flour and some speckles of different things. What is this going to be when it is finished

[00:33:39] **David Crabill:** Right. So what you said you were doing Avery labels and everything before that, are you using a label service now?

[00:33:47] **Cassie Menchhofer:** for most of the products, I still have a few things that I haven't sold enough of, and I'm still trying to see where it falls on whether it's popular enough to invest in the photography. Again, that it'll take. Plus the professional labels to have them created,

[00:34:03] **David Crabill:** What service did you use for that?

[00:34:05] **Cassie Menchhofer:** The Accu label company in Fort Wayne and also Mercer color here in Ohio,

[00:34:11] **David Crabill:** Did you have to change your packaging at all as well?

[00:34:15] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I have upgraded over the years, I was using the craft tin tie bags to start. And I've moved up to the standup zip top bags, whether they're clear all the way through or metallic on one side and clear on the other. And that's a different thing that I do as well compared to other mix companies that you'll see on the grocery store shelves, you can't see through their packages.

And I like to do that this way so that people can see exactly what it is that they're getting. people have questioned, you know, doesn't that lower the shelf

life, and it might, but I'd rather that people didn't leave it on their shelf for three years. I want them to use it and use it quickly.

[00:34:51] **David Crabill:** What is the shelf life of your products without all the preservatives?

[00:34:56] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Sure I put about a year on them and it would be good for two or three years probably, but in case the customer does not store it properly. If they don't put it in a cupboard that's dark and cool and away from their hotspots in their kitchen, I want to make sure it's still good for them to use. There's nothing going to go wrong with it, but there might be a loss in flavor, or if there's baking powder, there might be a loss in the leavening power. There

[00:35:20] **David Crabill:** And where do you get your bags?

[00:35:24] **Cassie Menchhofer:** a variety of places with the way everything is right now. I keep several different vendors. Paper Mart has been a big piece of it, even Amazon, every once in a while. The wholesale supply company, I think that's what they are called is wholesale supply. Just different. Places that offer the size of bag that I need, which could change at any time, whether they carry that product or not, they might be out of stock. You just never know.

[00:35:50] **David Crabill:** And has your pricing gone up since you had to put your products in stores and, start selling wholesale.

[00:35:58] **Cassie Menchhofer:** No, because my volume of purchasing has gone up as well. So that decreases my cost. The more I can buy in bulk so that then I can keep my products at a similar level,

[00:36:10] **David Crabill:** So our, what are people paying today to get your products?

[00:36:14] **Cassie Menchhofer:** depending on where the shopping from, because people can sell them for whatever they want to. I don't put a limit on what the retail prices at different stores. Depending on what it is they're buying a lot of times the spice blends are \$4 to \$7, depending on if it's in a small bag or if it's in a bottle, the baking mixes are \$7 to \$9. And the soup mixes are eight to 10

[00:36:40] **David Crabill:** And how do you determine your pricing?

[00:36:44] **Cassie Menchhofer:** based on the cost of the ingredients, the cost of the packaging. My labor of course, is figured into that. The overhead of having the building, it's all figured in the advertising cost, which I have very little in that I don't do a lot of paid advertising, but there is some,

[00:37:01] **David Crabill:** So you know, you have this building and I know that you use it for your own business, but you also use it to help other businesses. Can you explain a little bit about.

[00:37:12] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah. I really like to be able to help out other cottage food businesses that want the same thing that I've been able to achieve. They want to get out of the cottage food, but they don't have either a commercial kitchen close enough to them to make sense, or they don't have the time that they want to put into it.

And I offer that service to them. If they make spice mixes or other baking mixes or soup mixes, something that I'm already doing. I contract out my time to create those for them, package them to their specs, label them and ship them back to wherever it is that they want to store them. So they can distribute to their stores and throughout the nation that they would like to.

[00:37:54] **David Crabill:** Yeah, that's, that's pretty interesting. And so you're basically running a small co-packing operation for.

[00:38:01] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. And I wish that that would have been an option for me. That's why I'm offering it to other people, because I feel like there's a definite need for low minimums for people just starting out that don't want to have 20,000 units required of them. And it takes time to get a co-packer to even get you scheduled into their line.

I wish that would have been available for me. And I might not have made my own building. Then if that would have been an option.

[00:38:26] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I mean, I know that's the hardest thing about the co-packer route is that you got to have order minimums. You've got to have a thriving business at that point that you get to move to a co-packer. So, but on your end, you know, if you have lower minimums, do you feel like it's actually a lucrative business for you to do this, or is it just, you know, sort of something that you're doing to help other people.

[00:38:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** It is I price for the time and it's more expensive to have me do the co-packing than it would be for a co-packer to do it. But I

have those low minimum that people can prove the business rather than make that extreme expense happen. And they may not ever be able to sell that product. So per piece it's more expensive, but in the end it's not an expensive mistake.

[00:39:12] **David Crabill:** Have you had products that didn't work well?

[00:39:16] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yep. We've phased out different ones and I'm always trying new things. So I have to remind myself that I can't keep making new and holding on to the low sellers at the same time.

[00:39:28] **David Crabill:** what is an example of something that didn't sell very well?

[00:39:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** there was a pumpkin pancake mix that I made that since it's so time specific on when people would be interested in that and it took a lot more work on their part. It wasn't as simple as some of the other things I think was part of it. There was a chocolate muffin mix that I did that just never really took off, which I thought was delicious, but nobody else, I guess maybe that was something that they could buy much cheaper.

For the value that they perceived with just a muffin mix. So that one never really made the cut. There was a lemon coconut muffin mix again, that I thought was amazing, but not enough people like lemon and coconut mixed together.

[00:40:08] **David Crabill:** is there anything that you would like to sell, but you don't?

[00:40:12] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Not that I can think of offhand.

[00:40:15] **David Crabill:** I mean, like is there anything like, you want to have meat in your products, but you can't or don't.

[00:40:22] **Cassie Menchhofer:** No, I don't think so because I like to be able to offer that option, that everything is vegetarian or vegan and they can add whatever meat products they want. I always give those ideas on what they can do with the products to add meat into it. And it's just makes it more able to be used by more people.

[00:40:41] **David Crabill:** Have you ever done like custom recipes for an event or for a customer?

[00:40:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I've brought back recipes from the vault things that I no longer made, but people knew that I did in the past. And if they had a large order, then I would be willing to bring those recipes back that happened this past year. Somebody knew about my hot chocolate mix that I thought was too high priced they were a gift basket company. And so that price kind of gets hidden into that whole basket. And so I did that for them individually.

[00:41:16] **David Crabill:** So when you're selling at an event, I mean, most people who sell at a farmer's market, they will do sampling right. Of their product. But it's a little harder with mixes. I mean, are you making the product and having them sample the final version or do you do sampling?

[00:41:33] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I have done that in the past. The last couple of years, I have not last year. It wasn't really an acceptable practice this year. It would be, but I'm the only person at my farmer's market booth. And that's just too much for me to take on, to control the samples, to be checking out customers, to be talking to people with questions. And I find that, yes, I would sell a few extra things, but the time it takes to make the samples to bring them and have that extra added stress, it's not seem to really be worth.

[00:42:02] **David Crabill:** Is there ever been a time when you just sampled the mix by itself?

[00:42:08] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I don't think that would work with any of my products, you know, just tasting dried herbs or the flour, it wouldn't be able to give anybody a sense. I have done sniff jars for the different spices where people could open the container and smell them. But ever since the pandemic, I just kind of put that aside

[00:42:27] **David Crabill:** so what are the common questions that people ask you when they come up to your booth?

[00:42:33] **Cassie Menchhofer:** more of a, why did you start this business? Or how did you come up with this idea? Those are typically the questions. And then they see the front of the package, which doesn't have ingredients or the directions they want to know. Well, how do I make this? And I have to instruct them to turn over the package. And all of that information is on the.

[00:42:52] **David Crabill:** So you've done events, you've done these shows and I guess those probably dried up during the pandemic?

[00:43:00] **Cassie Menchhofer:** For the most part, our community is pretty rural and many of those shows still went on. I guess our community did not accept the fact that we had to stay home. So we still got out and did the events as safely as we could. But I think only one or two of the shows were canceled that I was planning to attend. Right.

[00:43:20] **David Crabill:** Yeah, certainly more common for a rural community. And then I noticed that you did this like national online show. Is that correct?

[00:43:31] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. It was where you could have video conversations with people that would come to your digital booth. It was pretty neat experience. I'm glad that I did it. The people who put it on did not get as many people involved as they thought we were going to. So it didn't create huge sales, but I did gain new customers on both coasts of the United States. So that was exciting.

[00:43:53] **David Crabill:** So how did, how did that work? Like what did you have to do to get into the event and did they just set it all up for.

[00:44:01] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I was a friend, I guess, of one of the people online who was putting it on and they knew about my business and thought that I would be a good fit for it. You had to pay a fee to be part of it. And then you set up your page, which was your booth with the products and pictures of what a booth would look like if people were visiting you in real life, and then they would have the opportunity to video chat with you or just you could type chat as well.

So it was, you had to be fairly technologically savvy to make it all work. It wasn't for somebody that didn't have any knowledge of that sort of work on the.

[00:44:38] **David Crabill:** Yeah, it's a very, different kind of way of, of getting your name out there. And uh, probably only happened due to the pandemic. So is that something that you would ever pursue again in the future?

[00:44:52] **Cassie Menchhofer:** No food, I think is something that people are so particular on and if they don't, if they can't put their hands on it and if they can't really see the packaging if they don't know you personally, it's, I don't know if I really trust this company that I've never heard of before.

[00:45:08] **David Crabill:** So amongst all of your sales avenues, like you've got local at the farmer's market, you've got indirect sales in the stores. You've got

your website sales across the country. What brings in the most sales and what brings in the least.

[00:45:24] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Definitely the most comes from the farmer's market. It's just after so many years, you just have those people that keep coming back. Again, and again, and they're willing to tell people that are shopping right beside them. Hey, you've really got to try this. And so then the next person will try it and take some home and come back the next week for more the stores, the wholesale piece is growing.

A lot of those stores are newer and have just started in the last few years. So it's hard to see if they're going to continue to grow with my sales as well.

[00:45:54] **David Crabill:** I would think that that aspect of your business would eventually take over the farmer's market.

[00:46:00] **Cassie Menchhofer:** That's the goal. Yes.

[00:46:01] **David Crabill:** So I see that you've not only done wholesale at stores, but you've also done wholesaling on Faire. Can you explain that a bit?

[00:46:12] **Cassie Menchhofer:** sure. Fair is a platform that. Allows other retail partners to check out what wholesale options are out there for them to purchase. And it's been really neat to get those orders that come in from stores that I've never heard of. They're not local, they're all over the United States. And they see a product that they'd like to give a try on their store shelves and they'll place an order. And I just have to fill it and fair, takes a portion of that sale because they're giving me that platform and that visibility, but it is a really great platform to be.

[00:46:45] **David Crabill:** I've never heard about this platform before. Like, did you hear about it or did they find you.

[00:46:51] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I'd heard about other food companies that had been on it. So I checked it out and I did apply once and was denied, but I didn't have great photography of my product. I just had the photography of the finished product. They didn't understand that it wasn't actually beer bread that I was trying to sell.

It was the package to mix. So once I got professional photography of the packaged goods, then they understood and they did accept me onto the platform.

[00:47:16] **David Crabill:** So, if I'm understanding this correctly, their customers are small businesses, right?

[00:47:22] **Cassie Menchhofer:** For the most part, it does seem like they're more boutique businesses, not your, Kroger's not your Walmart's, they're not on that. They would be more on the RangeMe platform .

[00:47:30] **David Crabill:** And as this across the country, are you shipping these out to boutiques in different states is that kind of.

[00:47:39] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes. I've sent things to Georgia and the Carolinas and California, Oregon. It's been all over

[00:47:48] **David Crabill:** Have you gotten repeat sales from them?

[00:47:51] **Cassie Menchhofer:** a couple, not as many as I'd hoped, but I didn't get on the platform until late October, probably, which is probably too late to get a lot of my products on their shelves for the Christmas and warm eating season. I would call it, you know, where you want to have your soups and you want to have your baked goods. I'm hoping that coming into late summer, since I'm already on the platform, I'll get more visibility than when they're looking for those products to start purchasing, to get on their shelves.

[00:48:19] **David Crabill:** is that the busiest time of year For you when you make your sales is the end of the.

[00:48:24] **Cassie Menchhofer:** For the wholesale piece. Yes, it is later in the year,

[00:48:29] **David Crabill:** so I guess it's not at the farmer's market because the market's only open in the summer. Is that right?

[00:48:33] **Cassie Menchhofer:** right? Yeah. We go through September and so I have great sales for different things and even including the soup mixes and baking mixes, but people lean towards the pancakes and spice mixes, that sort of thing during the summer. Whereas then come the fall and holiday season, they're buying all the comfort foods.

[00:48:52] **David Crabill:** So your biggest revenue stream is coming from the farmer's market, but that's not open for the whole year. So when the market ends, do people just keep on buying like your diehard customers. Do they buy through the website?

[00:49:05] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yes.

[00:49:06] **David Crabill:** And are you just shipping them or are they picking them up? I mean, they, I guess they're not picking them up. Right. Do you do delivery?

[00:49:13] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Most of them don't pick up. They, some of them will, if they, for some reason, need to come out this direction. But since I need to go into town, at least once a week for running errands, then I will deliver to local customers. Or I will ship depending on what the best use of my time is.

[00:49:31] **David Crabill:** So here's my big question. You've got this facility that you're using, you know, you're using it to package products for the farmer's market, for indirect sales, for people who order across the country. And you're also using it for the co-packing service. And you also still have a full-time job.

[00:49:49] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I am the sole provider of insurance for our family. And that is a big piece of this until I can have enough profit to cover both my income. As an employee and that insurance piece that most of my insurance is paid by my employer. It's going to be really hard to make that jump, but it could happen someday. And I look forward to when that happens.

[00:50:15] **David Crabill:** Is that what the goal is? I mean, what, where do you hope this business goes in the future?

[00:50:21] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Yeah. I mean, it is the goal that I can spend most of my days, especially when the kids are at school. And then that way when they're home in the evenings, I'm not telling them, sorry, I can't sit down and watch a show with you or play a game. Mom's got to go out in the facility to work. Instead. I'd love to be able to just have those times to relax at home instead of just eating up all the nights and weekends running the.

[00:50:47] **David Crabill:** as you look back on it is the trajectory of your business. What you ever thought it would be. Did you ever think you'd get to this point?

[00:50:57] **Cassie Menchhofer:** No. When I first started, it was just, it was for a hobby really. And then maybe some side money and then it was a little more than just side money and it was actually part of our income for the family. So yeah. I never thought that it would be to this point with the idea that maybe I could do this full time.

[00:51:15] **David Crabill:** So why do you keep running the business? Why are you so passionate?

[00:51:21] **Cassie Menchhofer:** I've seen how much people appreciate. The products. It's not just because of the taste. It's because they have that trust factor and that they're feeding their family things that they maybe wish they could or had time to make from scratch. But it's as close as you can get without doing that. And they love that piece that they can feed their family good food and still have time to enjoy.

[00:51:48] **David Crabill:** Well, it sounds great. It's amazing where your business has gone over the last decade plus, and I'm looking forward to seeing where it goes in the future. Now, Cassie, if people want to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:52:03] **Cassie Menchhofer:** My website is always available. It's www.cassiescountrycupboard.com. And if they're on social media, I'm very active. As you mentioned on Instagram and Facebook, Facebook is the easiest way to actually communicate with me. If you wanted to send me a message that way, or by email it's all on the website, you can find me just about anywhere.

[00:52:23] **David Crabill:** Great, well, thank you so much, Cassie, for coming on the show and sharing with us today,

[00:52:28] **Cassie Menchhofer:** Thank you.

[00:52:30] **David Crabill:** that wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/64

And if you enjoyed this episode, please head over to apple podcasts and leave me a review. A review is the best way to support the show and will help others find it as well.

And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course, go to [cottage food course.com](http://cottagefoodcourse.com). Thanks for listening. And I'll see you. in the next episode.