

Preserving A Culture By Selling Bread with Sahar Shomali

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 Sahar Shomali. Sahar lives in Los Angeles, California, and sells Iranian bread with her cottage food business, Kouzeh.

Sahar is a highly trained pastry chef and worked for many years in some of LA's top-end restaurants. But a little while after starting her home bakery in 2018, she decided to go all in and focus on it full time. This is a super niched business, and Sahar's probably one of the only people in the United States.

If not the only one who sells such a wide array of Iranian bread and focuses exclusively on them. In this episode, you'll hear how Sahar rediscovered the bread that she grew up with in Iran. What it was like to transition from working in a massive commercial kitchen to using her home kitchen and how she's managed to turn a highly niched bakery into a solid business.

And with that, let's jump right into this episode.

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

[00:01:05] **Sahar Shomali:** Thank you.

[00:01:07] **David Crabill:** Sahar, can you tell me how this whole journey got started for you?

[00:01:12] **Sahar Shomali:** Well, I'm a pastry chef and a baker by profession. When I moved to Los Angeles about God, it's been, I think 16 years now, I went to culinary school and I started getting jobs in restaurants and working in that field for many, many, many years.

And honestly, it was gradual for me to realize that I would like to work with bread more than anything else. And the fact that I was missing the bread of my country and my cuisine while living here, which was surprising considering I live in Los Angeles. And I think everyone knows that Los Angeles has a very, very large population of Iranians living here.

And we have Iranian restaurants and grocery stores and bakeries and all that all around Los Angeles. But sadly what I was seeing was that I couldn't find the variety of bread that I used to get while living in Iran. There are four different types of bread that are sold in stores here in Los Angeles and probably everywhere else in the United States.

And it wasn't in any way comparable to what I grew up eating in Iran. The one that I always talk about, the one that sort of started this whole thing is Barbari bread, which is a sort of a flatbread baked in an oven that is very similar to a Neopolitan pizza oven back in Iran.

And the way it's traditionally made in Iran is that it's sourdough bread, and there's a, let's call modernized version of it that is just in no way comparable to the real thing. But that's the only thing that I could find here in stores.

And I kept complaining for years and years and years to friends and family that I missed the bread of Iran and I can't find it anywhere. And, you know, one day it dawned on me that I actually have the skills and I have the knowledge and I can do this myself and that's sort of how it started.

I spent three months playing with sourdough and different kinds of flour and hydration levels and temperatures and baking in different types of ovens in different situations. And finally, I nailed it down to what I loved and what I remember eating back in Iran. And from there, spreading it between friends and family, started this idea in me that I could, could start a little cottage business with it. And it took off from there.

After that, I started looking into other items that I ate growing up in Iran and trying to make them here. And then it sort of branched out into researching regional bread of Iran items that Sometimes you can only find like one little village and one corner of Iran and trying to replicate those here And in the process, maybe, just try and preserve a part of my cuisine. That's it. Not usually talked about, which is the bread. And yeah, that's how Kouzeh came into play about four and a half years ago.

[00:04:05] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So you grew up in Iran and when, and how did you move over to the states?

[00:04:10] **Sahar Shomali:** Our family got green cards. We moved and we immigrated here to Los Angeles. It was about 16 years ago. I wanna say. So I was born and raised in Iran. I was basically a full-grown adult when I came here. Uh, So I have that knowledge of food and flavor from there. And

thankfully, the culinary education and the restaurant experience here. So the combination of the two has helped a lot.

[00:04:38] **David Crabill:** You kind of glazed over your food service experience. And I just wanted to let you share that you've worked at some pretty notable establishments. Can you share a little bit about that?

[00:04:48] **Sahar Shomali:** My first real job was at Spago, which is Wolfgang Puck's flagship restaurant. and I was working for Sherry Yard. The amazing, talented pastry chef Sherry Yard for about three or four years until she left Spago. And then I worked for another amazingly talented pastry chef Della Gossett.

And aside from Spago, Spago was and is maybe the main and most important one. I learned so much working there. But I've also done this since I was working for the Lucques Group for about three years, which would be Suzanne Goin and Caroline Styne's restaurant. It was quite an amazing experience with lovely people and amazing food.

I worked for April Bloomfield for a little bit here in LA, too at Hearth & Hound. Another lovely, lovely restaurant, lovely group of people, and amazing experience. And there are a bunch of little work experiences in the middle of those. But I would say those three would be, the bigger ones on my resume

[00:05:48] **David Crabill:** Yeah, all super notable. And so were you working with pastries for all?

[00:05:53] **Sahar Shomali:** yes, I would say 90 to 95% of my professional restaurant work has been focused on desserts and pastries and sort of anything other than bread. It's funny enough. Most of my bread knowledge comes from reading books and just experimenting and figuring it out.

[00:06:12] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, when I think of those super notable places, like top-end restaurants, and I think at the back of the house, I've never worked in them, but I think of it as super intense. Like, can you describe what it was like to work in some of those top-end restaurants?

[00:06:27] **Sahar Shomali:** Yes, intense. Definitely. It's not a place or environment for anyone. You really have to have very tough skin. For me, it was an amazing experience. I'm gonna be honest with you. I don't know why, but I sort of crave that madness and intensity. I've wanted it for a part of my life and it pushed me to be a better person every day.

I mean, It's restaurant work. So it definitely has its negative sides. It has its problems. It has its own trauma. But I liked it. I liked the fact that I was getting pushed so hard to be as good as I could be every day knowing that every move you make, every item that you make, even if it is just to stand in the corner and pick cherries for, five or six hours in the day to know that you have to do it right, that those.

Cherries need to look perfect every single time and not make mistakes, just to train yourself to be that good. It's an amazing experience and I needed it and I wanted it. And so I liked it. I liked working in those places and I liked what I got to see and what I got to learn. And again, of course, there are negative sides to it. There are hardships to it.

But it's all about what you wanna get out of it. And if at the end of the day for you personally, the positive parts are more, then you just deal with the negative and you're fine.

[00:07:49] **David Crabill:** So obviously by the time you started your cottage food business, you were extremely talented in food production, but that's quite a shift, right? Like. Like to kind of go from that intense commercial environment to your home kitchen. Can you explain how you may have used some of the skills that you learned in the big restaurants and brought them into your home and maybe some of the challenges that you faced when trying to start a cottage food business?

[00:08:21] **Sahar Shomali:** Oh, yes. There's definitely a mix of both that you're talking about. It is very different to go from any kind of, commercial restaurant kitchen to working out of your home. because this is one of the funnier parts is I've seen this amongst a lot of my peers because of how much work we do while we're working in a professional restaurant, how many hours we spend there, and the variety of equipment and ingredients that we're in contact with while we're working in a restaurant.

Most of the time, I'm not saying generally for everybody, for me, and for a lot of my friends, when you then come to our houses and look at our kitchens and our homes and our apartments it only has the bare essentials. We don't have anything to work with here because it just doesn't compare to what we're used to working within a commercial kitchen.

So I think one of the first things that I had to do was to learn how to, Change my tiny apartment's kitchen to a place where I could feasibly work out to get all the equipment that I need, but not overdo it. Because again, this is my home and,

you know, there's only so much space that I have and to also not let my, pastry brain take over and to just think about bread and not think about all the equipment that I would love to have, but I don't need them because I'm not making pastries here.

I'm not making desserts here. I'm making bread to just outfit the kitchen, to do what I need it to be, to be able to do bread production out of it and to figure out how to work with my home oven, which is a very normal everyday home oven. And to turn it into something that would be able to bake all these kinds of bread out of it took some time, into, to also bring it up to code for it to both be acceptable to me in my own eyes as a professional baker and to be able to pass health inspection, because this is not like most cottage businesses.

I go through, you know, health department inspections in my home. So, one big part of it is to get everything in place to outfit the kitchen. The other part of it was to adjust. My life schedules this, because as much as a restaurant job takes over your life, and it does, especially when you get to, you know, higher positions and pastry chef and executive pastry chef positions, you suddenly start spending 18 -20 hours at work.

And that is absolutely true. But When you come home, you are out of the work environment. Even if it is for three or four hours a day, you're still out of it. You're done. But when you're working from home, the lines blur. And being able to work with that. To learn how to separate the two. To know that after a certain time of the day, I'm not gonna take work calls even though I'm here and I can work, but I need to give myself that time to rest. That was also another part of it that I had to learn.

But yeah, there's, the transition was, uh, Those were the work transition parts. just learning how to make bread every day out of my apartment. I always think of it. Like it's spread for thousands and thousands of years, people around the world have been making bread in all sorts of conditions.

So I should be able to do it anywhere. But to consistently do it every day takes work and it takes time and time and temperature control. And that was another thing that I had to get used to. So yeah, I would say that would be some of the bigger things about transitioning from a professional kitchen to a home kitchen.

[00:11:49] **David Crabill:** So considering your experience and having been a pastry chef for all this time, why did you decide just to focus on bread? I know that's all that you do with this cottage bakery.

[00:12:01] **Sahar Shomali:** Yes. That is all that I do. It is mostly because of the subject matter of Kouzeh. I'm focusing on bread, and absolutely only Iranian bread. Those are my true rules. It has to be bred and it has to come from Iran as much as I've gotten requests for other middle Eastern type bread.

I always have to tell people that as delicious as other Middle Eastern breads are, this is what I do. It has to originate from Iran. So if you're asking me for a specific kind of bread, tell me where in Iran, I can find it and I will make it for you. That is mostly why it is only focused on bread.

As I said, it's a part of. My culture, and my cuisine, that's both very important to us Iranians. Bread has such a big role and part in our lives, in our cuisines, in our culture. But somehow it's not being focused on anywhere. There are a lot of recipes or even not even recipes.

While I'm doing research, sometimes all I find of the bread is a picture or a story or somebody's recollection of something they ate when they used to visit their grandma's house and some village or some city or somewhere. But somehow nobody wrote these recipes down.

Nobody tried to preserve them. when you go to Iranian restaurants or bakeries. You don't see that variety of bread. You still find the same 4, 5, and 6 types of bread that you would find everywhere else. The same ones that everybody knows about, but there are so many others, And, when I make them and I go and sell them at the farmer's market, I get so many Iranian customers who come by my booth and look at them and go, wait, I don't know any of these items. I don't know these kinds of bread and I'm, Iranian. How do I not know these? So that's why I think more than anything else that I try to stay in the lane of just.

Because there are so many different ones that people don't know about. There are so many that even I don't know about, and I would love to have the time to do more and more research to travel back to Iran to gather all of these recipes together. And maybe one day after I'm, you know, I feel like I've accomplished what I wanna accomplish with bread.

Then I would veer out into the land of Iranian pastries. But I think there are more people much more talented than me working on Iranian pastries. And very few people are focusing on bread. And I would like to preserve this part and I would like to just make bread

[00:14:29] **David Crabill:** so, obviously this is a super niched business. Not only is it just bread, but it's just bread that comes from Iran. And what is the

motivation for having that niche? Is that just a business decision? Because you think being in that niche is gonna make your business more successful or is it something more like, you're just passionate and driven to have only Iranian bread because you wanna preserve the culture?

[00:14:56] **Sahar Shomali:** I wanna say 95%, the second part, and maybe 5% for the business part. Of course, there is, at least in Los Angeles, I mean, I haven't found any other only Iranian bread bakeries anywhere else. But at least to know that business-wise Kouzeh is gonna be that source of only Iranian bread, definitely business-wise, it's a positive but it is mostly just preserving my own culture in my own way.

been criticized a few times by, friends and family for not expanding into other, areas of Iranian baked goods or not taking on opportunities that you know, why aren't you also cooking Iranian food and you could expand, you could make it, make more money or you could make it easier and give your recipes to a wholesale bakery and have them make it.

For me, it's a very personal thing to be able to make and learn and keep all these recipes and these items. And know that when somebody comes and asks me about a particular bread I can actually give them real information about it, to be able to talk about where it originated, why it's made the way it's made.

Why does it have the flavors in it, or why is it baked the way that it's baked or preserved the way it's preserved? It gives me real joy. So of course, again, it's a business. The money part is important. And I do wanna grow it into a cottage business and into a brick-and-mortar store at some point. But I would say money is maybe the second best reason for the business and the first one is still and will always be the love of bread and culture.

[00:16:32] **David Crabill:** So let's talk about how you got started on this journey. Like, I know you sell so many different kinds of bread now, but like how did you start the business? Cause I, you weren't doing any of this when you started right?

[00:16:47] **Sahar Shomali:** No, I started with Barbari bread. I only had one item which is still my best seller. I think it's the one that gets a lot of customers to my booth at the market. I wanted barbari bread because growing up, that was my favorite bread. There was a barbari bakery a 10-minute walk from our house in Tehran.

And I would go over there and buy fresh bread almost every day. And the original idea for Kouzeh was that it was going to be a barbari bakery. It wasn't going to be even an Iranian bread bakery. It was going to be only barbari. And the reason behind that is traditionally in Iran. That's how bakeries work.

You have a bakery that only makes one type of bread. And if you want two different types of bread, you have to go to two different bakeries. So a bakery will only make barbari and they will make a thousand pieces of barbari a day, but that's all they make. And another bakery will make sangak. Another one will make sheermal often.

So originally I thought that maybe that's something I can implement that I could just only make barbari. And that's it. But after making barbari for a while, I think it was partially the fact that I thought I needed some variety. I needed to make some other items. And also because I thought, well, if, the people and the customers and friends and family around me don't even know about what original barbari is and are just learning through me and through Kouzeh what original barbari is supposed to taste like and be like, then they probably don't know about Gisou bread which is a sweet braided bread similar to Challah.

So they probably don't know about that. So I started making Gisou bread, which was another favorite bread of mine. And once I made that. And I remember the day that my final tester came out of the oven and I just wrapped it in parchment paper.

And I went to the farmer's market to do some shopping with a friend and I gave it to her and I said, okay, here's, a tester bread. You should try this. And her reaction is she ate it and she would eat it herself and then tear pieces of it and just hand it out to the farmers as we were shopping. Just their general reaction is how much they loved it.

And I thought, okay. So this is another item that I need to share with people. This is another thing that I should put on the menu. And so it sort of became. Like that, I would move on to another item after that, and try to get that down.

There are these buns that I make that have ginger and turmeric filling on the inside, Eashly Kookah and they're based on a bread that's made in the Northwest of Iran in Tabriz. And I say based because, in its original form, it's a drier flakier kind of bread slash pastry, but I turned it into a bun because I sort of liked it better that way.

But I remember when I was testing that one out, I would make four different ones and I would drive over to my grandma's house. Have her try it because she's from there. And I say, okay, like I remember eating these when I was a kid, the few times that we went to Tabriz, but you would know better.

So you need to try these and tell me which one is better. Or there was Kelaneh which is a Kurdish Iranian bread. I learned about it through just reading articles as I read and I thought, wait a minute, we have this amazing, amazing bread. It's a flatbread that's filled with herbs and scallions and baked fresh and brushed with butter.

And how is it that I grew up in Iran and I never heard about this thing? And I made it and I started selling it to people and I saw the same reaction from customers like, wait, how did we not know about this bread? How did I grow up in this part of Iran that I never learned about this, or I would have those, you know, random one or two people who would eat it and go, oh my God.

Like I remember eating this at my grandma's house, or I remember eating it when I was growing up in Iran. So it sort of went from there just taking these items one by one starting from Gisou, Eashly Kookah, and Kelaneh and it just went from there. And I think it was at that point where I thought, okay, so I'm researching bread, I have these notebooks that I filled with all the information I can find on any kind of Iranian.

Sometimes it's just a name and a region where it comes from. Sometimes there are, you know, lists of ingredients that are in there. Flavors are supposed to be there. Sometimes there are, you know, I've managed to find a picture or something that I put on there very few times there are actual recipes out there, recipes from, home bakers.

So I have to adjust it, work with it, and see how it comes out. And now it's reached a point where I have quite a few different items on my research list that I know that I'm gonna make one day, but I try to pick the ones that are different from what I have on the menu now.

Because you can find similar items here and there under different names with like one or two ingredients have changed or their baking methods change like here, they bake it on a hot stone and over there they bake it in the oven. Now it's come to that. Do I make another bread that has turmeric in it and walnuts or do I try to find something new that has a different flavor to it?

Also, there is a matter of trying to find bread from all the different parts of Iran. I don't want all the bread to come from the Western part of Iran, for example. I'm trying to put something new on the menu. I have this map up that I put little dots on where all my menu items come from and I go, okay, so where have I not pulled the bread from yet?

And I go into that region and I start researching flavors and regional items. And I usually manage to find something new that I can call on the menu.

[00:22:18] **David Crabill:** So I know that you said you wanted to have this be just a barbari bread bakery only. And I know you started this as a side business and now take it full time. Do you feel like it? There would've been the demand to be able to support just selling barbari bread.

[00:22:38] **Sahar Shomali:** I think I would've been able to if I had marketed it in Los Angeles, My barbari bread is vegan. It's sourdough, and all the ingredients that I use are of a higher quality.

So if I had tried to market it to customers who specifically care about those things and obviously raise the price point, then it would've definitely worked or at least that's my wishful thinking. But I think for my own sake, it's better that I didn't do that. I do need variety in my day. And I think as much as I love barbari bread and I really, really, really do, I think having to make 2, 3, 400 of them every day all day would have become very tedious and tiring. So having a menu that has other items on it, making different kinds of bread.

And again, as I said, learning all these new items a lot of them I didn't know about until I started doing research and learning about them and making them has been great for me personally. And I would like to think that it's been great for my customers who get to, experience new items when they come and shop

[00:23:49] **David Crabill:** I read that the largest Iranian community outside of Iran is in Southern California and especially in Los Angeles. Are most of your customers Iranian?

[00:24:00] **Sahar Shomali:** I would say it's 50-50 at this point. I do have a lot of customers who are not Iranians but they have a love of bread and they're adventurous and they wanna try new things. So they were shocked at my store because they've had Iranian food before and now they hear somebody's making Iranian bread, so they wanna try it.

Or they were just walking by my booth at the farmer's market and they stopped and bought one thing and they fell in love with it. And now they come back for it every week. So I would say it's 50. I have my Iranian customers. I have my Iranian American customers who would be the ones who grew up here and have never been to Iran.

And I have my American customers and they're all lovely,

[00:24:41] **David Crabill:** So one of the hard things about trying to bring an ethnic food from another country, especially as far away as Iran, is just getting the right ingredients. But you do live in an area that has a large Iranian community. So was that not really an issue to find the ingredients you needed to start the bakery?

[00:25:01] **Sahar Shomali:** Yes. It's a lot easier to find ingredients here in Southern California and Los Angeles than it is probably anywhere else. I mean, we have three amazing brands that have almost all the spices that I would ever want and need for baking bread and very specific dairy products that I need to make the bread.

And I can always find them here. So that really is where I'm lucky. And it hasn't been that big of a challenge for me. And not just the Iranian or Persian ingredients involved, just everything. One of the reasons I absolutely love Los Angeles and Southern California, or generally California, is that we really do have access to really good produce, really good grains, really good flour, and all of that.

Is amazing. And it helps that it's wonderful that I get to have access to all these beautiful, beautiful ingredients. It results in being able to make really, really high-quality bread.

[00:25:57] **David Crabill:** Is there any bread that you haven't made yet or that you would like to make?

[00:26:05] **Sahar Shomali:** Oh, so many, so, so many as I said, I have notebooks with names and there's like every page, there's a name on top. Hoping for me to fill them out with a recipe one day and, there's a lot that I would love to make. but There are certain items that I don't make. I wanna say because of the sort of limitations of working out of my home kitchen in our cuisine, there's a lot of times that we use animal fat versus oils or butter or things like that.

So something like lamb fat is very readily available and used in food, in bread. And I have found quite a few breads that use that. And I don't because I can't really use that here in my home kitchen, maybe one day when I move to a brick and mortar then I might do that.

I try to stay away from uh, fried bread. And there are quite a few of those. Mostly because again, this comes back to limitations on a cottage business because whatever I make, I have to pre-package and sell. So if I had a store where someone could come and buy freshly fried bread, then I would absolutely do it.

But if I'm gonna fry it, let it cool. Put it in a package, take it to a farmer's market and have it sit there for four hours for somebody to buy it, to then take it home and maybe eat it three or four hours later. That's just not something I can control. So I try to stay away from fried items.

So those are all things that maybe one day I will make but not right now.

[00:27:33] **David Crabill:** So, despite not being able to make certain items out of your home kitchen, it sounds like you're not feeling limited in any way, shape or form by your super-niched business.

[00:27:44] **Sahar Shomali:** No, I actually find it very exciting. I love that. I get to learn all these new items and I love to be able to share them with other people. I can talk for hours and hours about the origins of a certain type of bread. And I love that. So no, I'm very happy with how this turned out at the moment.

And if I can turn it into a brick-and-mortar one day, then I think it's all worth it.

[00:28:07] **David Crabill:** So let's go back to the beginning of your business. I know you wanted to do this barbari bakery. Got the barbari recipe down. You decided to start selling it. You set up your cottage food business. What was the first thing? Did you sell it in the market? What was your response when you started selling your bread?

[00:28:23] **Sahar Shomali:** At first it was just friends and family. I got the recipe down and I knew from the beginning that if I was going to do this, I wasn't going to start just selling bread. And then if it's a cough, then maybe apply for a cottage permit. I wanted it all to be right from the start.

So I applied for the permit, started a company, made it all official, got everything together, and that on its own took some time. . And during that time I was working at hearth and town. So I wasn't going to the markets.

It was just word-of-mouth friends. And it was just that I know one of the things that I did during that time was I threw one or two breakfast parties at my house and invited friends and coworkers over and I made fresh bread and we set a table with all sorts of, you know, jams and cheeses and all eggs and breakfast items. And I made fresh bread.

And this way they sort of introduced friends who didn't know what I was trying to do, what the bread was to this. And from there, it got the word to spread a little bit. And just for the first, I wanna say eight months, that was all I was doing. It was just word of mouth, phone calls, text messages, and selling, not that many, to be honest, but still, as I said, I was working at a restaurant.

So it wasn't about that once the restaurant work ended and I decided to fully commit to it was when I actually decided to add other items to the menu and at the same time try to get into a farmer's market. So it all happened at the same time. As I was testing my new items, I was researching how to.

Get into a farmer's market and what I needed, what the qualifications for. And there are many farmer's markets happening in Los Angeles. And there are some really big famous farms and those you cannot get into as a startup cottage business, that's just not happening. So just figuring out where I could fit in all the items that I needed for it.

Like I had to get everything from, having tables and canopy and any kind of decorations, anything, but just getting all that set up took some time and during which I was researching my new bread items. So by the time I finally got to a farmer's market to sell bread, I already had four items on the menu.

[00:30:43] **David Crabill:** So you already probably knew you had a pretty good business on your hands by the time you went to your first market, but what was the reception like when you did that first event?

[00:30:53] **Sahar Shomali:** The first market honestly, was more a learning experience for me than a business growth for I've chosen a very small market that was very close to my house. Of course, I did sales there. I had some customers, but it wasn't a big market. I wasn't getting the attention that I would like to have gotten.

But again, it was a very good learning experience for me because as we've talked about before, I've always worked in the kitchen. In all of these restaurants and places where I've worked, I had never had to do customer service. I've never had to talk to people and try to be a salesperson.

I never had to do that. And just teaching myself how to present an item to a customer who doesn't know anything about it. To be able to talk to people about all these different things without overloading them with information, is something I tend to do.

Because before this, I had only talked about baked goods with other people that bake so they would know, and would want information. So when I start talking about it, I would go into details about flours and sourdough and bake times and temperatures and all those things. And the average customer doesn't want that information or doesn't understand it.

They want to know what the bread tastes like, what its textures are like, how to use it, and how to eat it. So just learning that for me was very important. So that first market, I think, provided that opportunity for me more than it did to get me customers and get me growth in my business.

It was when I moved to my current market, which is a larger market that happens on Sundays, that I managed to put those skills to use and actually get customers and grow the business.

[00:32:38] **David Crabill:** When did you feel like this business was becoming a real thing? Like it was really starting to get people's attention and it was starting to grow.

[00:32:46] **Sahar Shomali:** I don't know if I've felt that yet. It's funny because the business has grown a lot. It's grown a lot. It has a dedicated fan base. it got a review from bill Addison, which I still can't believe happened, but it did. it got written up in the LA times. That was amazing. But. it never hit that mark of, you know, suddenly becoming popular.

It's been gradually building up which is great. It's wonderful when the business gradually builds up because you know, it has a solid foundation. But because of that, I don't think at any point I haven't felt that, oh my God, it's happening now. But I know when I look at the numbers, when I look at the sales, when I talk to my customers, I know that it's a solid business and I believe in my heart that it will be a successful one.

[00:33:32] **David Crabill:** That's so funny that you say that, cause I mean, I've just seen some of the media attention you've gotten, you definitely have become a known, recognized business. So you started the business in 2018, And that was just on the side. And, did you take it full-time in 2019?

[00:33:48] **Sahar Shomali:** Uh, I wanna say, yes it definitely started in 2018 But when did it become the full thing would be when My, job at Hearth & Hound ended. Yes. That was 2019. That was April of 2019. I wanna say

[00:34:06] **David Crabill:** So how long after your job ended did you, like, I guess move into the market? You weren't doing markets up. Point. And you did a little tiny one. What was the evolution of your business? Like, how long did it take you to jump into your first market, then jump into your bigger market?

[00:34:23] **Sahar Shomali:** The first market was probably about a month or two months after Kouzeh became my main focus. The second market was a few months after that for a little while.

I was doing both markets at the same time because one was on a Wednesday and the other one was on a Sunday. And this is, towards the end of 2019. And I finally gave up on the Wednesday market, the smaller market, and focused my energy on the Sunday market, where I was getting attention.

I was getting a fan base and then the pandemic happened and it sort of all went. Crazy after that which I would say funny enough, my business being what it was and being a cottage bakery actually helped me a lot during the pandemic because as the rules of cottage business go, they are very similar to all the regulations that the health department put in for other food businesses during the pandemic.

I already had delivery systems set up. I already had everything prepackaged, I had all the labels set up. Like I, I had all those things. I even had a place at the farmer's market where I could sell it. So I guess I did have to go through a pandemic. Like everybody else, I did lose a certain amount of business because of it, and getting my hands on ingredients was difficult, But it also had the benefit of, I didn't have to worry about those other little things because they were already in place and then from there it was a year or something of just, pandemic business, just running the business through all of that. And it has been the past eight months or a year that I would say things have started to slowly go back to where they were before. And my business has slowly grown throughout this whole time, slowly by little.

[00:36:06] **David Crabill:** So, can you remember back to your first markets? What were you charging for your products back then?

[00:36:13] **Sahar Shomali:** I haven't really changed my prices that much. I will have to do it probably very soon, but I've tried to keep my prices as low as it is possible without it, taking away from my own work and trying to keep it steady. So like the price of barbari has been the same, the past four and a half years that I've had it.

It's always been \$3 a piece. It's still \$3 a piece. The price point on that one is still pretty good. But if the price of flour rises any higher than it is right now, then that will have to change. Uh, Certain things have changed, some items like the Gisou bread.

I was making a much larger version of it. At first, I was making this huge loaf that would've, you know, lasted one person probably a week to eat and I was charging \$12 for it. Because it was huge. But then I realized that like most people. They would rather buy a smaller item and just eat it in a day and be done with it.

So I had to change that one to a smaller one, and then, of course, change the price for that one. There's been a lot of that with the pricing, but I've really tried to keep my prices steady as much as I can while keeping the ingredients still at the same quality which has been a little difficult, but I think I've managed to keep it the same way.

The two items that the price has changed for more than anything else I wanna say are the two filled flatbreads, Kelaneh and Dastaneh and that's mostly. the fillings for Kelaneh, it's scallions, parsley, and cilantro. For Dastaneh, it's walnuts and caramelized onions. Those ingredients that go into those have had quite the price throughout the years uh, special since I buy all my herbs and onions and all that from the farmer's market, I get them from farmers. So I had to change prices on that.

[00:38:05] **David Crabill:** I have to say. I checked out your website. I was very surprised by the prices you currently have. I know you're in LA, you're in Southern California. So I guess I was expecting a much higher price point. And my first thought honestly was, are you making a significant amount of money with this?

Cause I know how labor-intensive bread is. And it just feels like, especially with the price increases recently that that's a pretty good deal for customers. Right?

[00:38:34] **Sahar Shomali:** It honestly is. I do believe that it makes sense. Both funny and a little hurtful when every once in a while I get that one customer who just thinks, why is everything so expensive? It just says it's like, why are you charging so much for this bread? And I just don't get into arguments with people about that, but, I think some of my bread items are even cheaper than a cup of coffee here in Los Angeles.

But I always stick to the numbers and right now the math and the numbers work for these prices. I can work with the price of milk, rising a dollar. I can still take that on without having to raise the price of my bread product and that'll be okay.

But if the price of flour goes up, then it's gonna have a huge impact on my expenses, which then I would have to reflect on the prices. There's a lot of that going on. Yes, bread is very labor intensive but Kouzeh is what it is, which is a cottage bakery, which means I don't have to pay rent for my space.

I mean, I do, but that's the rent from where I live. I don't have two rents to pay. How about that? It helps with keeping the price point down. It really helps the labor being just me. So I only have to pay myself, which helps with keeping the price point down. And then there is that problematic belief that I have. I love it, but I think a lot of people feel like it's problematic when it comes to me.

At the end of the day, it's the bread and it shouldn't cost an arm and a leg for anyone to have good bread. It really shouldn't. So I will go to any lengths to try and keep these prices where they are and as low as they are so that everyone can buy good, healthy bread at all times. Like, I completely agree with anyone who wants to charge \$20 for a good loaf of bread.

I get that there's that much work that goes into it. The ingredients cost a lot. It's worth it to have one loaf of really, really good bread versus having 20 loaves of mediocre bread. Absolutely. But I would also love to think that I can provide really good bread for a price that most people can enjoy. I will definitely try and keep those prices down as much as I can.

[00:40:40] **David Crabill:** Can you share a little bit about what your calculation is like? What percentages are you looking for? How much your ingredient cost

should be percentage-wise, how does that go into determining the price of what you sell your bread for?

[00:40:54] **Sahar Shomali:** I try to keep the ingredients somewhere between 28 to 30% of the final price. So that's most of the time where it falls.

[00:41:05] **David Crabill:** That sounds pretty standard for a food business.

[00:41:07] **Sahar Shomali:** Yes, it is. It is for the food business. That is usually where it goes. And I try to stick to it. So that's where I can take on some price changes. So, at first, let's say three years ago it was at 27% and now with the price increases in ingredients, it has reached 30%. I can still take that on and make a profit and not have to raise my prices. But once it goes over that, then I will definitely change my prices.

[00:41:36] **David Crabill:** So, what does your weekly schedule look like? I assume you make bread on certain days and like, else are you selling?

[00:41:44] **Sahar Shomali:** My first order of the week usually is Wednesday morning where I have a wholesale account with this wonderful company called avocado toast here in Los Angeles, where they do grocery deliveries. So that's my first order, usually on Wednesdays.

These are the set ones. I have another wholesale account on Thursdays with good eggs. Then I have my popup market on Fridays where I make bread, and I have my farmer's market on Sundays. So those are the preset ones of all the other orders that come in throughout the week with deliveries or special requests.

Or large items for catering things like that. It just depends on what order comes in. So sometimes I'm working seven days a week on orders because that's what it is. And sometimes I get to have a Monday and Tuesday off. That's my weekend. My days usually start at around four in the morning on the weekends as well, Friday through Sunday because of the two markets that go back to about one in the morning.

And I try to shut everything for the business down by about five or six in the afternoon. And my loyal customers know not to try and contact me after that time. And yeah, that's my current schedule. If I'm having a slow week which happens more during summer because it's hot and people eat less bread when it's hot, it's just another thing that I've found out through having this business.

If I'm having a slow week, then I get to have a Monday and a Tuesday off. That's a weekend. I get to spend time with friends and family, and maybe take a day trip somewhere. but the rest of the time I'm working and I'm prepping and it's not just the making of the bread. It's everything else that goes into it.

It's all the fillings that go into different kinds of bread. making sure that I have all the toppings, making sure that I have all the packaging items, all the labels, even bags, like things that at first I never thought about. Okay. Somebody ordered 20 loaves of bread. Great.

I made it, I packaged it. I put the labels on it and I remember I looked around and I said, oh my God, I don't have any bags to put these in. Like, I can't just hand one loaf of bread to someone without a bag. So just having those things makes sure that all those inventories are in place and everything is correct.

and doing the financial parts of it, keeping all the numbers in check the Excel sheets, and all that. Those are all the things that I do throughout the week that keep me busy.

[00:44:13] **David Crabill:** These are all things, obviously you never had to worry about when you worked in the food service industry. Was it challenging to learn how to wear all the different hats as a business owner?

[00:44:25] **Sahar Shomali:** Challenging, definitely. I've had experiences with most of these items. Like most of these works before when I was working in restaurants, but It's very different when you're doing it all by yourself for your own business than when you're doing it in a restaurant where you can rely on other people and where systems are specifically made for that food business.

you know what you're working with, it's very different adjusting to that. So, yes at first it was a challenge at first there were a lot of moments like the bag moment that I just talked about,

I had a lot of moments like that at the beginning, to take the time, to sit down and come up with my own spreadsheet to be able to enter all the numbers to be able to. Put the recipes in and get the right price point for it To build and manage the website.

that was the whole thing to put that together and to manage it every day and make sure that I'm on top of it all the different aspects of social media those are always challenging to remember, to take pictures of everything so that I could

post it for people to see what I'm doing to remember, to update my customer base with emails.

So all of these things take up a lot of time. So yes, definitely. It's a challenge.

But at the same time, it's a good kind of challenge. I love learning new things. I love knowing that I've done all these new things that I, know how these things work that if in the future, the business grows to a point where I have to hire people to do things for me that I know how everything is supposed to work, so I can keep an eye on how things are working then. So it is definitely a good kind of challenge.

[00:46:09] **David Crabill:** Do you often feel overwhelmed by your business?

[00:46:13] **Sahar Shomali:** No, no, I'm still pretty good. As I said, I like the challenge. It's a good kind of challenge. I like keeping busy So I don't think that I, at any point, have felt really overwhelmed. There have been difficult times. And thankfully, I have an amazing support system with my family and my friends.

So if I really, really am in a jam, I can just pick up a phone and call someone to come and help me, maybe take care of some deliveries. Clean some herbs or wash the dishes or something so that I can just focus on the bread. But maybe it is the training that I got in all those restaurants where there's a lot of work.

Yes. But you put your head down and get it done. And once it's done, you get to sit down, rest, and relax. That's the way my mind works. That's how I do it.

[00:47:02] **David Crabill:** What was one of the most difficult times that you had when running your business?

[00:47:06] **Sahar Shomali:** Difficult maybe is not the right word I would use for it uh, challenging And that would be within half an hour after bill Addison's article came. Online about my business. and I remember this, it was a Saturday morning. I had just mixed all the dough for my Sunday market because I do sourdoughs.

So almost everything that I make has a minimum 12-hour fermentation period. So I had in the morning mixed all the dough and I had sent them all to rest for 12 hours. And I just had started getting breakfast. And suddenly I was bombarded with phone calls, emails, and text messages from new customers

who had just read the article and who were placing orders online or calling in to place orders or to find out where I am at the market.

Friends who'd read the article were calling to say congratulations. You know, "We just read about this." And suddenly I got all of these orders that I had to fill and get to. For a while after that, it was a little crazy. I remember one of the things that I did was just like, I called my parents and I said, guys, I'm gonna be very busy.

I will not be able to make it to our weekly dinners to see you guys. And if you guys could, please, please, please make me some food that I can just put in the fridge and not have to think about what I'm going to eat. I would very much appreciate it, which they did thankfully because I knew that with all the work that I had to do, I wouldn't even have time to think about it, "Hey, what am I gonna have for lunch?"

So I would say that was the most challenging. It went on for about two months of absolute craziness. The article came out online and then he did a radio interview, KCRW with Evan Kleiman, which then again got me a bunch of attention. And then the article was finally printed in the LA times.

It just got more and more and more for about two months. I basically worked nonstop every day for about 20 to 22 hours. I was getting like one-hour naps here and there just to be able to keep up with all the demand. And then it started dying down and became a steady stream of, okay, these are the people who are gonna stay with this business and they're gonna still order and they're gonna be around. If that, craziness had gone on for any longer, I'm sure I would've had to change the way I run the business so I could handle it.

But I would say that was the most challenging, but again, a very good kind of challenge. It was because of very good attention from everybody. So I've zero complaints about what was going on.

[00:49:47] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I noticed that you've been in a few publications now. And I was wondering if there is anything that you've done to try to get it. out there or get the media attention or has it just all come to you?

[00:50:00] **Sahar Shomali:** I've been lucky enough that I haven't had one. Do anything really? The first one was, I think a friend recommended me when it came to Shoutout LA. So it was just an online interview that I filled out. And that was the first one. And then the second one was when I taught a class on Persian bread for the bread bakers Guild which again, I think they were friends

who recommended me to the people in charge and they thought, oh, you know, nobody's ever done a Persian bread class.

So let's see how that goes, which was wonderful. And it went from that. And from what I've heard through that class, Somebody who either attended the class or learned about the class was the person who then called up Bill Addison and told him, Hey, this person is doing this thing in LA.

You should check him out. So that's how I got all that. And then after that was when I got tapped for that little new segment on Spectrum News 1 which again was fun. I think that's pretty much all of it.

[00:51:05] **David Crabill:** Well, I noticed that you also, I think, got a Good Food Award last year. Correct?

[00:51:11] **Sahar Shomali:** Yes. Oh my God. Yes. I love that one. I have this really, really wonderful, talented friend who uh, works up in NorCal in San Francisco and she has her own jam company called Saba Jam. And she has been attending good food awards for years. And she was the one who recommended me. She called me up and said, this was two years ago she said that the good foods committee has now been added. A category of grains and a category of flatbreads. And it has to be a flatbread only for the competition. And you should enter. So I had to choose from all the items that I had, only the ones that would qualify flatbread, and enter them into the competition. Dastaneh, the one with walnuts and caramelized onions and turmeric, won that year. And, it was wonderful. It felt great knowing that I am making a product that fits. Into these criteria of being labeled a good food, it's healthy, it's delicious.

It's made the right way. It was very satisfying and yeah, I have the label on my desk and the bread at all times. It says I won. And hopefully, in the coming years, I will have new flatbreads that I can add to the competition and see if they will win too.

[00:52:25] **David Crabill:** So on a week-to-week basis, how many of your customers would you say are like regular customers? Like what percentage?

[00:52:33] **Sahar Shomali:** About 70% are regular customers at this point. And the other 30 are a combination of those who have heard about me but haven't had the chance to come to them to try the bread yet, or the people who are just walking by the booth and see the bread items and go, oh, you know, that looks good. What is it? What are you making?

[00:52:57] **David Crabill:** And I know you have like three distribution pillars. You've got the pickup and delivery option. You have the farmer's market or the markets that you sell at, and then you have the wholesale locations. How are your sales spread between those, like what gets the most, what gets the least?

[00:53:13] **Sahar Shomali:** Farmer's markets still do the most. The wholesale accounts are wonderful because they're steady. They give me peace of mind, and I know that their businesses are there every.

So that's very helpful. Everything else, the orders, the pickups, the shipping bread around the state that one just varies week to week. So it's not something I can fully rely on for some weeks. It's a lot, in some ways there are none.

[00:53:43] **David Crabill:** And at the farmer's market do you usually prepare the same number of items each time, or like, do you typically sell out before the market ends, or do you usually have leftovers?

[00:53:54] **Sahar Shomali:** At this point, having done it for about four years at the markets, I've gotten a good sense of how much I'm going to sell on a weekly basis. I have all my numbers from the previous years. So I tend to know where my sales are going to be and just make that much. So if I usually sell out by the time the market ends, or if I have leftovers, there are very few, maybe three or four pieces of bread at most.

So yeah, thankfully I've got a good handle on it. I also encourage my steady customers to pre-order if they want. So that it both gives me an idea of how much bread I need to make for our market. And also ensures that those people who are coming back every week, that they are getting the product that they want, that they're not gonna show up every week. Wondering if let's say the library, they wanted it. If it's gonna be there or not.

[00:54:49] **David Crabill:** And I know that you'd also offer to ship within California. Is that something that you do a lot? Like how much have you gotten sales from outside of your area, considering that you probably are one of only people that offer authentic Iranian bread in the state?

[00:55:08] **Sahar Shomali:** It's good. Yes. I do get orders a lot, usually from around the San Francisco area. I do get asked every once in a while from people out of state, which I have to sadly decline because again, cottage business, I can't sell out of state how much as I said before, it really varies.

So during the holiday season, both the, Western holiday season and the Iranian holiday season, which are about three months apart, I get a lot of orders, and a lot of shipping everywhere. A lot of pickups, all that. And throughout the summer, it usually drops low.

[00:55:45] **David Crabill:** So obviously you've built up quite a notable bakery at this point, and I know that you still have plans for the future. So where are you trying to take this business? And would you like it to go?

[00:56:02] **Sahar Shomali:** oh, the dream. I would like to have a small bread bakery. I want Kouzeh to be a brick-and-mortar store. I honestly still believe, and I don't know if it will happen when I actually do this, but I really wanted to be the only bread just like the rules are right now. Only Iranian bread.

I don't even want to have seating. I don't want chairs and tables. I don't wanna serve coffee or tea or anything like that. I want it to be a bread bakery. You walk in, you buy your bread, you walk out and that's it. Because that will give me the freedom to make so many different types of bread and offer it to everyone as fresh as I can, keeping the steady schedule of baking fresh bread rather than having to deal with tables, service, and things like that.

That's my dream. Maybe again, it comes from the fact that I'm not really a front-of-house person. I'm more of a back-of-the-house person. So we'll see. if I ever actually put the place together. but the dream is a small bread bakery, nothing too big, just enough that I can run it by myself.

And really two or three employees to be able to keep this business going to achieve what I wanna achieve with it, which is to make good Iranian bread and preserve the culture in some way. And also to be able to live my life without it being 24 7 work. That's the dream.

[00:57:28] **David Crabill:** Have you already started looking for commercial locations to potentially buy?

[00:57:35] **Sahar Shomali:** I think I've been looking for it all this time. It's one of my favorite pastimes to just look up what's available out there. But I haven't taken any solid steps in that direction yet, because I know where my business is right now. And it will be very risky of me to try and move it to a scenario like that with the amount of work and attention and money that's gonna take to move it out of my house right now.

It will be extremely risky for me to do that right now. So I think I will still just window shop online until I get to a point where I feel like I can do it.

[00:58:13] **David Crabill:** Well, Sahar, thank you so much for coming on and sharing your story with us. Now, if someone would like to learn more about your business, how can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:26] **Sahar Shomali:** Of course, they can always find a lot of information on the Kouzeh website, which is www.kouzehbakery.com. Almost all the information about me, about the bread, about where they can find Kouzeh at the farmer's markets or at wholesale places. All of that information is on the website. Also, my contact information, which would be the email and the phone number for the business are both there. They can always reach out to either one of those. I'd be happy to take a call or answer an email.

[00:58:59] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today.

[00:59:03] **Sahar Shomali:** Of course. Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun.

[00:59:06] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/70. And I have to ask, are you enjoying this podcast? And if so, have you left me a review yet? If not, please head over to Apple Podcast and leave me a review right now.

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