

Serve the People with Lee Thomas

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 Lee Thomas, who is the first MEHKO I've had on the show.

I'll explain more about that in a bit, but a quick reminder, we are just a couple months away from the Home-Based Food Entrepreneur Conference. This is the only national conference for our industry, so you're not gonna want to miss it.

It's a virtual four day conference that goes from April 10th through April 13th, so four full days of keynotes, workshops, breakout sessions, and perhaps most importantly, the community that you'll get to interact with along the way. Now most multi-day virtual conferences like this cost well over a hundred dollars, but this conference will only cost you \$35.

And yes, that price includes everything. And even if you can't attend during the day, you'll still get access to all the recordings that you can watch on your own time. So if you haven't registered yet, you can sign up right now by going to cottagefoodconference.com

All right, so I have Lee Thomas on the show today, and this is a pretty unique story. Lee lives in San Leandro, California. He actually just recently ran for mayor of San Leandro, but he also sells barbecue meats and veggies with his home based food business. GrilleeQ.

Now you might be thinking, wait, he sells barbecued meats. That can't be a legal cottage food business in California and no it's not. Lee is actually a licensed Microenterprise home kitchen operation or MEHKO for short. So to quickly catch you up back in 2018, California passed its first of its kind MEHKO law to essentially allow home based micro restaurants.

Utah now also has a MEHKO law and other states are looking to adopt one as well.

But California's MEHKO law came with a big catch, which was that each county had to adopt an ordinance for the law to apply in that county. And

ordinances can take a long time. So basically, lots of people got excited about the new law, and then lots of people got disappointed when they realized they couldn't actually use it.

And one of those people was Lee. But instead of getting disappointed, he realized that he could leverage his political connections to help get an ordinance passed. And that's exactly what he did. And he became the first licensed MEHKO in Alameda County. Now, there's a lot more to this story, but I will let you discover that along the way.

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

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

[00:02:51] **Lee Thomas:** Thanks for having me.

[00:02:52] **David Crabill:** So Lee uh, you know, usually I have people start by talking about their business, but we're recording this in November. This actually isn't going to air until 2023, but it was just a week ago that the election happened, and I know you ran for mayor. And so it's just been real time happening right now.

So I just wanted start with that and ask you like, what was it like to run for Mayor of San Leandro?

[00:03:18] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, I tell you, it was a, it was a great experience. You know, being a former council member in the city of San Leandro I was pretty much used to what it actually took to run a campaign. But this experience was uh, quite different from when I ran for city council because the stakes felt a lot higher as you were running for mayor and the amount of tension that was needed and the amount of people that you spoke to and interactions that you actually had with folks was quite different from running for a council seat versus a mayor seat. And so, ultimately great experience. Lots of volunteer support lots of donor support. And, you know, anyone knows anything about running for office is like you build a, a mini company in a short amount of time.

[00:04:01] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, I know you didn't win, but what do you feel like you took away from this experience?

[00:04:08] **Lee Thomas:** I just hope that I inspired next generation of African Americans to run for office in the city of San Leandro. If uh, anyone knows anything about San Leandro, it was at 1.1 of the most racist cities in America

and a sun, sun up sundown city for a place where African Americans couldn't really be and to be the second African American to run for mayor in the last 16 years.

I just hope that if anything I inspired a generation of African American youth or even adults or young adults that said, you know, Lee went out and did this. He put it all out there. He left it all out here. In an attempt to become the next mayor of San Leandro, serve the people of San Leandro, and I just hope I inspired them to feel passionate enough about getting into service and believing that they can actually do it.

And so while we were unsuccessful this time I'm hoping that one day the city of San Leandro considering its dark history, will see an African American elite, the city.

[00:05:12] **David Crabill:** Obviously didn't win, but I saw that you were endorsed by a lot of people and a lot of mayors, including the current mayor of San Leandro, like, it seemed like you, you had at least, pretty decent positioning to win, right?

[00:05:27] **Lee Thomas:** Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, I've, been so grateful and lucky to be able to build relationships with politicians throughout Alameda County. I was endorsed by almost every mayor in Alameda County except for I think three. And really just felt good to know that they believed in me to be able to run for office.

They believed that I could be the next mayor of San Leandro and do good. And it just goes to show that have And you build the right relationships and you do what you ultimately set out to do, which is make an impact and support people and help people and make change.

People will see that and they'll recognize that.

[00:06:08] **David Crabill:** We're gonna get into your, business in a little bit, but almost everybody who listens to this podcast has never given to think about running for mayor. And I was just curious like, election day, what is that like? I mean, that must have been just a crazy day.

[00:06:24] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, it's, it's, you know, it's nerve wracking, right? Uh, Because, you know, you wake up in the morning, you know, it's election day. If you're not voting in person, you've already submitted your ballot. You've got people reaching out to you who said, Hey, Lee, good luck. And they voted for

you. And you're, you're having these sparse conversations throughout the day and you're receiving text messages of people who are telling you, good luck tonight.

And you're literally waiting for the polls to close at eight o'clock. And once the polls close at eight o'clock, you're then waiting from about eight to about eight 15, potentially 8 24, the results to come out. And so, you know, your stomach's, kind of twisted. The anticipation is there and you just don't know what to like, expect.

And as you wait and wait, you know, you eventually find out that months and months of walking and knocking on doors uh, what the result is actually going to be. And so, It's a little nerve-wracking, but yet at the same time it's a great feeling knowing, knowing that you came to the end of a finish line that you worked hard to try to get something done and you make connections and spoken with folks.

And it also felt really great just receiving text messages from citizens who were like, really rooting for you. And I think if anything, what's hard about an election is that you feel bad for the folks. Or not bad, but you feel sad that you weren't able to get the office to do the work that you knew, know you could do when you had so many people supporting you because you wanted to do it for them as well.

[00:07:55] **David Crabill:** Leading up to election day, like did you already have a pretty good sense that you weren't gonna win, or did you really have no idea at 8:00 PM on election day what the results were gonna be?

[00:08:09] **Lee Thomas:** Oh no. I mean, we myself and my team, we felt really confident. We felt that we, we felt that we picked up a lot of momentum towards the last couple months of the, of the election. And you know, with rank choice voting we really thought we were gonna be in the top two there.

unfortunately we weren't. But I think, you know, there's a lot of factors that go into potentially why you weren't in the top two. Why you, you know, didn't win. I think the hardest part about elections and running for office is you can't actually really pinpoint what worked and what did not work when you were campaigning.

You can look at all the data that you want after the fact, after all of the ballots have been closed. And But at the end of the day, I don't think there's one particular strategy that you can say you should have done.

Or maybe we should not have done because you have to put your trust in the voters.

[00:09:07] **David Crabill:** So when you finally knew, like you had definitely lost, what was the feeling?

[00:09:15] **Lee Thomas:** Well I think once again, know, running for office, it's, it's a mental, it's all a mental game. You're working on trying to not be distracted by what your opponents might be doing.

You're working on not trying to be distracted by what naysayers are doing. you know, you're building up the shield. As you build up the shield, the shield is going to, it is gonna protect you in two ways. One, it's protects you throughout the election from being able to rub off the negativity that might come your way.

But second, what it really does is, you know, it preps you for election night. You know, you're, you have to be ready mentally for loss. And as much as I was mentally prepared for a win, I prepared myself uh, mentally for a loss because, you know, I know that, you know what, there's a lot of things that can still be accomplished with not being in office.

You know, for me, yeah, it was a sad moment, but yet it wasn't a moment that I felt defeated because I know there's still a lot that I could do.

Even not being an elected official.

[00:10:19] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, you won't, you won't be the next mayor of the next term, but you, you certainly have done a lot and will continue to do a lot. I mean, can you walk through some of the things, I know you've been on the city council. What are some of the other things you've done to support the city and the community of San Leandro?

[00:10:34] **Lee Thomas:** Oh yeah, you know uh, I'll be going into my ninth year as the founder of the New Shoes for School Drive. And uh, essentially what that is, is I raise money every year and I get donors and, sponsors, and I raise the money anywhere between, you know, \$3,000 and \$4,000 every summer.

And then I worked directly with the San Leandro Unified School District, who then works on putting a, a group of students together and families who are underserved. And, you know, will take anywhere between, you know, 50 to 60 kids uh, shopping for brand new pairs of shoes. And so it's just a, a real great

feeling to continue to be able to give back. Last year, or not last year, but this year we did a fundraiser with the San Leandro Girls softball team for equipment. And toy drives. I recently did a fundraiser for Spectrum Community Service that supports seniors and fall prevention, and they provide meals for seniors.

And so to be able to do things like that and then just being in service clubs, you know, I'm a member of the San Leandro Rotary and I'm a member of the San Leandro Scholarship Foundation. So I continue to just have impact in San Leandro just through service.

[00:11:45] **David Crabill:** you know, I know that the barbecue business is just a side thing, right? So what is your career?

[00:11:52] **Lee Thomas:** Monday through Friday I work for Oakland Unified School District and I'm an administrator in the district there. And my job title, I'm a community school manager. So essentially I'm in charge of bringing all partnerships into schools, coordinating outside partners who might wanna come into school and do work with our youth and families.

And on top of that really just being able to support families with social service work. Unfortunately sometimes domestic violence needs housing food insecurity. A wide range of things that I think a lot of people sometimes don't know is that in order for a student to be successful in school, there's gotta be a wide range of wraparound services to help them at the same time.

and that's really my job there is, you know, if you've got a kid. You know, with no insurance and they've got a toothache, well, they're not gonna be able to enjoy lunch. They're not gonna be able to have the focus that they need in the classroom. And so my job there is to work on getting the family connected with services so we can figure out how to help that kid with the toothache

so on top of just that being the Monday through Friday job, I also serve as union president for the administrators in Oakland, where I represent 300 administrators And essentially make sure that, you know, they're getting paid for what they deserve.

[00:13:10] **David Crabill:** So it sounds like the common thread that I'm seeing here is just a lot of service, a lot of support, a lot of community support which just seems like that's who you are. Like would you agree? Like that's the common theme behind everything you do.

[00:13:25] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, absolutely. I would say that this was instilled for me from my first job at the YMCA. And one of the things that I learned through my years, and I spent about almost 20 years with the Y M C A was you didn't really do the job as much for the pay as much you did for service. And that just kind of got instilled in me as a kid and as a young adult. And, you know, I've just kind of taken it with me the whole way.

[00:13:54] **David Crabill:** Well, that's good transition into GrilleeQ into your barbecue company, right? Like why did you choose to start this barbecue business?

[00:14:03] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, well uh, GrilleeQ, first of all, if any anyone, uh, wants to know? Uh, GrilleeQ is just, it's it's a playoff in my name G-R-I-L-L-E-E-Q, so Grill Lee, and then Q so that is, that's the creation of the name first of all. Second is um, I barbecued a lot college and I wasn't very good at it in the beginning and barbecue with three of my good buddies.

And we'd host these, gatherings at our place. It was, we'll, barbecue, the meat if you bring over the beverages.

And so that's how we put the parties together. but eventually, uh, as we, you know, continue to grow and we move on to become adults I just kind of stayed with barbecue. I really enjoyed it. And so it went from barbecuing to barbecuing for family on a regular basis. And every year I have at my house, I host a huge 4th of July It's an annual thing that my wife and I do, I break out anything and everything on the grill. And so when AB 6 26 came along and I was actually still in office and I was looking at it, you know, when I was off in office and then when I didn't go back into office as a council member I reached out to Cook Alliance because at first it was all about, boy, I would really love to do this and do a barbecue business, but the more I really dove into the bill, Going back to the, what we just talked about service, I realized that I could have a substantial impact in like, changing lives for folks.

And so making the push to be able to get that bell passed as much as it was yes for me, because I wanted to barbecue and I wanted to share my passion for barbecue with other folks. It started with me, but then it reverted not being all about me and being about what I could actually do for other people.

[00:15:52] **David Crabill:** Right. So just to let anyone know who doesn't know, AB 6 26 is the micro enterprise home kitchen operation or MEHKO bill that was passed through California in 2018. And one of the unique things about the law that was passed is that every single county had to create an ordinance to

actually allow the law in their county. And you know, at that point there was only one county that did, which was Riverside County. But I guess you learned about the law after it had already been passed and like had it already gone into effect by the time you actually heard about the law?

[00:16:27] **Lee Thomas:** Correct.

[00:16:28] **David Crabill:** Was the law what caused you to want to start this business? Or did you already like, have the seeds in your head of starting this business before?

[00:16:40] **Lee Thomas:** Well, yeah. I already had the seeds in my head. Right. I mean, you could say off the grid, I was already doing, you know, things for family and friends. Right. Just wasn't really advertising that. And so the seeds were already there. It was more about how do I get a chance to do this And do it legally, right? my, first true initial drive was how do I get involved in this and get this thing passed in Alameda County? Because I want to be legit. I wanna sell barbecue.

Right. And I had already written a business plan, you know, the name was established, you know but it was about the implementation of being able to do it without having the fear of someone coming and knocking on my door saying, you can't sell barbecue. Right. But as much as I wanted to do it you know, I'm blessed to be able to have a Monday through Friday, you know, a good paying job.

Right. And so, you know, yes, it's a, it's a side hustle for me. It's a way to be able to share something I'm passionate about and, be fortunate enough to call it a side hustle. but this is not a hustle for some folks, this is a like legitimate way of saying, this is the skillset that I have.

I know that I can do it and you know what? I need money. I need to be able to make a living. I got bills to pay, I got mouths to feed. And that became just such a driving force for me, knowing that when I think about mouths to feed, rent to pay bills to pay, like I'm thinking about immigrants and people of color and you know, single moms.

And for me, yeah, isn't as much as about I need to get this bill passed cause I wanna start GrilleeQ. It was about I need to get this bill passed. Cause we got people out here trying to cook to live.

[00:18:20] **David Crabill:** so I know it took a little bit of time to actually get that ordinance passed, and that's true of pretty much every county that has passed the, laws so far. But when do you remember first selling your barbecue to somebody?

[00:18:35] **Lee Thomas:** Oh boy it was friends. random friends. I can't remember, you know, what year, it actually was, but, it was as easy as someone just, you know, a friend of mine just saying, you know, can you grill us some chicken for a party? And, I can tell you that was probably you know, prior to, opening GrilleeQ I remember one day sitting here saying, I think I could actually sell my food when people started asking about it.

Or people started saying, Lee, your food's really good. And it was right kind of then and there, like, it became more of a reality of something that was a hobby and something that I was actually passionate about could actually start to make some money for me.

[00:19:16] **David Crabill:** So it sounds like you're, you know, just kind of selling to friends or family or whatever on the side, you know, for a while, which is very common. That's one thing, but it's another to actually like come out, establish. Business, create a business name and actually promote your business without having a law to back you.

And I know you did that, at what point did you decide to just, you know, I'm gonna put myself out there even if it's not legal. Did you have ambitions to get the ordinance passed soon at that point? Or, did you just know that that wasn't really an option?

[00:19:47] **Lee Thomas:** you know, there was a point, it took us about three years here in Alameda County to, you know, work through the bureaucracy and get it adopted here. And it just came to a point where I said, you know what? I'd rather be the poster boy for getting shut down. And yet being able to use data and be able to show that people buy from me and no one's gotten sick from the food that I've eaten, that they've boughten from me.

And that was really like my motive, right, is to just kind of buck the system a little bit to show that, you know what I'm doing everything that's right here. I've got a food manager license, I've taken the class, and I'm doing everything within the, parameters that the bill actually says to do.

And yet, as we were working, you know, through, through the bureaucracy here in Alameda County and, you know, seeing some, potential, I wouldn't say as

much pushback as much, as more just hesitation. I just thought it was really important to be able to say, look, this works, No one gets, no one's getting sick, and there's a need for.

[00:20:56] **David Crabill:** Well, one thing that really brought this to the surface was the pandemic, right? and you had already started advertising promoting your business before the pandemic happened. Then the pandemic happened, Did you see a shift at that point? I mean, what was it like to kind of walk your business through the start of the pandemic?

[00:21:14] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, absolutely. You know, so when I put my first initial business plan together what I was doing is I was loading up my Weber grills and I was going to people's homes here in San Leandro, and I was cooking in their backyards. Well, when the pandemic hit, the first realization for me was when people started calling me.

And if anyone remembers, you know, the, supermarkets, you know, there was, you know, everyone went and, and bought up as much meat as possible and, you know, all the supplies, everyone was worried, right. It was right then and there that I started having friends call me and say, Lee, can you barbecue with some food?

Right. Because for them it was also like they would go to the, you know, they're going to the supermarkets and they can't find meat. And so it was right then and there, like, I'm going to the, the butchers, the meat suppliers, and I'm being able to buy meats and I'm being able to cook meals for folks.

And at that time, once again, the shift was really noticeable to me because I'm whipping out, you know, several meals a week for folks. Because what they're doing is then they're just, they're eating it through the week, but then they start, you know, they're freezing it at the same time. And so it was pretty obvious that I had to make that shift with the pandemic and really just wrap up the sales from my own home because it was an actual need.

And when we went to uh, the county the final push for us was this was, you know, it was a covid response. You have to pass this now because it's a covid response for people to be able to cook and sell food from their home.

[00:22:51] **David Crabill:** So as you were trying to get the ordinance passed in Alameda, I know you didn't get shut down, but of course there is a whole thing with the broke ass cooks fiasco, right? Like, can you share what that was and like maybe how that affected things?

[00:23:08] **Lee Thomas:** I think as much as COVID played a role in, in expediting and speeding this process up, I think the shutdown of folks like broke as cooks and, you know, anyone else that was shut down in this pandemic was just as impactful in regards to being able to show that this was a real need.

You know, broke ass cooks. It was phenomenal to just see how they exploded and how many people started following them and being able to see them, you know, succeed in such a short time only to see that taken away. I sit here and say, this is the, one country where you're, allowed to go out and make as much money as possible, but yet you are not allowed to make money when you've got certain things preventing you from being able to just do what, you know, the American dream is like, be able to make money, be able to succeed and, you know, feed your family or do whatever you, whatever else you want in life.

[00:24:07] **David Crabill:** So would you say that the health department was always really opposed to passing this ordinance? Like I know that it ended up not being in their hands, but I think it was the city council that had the ability to pass an ordinance, but were you getting a lot of resistance from the health department through this process?

[00:24:26] **Lee Thomas:** You know, the county supervisors, right? Cause they were, you know, they report to the county supervisor here in Alameda County and, you know, sometimes, you know, from being a government employee to being a council member, things move slow in government sometimes also things move slow because of hesitation.

And I'm not sure of the health department. they against this as much as they were just more concerned about adding something else to their plate, and how does it look in working through the logistical details of what does this look like in Alameda County if on top of restaurant inspections, now we have home inspections to have to add on top of that.

And so I think some of it was just hesitation for adding more to their plate on top of not really just having a feel for like how this actually helps people. Right. I don't think that was ever really on their radar that like, MEHKOs were gonna help people. Versus it was kind of like, well, this is not traditional.

[00:25:32] **David Crabill:** Let's say the pandemic never happened. do you think that you would've eventually gotten an ordinance passed, or do you think that that sort of had to happen for it even to be a consideration or a priority.

[00:25:46] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, I had no doubt that we would've gotten past because at that time God bless her soul on rest in peace, Wilma Chan supervisor, Wilma Chan, was one of the biggest champions for us here in Alameda County and believing in this process. Supervisor Chan was always about family, always about youth. And I think she was able to make the connection of how this was going to be able to support families.

And so it might have taken a little bit longer, but I have no doubt we would've passed.

[00:26:20] **David Crabill:** So, I know you worked with Matt Jorgensen and the Cook Alliance and you're considered the lead for Alameda County passing the ordinance. So what were some of the connections or the relationships that you brought to this process that helped get it passed?

[00:26:34] **Lee Thomas:** Well, you know, right out the gates, just because I had the established relationships within the county already as a former council member is what allowed us to get a seat at the table quicker and have, be able to have the conversations with, the supervisor's office here in Alameda County.

On top of that I think I was able to bring a very unique skill to support Cook Alliance, which is just kind of overall strategy of how to work with the local politicians and the things that we actually needed to do to bring attention to the cause. And so being able to be a lead was great because, not only did I bring just political connections, but I also brought a lens of how to navigate the system and kind of steps and processes that we need to do to try to work, to try to get this thing on the agenda.

[00:27:26] **David Crabill:** That's so interesting because I'm, you know, you're trying to do this business to not only just help yourself and start a business and make money, but to help a bunch of people in San Leandro and Alameda County start their own businesses. But what's interesting is like what you brought to the table, it sounds like in a similar way, You might've been doing it to help Alameda County get an ordinance passed, but just the process that you went through and Alameda County might you know, be helping better move that process along forward in other counties as well.

[00:27:58] **Lee Thomas:** Oh yeah. I mean, I can tell you that being able to get it past here in Alameda County for me was being able to, like, I wanna set the tone right. I want to be able to say, look, Alameda County did this, so can you, and for me there was a bigger picture. Yes, it was, you know, always about, being able to help people.

But it was also just about like, let me show you that if Alameda County can do it, hey, any other county can do this as well.

One thing that I've learned in government is that there are, you know, there's copycat counties, right? And when something is working you will tend to see other political officials jump on that bandwagon and bring it to their county as well.

[00:28:44] **David Crabill:** you know, you went through this big process and it took years. Like when did it actually pass and what was that day or what was that feeling like when it actually got adopted?

[00:28:55] **Lee Thomas:** Oh man. there was just such a sense of joy when it was finally on the supervisor's agenda. And there's five, supervisors here in Alameda County.

And just the overwhelming joy of like, as they did the roll call vote. And you're sitting there and you've got, you know, five supervisors and you're, you know, you're hearing a yes, a yes, a yes and a yes. And you're seeing a unanimous five votes come to support this. I tell you, it was just, it was overwhelming.

It was you know, knowing that three years of hard work, many phone calls, many meetings many times silence that it finally just came to fruition. And, you know, that the fact that we didn't give up on it, and even at sometimes where it seemed like we had no momentum

it was an overwhelming feeling of just like joy and, and satisfaction of knowing that we didn't fail.

[00:29:55] **David Crabill:** So not only did you, help get this ordinance passed, but you were the first legal MEHKO right?

[00:30:04] **Lee Thomas:** sure was.

[00:30:06] **David Crabill:** And so what did you actually have to do to get the, like permit? Like what was the cost? What was the actual process like?

[00:30:14] **Lee Thomas:** Well, you know, the cost is something that I think we still need to come back and evaluate here in Alameda County because it's, it's currently \$697. And to me that is just a, it's a shame because something that's written to support a specific demographic of people. And yet you tack on a 6 97

you check on a permit fee, well, that's the barrier, you know, it becomes an instant barrier.

And so that's something I think we've gotta continue to kind of work on here in Alameda County. and to answer your question, yes, so I, you know, I paid a \$697 permit. I showed that I had, you know, my food manager license and that I've gone through the, required training that is there, and essentially being able to just have my house prepped under, what was needed.

So, for instance, you know, being able to show where my food was stored and being able to show that I had the food storage correctly, in my refrigerator, and that I had a thermostat in my refrigerator, and that my refrigerator was running at the, you know, proper temperature, the hot water that was coming outta my sink was running at, you know, the, the temperature, temperature you know, it's just being able. Have the necessary pressure and hot water coming out of there and, you know, showing where, you know, I store my, you know seasonings, right? And on top of that I had to fill out their application process.

But on top of the application process, you had to pre, you know, fill out your menu and, and load your menu and on top of your menu had to list um, any allergens uh, that you may be using as part of your food process. And so um, for me it was quite easy because I already had a menu made and so I just transitioned my menu onto their paperwork.

It is a little bit of a tedious process for people just starting, and I've been fortunate enough to help two people now kind of work through that paperwork process and, and, and let them know what they needed to do.

[00:32:11] **David Crabill:** Would you say that the inspection process ended up being easier or more complicated than you were expecting?

[00:32:19] **Lee Thomas:** I thought it was easier than I expected. You know? I remember the first inspection, the first inspection was the first time I had the health department here at my home. And because they, I don't even think they knew what to expect, right?

And so, you know, they were very thorough and they went down the list in making sure that I agreed to, you know, the protocol and procedures of, you know, how I was gonna sell food and how I was gonna prep food. But I noticed a vast difference between the second inspection this summer from the inspectors who looked a little bit more comfortable and in somebody's home.

And part of this \$697 fee is my understanding is because they're going into people's homes. So they're sending two inspectors with them. And I guess, which is, you know, when they do their inspections for restaurants, they're not sending two inspectors, but because they're going into homes, they're, they're in pairs.

And so the second time around it was pretty obvious, or I felt it was pretty obvious that the inspectors who came through had gone through a MEHKO process um, many times.

[00:33:26] **David Crabill:** that is so interesting because even the cottage food law Class B permits since two. And 13 have had an inspection process. And I have never heard of a county sending two inspectors to inspect somebody's home in any state.

[00:33:43] **Lee Thomas:** I'm absolutely shocked by it as well, it's just interesting because hey, what's the difference between going into a person's home, maybe to going into a, have I owned a restaurant and I'm the only owner there, and I'm the owner there when you come in and it's just myself and an inspector,

[00:34:00] **David Crabill:** it's definitely not typical. So it's very interesting. Now you went through the permit process, it costs almost You got a food manager training, which is like a hundred bucks or more. And then was there any other permits that you had to get to be legal in San Leandro?

[00:34:22] **Lee Thomas:** Then I've gotta pay the San Leandro business license here. And so the business license tax here, I pay like 130 bucks for that.

[00:34:31] **David Crabill:** So you're, you know, you're almost like a thousand dollars into this before you even get going.

[00:34:36] **Lee Thomas:** Oh yeah. No doubt. You're gonna be, you know, look I've got to estimate it, our projected cost of you're gonna, you know, you're gonna be probably anywhere between, 1200 to 1500 bucks, right? Just to kind of get going. And that is a low estimate of you want to talk about, you know, your website fee if you know, if you're gonna do a website, if you're gonna, you know, you're gonna have your logo designed and you know, if you're gonna buy, you know, stickers or, you know, things like that that you need and then your to go your to-go stuff, right?

I mean, I remember my first, couple sales, it was on paper plates before I transitioned to like, to go boxes.

[00:35:15] **David Crabill:** So you went through this whole process to get your business like legally set up, and it is kind of a complicated process, but it's not like you can just be like a commercial restaurant, right? And sell whatever you want, do whatever you want. Like there's quite a bit of limitations to this bill. So what are some of the limiting factors or the restrictions that you have to adhere to as MEHKO in California?

[00:35:38] **Lee Thomas:** Yeah. So, you know, I, I think one of the most challenging parts for a MEHKO is like, especially in the business that I'm in, right? And like, I deal in a lot of meats, right? I'm, I'm a barbecue business, right? And not being able to marinate your meat ahead of time, So like, that's a challenge, right?

I don't know if that restriction is in restaurants that, you can't marinate your meat. You know, you've gotta marinate the same day. Sell the same day, right? And so, obviously, how do you get around that? You know, you, you say, okay, well I'm gonna go ahead and marinate my meat at 12 midnight, I mean, 12:00 AM right?

The next morning,, because it's, you know, marinate the same day, sell the same day. The 54, it's now it was 50, but now it's now up to rate, it's been pushed up to \$54,000 a year that you can actually make. It's once again, going back to like we live in a place where you are encouraged to make as much money as you can, but it's ridiculous that they put a cap on not allowing people to make as much money as they can.

It's just like ludicrous to me that, you know, going outside of any typical business and you're like, Hey, you know what hey, you restaurant you're, no, you're only gonna be allowed to make this much and if you go past this much, you know, you've got problems, right? And so there's a limitation, \$54,000 a year, there's a limitation on how much you can cook and sell.

It's like 30 meals in a day, or 60 meals in a week, That you could actually do that as well. You can have a deliver. You could, you know, one person in your family could actually be able to deliver. You can't use third party delivers unless it's for, uh, the purpose of serving somebody with a disability.

And so there are some restrictions. Um, Some of it I understand, I guess because, the last thing you need is someone putting food safety at risk. Of trying

to turn their home kitchen into a commercial kitchen. So I can kind of see a correlation there. But yet at the same time I just can't believe that you put a, a financial cap on something that you're allowing somebody to call their actual business.

[00:37:48] **David Crabill:** Think one of the reason, I don't think it's for the cap, but I think, you know, the limitation for how many meals you can sell is like, they don't want neighborhoods to feel like business centers. Right? Like they don't want someone running like a full fledged restaurant. You know, people coming and picking up and parking issues.

Like, I don't know. Is that, you think that's part of the reason why they're the limitations?

[00:38:09] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, no doubt. I I have no doubt that that has something to do with it. Right. I mean, the last thing you need are, cars double parked or people's, you know, driveways being parked or like mass lines, going out the side of someone's house because they're waiting to pick up food. Right. I think that definitely has something to do with it.

But like look, I mean, what, you know, \$54,000 a year. First of all, I think if you, if you're racking 54, 50 \$4,000 a year outta your home then you're doing something extraordinarily special. And so I would hope that if that's the case, that they're not for long in their home and they're, you know soon to be a food truck or, brick and mortar somewhere.

[00:38:53] **David Crabill:** you know, so you, went through this process. You became the first MEHKO in Alameda County, and then like, you actually kind of made a big deal about the grand opening of your business, right? I know this is partly with the Cook Alliance, but can you describe what that grand opening day was like?

[00:39:09] **Lee Thomas:** Oh man. Phenomenal, right? If anyone uh, was to go check it out, you can, you know, you can see it on some of my social media platforms. I mean, we, pulled out all the stops, right? There was a lot of press there that day. I had my own video guys there, my own photographer guys. I mean, we had a drone run you know, some footage from the top of my backyard.

Uh, we had the mayor of San Leandro here, a couple other politicians from other cities as well as the city manager and you know, folks from, just other political organizations. And then we had to cook alliance team here. And so,

yeah, it was absolutely a big deal because we just wanted to highlight like how successful this could actually be and the feel of everyone in my backyard.

And they're sitting there and they're eating. Having a good time, and you're sitting here saying, this is no different from if a group of people were in a restaurant at a gathering or, you know, rented out a back room at the restaurant, except that they were in my backyard. And it was just, it was an unbelievable day.

one of the things that, you know, as I've worked with Cook Alliance and, and I, and as I've talked with other, potential politicians or other folks who are always hesitant about a home cook, this is what I tell them. I say, how many times have you gone to a friend's backyard barbecue?

Most of the times. They say, many times. And I said, were you ever concerned about how the food was cooked?? And they generally tell me no. And I said, if you're not concerned about going to a friend's backyard barbecue, then you should especially not be concerned with going to a home cook, because I guarantee your friend doesn't have the food manager license.

Your friend is not concerned about you getting sick. But the home cook is because it starts with the home cook and it leaves with the home cook. So it starts in their hands and it leaves their hands.

[00:41:11] **David Crabill:** Let's talk about your menu a little bit. Like what's on your menu and what was on your menu initially when you started it illegally? And what's on your menu today?

[00:41:20] **Lee Thomas:** I'm actually going through, as we speak, a, a menu revamp uh, right now, just based off of some things that are not on my menu that people have asked me to do. for instance like brisket I call all of my customers that, that nobody's considered a customer, they're considered a client.

That is the term that I use for everybody. And so they're all clients. And so I'll be doing a brisket for a client And that has come about over the last year because you can't get brisket here in San Leandro. there's not a place to get brisket. And so people come to me and they've started coming to me.

And so now this is gonna be a featured, it's gonna be a special request item, but they'll ask for a brisket. And it's about 15, it's usually about 15 hours for me to smoke on a brisket. so that we'll be adding that to the menu. One of the most. Popular things. On my menu is the skinless bonus Chicken Thighs, which have

been kind of coined or dubbed by many of my clients as Callie Thighs. And so I'll be switching as I revamp this upcoming menu. They'll go from chicken thighs to Cali. They'll be titled Cali Thighs. And just kind of an appreciation to folks who have had them and you know, I've got these portobello mushrooms that, you know, I smoke on the grill.

And then do a lot of pork bud, for folks. And so smoking that, that's usually, pretty anywhere between eight to 10 hour process. everything I do here, it's charcoal and its wood. So it's not on a trigger. It's not what a pellet grill.

There's no propane here. It's purely charcoal and it's wood and it's really trying to stick as close to just like the authenticity of like smoking meat. And so the example when I'm doing a 15 hour smoke you know what I'm getting very little sleep through that process because I'm checking the temperature the internal temperature of the meat.

I'm checking the external temperature of the, grill. And I'm working just through all of the elements that I actually have to do to ensure that any item that's being smoked is going to be to like the standard that I'm actually setting for, like, smoking meat here in San Leandro.

[00:43:34] **David Crabill:** So I know you have a lot of things on your menu. You do. I think all barbecue, right? But what's I thought was kind of interesting is you don't do the very most common barbecue items, right? Like burgers, hot dogs. I didn't see like that on your menu.

[00:43:50] **Lee Thomas:** No, you'll never see a burger or hot dog on my grill. unless you've got a super special request for a kid party, I, I won't turn you down because I want to make your kid happy. But that's just not what I do here. Right. there's some art that kind of goes behind this, right?

And that's what I try to really make myself known for, is like, just kind of the art of being able to do something exceptionally and knowing that you can't get this anywhere else, in San Leandro, at least not at this time, I know maybe one other guy potentially doing this, and I don't think he's legal

Um, And I don't think he has any, you know, any interest in being legal. But I want people to be like, man, I can go GrilleeQ and get a hickory smoke tri-tip and I can get it, done, you know, medium rare or rare to like whatever they want it at.

And they know that it's going to be an amazing try to, they know it's gonna have a, a unique smoke flavor to it. And I think one of the things that you get with me uh, this is great. So let's just, you know, David, let's just say you ordered a tri-tip for me, right? the tri-tip process is about an hour and a half right after I smoke it.

And then I do this, you know, I do the direct grill or indirect grill, but what I do for everyone who orders meat from me is I will show them like when their meat gets, gets onto the grill and I'll show them what I've marinated their meat. I show them as I put it on the grill and I will literally show them a, text them a picture of like when it's about to come off and there's just something relational, the relationship between me, the client, that they actually see the start of their meat hitting the grill and they see the finished product before they even eat it.

you know, it's an educational process, right? So for instance, when you order a slab of ribs for me, right? One of the first things I ask is, how many, guests do you have? And then I say, there's 12 bones in the slab of ribs. And then we do the mathematical breakdown of how many actual bones that we think a person's going to eat at their event,

And When you order a tri-tip from me, right? You don't just order a tri-tip from me, because one of the first questions I ask you is, are you gonna eat this? Right? And they, you know, most of the times they say no. And my response is, I don't mind slicing your tri-tip but I would prefer to leave it whole.

So the juices stay into meat. And so when you're ready to cut it, you're getting it at like the optimal taste and you just don't get that when you go into anywhere to like be able to like order barbecue, like I order meat or order anything, right? They take your order and you tell them how you want it and then they just fix it for you.

But I'm trying to create an experience here for you that not only did you just get a little bit educated on, you know, your meat and why I didn't slice it or why I gave you the option not to slice it, or maybe I'm going to tell you, I'm gonna give you a to go container of apple cider vinegar and I'm gonna tell you to pour that, a little bit of that in your wrapped foil ribs.

And then I'm gonna tell you how to warm that up so you have the best experience when you take those ribs out the oven for your.

[00:47:01] **David Crabill:** So I saw that you only do meals for 15 guests or less. Is that uh, because of your own limitations or is that because of the limitations of the.

[00:47:13] **Lee Thomas:** No, I mean it's, you know, that's, that's just a slight update that I gotta do to my website. normally, I get up to about 20, about 25 you know, 15 that was kind of put there just as an initial limit because I needed to kind of see where I was actually at, But for me, you know, my model, I've got a couple, different models kind of going here, which is like, for instance, I'll run a lunch special. Right. And generally I'll run a lunch special if I'm not taking what I call a customized order, a customized dinner for somebody. And so I'll say, I'll run a lunch special this week and I'll, go out on my email list and I'll put that out and people can come by and pick that up.

But generally what I find myself doing is I'm not running lunch specials as often because I'm doing like these dinners for folks. generally people, they'll call me by Wednesday, Thursday latest, and they, you know, we talk about what they actually want to eat.

Um, They ask me questions. I give them kind of a detailed run through of some of the things that, you know, they might need to know that they're ordering. And then I shop, I go shopping for them and then I prepare their meal and we, we talk about a set time for them to pick up. And so it's a great, because you're never getting any frozen meat from me.

I'm not defrosting anything. I'm never defrosting anything because I'm shopping on demand.

[00:48:31] **David Crabill:** So considering that it's like such a, you know, client catered process, like are you charging for that? Like do you charge premium pricing or how do you come up with the prices?

[00:48:42] **Lee Thomas:** Yeah. So, you know, the, I think one of the, the more unique things about my business is everyone gets what they call, I call it the, the car invoice, And so as I mentioned, you put your order with it in with me, and I go shopping for you. But when I give you your invoice, I show you your, the actual cost of your food. and on the top of your actual cost of your food. Then I tack my labor onto it. And so just as you would get your car fixed, you generally see how much the parts cost you, and then you see the labor cost. Well, that's exactly what you get from me.

And so we, we have this conversation because it's like, look, if you want this much food, this is generally what it's gonna cost you. And I give folks a general, you know, I've been doing this long enough now where I, I have a general idea of what the food is going to cost them. You know, sometimes I lose a couple dollars here or there, but it's nothing really significant.

And then I put my labor behind it, and then if it's too expensive, then we adjust the food. So we might, you know, take something off the menu or we might switch something out on the menu because as we change your menu, my labor changes at the same time.

And you know what, it's been amazing to me that I get no argument or no pushback when I break the model down to them. Because all they see is the fact that this guy just went shopping for me. And when they get to invoice under the description, it's food prep, grilling, smoking of meat.

And that I usually put how many hours it is that I, that I'm smoking your meat. so while I put my labor cost in there, I've got automatic supply cost built into that regardless. my supply cost, I got it anywhere between minimum \$10 supply cost or a \$20 supply cost. And so that's already built into my labor.

that way, I'm also factoring in when I gotta go back and I gotta buy charcoal in the long run, or I've gotta buy x y z. I've actually factored in a supply cost over a period of time for, for each order.

Did you see last year how uh, Kingsburg, came out and donated. I had a year of charcoal.

[00:50:55] **David Crabill:** Oh, I did not see that.

[00:50:57] **Lee Thomas:** They came out when I first became the legalized. And they caught wind of it. And they caught wind and I used Kingsburg charcoal. They came out and they brought a pallet of charcoal that took over a year for me to get rid of. And they came and ate breakfast. I couldn't barbecue breakfast for them that morning at my house.

It was pretty amazing.

[00:51:20] **David Crabill:** Did that promotion from them increase your business at all?

[00:51:26] **Lee Thomas:** you know, I don't know if it increased cause I didn't really look at the metrics, so like, you know, was there a ramp up in it. But I definitely, it increased my following on Twitter for sure.

every once in a while give them a plugin and marinate and I'll shoot it to them just to let them know they haven't gone anywhere.

[00:51:42] **David Crabill:** Well uh, we have to talk about your podcasts, right? Can you describe a little bit about that?

[00:51:48] **Lee Thomas:** Hey, the, the marinade um, I've got a podcast just finished season two here of the Marinade, and it was really a way for me to combine like two things I love, like politics and barbecue, right? And so I've got a co-host Steve Tavares from the East Base that it's in, who writes about local politics in San Leandro.

I reached out to Steve one day and I said, Hey, you know I kind of wanna do this podcast all about San Leandro and, and politics in San Leandro. And yet at the same time, like, give some exposure to my business at the same time. And so I dreamt up this idea of the marinade. And one of the things we do over the summer is local politicians come over and I prepare a barbecue meal for them, and we eat barbecue in my backyard. We talk barbecue and we talk politics. And so it's been just a, an amazing two years of having folks over. For the listeners, it gives them an opportunity to see the local political official a little bit differently because, you know, we go back and forth badgering about politics, but we talk about, their favorite piece of meat, what do they like about the barbecue?

What do they like about what they're eating at that very moment? it's been such a fun way to be able to combine two things that I really love. And at the same time as I get ready, you know, for season three, when the summer comes, you know, I've already been approached by just local business people saying, Hey, you know, is there a way for me to just get, pay a little bit of sponsorship for you to call out our, business name on the podcast.

And so that's something that, I'm looking forward to being able to do this summer is, you know charge something that's not ridiculous, but help some of these small businesses and throw a plug out to like, help them out at the same.

[00:53:37] **David Crabill:** So I know that at the end of season one you announced that you're running for mayor. Did you start the podcast as a way to

start promoting yourself? Like did you know that that was goal when you started this

[00:53:52] **Lee Thomas:** Yeah, there was, definitely an underlying piece that I knew that I was actually building up to be able to put me kind of back in the spotlight that I was gonna run for office.

But at the same time it was, it also gave me a platform to have some discussions about things politically here in San Leandro. And it gave me a platform to like cross promote my business and get like my food in more people's hands.

[00:54:17] **David Crabill:** I mean, you're definitely, it seems like you've, you've done quite a lot of orders and like you have no ambitions to take this to something bigger.

[00:54:29] **Lee Thomas:** No, not at all. and if I do it is gotta happen organically, If it happens organically, fantastic. If not I just really like the people contact, you know, like the people contact and the, they come over, they have some conversation with me before they pick up their meal and they, you know, they take it.

I think of anything like long term, it's like the long term plan to like, I could see myself maybe ramping this up when my girls go to college because I, I have a great inkling that it's not gonna be a cheap college that they go to just based off of academically how they've been over the last several years.

And so I said I, I see this as a maybe ramping it up even more to help maybe offset, you know, a college cost. Cause the 5 29 count's not gonna do it by itself anymore.

[00:55:14] **David Crabill:** I saw in a news article that you also like, have or had aspirations to help fundraise, to help other MEHKOs get started. Right?

[00:55:25] **Lee Thomas:** Absolutely. I still see that as a real ultimate goal here. Like, a long term goal for me is how many MEHKOs will I be able to get support in San Leandro and help get open? I would love it if San Leandro was the poster child for MEHKOs throughout the county, And, you know, just as I've helped a couple other folks, not in San Leandro, but within Alameda County get started. yeah, that's, it will definitely be a long-term plan of mine, of really trying to figure out how do I start more MEHKOs in San Leandro

because everyone wins. you increase your food options here in San Leandro, right?

You increase community here in San Leandro when you do that. And one of the things I said, which I feel is so unique about a MEHKO is that you potentially have the ability to taste food that is a generational recipe that you're probably not gonna get in a brick and mortar because that person never had the ability to open a brick and mortar.

And so you think about the possible food like the food that you're gonna be exposed to that could possibly then pass down from generation to generation. You think about culturally the actual food options. Like one of the things will, people will see here when I revamp my menu is that I'll have garlic noodles on my menu, right?

But I learned how to do the garlic noodles from my wife who learned how to do it from her mom. And so it's just, you know, being able to be able to do things like that. That right there, I really hope that I'm able to lead to change here in San Leandro and be able to, to open that door for folks

[00:57:02] **David Crabill:** it is cool to see what you've already done, and I know you're gonna do a lot more in the future. But if somebody is interested in learning more about you or wants to know more about your business, where can they find you? How can they reach out?

[00:57:17] **Lee Thomas:** Oh yeah, definitely you can, they can easily send me an email at grilleeq@gmail.com. So G-R-I-L-L-E-E-Q @gmail.com. They can reach me that way. Uh, They can ping me on any of the social media platforms, so Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram.

[00:57:36] **David Crabill:** Awesome. Well thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today.

[00:57:42] **Lee Thomas:** Oh, thanks for having me. And uh, as I say with any podcast that I might be on or my own podcast, you chill. We grill

[00:57:53] **David Crabill:** that wraps up another episode of the Forrager Podcast.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/82.

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