

Healthy Grains, Wealthy Gains with Tamara Ketchian

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 Tamara Ketchian.

[00:00:11] Tamara uses Square Online for her website, and before we jump into her episode, I wanted to tell you a bit more about this awesome tool. Square Online is also what I use for my fudge business' website. And what I especially like about it is you can create a very powerful website for free.

[00:00:29] A lot of entrepreneurs still think they need to spend money to get a good website, and that is simply not true anymore. So I created a free tutorial that will walk you through how to set up a totally free website in less than an hour.

[00:00:40] I think Square Online has hands down the very best website tool for most cottage food businesses. So if you want to learn more, you can watch my free tutorial by going to forrager.com/website.

[00:00:53] Alright, so I have Tamara on the show today. She lives in Orange, Connecticut and sells gluten-free vegan granola with her cottage food business, Wildwood Granola. Tamara started her granola business in 2021 after years of making a healthier granola for her family. After being a longtime stay-at-home mom, she was finally ready to do something for herself.

[00:01:17] And in the past two and a half years, her business has grown substantially. And she recently won a pitch competition where she received a \$10,000 business grant to help grow her business. Now she has expanded into a commercial kitchen so that she can sell in stores, ship nationwide, and keep pursuing her longtime dream of building a successful food business. And with that, let's jump right into this episode. Welcome to the show, Tamara. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:46] **Tamara Ketchian:** Yes. Thank you for inviting me.

[00:01:49] **David Crabill:** So Tamara, can you take me back to how this whole journey got started?

[00:01:54] **Tamara Ketchian:** Okay. So I began making my own granola. Years ago, because I was very unhappy with the selection in the stores. It always had extra added sugars chemicals, preservatives, all this stuff to make something healthy, unhealthy. So I started making it myself.

[00:02:14] And then I would, you know, give it out to family and friends. And then they were requesting it, like when I went away to girls' weekends, people were asking for it. So at this point I was a stay-at-home mom. As my kids were getting older, I was starting to think about Doing something. I wanted to open a coffee shop, was my original plan.

[00:02:34] I had like been thinking and dreaming of this for like 10 years, which I'm sure a lot of people think about and dream about. After doing the financials for it and realizing how much it was going to cost to open a coffee shop, I decided to take a few steps back and I went to my granola and I was like, you know what?

[00:02:52] This was gonna be a product I was going to serve at my coffee shop. So I started with my original nutty, which was the one flavor I had at the time, and I just expanded on that and just created a whole business around that granola recipe. And I've been in business um, I'm in my third year right now.

[00:03:10] **David Crabill:** So it's interesting that you wanted to start as a coffee shop and now that you've gotten into your business, has that desire sort of dissolved or is that the ultimate end goal here?

[00:03:22] **Tamara Ketchian:** You know what? I don't know if I wanna do that anymore. That is a. Huge, huge time commitment. Not that this business isn't, but I feel like what I'm doing, I have a little bit more flexibility with my time

[00:03:36] so I do still have kids at home. They're teenagers. They might not want me around, but I still wanna see them. So until they're like completely out of the house, I would like to have a little flexibility with my time you know, just be around more.

[00:03:49] So I feel like at this point in time, I'm just thinking I'll stick with the granola and grow that business and see where that takes me.

[00:03:58] **David Crabill:** So, I know you started the business in 2021. What sort of pushed you over the edge to actually start it because it sounds like you were thinking about starting a business for quite a long time.

[00:04:09] **Tamara Ketchian:** In my quest to own a coffee shop. I had taken a job at a coffee shop. Kind of my husband's idea and it made a lot of sense. He said, you know, maybe this isn't something you even want to do. Why don't you go work for a coffee shop, see if we even really like it.

[00:04:22] Get some experience before you go open in your own place. So I did that, but then that shut down during COVID. So being home during COVID and not working, it kind of gave me time to really think about my plans and really plan on. If I did wanna have this coffee shop and have time to do the financials.

[00:04:42] And so that kind of is what pushed me to actually start my own business. Being a stay-at-home mom, for 17 years I kind of went to do something for myself. I didn't wanna work for anybody after being home. So that was kind of my impetus for starting my own business. and I've kind of always been in the food industry, so it kind of just made sense.

[00:05:04] **David Crabill:** What do you mean saying that you've always been in the food industry?

[00:05:08] **Tamara Ketchian:** I've just worked in restaurants you know, as managers or a waitress. I've always loved cooking for the family and baking and, just being in the kitchen. So it just kind of made sense that this was a route I was gonna go.

[00:05:23] **David Crabill:** What are some of the skills that you think you learned from your food service experience that you brought into this business?

[00:05:29] **Tamara Ketchian:** Customer service is a big one. Um, And being able to talk to people Also just like being able to dig in and just do anything, because I was a manager in college at fast Food Restaurant and I had a lot of friends working for me and I had to kind of tell them what to do as a manager and that was very difficult.

[00:05:50] So I kind of went and did some stuff myself and I wasn't, I was not averse to going to sweep the parking lot or, clean the grease trap or whatever it is we had to do. So you kind of have to just be willing to do anything and everything. And as an entrepreneur, that's kind of the mindset you have to have

[00:06:06] because most of the time you're running your business by yourself. Either you don't have support around you or you can't afford to have support around you because it's expensive hiring other people whether it be an accountant, a salesperson, whatever. So a lot of times you're by yourself, so you

have to be willing to put in the work. Just digging in and doing what you have to do.

[00:06:25] **David Crabill:** That's an interesting juxtaposition that you were a manager at a fast food restaurant, which is obviously completely unhealthy, right? And now you have this healthy food business, so were you interested in starting a healthy food business or was it just because you had the granola kind of on hand?

[00:06:44] **Tamara Ketchian:** I didn't always eat this healthy when I was in high school and college. I did not eat as well as I do now. So I don't know, it's been probably 30 years since I've eaten beef. I don't eat beef or pork. part of it's animal rights, part of it's healthier lifestyle.

[00:07:02] I just started watching what I put in my mouth reading labels. So that kind of started me down the eating healthier route and then that's how I started kind of getting into making my own granola my own salad dressings. That kind of stuff. So, Just being healthy myself and making my own healthy granola was I guess the impetus for starting this granola company.

[00:07:27] Because there are a lot of granola companies out there that have extra crap in them, you know, even small ones. not all granola is healthy and which is a problem because it's supposed to be a healthy food, and it's gotten a really bad rep. A lot of people are like, oh, I can't buy that because it's got too many calories.

[00:07:43] And when granola was first created, It was created as a healthy breakfast or a healthy snack But that's kind of fallen to the wayside mostly from the large, food manufacturers just pumping it with all this extra stuff.

[00:07:56] **David Crabill:** So, are most of your customers really interested in the health aspect of your granola? Like what kind of customer do you feel like you attract?

[00:08:06] **Tamara Ketchian:** I would say a good 75% of them are because I am gluten-free. My granola is gluten-free. It's all plant-based. So I draw a lot of the vegan and gluten-free customers because of that. Mine ends up happening to be vegan because I use maple syrup instead of honey. So I'm not averse to eating honey myself.

[00:08:29] But in my granola I use maple syrup. So it ended up being kind of a marketing thing for me that it's vegan and I advertise that and it's amazing how

many people that draws over because I just say this is vegan and plant-based. And it just happens to be that My recipe was maple syrup and not honey.

[00:08:49] So it was kind of a happy accident. So I do get a large, percentage of my customers are definitely because it's a healthy ingredient. They thank me all the time for providing something they can eat that's allergy friendly and healthy. I do have a couple nut-free options as well, which is very hard to find in granola.

[00:09:10] So people are surprised at that and happy to find granola they can eat.

[00:09:15] **David Crabill:** So let's talk about your flavors a little bit. What are some of the most popular flavors that you offer?

[00:09:23] **Tamara Ketchian:** Okay, so my most popular is Chunky monkey. Which I realize I'm probably gonna have to change that name once I get my wholesale license. Although if a certain company knows who I am for using that name, maybe that means I hit it big. Right? So that one It's kind of more on the, I guess, dessert side.

[00:09:42] It's a fun granola. It's got dairy-free dark chocolate chunks in it. It's got dried banana, dried pineapple, macadamia nuts and coconut. So that one kind of attracts a lot of people that aren't necessarily. In there for the granola, they're in there for something fun, you know. Then I also have a ginger cranberry.

[00:10:02] I have one called Lavender Berry Tart, which has like dried lavender in it and sweetened blueberries and lemon. So that one's a really popular flavor as well. So I try to do different flavors. It's more. Artisanal granola, it's not your just basic. I do have a regular, like, original nutty, which is the one I started with.

[00:10:23] It has no like different fun of flavors. But most of them are like a nut free triple coconut or a tropical, so I'm trying to like elevate it a little bit so it's not just your basic granola.

[00:10:35] **David Crabill:** I was going to say, I'm pretty sure I know what my favorite flavor would be. Be the Forrager flavor.

[00:10:41]

[00:10:41] I Oh yeah, that one actually is really popular. Forrager,

[00:10:45] I was just really surprised to see that. I actually had no idea you had a Forrager flavor when invited you onto the podcast.

[00:10:52] Tamara Ketchian: Yeah, that, that one is very trail mixy. A lot lot of people like that one because it's got a lot of stuff in it and it's really nice on top of a salad too. So I like to tell people other ways to enjoy it. Most people eat it with like yogurt or as a snack, but there are quite a few flavors that are good on as a salad topping or on top of ice cream.

[00:11:10] So I like to let customers know and they're always surprised. Oh wow, I didn't think of that. So it's nice to give them other options so they can see different ways to enjoy it.

[00:11:18] **David Crabill:** yeah, with you saying it's like trail mix, that was actually something that came to mind when looking at your flavors. It just seemed like you swapped out the peanuts for, granola. Right. And it looks like you just have kind of a unique take on granola. That, I, I don't see that often.

[00:11:33] **Tamara Ketchian:** Yeah, and actually Trail Mix is my next line that I am going to be putting out at some point. I would like to add that as well. granola bars or granola balls something like that. So, so I got plans.

[00:11:46] **David Crabill:** Why haven't you added any other types of products up to this point?

[00:11:50] **Tamara Ketchian:** I've been focused on finding a kitchen, which I just did to get the business out of my house. So I'm kind of in a, transition gray area right now. I still have my cottage food license, but I am applying for my wholesale license as well. So once I get certified through the D C P. And I could sell wholesale then I'll start adding some product lines. I wanna make sure that I've got, the granola kind of stable and in a good place in the, in the market before I start adding too much on, I'm still by myself, so I'm gonna have to start adding employees and, a little more expense

[00:12:26] when I add more product. I only have so many hours in the day.

[00:12:28] **David Crabill:** Yeah, so it's exciting to see that you're moving your business forward into a commercial kitchen. We'll touch on that later, but I did wanna go back to like the beginning of your business and how you sort of took

it off the ground. Um, How many flavors did you actually start out with when you opened the business?

[00:12:48] **Tamara Ketchian:** I think I started with maybe eight. I wanna say so I did like this big group of testing. I didn't just say, Ooh, I like this flavor. I'm gonna release this one. I did lots and lots of testing where I gave out all these samples to Family and friends, and I had them do this questionnaire where they would answer you know, which flavors they liked, which they didn't, what they liked about the flavor, what they would prefer.

[00:13:17] So that kind of helped. Instead of me going to market with a flavor that was gonna bomb where I did all these tests first and got feedback did my market research, I guess is a term for it. So I would know which ones were actually gonna be ones that would probably be successful and people would spend money on.

[00:13:36] but right now I have 11 flavors, and when I bring my pumpkin spice back it'll be 12.

[00:13:42] **David Crabill:** I was gonna ask if you do like seasonal flavors, which are only available for a limited time.

[00:13:49] **Tamara Ketchian:** Yes, so I do pumpkin spice., my pumpkin spice is actually really popular, so I don't just keep it for the fall.

[00:13:57] I actually keep that one through the whole winter. So I do have people that want that one year round, but not enough to keep it in production.

[00:14:04] **David Crabill:** Have you thought about just pulling some of your flavors off temporarily? Just for a marketing angle of just having that scarcity built in. They can only get it for a certain time of the year and, that makes it also easier on you to not have to produce all 11 flavors and keep them in stock all at the same time.

[00:14:23] **Tamara Ketchian:** Yeah, I might actually end up doing that when I go wholesale because I know the stores like to have new product coming in. To like get some traction and they can advertise to customers, Hey, this is coming in now, come in and grab it. So I may end up doing that with a couple of the flavors and it will help me, obviously not having to keep track of all those skews and produce year round every single flavor.

[00:14:51] So yes, that is something that is in the back of my mind.

[00:14:54] **David Crabill:** Now you are the first Connecticut cottage food business I've had on the podcast, so I'd be interested to hear what that process was like. I believe you have to get an inspection, right? What was it like for you to get your cottage food license in your state?

[00:15:08] **Tamara Ketchian:** So for me it was actually pretty easy. I don't know if this is, because I did it during Covid and everybody's remote, but they never came to my house, which I thought was odd.

[00:15:18] Uh, Since I have a, well, I also have to get my water tested to make sure my water is safe

[00:15:24] so I had to get that done. I had to have my labels approved, they had to have certain things on them.

[00:15:30] But I don't think it was too difficult. And I think anybody that wants to get into the food business, this is the way to do it.

[00:15:38] Start with a cottage food business, very, very low overhead and then you're not. aside from finding a kitchen space, that's the most difficult part, but then you're not paying the overhead of that before even making any money and seeing if people want your product.

[00:15:53] **David Crabill:** So I know what you can't even do in-state shipping in Connecticut, obviously can't do wholesale, and you're moving your way towards that now. Do you feel like that has held you back?

[00:16:03] **Tamara Ketchian:** It has in a little way. Yes. I would say the last year where I was really looking for a kitchen, trying to move to the next level, I had. A bunch of little shops saying, do you wholesale? Do you wholesale?

[00:16:18] I had to just keep saying, not yet, not yet. and I just have like a list of stores I'm gonna contact when I'm ready. So it has been kind of limiting in that aspect. for me it's been a lot every weekend. At one point I was doing, last year, I did five shows a week. I was the only one making bagging and selling the product. So going out to five farmer's markets or events a week. And it's not just the time at the market, obviously I get there an hour, sometimes two hours before the market and thereafter it's been a lot.

[00:16:50] On me setting everything up, taking it down. So with that, I am ready. Like I just wanna pull back on some of these, get some of my weekends

back and go to not all wholesale, but a good percentage of wholesale. I realized my margins will be slimmer, but I wanna have a little bit of a balance,

[00:17:10] **David Crabill:** Wow, five markets in a week is quite a lot. Obviously you have to make your product on top of that. And, and I know that you were a stay at home mom before this, so I sort of assume that you already had sort of a stable financial situation at home. So what's driving you to go out to so many markets and grow this business to be a lot bigger?

[00:17:32] **Tamara Ketchian:** I don't know. I've always just kind of pushed myself. I don't know why. I don't know if I am proving it to myself or to other people. That's just always been my personality. whatever I'm doing, I'm, I'm working hard at it. So I knew that if I wanted this business to succeed and to go anywhere that you know, I was the one that was gonna have to do it.

[00:17:57] I don't know if somebody told me this or I read it somewhere that nobody is gonna care about your business as much as you are. And I kind of have to remind myself that sometimes because there has been a couple times where I've been like, you know, as an entrepreneur you kind of waffle between, I'm working so hard, I deserve a break.

[00:18:18] And then you take a break and then you're like, I should be doing more. What am I doing? So sometimes I have to kinda remind myself I'm the one that's driving the ship. And I'm the one that can go fast or slow and nobody else is telling me to do this telling me to go in wholesale.

[00:18:38] Telling me to do five markets a week. I don't know. I've just made myself crazy with that though. I realized that last year it was a little too much, but it was a good way to kind of get my product out there. That was kind of my thinking behind that. I was trying to spread my brand around the state, so I would go to.

[00:18:55] Different areas and, try to get my brand out there to different customers. So then when I do go wholesale and my, my product is out on a shelf, people will say, oh, I know that brand, I know that granola. I've seen that before. which is half the battle I think when you're on a shelf, you know, with other brands and you're kind of competing for customers Dollar.

[00:19:15] I wanted them to be able to recognize it and to know who I was. So that was kind of my reason for pushing myself a little bit too much last year. I realized that I did not have a really good balance last year, so I pulled back a

little bit on the markets which has given me time to focus on getting prepared for doing some wholesale.

[00:19:34] **David Crabill:** What have you found in terms of markets Um, What's worked well? Do farmer's markets work better than other types of events or shows? Uh, what have you learned?

[00:19:46] **Tamara Ketchian:** Farmer's markets are definitely the better spot for like a food product, but I do do well at certain events and fairs depending on the town. There's this one town near me that I've tried like five different ways. I've tried a farmer's market, I've tried a pop-up event. I did a festival, and finally I was like, all right, I just, I got to give up on this town, even though it's like, two towns over for me.

[00:20:14] And it's really close and it would be convenient, but there's just not a granola town, you know, I just have to admit that. So sometimes it's just the area where you are where you're trying to sell. And I've noticed too uh, certain markets. Certain brand, certain flavors sell more at one market than they do at the other and vice versa.

[00:20:33] So, I think for me a lot of it depends on the town not necessarily the event.

[00:20:40] **David Crabill:** was there something that you noticed about that town's markets? In terms of what else was being sold there, that would've given you a clue that your granola wouldn't have worked so well.

[00:20:51] **Tamara Ketchian:** I don't know how to say this without, being politically incorrect, but they didn't have a lot of extra uh, spending money this town.

[00:20:58] So to spend \$10 on a bag of granola didn't make sense for them they can go buy a \$3 bag in the store. So for them, they're looking at buying this product. To get into their house and not necessarily looking at the ingredients. You know what I mean? I can't explain that right.

[00:21:17] **David Crabill:** No, it totally makes sense. I mean, you have a premium product, you have a high priced product, you have a vegan product, gluten-free product. I mean, you're definitely catering towards that premium, specialized end of the market. So can you talk a little bit about how you came up with your pricing?

[00:21:32] **Tamara Ketchian:** So I did some market research for kind of what is the going rate of not like the big box granola out in the stores other small. Businesses similar to mine. And I also have to take off, take my, COGS into account especially like nuts and seeds and gluten-free oats. Those are a lot more expensive.

[00:21:55] And that's why I don't do organic right now. People have asked me if my product's organic. I do have some organic items just because they happen to be organic when I purchase them. But at my business level right now, I cannot afford organic and I just have to unfortunately let people know that most people are okay with it.

[00:22:11] but it is um, a little more of an expensive product to make because of the nuts. Um, they're expensive, especially now prices have gone up. Um, I did have to adjust my sizes slightly because of the increase in price. So instead of raising my prices, I went from a nine ounce to an eight ounce.

[00:22:30] And my smaller ones, I went from a two ounce to a one and ounce and nobody said anything. Nobody recognized it. Nobody noticed. But the bag I was using at the time when I had my nine ounce instead of eight ounce. The granola was like, it wasn't fitting in the bag. Right. So it kind of made sense for me to lower this, lower the weight anyway, so it just worked out that way.

[00:22:53] **David Crabill:** Were you concerned that if you increase the prices, you might get pushback?

[00:22:59] **Tamara Ketchian:** I was concerned about that. Yes. Um, I have like kind of. Even like I have a \$10 bag and a \$15 bag. So it's kind of like an easy pull a 10 out, So if somebody had to pull a 10 out and then look for a one or whatever, I feel like it's just. It's cleaner, it's easier. I don't know. I think with the way things are in the economy, I have noticed a difference this year as well in the markets.

[00:23:24] They're definitely not as busy as last year. I don't know if that's because the economy or because Covid is like completely gone and people are just back to their normal shopping habits. So it could be a combination.

[00:23:38] **David Crabill:** So have you ever increased your prices or have you charged this since the beginning?

[00:23:42] **Tamara Ketchian:** I think I've charged it since the beginning, so I am actually at this crossroads right now where I have to look at my pricing

again, which I have not done in a while. I've gotten some new suppliers and the pricing of my ingredients has changed a little bit.

[00:23:57] So I kind of have to go back into my spreadsheet and look at my COGS and see what things are actually costing me. Be cause when I'm going to wholesale I don't wanna shortchange myself, so I have to really look at that and then decide if I'm gonna change my retail price as well.

[00:24:14] Because I, I know in like the restaurant industry I think yearly you're supposed to look at your prices and, and up them.

[00:24:21] So some of that trickles down to the C P G as well.

[00:24:24] **David Crabill:** The other thing about this is that, Looking at some of the ingredients you have. I mean, there are some very expensive ingredients. Obviously the granola itself, you think you use Bob's Red Mill. I mean, it's, it's high end, but you have different ingredients in these, like some have freeze dried foods. Certain nuts are obviously expensive, but you have the same price for all of your granolas.

[00:24:49] And why did you decide to do that?

[00:24:50] **Tamara Ketchian:** I kind of figured it would balance out when I was selling the more expensive ones versus the cheaper ones to make. So some of them I'm gonna make a little bit more money on. Some of I'm gonna make a little less on. So I felt like just to make it easier for the consumer I would just do a flat.

[00:25:10] per size price. Otherwise it would be too confusing. I do have one flavor, my grain-free, sugar-free that is a little bit more expensive because there's no oats in that one. That one is all nuts and seeds. So that one is definitely a lot more expensive to make. And that one I'm probably even not charging enough for.

[00:25:28] But I just wanted it to be easier for the consumer and. not to confuse them, oh, if I buy this one I'm paying 11. If I buy this one, I'm paying eight. You know, like that just didn't make sense to me. So I knew I was kinda, I, I was gonna maybe not make as much on some flavors as others, but that it would in the end balance out.

[00:25:46] **David Crabill:** With that grain-free, sugar-free flavor, What was the impetus for creating that flavor?

[00:25:53] **Tamara Ketchian:** So that one was basically uh, listening to customers, being out at a market and getting feedback. I had enough customers ask for Something without oats or something without maple syrup. There's a ton of people out there now that are um, either a keto lifestyle or diabetic who are really trying to watch their sugar intake.

[00:26:18] And even though my other flavors I use uh, Connecticut maple syrup, which is a healthy low-glycemic sweetener, if you're in one of those lifestyles where you're really watching every little bit of sugar coming in even having the maple syrup or the oats for them wasn't, gonna work.

[00:26:32] So I created that flavor For that set of people. And it's actually, it does pretty well, not as well as the other ones, but enough people purchase it and, uh, made sense to keep it around.

[00:26:43] **David Crabill:** you mentioned you have this like 1.5 ounce bag. It's pretty small. Right? And I was wondering like, Considering the time it takes to package all those 1.5 ounce bags, is it just so that people can easily sample your product or is it, are you making a return on that little bag?

[00:27:03] **Tamara Ketchian:** So usually the little bags. Um, so I do what's called a granola flight where you can get five of those bags and you get a dollar off. those are so popular. Because people are come to my booth that haven't had it before, and they're like, oh my gosh, you have so many flavors. I don't know which one to get.

[00:27:23] And so I offer this flight where you get a flight of granola where you can pick five of these. And all my flavors are in these little sizes as well. Even the grain-free one where you can pick five of these flavors and you get a dollar off. People do this all the time, they love it. They're like, oh, that's so great.

[00:27:41] I'll do that. And then next time I come back, I'll get the flavor that I really like. A lot of people just still just do it anyway because they love that. It's it's like an individual size. It's like portion control. People give it out as gifts because it's a, nice looking little, little gift to give to somebody.

[00:27:57] And I love when people do that because I end up with a customer sometimes. So, Individually, just like somebody buying a three hour bag, I'm not, obviously not making much on that, but a lot of people buy the flight. It's probably one of my most popular things that I end up doing.

[00:28:10] Okay. And it's say, great. 'cause then people try different flavors. They'd love that. One customer said it was like Christmas morning every time she, you know, tried a new flavor. It was like, Ooh, what am I trying today?

[00:28:20] **David Crabill:** I just thinking about must be so much packaging work.

[00:28:26] **Tamara Ketchian:** Yeah, that is kind of my bottleneck right now. And my son's been helping me for a little bit at some markets. And I was like, this is great. I'm in the kitchen. I could produce more at once in my commercial kitchen. Because previously I would go to a market, so I'd have five markets a week last year, and I would do two or three of them and run out of product, and I would come home from a market.

[00:28:48] Exhausted from the market and have to bake and bag in order to have enough for the next few markets.

[00:28:52] Be cause I don't wanna go to a market and not having what the customer wants because I lose a sale and not just a sale that day, but a potential future customer returning customer.

[00:29:03] Which are the lifeblood of any business. It's not just your one-up person that buys from you, you know, of course, obviously I'll take their \$10 for that one bag of granola, but in the end, I, I want to create a relationship and have these people coming back and coming back and coming back. I don't ever wanna sell out at a market.

[00:29:22] I know some other, vendors. Oh my gosh,

[00:29:23] such a great day. I sold out. I don't wanna sell out. I don't want somebody to come to my table and look for a certain flavor and not have it, and then walk away because I may not see them again.

[00:29:34] So now I'm in the kitchen and that helps with the baking end my gosh, I had such a mass bake massive amounts at once, but I still have to package. Those amounts. So that's kinda my bottleneck. I do need to come up with a solution or I just have to hire somebody to, to bag for me because that is time consuming.

[00:29:54] But it's funny because my husband was looking at he was like, oh, they've got these machines where you can um, bag them. I follow all these other granola companies, large granola companies, bigger than me, and they'll do

some behind the scenes and they literally have people standing at tables hand bagging the granola.

[00:30:11] So I was like, you know what, I, I don't need one of these machines. These people are doing it the same way I am and they're much more successful than me at this point. So I'll just have to hire somebody to do the bagging because that's kind of my bottleneck right now.

[00:30:24] **David Crabill:** Is there anything that you've learned that makes the packaging process easier?

[00:30:29] **Tamara Ketchian:** well, I've been doing it so long. I kind of know how many scoops go in each size even though I'm still weighing it, I do weigh them, to make sure it's accurate. It doesn't take me as long now because I kind of know how much goes into, into each. Um, they do have these kind of conveyor belt sealers, like heat sealers, so I think that might be my next step.

[00:30:52] because the heat sealing also takes time. Aside from the, the bagging, I also heat seal, so then the product is protected. Nobody can get into it until you like rip the top off and you know, the person purchasing is the one doing that. So that's another way I could streamline a little bit is to get one of those.

[00:31:10] **David Crabill:** Where do you get your bags from?

[00:31:13] **Tamara Ketchian:** Oh, you're gonna laugh at me right now. I get them from Amazon. So I had samples from a. bag company and I just did not like the quality. So there's this one supplier from Amazon that I really like the quality and it's like a little sturdier. I like the color because I use craft paper right now and

[00:31:34] there's so many different variations in craft paper. I wanted to stay with craft paper 'cause it looks more uh, natural. It worked with my brand. And, you know, I don't know. I, I have an art background, by the way. I don't know if I told you that. I used to be a graphic designer, an art director, so, I know about branding and it kind of has to go throughout everything.

[00:31:56] it's not just your product, it's the packaging you use. It's your logo, it's the font it's how you set up your tent at the markets. So it kind of all has to work together. Under that, brand concept that you have. So for me the craft paper works with my image. I want for my company to be natural.

[00:32:18] Kind of like a Bohemian, I actually get a lot of compliments on it and of my logo at markets. But we'll see once I get out into a store shelf how that's gonna track. My thinking is because, it is more natural looking, it's not bright colors and plastic, that it will differentiate itself among the other products out there right now, which are not in that kind of packaging.

[00:32:41] **David Crabill:** So you get your packaging from Amazon. Where do you get your ingredients from?

[00:32:47] **Tamara Ketchian:** So there's a few Companies. One of them is actually in orange which is nice. So I could just drive it over there and pick it up. So I get a lot of nuts and seeds from them. It's called Aurora products. Um, Nuts.com, which I get some of the dried fruit from, because I can't find that elsewhere. They're a little pricier, so I'm gonna start looking around somewhere else.

[00:33:09] And then Webstaurant, I get my coconut oil. Right now that's where I get my Bob's Red Mill because I wasn't big enough to order directly from Bob's itself. But You know, hopefully when I get some wholesale accounts under my belt, I'll be able to order, you know, some pallets of that right from the uh, source.

[00:33:27] **David Crabill:** so what is the shelf life of your granola?

[00:33:30] **Tamara Ketchian:** So I've kind of just based it on what other granola people are doing. I'm actually researching right now doing some shelf life stability testing. So I tell people unopened six months, once opened, three to four months, and it's not gonna make you sick, like if you eat it like past its date. It'll just, maybe if it won't be as fresh, the dried fruit won't be as fresh.

[00:33:55] Um, Right now when I label it, I do a baked on date, so I have to figure out my wording when I do like wholesale stuff because they're gonna want Best enjoyed by, it's very confusing right now because some consumers will look at a product that says Best Buy, and it'll be a day after and they'll be like, oh, this isn't good anymore.

[00:34:16] I'm gonna throw it out. Meanwhile, there's nothing wrong with it, you know, it's just maybe not gonna be as fresh, So I have to figure out the wording to put on mine. When it's gonna be on the shelves so that people understand that it, like it's not expired and you have to throw it out. it's just like, best enjoyed by this date for its, freshest taste or flavor.

[00:34:35] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I was just thinking, you said you went to markets and came, sold out, came home and were exhausted and then had to make more.

[00:34:44] With your granola having a shelf life of six months, what prevents you from just making a ton of it and having it on hand since it doesn't really go bad quickly?

[00:34:54] **Tamara Ketchian:** Oh, so this was when I was baking out of my home kitchen. so I have a double oven in my home kitchen, but it can only fit four half trays. In the ovens, which only makes so much at once, you know? So having 11 flavors, I have to let it cool. Some of it gets chocolate or dried fruit added after it's cooled.

[00:35:15] So it's a, process and it's time consuming. Now that I'm in the commercial kitchen I have Full convection ovens. So it's a quicker turnaround, baking time. And I could bake eight full trays at once, actually, probably more than that. It's kinda life changing. I'm not like in this rat race constantly.

[00:35:36] and I have a little bit of my sanity back and it's funny because other, other vendors that I've met at markets who are in commercial kitchens, they said, oh, it, you're, it's gonna be life changing. Once you get into that kitchen, you'll see it's gonna be life changing.

[00:35:50] and I see what they mean by that. Because. I have a little more time now, a little more of my life back. And it's not like wrapped around my neck constantly because I have to just keep baking and bagging, baking and bagging in order to keep up with the markets.

[00:36:07] **David Crabill:** Was there any kind of uh, transition in learning how to adapt your recipes to the commercial kitchen? I know sometimes people say that when they start using commercial kitchen, the recipe doesn't turn out the same.

[00:36:22] **Tamara Ketchian:** Well, yeah, I kind of had to play around because in my home kitchen I have two ovens, but only one of them's convection. So I could never use the convection on my home kitchen when I was baking. But in the commercial kitchen, I'm using convection now because obviously it bakes it a lot quicker. So there was a little learning curve with that, figuring out the right timing.

[00:36:44] Currently I'm doubling my recipe. So I'm still not at full capacity in this kitchen yet. ' Because I am not wholesale yet. So I'm still just doing markets. So once I get wholesale and I have more orders coming in and more need for my granola, then I will be using more of the Oven space.

[00:37:05] So right now I bake four full trays of each flavor, which is double of what I was able to do at my home kitchen. So figuring out, the recipe was me just kind of I double the recipe that I was doing at home. But once I go into a bigger production that's kind of where I'm gonna have to hire people, I think, because some of my ingredients I have to chop before they get added before I bake or after I bake.

[00:37:30] And that's a little time consuming as well. So it's not just going and baking the granola, it's, you know, maybe I have to chop some pineapple or macadamia nuts or, you know, In order to make a flavor which just adds to the time in the kitchen.

[00:37:42] **David Crabill:** So when did you know that you're ready to step up into a commercial kitchen and license?

[00:37:49] **Tamara Ketchian:** Um, Kind of like when I was just maxing out at my capacity in my home kitchen. My family was getting frustrated because I literally took over the kitchen and the dining room. So like my dining room is my bagging and storage area. And then I would have like, You know, trays of granola all over my kitchen.

[00:38:09] Giant bowls. I had to put a little sticky note on the oven that said, granola inside so somebody wouldn't turn the oven on and reheat while I had granola in their cooling. it was kind of like, my family was ready to get, for me to get out of the house. I mean, it is a good way to start your business, but it was literally here all the time.

[00:38:26] I would wake up and literally start working right away. I had no separation. And I had enough enough people. Out of state, even in state, if you're an hour from me and you want my granola, I'm not, driving an hour for a 14, \$15 bag of granola, you know? And I can't ship it. So I had enough people that were asking for me to ship it either in-state or out of state and enough little like shops that were saying they wanted to sell my product, that I was like, okay, I've been doing this.

[00:38:56] two years, let me start, thinking about taking it to the next level. But that was a whole other process, trying to find a kitchen that was, that took a long time.

[00:39:03] **David Crabill:** So can you talk a bit more about how you found a kitchen and what you looked at and what the options were?

[00:39:11] **Tamara Ketchian:** So it actually probably took me about a year to find a kitchen, not like nonstop looking. Because then when I get into my busy period I had to pull back from searching. So there are a few incubator kind of commissary kitchens. But not enough of them. There's definitely a big need for those kitchens to be around.

[00:39:33] And I was at a point where, If I don't find one, I am going to make one and I will be the commissary kitchen. And that would be another, line of revenue for me would be to rent kitchen space. I didn't wanna do that though. I wanted my next step to be renting from somebody else and then get enough wholesale accounts where I was big enough, where I outgrew that space.

[00:39:52] So one of the farmer's markets I do does have a, incubator kitchen space for small emerging food businesses. But they were maxed out of capacity. They had like five o'clock in the morning timeframe opened or I don't know, weekends. And, you know, I was still getting my kids up and ready for school. I was doing markets on the weekends, so there's no way I could be in the kitchen. and a lot of these places I looked at were really expensive. They charged by the hour. They charged to have a shelf of ingredients, never mind a whole rack, just one shelf.

[00:40:25] They charge per shelf per month. They charge if you needed any refrigerator shelf, and then you're working around the schedule of everybody else in the kitchen. So one of the problems I also had was I could not get enough time. For getting in there for my product because it's, you know, making the granolas a little time consuming.

[00:40:45] Sometimes I have to prep ingredients before I have to bake it. It has to cool. I have to bag it so I'm not just in the kitchen for a couple hours, you know. So that was, multiple issues. And a couple times I thought I had a place and it didn't work out. Zoning played a big part in it.

[00:41:02] Because some places were zoned as a commercial kitchen, but not zoned to have a business in them, which I found out the hard way after going down further down a route and getting ready to sign on the line, and then the

zoning department got involved. So there's a lot of factors you don't think about when you're looking for a kitchen and um,

[00:41:20] you know, so many people said, oh, what about churches? All these local churches and um, halls, they all have kitchens that are commercial. Yeah, they do, but they're not really commercial in the sense where you can bake your product out of there.

[00:41:34] What I'm doing is manufacturing a product. So when I apply for my license, I'm applying for a food manufacturer license. Which is different than going in there, I think, to bake cupcakes, to sell at a market because I'm making a product and packaging it and selling it in stores. So it's a little different of a license.

[00:41:54] And, you know, there's a lot of factors to look at, but cost and time in the kitchen, those were the two brick walls. I kind of, I kind of hit and, and as well as distance. I didn't wanna be anything that was 20 minutes away. I wanted to be close enough that I can go get my product if I needed to, to go to a market or if somebody put an order in, I could get my product.

[00:42:16] I couldn't be driving an hour to go to the kitchen.

[00:42:18] **David Crabill:** So what ultimately did work how did you find your current kitchen?

[00:42:23] **Tamara Ketchian:** So the place I am now uh, was funny is I had called this place a year ago, kind of when I first started my search. Left a message and then never heard anything. Went a whole year trying all these other places and getting frustrated. One I almost, almost went through with, but then the zoning got involved.

[00:42:44] And it ended up being kind of a blessing because that place would not have been. The right place for me. So, I was like, you know what? Let me try this other place again. I never heard back from them. Let me try again. So I had called this place in the winter and it's a food truck commissary kitchen.

[00:43:04] So he was closed in the winter. Which is why he never called me back. So now I'm like, let me email this time. So this is a year later. It's in the spring. And I emailed and I heard back from him. It's 10 minutes from my house.

[00:43:19] So this guy Took over a space that used to be a garage. So it's got these giant bay doors and. He portioned off a part of it and made a commercial kitchen in there. And the rest of it, he stores his food trucks in.

[00:43:33] And he's been really awesome. He wants to help me. He wants my business to succeed. I just had my inspection through the D C P, which is who is gonna certify me through wholesale.

[00:43:44] I have to move a couple things around where my ingredients are, has to get moved. and he was like, well, whatever you need to do, let me know. Let's meet in the kitchen and let's figure this out. So looking back now at where I could have been and where I ended up Having the patience to know like the right thing is gonna come along is really a big factor.

[00:44:05] I was pushing and pushing and pushing. I need to get a kitchen. I was really working at it and when I finally like took a step back and was like, you know what? Something's gonna happen when it's, when the time is right. And then I contacted this guy again and it ended up working out.

[00:44:22] **David Crabill:** So how complex has it been to go from a cottage food license to a commercial license?

[00:44:30] **Tamara Ketchian:** So I am not fully licensed yet. Commercial, I'm waiting. I just had my inspection. But fingers crossed I just had to change a couple things on my label and then move my ingredients, but I should get certified. So I don't think it's been as difficult as, in my mind, I thought it was moving my production into the kitchen.

[00:44:49] Uh, It's just getting used to working out of the house again. The thing that I need to work on is My whole process of selling wholesale, that is something that I need to do. I have to do my nutritional labels. I don't need to do that, but I wanna do that. Customers have been asking, some stores want it.

[00:45:08] So before I go wholesale, I have to put these things into place. Barcodes, nutritional labels, shelf life testing, and figuring out my wholesale pricing. That stuff I think is gonna be a little more of a headache than physically moving into the kitchen and getting certified through the kitchen.

[00:45:26] what helps is being in a kitchen that was already a commercial kitchen and certified the state and through the health department. If I had to build my own kitchen, this would be a whole other whole other problem. It

would be a lot, a lot more work, a lot more headache and a lot bigger of a transition period.

[00:45:44] So me just being able to get into this kitchen and right from the get-go, just start working has just been a blessing. My, my business has not been affected. I haven't had any time where I was like, down where I couldn't. bake and customers were waiting. So it's just been a great transition.

[00:46:04] I think it helps that the kitchen I'm renting from he is very laid back. He's not there when I'm there, which works with the schedule.

[00:46:13] So that's what also makes this relationship work well.

[00:46:17] **David Crabill:** What has the investment been like to move from cottage food to commercial?

[00:46:24] **Tamara Ketchian:** So because I didn't have to build my own kitchen, it has not been huge. I literally brought over the rack. I had my ingredients on over there with me. I just had to buy a few kitchen items. Most of the items I use are. Once I had already, or I'm using his trays because he had full baking trays and I only had half trays.

[00:46:47] So it's really been a minimal investment going into the kitchen. But as I mentioned before, doing all that other stuff To be wholesale is where the, where the money's gonna be. Doing my shelf life testing doing my nutritional labeling, paying for the barcodes, all the marketing material involved with like making sell sheets and all that stuff involved with being shelf ready for a store.

[00:47:11] that's more where the money's gonna be. Literally my license fee. To get certified from the state was \$20 like that. It's like such a big step and like it's, I think my cottage food license costs me more money.

[00:47:27] **David Crabill:** So in trying to figure all this stuff out, like have you been working with a business coach? Have you just been doing your own research? Like how have you been figuring out some of these difficult things especially with the wholesale stuff?

[00:47:41] **Tamara Ketchian:** Do my own research. Really most of it is just talking to other vendors, I meet so many different not just food businesses like even like a candle makers and jewelry people who sell wholesale and have connections. So **most other small businesses um, they're not gatekeepers.**

[00:48:01] Like, we're kind of all in this together. They want to help you. They have all been where you were. They're always like, if you have any other questions or you need help, reach out. You know, so most other small businesses I've met have been very open to sharing information and they want you to succeed.

[00:48:20] they know what, they've been through, and try to keep you from, you know, having to make the same mistakes. So a lot of it has been kind of research in that way. there are a couple organizations that I take classes from once in a while. One's called the W B D C, and then there's a small business association of Connecticut. I've also taken a class some food incubator classes, which have helped a lot as well. the classes involve just learning how to run a business on the backend, but some of it's also marketing.

[00:48:54] Customer service. So you learn all different things taking these classes. And most of the classes I take are free. Like there's so much out there so many resources for small businesses and I just take advantage of everything. You know, I've done a bunch of pitch competitions where I've gotten some grant money, which has helped as well.

[00:49:14] Yeah, do your research with other vendors and take advantage of all these small business um, organizations. They're there to help you.

[00:49:22] **David Crabill:** Can you expand a bit on how you got the grant money?

[00:49:26] **Tamara Ketchian:** So the most recent one was through a small business association in Connecticut. And it was a class you take, like an online class at your own pace. And then you had to present like a one, kind of a one page business plan. And then they took a certain number of people from that onto the level where you can do, do the pitch competition.

[00:49:50] So that was the last one I did. And I think there were five people that got brought to the end for the pitch competition and that was a remote competition. I actually did it while I was on vacation, so from the hotel room. and that one I won, which was exciting. I won first place on that one. Other ones I've done, I've won like second place.

[00:50:10] But all of them not just getting the, grant money. You're learning not just from the class you're taking, but you're also learning from the other people in the class who are running small businesses, which has been great. And just making those connections because you never know down the line you know,

who's going to help you or refer you to, you know, make a connection with another business that maybe can further you along.

[00:50:32] So it's all connected.

[00:50:34] **David Crabill:** So you, you won this pitch competition, so how much grant money did you end up getting?

[00:50:40] **Tamara Ketchian:** So this last one was a big, I got 10 grand. I'm gonna use that money to help finance getting my labels, doing my shelf life stability marketing materials, barcodes, all the things I need in order to go into wholesale.

[00:50:56] **David Crabill:** yeah, so \$10,000 is a pretty good chunk of change were you participating in these classes or competitions to try to get money for your business or was that just sort of like icing on the cake?

[00:51:10] **Tamara Ketchian:** So I have done quite a few of them in the past year. The first one I did was I was gonna be a vendor at an event. Then they also had where you could also apply to pitch. And I wasn't thinking that at first, but one of my friends was like, oh, you should pitch. And kind of as a joke, I was like, okay, yeah.

[00:51:32] All right, I maybe I will. So the first one I did, I had no clue what I was doing. Like out of nowhere, I just. Just dove in and did it. So I mainly went into that one to be a vendor and ended up doing the pitch competition. Most people that go into pitch competitions are doing it to raise capital.

[00:51:51] Some of the classes I have taken. Have had a pitch competition at the end of them. So those, I went in more to get the information from and the connections. And then the competition at the end was, like you said, icing on the cake. This last one I won for 10 grand. I went into that one because I wanted the money.

[00:52:15] That one was definitely a big pot and I was determined that I was gonna win that one. Mainly because this wasn't one of the classes where you're really making connections with the other classmates. The other classes I've done where there was a pitch competition for grant money at the end, we've all been in a Zoom class together, making connections seeing each other weekly.

[00:52:38] This one I just did was a take the lessons at your own pace. A lot of it was information I had already learned from other competitions from other

classes I had done. So it was pretty easy I was kind of just going in like, this is it. I want that 10 grand. So, every competition I've been in, I've gotten second place.

[00:53:00] And I said, you know, I'll be done once I get first. And so I finally got first. Maybe I'm done. I don't know. We'll see.

[00:53:07] **David Crabill:** well, so with you, having done a few of these pitches, what have you learned about making a successful pitch?

[00:53:14] **Tamara Ketchian:** Well, you have to make it exciting. Obviously, you have to get them invested in your business. So they're rooting for you basically.

[00:53:26] **David Crabill:** And how do you do that?

[00:53:28] **Tamara Ketchian:** bring it to their level. my last one, the one that I just won I kind of started as, who wants sugar for breakfast? I sure don't. And that kind of like, it's people's attention, they're like, wait a minute, I don't wanna eat sugar. I don't want sugar for breakfast.

[00:53:42] And so that kind of gets them invested in like, wait a minute. Yeah, that makes sense. Why does all this granola have all the sugar in it? And, she is making a great product. it's like the hook they call it. you start with the hook and you kind of grab their attention and get them in and then they're gonna listen to you.

[00:54:00] Because. It's very hard to get people's attention. They're very distracted. So you have to get their attention and try to hold it and engage them.

[00:54:10] **David Crabill:** So you've been at this for two and a half years now. It's obviously grown substantially. Has it just been sort of organic growth slowly over time, or was there a time when you felt like you hit a turning point and. It started growing faster.

[00:54:24] **Tamara Ketchian:** I would say it's probably more organic. I haven't really done any pay to advertising. It's mostly been word of mouth. I love it when I'm at a market and a customer is standing there and basically selling my product to another customer that comes over or like, Somebody will come to me and say, oh my gosh, so and so told me about your product.

[00:54:47] I'm coming, to try it. So a lot of it has been organic. I would say I'm at the cusp of the growth that you were asking about. Moving into wholesale. I'm sure I'm gonna have some growing pains because it's a whole new, um, whole new arena that I'm gonna be going in and just figuring out production for what I need for that on top of the markets.

[00:55:09] So, it has definitely been organic, which is what I wanted. I didn't want to have this giant growth and not be able to keep up with it. Being in my home kitchen I'm already already at the max capacity for what I could do, so,

[00:55:24] **David Crabill:** So as you look forward in your business, obviously you're trying to get into wholesale, be allowed to ship, but where are you going? When do you feel like your business will be at a place where you're done growing.

[00:55:38] **Tamara Ketchian:** You know, I don't know. I'm not interested in getting into big box retail. I do know that I'm more interested in small specialty stores kind of keeping my arms around it and then I will do not upward growth, but more growth where I'm adding product line. So a different kind of growth I guess.

[00:56:00] And then adding maybe some more specialty retail stores. I would like to start. On the East coast and then eventually I can work out. But you know, I am also in a shared kitchen space right now too. So I have to take that into consideration. I can only do so much in the space I'm in, so it is a good place to start, but I may outgrow it at some point if I have too much wholesale.

[00:56:25] So I really have to have a, a balance there.

[00:56:27] **David Crabill:** So you could see yourself building out your own kitchen at some point.

[00:56:32] **Tamara Ketchian:** yes, I may need to. My other option is he did tell me that his lease is up in two years and he doesn't know what he's gonna do. so I'm already planning, I'm taking some walls down. I could just take over where he is and everything's built already and I just have to change minimal. Which, that would be great.

[00:56:50] I wouldn't have to start from scratch.

[00:56:53] **David Crabill:** So as you think back over your business journey, what has kept you moving forward even as you've been overwhelmed sometimes? Like, why do you love running this business so much?

[00:57:06] **Tamara Ketchian:** You know what It's like the support I'm getting from the customers, it's just a really great feeling. When people tell me they love my product it's something that I created that didn't exist before and now these people like needed in their lives and they tell me I ruined all the other granolas for them.

[00:57:28] So, That feeling. And also I have three kids and they saw me as a stay-at-home mom. obviously being a stay-at-home mom is a lot of work. It doesn't get enough credit for what you're doing, but it's one of those jobs that doesn't get any respect. So I think. them seeing me start this business from scratch.

[00:57:48] My daughter does help me sometimes. My son was out of work for a little while, so I was able to hire him and give him a little work. So I think them seeing me do this has just made me really proud and I'm hoping that it also, you know, is making them proud. And I hired my little neighbor girl once too to help do some prep and.

[00:58:10] Her mom, my neighbor came over and says, you know what? She says this is awesome what you're doing. you're showing these kids that you can just take something and start out of nowhere and just build something. So that just kind of made me feel really good that maybe I'm a, a role model for somebody.

[00:58:27] That maybe a starting in their own business. And I do get, asked by a lot of other people that are starting cottage food businesses. You know, they ask me questions a lot, the process what I did, how I went through it. and of course I'm gonna help them out because why not? they're doing the same thing I did.

[00:58:43] **David Crabill:** Well, thanks for sharing all of that advice with us, and I'm really looking forward to seeing where your business takes you into the future. Now, if somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:58] **Tamara Ketchian:** Okay. I am on Facebook and Instagram. You can follow Wildwood Granola at Wildwood Granola, and I also have a website. It's wildwoodgranola.com.

[00:59:10] **David Crabill:** All right. thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today.

[00:59:14] **Tamara Ketchian:** Thank you, David. It was great talking to you.

[00:59:17] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

[00:59:22] For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/97

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[00:59:40] And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground to get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

[00:59:52] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.