

Cupcakes Paid the Bills: Amber's Cottage Food Survival Story

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 Amber Stokstad.

But first, I wanted to thank the sponsor of this episode, [Cottage CMS](#). Cottage CMS is a newer platform for cottage food entrepreneurs that is growing rapidly. It now hosts well over 1,000 cottage food business websites, and for good reason. I have checked it out myself, and it is very impressive.

If you find yourself juggling a lot of different tech tools, Cottage CMS can definitely help. I'll talk more about them later in this episode, so stay tuned for that and for a special offer for Forrager Podcast listeners.

All right, so I have Amber on the show today. She lives in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and sells custom cakes and cupcakes with her cottage food business, AHTA Cakes.

I got to meet Amber at CottageFoodieCon this past April, and I was super impressed with her and her business.

Amber struggled to have children, so when her son was born, she celebrated everything in a big way. People started telling her that she should sell her elaborate cakes, so she started AHTA Cakes a few years ago with virtually no business ambitions whatsoever.

Since then, Amber has created literally tens of thousands of baked goods and reached a point last year where her business was able to support their family after her husband lost his job.

She's now expanded into a food trailer and has already lined up over 100 events this year alone. In this episode, you'll see how Amber's cottage food business has not only had a profound impact on her, but also on her family and her community as well. And with that, let's jump right into the episode.

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

Amber Stokstad: Hi. Thank you. Nice to be here!

David Crabill: Long time no see.

Amber Stokstad: Yeah!

David Crabill: Yeah, the conference was awesome. I loved getting to meet you and see you there. How'd you feel about the conference?

Amber Stokstad: Oh, I absolutely loved it. I learned so much. I connected with people and didn't realize how many like-minded people there are in our industry and, like, made me feel less crazy about the way I feel about things sometimes.

David Crabill: I well, uh, can you take us back to how this whole journey got started for you?

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. So When I had my, um, my boys, we struggled having them. Lots of miscarriages and issues. And so when my first came along, we thought he would be our only, and we celebrated to the nines. Um, starting at six months with a candle in the applesauce, and his first birthday, the cake I made him was bigger than him.

And a full seven, a seven-layer cake, all different colors of the rainbow inside and out, and his current favorite food, banana, so. And by the time my second came along, um, I had learned even more what I could do. I found out what I could do with fondant and all the different decorating. And people kept telling me I should make it into a business, and I started looking into it January of '22, and by March of '22, it was set up and already got orders rolling in

David Crabill: Right? All right, so but even before you had your kids, you were a cake maker, right? I mean, you were making cakes.

Amber Stokstad: Nothing super fancy, and like I didn't know what I was doing. I was doing box cakes then, and nothing wrong with using box cakes. It's nice and easy. But, um, I remember doing one for my sister. Her favorite color was red, and I only knew about the typical like store-bought food colorings in those little droppers, [00:04:00] the liquid food coloring.

And I'm just putting all of the red in there trying to get it red, and it's still not red, and it's ... The frosting is runny, so runny. It ends up splitting down the middle on the way while I'm holding it. And they ... She lived with a bunch of people at the time. Uh, they lovingly called it the hippie house, and they all came out to get floor cake, as it's been called eating it off the floor of the car. So I've always liked giving them. I don't know why before

David Crabill: You learned about food coloring and powders and everything, right? You actually, it's you the food coloring because that's

Amber Stokstad: Yeah.

David Crabill: Thing that I that I thought about when looking at your business. I mean, your, Your cakes are very bold. Like they're very rich in color, super saturated. Um, and i'm thinking like even with the gels, that's a lot of food coloring, right? Like what, what do you personally use for food coloring?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, it's n- [00:05:00] honestly not as much as you would think with the exception of reds and blacks. Um, but I use, um, a combination between Chef Master and

Americolor, and, um, Colour Mill for chocolates. But it's so concentrated that usually you can get what you need without as much as you think. And there's also a few different methods of, um, I use my food processor.

A lot of people use an immersion blender. I don't have good luck with that, so I just use my food processor. It gets it runnier, so you do have to wait a little bit before it's ready to use. But it deepens the color and gets it spread out evenly, and that helps a lot

David Crabill: Yeah. Well, it is a, an impossible, um, to ignore brand. You know, it is, it is also very bold. You know, it's very, um, very vibrant. And I, and I know you have everything rainbow themed, And that concept of the rainbow baby, right? That's a big part of your story

Amber Stokstad: Yeah, they're [00:06:00] our rainbow baby is the calm after the storm, you know? That, the joy you feel after going through all the hardship And my dream before even having kids was to be a stay-at-home mom.

And we got that chance 10 days before I was supposed to go back to work, and I remember laying on the floor with, uh, with my oldest, and he was, like, three months old, and I just laid there and let him crawl all over me and just felt this huge weight lift. And being-- never missing a first, always being able to do the field trips and the things with their schools, and watching them just grow in all the different ways, but then also being able to work and do that and watching them take what they see from me.

Like, they'll take their little rolling pins with their Play-Doh, and they make me cakes out of their Play-Doh and all that

David Crabill: Yeah. [00:07:00] Yeah. It, it's such part of your story, know, your kids. Your story everywhere. on website. It's, it's, it's it's on, like, every of your your website practically. So, you know, it's, it is all over the place, and and I know you share it very openly. is that something that, like, you do to help boost the business in any way?

Amber Stokstad: I found, um, when I suffered my first miscarriage, I found out that it's not widely talked about, and it's super common, but it's not talked about. And all these people I knew came out of the woodwork sharing their experiences with me, but only because they knew I had one. And I... That support I felt was great, but I didn't like that I had to kind of look for it and express my pain in order to find that.

I w- I have, um, uh, gotten the joy to meet a, a client who is now a friend of mine. We [00:08:00] have a play date with her child all the time, but I was with her through all of her IVF and her miscarriages, such until she finally had her wonderful daughter. And I like to be able to make those connections and be a source for people if they want to.

If they need someone to talk to, I wanna be open and know that they can come to me

David Crabill: Oh, man ... so clearly this business is more than just a business to you, right? Like, it's, it's, it's, like, kind of a, a way of, of helping people and outreach, it sounds like.

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. Was just a way to create, and like, people enjoyed what I did for my family, and put it out there, and then it turned into, um, fun with the boys and having all this just flexibility going around being with them.

And in the last, um, seven months or so it turned into also completely providing for our family when my husband got [00:09:00] laid off, and still being able to get everything taken care of with the family. And but good news, he just got a job yesterday.

David Crabill: through a lot of through a lot of interviews, right? So

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. So many, so many. Uh, yeah, but no, he just got it yesterday. Got the offer letter and everything, So so

David Crabill: Wow, that's that's awesome. And, and but, you know, you said that this business has provided for your family over the last seven months?

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah

David Crabill: And so, I mean, what's your, your, uh, past in in... like... I mean, it sounds like you do this full time, but, you know, what did you do before you started the business?

Amber Stokstad: mostly customer service, uh, grocery stores, bagging, pizzeria. I did work at a bakery actually when I was, uh, 14. Um, I, I mostly helped package things and scoop the ice cream out there and such like that, nothing like major. But, um, I used to be a cosmetologist.

[00:10:00] Uh, I mostly focused on skin and nails. Um, I owned my own waxing business in Texas when I lived there for a while. Um,

David Crabill: this is not your first business.

Amber Stokstad: I guess not. I, I sometimes forget about the wax pieces.

David Crabill: But it sounds like a lot of customer interaction, though. Like a lot of interaction people, like you're a you're a people person. Uh, I would say you're an extrovert. Would you agree with that?

Amber Stokstad: Yes and no. When I am in the public, I am definitely an extrovert. Getting me out there sometimes, not so much. I have to be ready to go out. Like, over the... I used to be, very much so. Let's go do this, let's go this, let's go in the big crowds. I love it. Minnesota State Fair, let's go. But over the last few years it's been like, oh, crowds, whew.

But I love being able to experience it from up until this year in my tent or now in my trailer. Like, I get to [00:11:00] be in it without being fully immersed, and, like, just being able to stay in my bubble and still see everything and be out there and talk to people one-on-one

David Crabill: you feel like the business has changed you as person and gotten out out there more, it's gotten you socially talking to people more? Like do you feel like you're more extroverted now than you were when you started it?

Amber Stokstad: I think so. I do see a lot more people. I do a, I have a lot more events, um, even just this last year alone, especially with the trailer really opened up so much. And I think I last checked, I have 126 events this year

David Crabill: I'm going through through your Facebook page. It's like, wow, you have done a lot of baked goods. Like, there's thousands and thousands and and thousands of pictures, and each picture typically has like a dozen baked goods in it. So it's just like, wow, over the last few years.

So, um, you started this in, I know, the beginning of 2022. Mm-hmm. What do [00:12:00] you think prevented you from pursuing something like this sooner?

Amber Stokstad: I didn't really think about it. I didn't, I didn't... Well, one, I didn't even know about cottage food, um, as a thing until a month after I started it, and I just, I, I didn't really know it was something you could do from home, and I didn't... I don't know. I never really put much thought into it until people started, uh, telling me I should, and then I did.

That's kind of how it started with my cosmetology too. Like, I was always doing funny things with my hair, and one of my bosses told me I should go into it, and so then I did and loved what I did except for it was very hard on a tall person's back. But, um, the- people just kinda have to point things out to me sometimes. I don't see them until I get into it

David Crabill: Because you had been making cakes for people, been making celebration cakes, and maybe not as elaborate, but were people people telling you " like, oh, you should start a [00:13:00] business. You should sell your cakes," before you had kids?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, not that I recall. It's possible. If it was, it wasn't very many, uh, or enough to stand out, but it really got hit after the kids came and I was doing way more elaborate things So it was it was when cakes became super elaborate, and they they became

David Crabill: elaborate because, essentially because of the miscarriages, right? I mean, essentially because you thought that your first child was gonna be your only child, so you went big with everything that you did, and that caused your cakes to become more elaborate, more creative, which then caused people to take notice and then say, ""you know, hey, you should start, start, uh, selling these."

Right? So did you start get requests from other people say, "Hey, you make my cake?" that how got the ground?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, not until I actually made it into an official, um, like business page on my Facebook. And my first order was a referral from a friend of mine. [00:14:00] It was one of her

coworkers, and it was a cowboy cake. And I made a full-on edible cowboy hat and boot, a cowboy boot, and I filled the boot with Oreos. And, uh, he ate the boot.

He act- but the mom actually ended up saving the cowboy hat and sprayed it with a varnish, and they still have it.

David Crabill: Wow

Amber Stokstad: And I s- actually, she ... I think this is one of the shirts she made me, actually, 'cause now she does her own thing with shirts. And so I'm like, "Well, hey, you started me off, and now I would like to help support yours."

David Crabill: Yeah. No, uh, I was looking at the very pictures have, and I and I know that your kids caused you to do more elaborate things, but there's no question that you had skills back in the very beginning. So you were, you weren't starting from ground zero by any means, right? I mean, you were a pretty skilled cake decorator even when you started the business.

Amber Stokstad: I, I enjoyed it very much. I, I [00:15:00] guess I didn't really know what I was doing then. I was just putting stuff together, so I guess it was hard for me to see that. But if I look back at them, I, I do see some of them, especially on one of my earlier, um, baby shower cakes I did. A full sheet cake where I made a crib out of chocolate and everything, and I remember taking a tight curve with that and one of the bars falling.

Had to fix it when I got there

David Crabill: I, I saw that crib and it's just there is so much going on I it. I It's it's so over the top, and that's kind of how you are, right? Like, it's just you you go all out with these.

So that is something that's pretty unique because, I don't know, I see a lot of, like, cake makers these days are minimalist or simple or, like, elegant, and you're just, You just... there, there's no way you could possibly ignore any of your cakes. I mean, they are just, they are just [00:16:00] so vibrant. They're so full of energy and creativity.

so why did you decide to go in that direction?

Amber Stokstad: I, I don't see the point in going small unless, unless they request it. I mean, if, I, and I do post that on, on my website too. I said, "If you really want simple, you need to specify that." Because I, I might quote you for what you requested, but I tend to just add my own flair wherever, 'cause I just, I, I just want it to shine.

I want it to express the event that you're having, and it to be a memory of your day

David Crabill: Well, there, there is a business consideration here, right? obviously the more that add more time the the more cost it is, cost of ingredients, Yeah ...cost of labor, right? Yeah. And it sounds like from what you just said that maybe you're adding things that are even beyond the quote, right?

So maybe you're actually, like, the [00:17:00] profitability of the, the cake, because you go all out for it.

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. I, I, I don't know how not to though. I, I, I do my best to quote what I think I'll end up doing, and I don't, I don't feel right to ever go back out and go, "Oh, but it actually took me this long and this much stuff, so I'm gonna change the price at the last minute. You know, we've already agreed on this."

And a lot of times it's just I really wanted to try something new, or I wanted to, uh, this came to me last minute and I wanted to throw that on there, and I'm not gonna charge them for that

David Crabill: Let's go back the beginning of the business. Uh, I know you started four years ago, and, you know, y- people were were telling you should make this into a business, right? And then you got that, that first referral. But what do you remember from that first year?

Amber Stokstad: Um, I definitely had, uh, family and friends supporting me. I started out trying to do, [00:18:00] um, posting, uh, like I, I made Valentine's cupcakes and posted those out for sale, then I made some, uh, St. Patrick's Day ones 'cause they were right around in that, uh, area. And my family would order them, and we'd drive and meet halfway and deliver those.

And, um, just posted a few little fun things like that and brought some stuff to some gatherings. Um, and then I got an invite to do a vendor show at the Eagles Club. That was my first one. I hadn't even thought about that as a possibility when I started.

But that's how I found out about the cottage food because they asked me about my cottage food registration, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, totally working on that.

Give me a moment." Getting about that taken care of, but... was a lot. I didn't know how to even package things. I, I didn't wanna do all these single cupcakes. That seemed tedious and [00:19:00] ridiculous at the time. Now that's all I do. But when I do events, but so I like did four packs, but then I'm sitting there going, "Well, how do I know which flavors to put in the four pack?

People don't necessarily want all one flavor. But what if they don't like a flavor I put in the pack, then they're not gonna buy it." My brain was just reeling trying to figure out all the logistics of it, and over time I figured things out. The vendors have all been amazing, offering me tips or just seeing people do certain things and taking tips from that.

I learn something at almost event I go... Every event I go to. It's like from lifting up the table to put on my tablecloth instead of bending down to put it on every time. I saw somebody do that once. I'm like, "Oh my God, that's brilliant. Why didn't I think of that?" It's just, there's just so much learning that has happened over four years.

It's, it's been wonderful all the way around, 'cause some of it can just be transferred into daily life, too [00:20:00]

David Crabill: You felt like your first event was overwhelming, which is typical. You have a lot of experience now. You could go back in time, what would you tell yourself before that first event?

Amber Stokstad: Stop overthinking it and just make what you're comfortable making. Don't overguess it. It's okay to sell out, even though I still struggle with that part, but

David Crabill: So what was your first event like for you?

Amber Stokstad: It was, uh, it was really fun. I had my friend, uh, got to come with me 'cause I had no idea if I would, like, need to run to the restroom or, you know, I didn't wanna leave my booth unattended. And, um, but it, it went pretty well, I think, for my first one. I made back my booth fee and a little bit more, so I felt that that was somewhat successful.

Uh, got my name out there, and I think I had already started my portfolio, a little bit with just the few cakes I had [00:21:00] made at that time, and that I could find pictures of from the past. And got that out there. Um, just it was a nice... It was a good social experience for sure.

David Crabill: I mean, when do you feel like your business really started to take off? You said you had a lot of family and friends supporting you in the beginning, and then I know Yeah...you did this event. Was this event kind of the starting point? Like, when do you like, "like Oh, this is becoming a legitimate business now"?

Amber Stokstad: The orders for the custom cakes actually started rolling in pretty quickly. We do not have a, um, a lot of options for custom cakes out here. So it seemed to be I was found pretty quickly. Um, and then being that my business starts with an A, I do pop up at the top of a lot of searches. That was an accidental happy accident.

Um, so that definitely helps me out, [00:22:00] um, being found in the searches that way. Um, I definitely think my, h- whatever my price point was in the beginning was also helpful in reeling those early customers in, but it also helped me get my experience and my name out there as well, and learning curve with a lot of all that.

David Crabill: That is so interesting that you say that feeling like your name starts with an A is helpful, helpful, I felt like that was kind of an outdated thing, cause, you know, there are all these businesses that still exist today that are like A1 this, a... You because you were of the 'cause of the yellow pages, right? I mean, the yellow Pages. Right, right. You want to be the very first listing in the yellow pages in their alphabetical order, and now you, you, you're searching for cakes and then, you know, uh, Google or whatever's gonna show whatever they feel is the most relevant based on your location, based on keywords, based on reviews, et cetera. So I had thought that that was kind of no, no longer [00:23:00] relevant, but it's interesting to hear that you like like it

Amber Stokstad: like it is. Um, there are some events that will post, um, their vendors alphabetically as well, so I'm almost always right at the top on that. Um, if I remember correctly, Benton County Fair also lists them, uh, alphabetically, so I'm always up on top on that. Uh,

there's a couple of them, and, that do that, and then I try to go in incognito mode sometimes and check and see bakeries near me, and I don't know if it's just because it's closest because it's where I am or if it still recognizes my area even though I'm incognito or what, but Atta Cakes pops up first

David Crabill: Hey, real quick. Earlier I mentioned our sponsor, Cottage CMS, and I'll be honest with you, when I first came across this platform, I was pretty skeptical. I have seen literally dozens of software platforms built for cottage food entrepreneurs over the years, but [00:24:00] this one feels different. For one, Drew and his wife Kat are actually successful cottage food business owners, and I featured their story on episode 165.

And also, Drew has a ton of experience building software tools like this. I personally set up a site on Cottage CMS for my fudge business in under an hour, and I was impressed. And clearly I'm not the only one. As I said at the beginning, even though Cottage CMS has only been around for a few months, it already powers well over 1,000 websites, so I encourage you to check them out.

And as I said at the beginning, we do have a special offer for listeners. You can check that out by going to [cottagecms.com slash forager](https://cottagecms.com/forager). Again, that's cottagecms.com/forager. And when you sign up, you can set up a totally free website that is forever free. But if you do want to try the premium features, you can try that totally risk-free.

Drew offers [00:25:00] a 30-day money-back guarantee, and if you face any hiccups, he provides incredible support, which anyone who uses Cottage CMS can attest to. So again, I encourage you to check them out. You can do so by going to [cottagecms.com slash forager](https://cottagecms.com/forager). Now back to the show.

So when you you started out, you know, you're, you're getting this off the ground, what did you hope for at the time? Like, you think your business was going to become, or what did you hope it was going to become?

Amber Stokstad: Honestly, I didn't really even think further than let's start this and have something to do while I'm home with the boys sometimes and like a little downtime. I had no, no, I could no way see where I am now four years ago

David Crabill: So so no really strong business ambitions whatsoever.

Amber Stokstad: [00:26:00] No. I, I have no business sense or had none. Obviously I have some now. I had no business sense whatsoever, no business plan. Um, I still don't have a business plan technically. Um, but I just, I just was winging it. Let's go.

David Crabill: So what do what do you worked for 'Cause a lot of businesses and fail, right? Why do you feel like like your business has worked so well?

Amber Stokstad: I think my rapport with the customers definitely helps a lot. I have a good number of repeat clients, um, and those that I believe have dropped off because they can't

afford my price point anymore, they still engage with me on Facebook and comment and all that stuff. They still support me in their own way, and I think that helps a lot, and it's...

I've just gotten kind of well-known out there, and it just... Being able to connect with the customers I think really helps. A lot of them, I- like I said, are more friends than [00:27:00] customers even. I hate using that word now 'cause it feels so impersonal

David Crabill: and just having met you in person, like I could see that. Like you engage so well in person, you you're you're just so, such a warm person and so fun to be around.

But I'm sure like it's also your product, right? Your product's definitely, uh, it's, it's there in terms of quality and, and creating memories for people, creating experiences for people. I know that's a big part of why you do what you do.

So like what, w- what would you... how, how would you describe your to someone? 'Cause I ' know for you it's, it's not just a cake, right?

Amber Stokstad: Right. It's a memory. It's, it, it lives on. Like, if you have a simple cake, you're not gonna... I mean, I don't remember the cakes I had when I was growing up for my birthdays. I remember one because I've seen it in a picture, and I loved unicorns, and I remember that there was a toy unicorn on it, but that, that's all I [00:28:00] remember.

But I'm hoping that the cakes I put out there, they're a lasting memory. And, like, people will bring up something, I'm like, "Oh yeah, I made a cake with this on it that's like that." And there's just so many different ones. I mean, I occasionally replicate one, like I do the SpongeBob "What's funnier than 24? 25" thing a couple of times.

But otherwise, they're all so different and have their own meanings behind them. I just did one for, um, a guy who was turning 80, and he was in the Marine Cor- or, yeah, the Marine Corps. He was part of the Stearns County Sheriff Unit and, uh, loved Harleys. And she just threw this stuff at me and said, " I just wanna incorporate 80 years of his life.

Here's the things he enjoyed. Have at it." And she was in tears when she saw it. She was so enthralled. And she goes, "There was [00:29:00] not a single cupcake left over at the end. My son wanted to take the rest of the cake itself home." I said, "No, that's coming home with me." And she came and visited me at the Mother's Day event this weekend, and was just telling me again how much she appreciated it, and she loved how awesome, like, my husband was, 'cause he had to deliver it for me.

How nice he was in making sure everything was set to go and just... I think it's the whole experience behind it. It's not just a, "All right, you're another order on my books, and scratch you off. Done. Here you go. Hope it works out well. Bye." can't do that

David Crabill: it's interesting 'cause you, know, know, you create these memories and experiences for people. Very passionate about it, but also your business gone in kind of

direction. I know obviously still do a lot but you this whole other side of the business, right, that involves events. So how did that develop?

Amber Stokstad: [00:30:00] Um, it was originally just people just kept inviting me to all these events, and I'm like, "Yeah, sure, why not?" And then some of them are, uh, meaningful, uh, have like different, um, reasons for why they're out there, and then like w- a very new one to me this year is I'm going to be doing the fireworks down at Wilson Park, which is a core memory for me when I first moved here.

That's what we always did. We went to Wilson park, and we watched the fireworks every year until crowds got to be too much for me. But that was a thing, and like so it's a core staple. And so now I get to go bring my trailer down there and be at the fireworks and have my kids with me and do all this and just bring that full circle.

So that means a lot. Like so sometimes those events, they just mean like that to me, and it was just a ... And then like I said, there's been a f- four times in the last seven years, [00:31:00] um, so beforehand, um, we started, but then my husband has gotten laid off. And so in those times, I was able to pick up these events and just bring in more money for the family and help provide.

And then we got the trailer in August of, uh, '25, got the window put in and t- set up by September, and like days of having that finished, my husband got laid off again. And I'm like, "It's still farmer's market season. I'm gonna hit the ground running, and I'm just gonna take care of us. We're just gonna figure it out."

And that's, that's always been no matter what life throws at us, I find a way to make it work, and we take care of it

David Crabill: right? What was yeah, I know you got this trailer last year in August, and, uh, and that was a process right? What was the process like before you actually got that trailer?

Amber Stokstad: So it's funny, I'm very much a, I get an idea in my head and I [00:32:00] don't think about it for a while. I will do research, but it's a very, like, I, I don't spend a long time doing it. I, I find all the new research I need and I figure it out. And I was at Benton County Fair my second year in the heat, in my tent, swapping out my cupcakes every hour or less, depending on how hot it was so they don't melt, and dealing with, like, people want cake pops, but I can't because they melt if they look at the sun, and just dealing with all the things in the heat, but loving every minute otherwise.

I, I love being out there. Like, oh, it would be so nice to have a food truck and be in there with that. It would be s- have air conditioning and not have to worry about this stuff. And I had my friend sitting with me and we were really talking about it. I started looking on Facebook Marketplace, and I found one that was too good to be true, and I, I knew it was a scam and whatever, but it gave me ideas of what to look for.

And so [00:33:00] after the fair was over and I saw my profits that had increased from the year before, which was a huge, like, achievement for me, I thought that was so awesome, and I

found a couple. My father-in-law helped me, um, go look at them 'cause I don't know what I'm looking for per se, like in terms of is it reliable and safe to drive and all that.

And we found a couple of duds, but there was one that the price was right on with my profits from Benton County Fair. It was just made to be, and it was perfect. The inside was just done. Like, he was just for a lawn care business. There was nothing wrong with the interior or the exterior. All we had to do was put in this window, and so we did that, and then of course I decorated in lights and things like that with my Cricut and all that jazz.

But my father-in-law came over, helped me, uh, put in the window. He helped me learn how to use the [00:34:00] whatever it was. I don't remember the names of the tools, but hey, let me use the tools so I could help cut the steel to put the window in, and it wasn't just him do- him and my husband doing it. I got to hold the tools and do things too, and it was a full family process with that, and got that going and up and running, and then I hit the ground running right away.

David Crabill: no, I mean, I mean, the, the trailer looks amazing and- but it is a trailer, right? It's not a food truck. This- no, but it's rightusually people are like, they're looking for a food truck, right? It- that, Mm-hmmthat's my next step. That's the next thing I'm gonna bump up to. I'm gonna bump up to truck. Truck. But this is definitely an intermediars- intermediary step here where you are bumping up to a f- a trailer. I just a normal pull-behind cargo trailer. Um, a few thousand bucks, right? So, um, why decide like, look for for this as an option instead of, of like, trying to find a used food [00:35:00] truck or something?

Amber Stokstad: Used food trucks from what I could find were one, thousands and thousands of dollars, even in poor repair. And a lot of them had old logos on them, so you'd have to redo all of that or cover it up to some extent somehow. Also, if it, if it was an actual food truck and had any of the cooking gear in there, kitchen, refrigerator, any of that stuff, I wouldn't be under cottage food anymore.

I would have to go to a different license. And I wasn't sure if I was ready for that route yet. Not to mention, I'm not sure how I would make cupcakes on demand. Um, so it just worked better for me to have completely empty space, and I just bring my coolers in there and have a... I got a, like, table countertop thing in there for under my window so I can set up my till and have my cupcakes laid out ready to go and package them up for people. [00:36:00] that's just what worked better for me, especially with the price point. I could have custom ordered some stuff too, but again, thousands and thousands of dollars, and no, this was the best step to go

David Crabill: Yeah. You mentioned a a big part of the reason why you moved into the food or to the to the food trailer is you in a tent and it was hot. This- I'm sure this trailer black. Like, I would actually think would be hotter inside the trailer than it would be in an airy setup, right? Do you, like, do you have AC hooked up to this thing?

Amber Stokstad: I do now. Um, so I- the last- when I was doing the fall markets, um, last fall, I had, I think, two really hot days where I'm like, "Yeah, we gotta figure out this air-conditioning unit." I, uh, had some fans going in there, but because it is metal and black, it was essentially, I

turned it into a convection oven. It was just rotating the hot air. But, um, I do, I have an air conditioner and a [00:37:00] generator, generator now. Um, and I got to test that out, um, one of these really weird spring days that was super hot. So I was able to test that out, make sure everything worked, and, uh, got a nice quiet generator, so that seems to be, um, acceptable for most places.

So, um, actually also worked out in my favor for another, um... I'm gonna keep mentioning the Benton County Fair, I guess, because I, I love that event. Um, I've always gone, and now I get to be a part of it the whole time. But they had a, um, longtime vendor back out this year, and then well, they're not gonna come back.

They're retiring. And normally it would be a spot that most food trucks would fight over, except for they don't have much power in that spot. Well, I don't need it because I've got my generator, so he's putting me there in the prime spot. So another reason this worked out the way it was supposed to

David Crabill: So this is this is for [00:38:00] this upcoming right?

Amber Stokstad: Yeah.

David Crabill: So you're even more profits this year, I would imagine. Yeah, and, and and so the last time you were at the, the fair, this was before you had this trailer, right? That this ...fair essentially you to get trailer. a of events with the trailer, like, has the trailer affected your sales at events? Like, has it allowed you to sell is it just just easier? Like, it, it, h- how has it affected anything, if at all?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, definitely allows me to do more, um, in the fact that I can do m- more events that are outdoors. I can bring more with me. Um, when I would do other outdoor events, I could maybe bring two of my coolers. With having to pack up the tent and everything else, I just didn't have the cargo space, and I have a big car.

I have an Armada. It's pretty big. Um, but it could still only do so much. [00:39:00] With this, I can bring all four of my ginormous coolers. I have my air conditioner. I've got all the fans I need. I got lights. I got... And I've got the new sign on top of my trailer now, too, which that has been phenomenal. I've had so many people come and say, "Oh my God, I just saw the cupcake sign."

They're like, "I gotta go get cupcakes." Like, they didn't even know about the event. They just saw the sign. And so the colors, even though it's black, but the pink pops so much and all the other colors, that it brings people in as well. But, so, the, the ability to do more, and I think the, the colors, the brand draws people towards it, too, just to even see what I have.

And I will get people that will be like, " " I'm not getting anything today, but I'll grab your card." I'm like, "Yeah, absolutely. I do custom orders. Feel free to message me." You know, and just getting the name out there, too. It's just more visibility

David Crabill: Do you feel like the, the trailer itself draws more people just because not [00:40:00] every other pop-up, like it's not every like it makes your business seem more legitimate because it's in a trailer?

Amber Stokstad: lot more legi- legitimate, but I do think it definitely draws attention. Um, that is something I tend to do in general. Um, that's just kinda me. My tent even drew attention. It was bright pink and black, and not just like the pink tarp like you see some of them get the pink tarps. No, it was hot pink, fully branded, and the logos and everything.

It was all... I, I go big or I go home. I, I don't know how to do small, so like I'm always like, "Bring the attention. Come talk to me."

David Crabill: so, so now that doing events, uh, with the food trailer, like how, how how how is your split? know, initially it was all custom custom I know you do a lot of events. You're doing over 100 year. So like how much of your business [00:41:00] percentage-wise is doing events, selling cupcakes and d- individualized treats, uh, versus percentage is is doing custom orders?

Amber Stokstad: Well, this year is definitely gonna be way more events, only because I was focused so much on being able to provide for the family with my husband being laid off. but I do have a goal of taking this winter off for events. now that he ha- he does have the job, hopefully that all goes well, and I'm hoping to do really well this summer through the market season, and it gets really slow in the winter anyways for markets, and I'm just hoping to have a little more chill on that and just work on some more custom orders and get that creativity out there a little bit more.

I don't get to do as much of the creativity in the summer, but they are a little more sparse in the summer too, so it kind of balances out.

David Crabill: to about. So so I I know that you're super passionate about making the expressing [00:42:00] creativity, making memories. Do you do you feel like you get of the events too, or is, are the just a a way to generate revenue for the business?

Amber Stokstad: It, it's a little bit of both. I would say a little bit more revenue, but yeah, I don't get to express my creativity as much. Like, I can do some toppers on my cupcakes and stuff like that, um, but they end up changing so much that I try to limit it now with the trailers so I don't have to change my pictures out every single time.

But also, I do get to have all that interaction with the customers, and talk about different things of what I can do with them. So I do get to, they're like, "Oh, so-and-so loves this kind of, um, thing," or, "They love tacos. Oh my God, I made taco cupcakes for my niece, and this is how I did them." And, like, I get to explain that and show them, or show them my portfolio, and I get to go about it that way

David Crabill: And in terms of the h- like i, I I wanted to [00:43:00] ask about you actually sell. have you found works well, and at what point? point Because it's a unique, a u- a unique setup have there. I there. I know you had that setup at the conference too. Um, so yeah, how figure

out how how to, to... the the price point and and just kinda how, how, your work in terms of terms of how they're laid out and how you sell them.

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. So, um, for m- for all of my events, I mostly focus on cupcakes. That's my main draw is I do cupcakes. So on top of my trailer it literally says, "Cupcakes," now. So, um, I focus on that, and then I'll bring in the other stuff. So like my cake push-ups, um, they're in the tube like, like the old-fashioned orange push-up, um, popsicles like, but cake.

And those have been a huge hit ever since I introduced them. And so I make cupcakes, and then I make my sheet cakes so that I can make those. And then I use the [00:44:00] scraps and I make cake pops. So I'm using everything. My husband always jokes. He's like, "Yeah, my wife's a cake baker and I never get to eat cake, 'cause she learned how to use everything."

But, um, so I focus on those three, um, main things. And then occasionally when I... Basically, it's when I feel like it or I've had an order and I just feel like making more when I'm doing them, I'll do like chocolate-covered pretzels, chocolate-covered Oreos, um, different things. Or I'll see an idea and I'm like, "I'm gonna test that out."

I got an idea at the conference to do buttercream shooters. Literally just a shot of buttercream. Um, I had gotten the containers that were like the push-up ones, um, but smaller, so I, um, did some of those. Then I also tried the little, um, like Jell-O shot glasses with the lid, and then I made a chocolate spoon.

So, um, testing that out. So far, not a huge draw, and that's okay. Just a test. But occasionally... But some people think it's really fun and cute. So [00:45:00] I haven't decided if I'm keeping them yet. But that's... I just kind of play with them, like, and see what goes, what sells, what people want. Um, as for price point, I've been doing, uh, \$5 and then mix and match.

Up until recently, I had like two for nine, three for 13, four for some- and five, six, that all the way up to 12. I don't know why I did that. It was insane. And I did

David Crabill: price So just to clarify here, you're talking, you're, you're reducing the price if people buy more,

Amber Stokstad: Yeah. yeah. yeah. I was, I'm like, "I'm gonna do the popcorn pricing," as they call it or whatever. But I went way too crazy with it. I've... Since, since the conference, I have simplified it. I have four price points. It's, uh, so it's \$5, two for 9, four for 17, and six for 25. and they can mix and match between [00:46:00] the cupcakes, the cake push-ups, and the cake pops.

Uh, if I have any of the other things, those tend to be, um, cheaper in price points. Um, the chocolate-covered pretzels and Oreos, they're less ingredients, they cost less to make, and, uh, so I price that accordingly. If I do, I combine them. Like, I'll do three pretzels for the \$5, or a three-pack of Oreos, or something like that, um, so it's not as confusing.

Um, and then I had, like, for the Mother's Day weekend, I had mini cakes available. so it's just a four-inch, one-layer mini cake, so it's pretty small. pretty small. to... Yeah, it's pretty small. And I had those at \$15. And, well, it started at 12, and then I had to have my husband run the trailer one day while I went back and made more, 'cause they were just flying off the shelves.

And then I did increase it to 15, because I was taking that extra time and making them kind of rush

David Crabill: even if buys six half dozen, you're [00:47:00] still over that \$4 a cupcake price, right? It it still it still costs than \$4. Um, and these are normal cupcakes, right? Are there there anything special about them, would you say?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, I d- I do a lot of specialty flavors. I do, uh, try and harvest locally when I can. Um, my carrots come from a farmer in Cold Spring for my carrot cake. Um, my... I do a honeysuckle buttercream, which I harvest from my kids' preschool. I try, I... doing a bunch of jams from an- another farmer friend of mine, and I make those into specialty frostings.

I'm actually gonna be having a new cupcake flavor on Thursday using her blueberry bourbon pecan jam, and making it into adult PB&J. I do have some of the regular, um, basic flavors available usually, but I'm always working with, [00:48:00] um, good ingredients and trying to use stuff locally as well

David Crabill: are these, regular size cupcakes, like normal or are they or are they like jumbo cupcakes?

Amber Stokstad: They're, they're regular size. I do use a jumbo liner so they rise up more, but they're not quite like a muffin liner

David Crabill: so that's pretty, pretty good good pricing. You know, like you're you're, you're you're attaining a pretty high price for items. Items Do you ever pushback for your prices that, that you can see?

Amber Stokstad: Occasionally, yeah. And I get it, but there's a, they, they don't under- they don't know the time and everything that goes into it, and I need to be able to cover my time as well, and that is one thing I've learned along the way

David Crabill: how have you seen, like, in terms of the demand cupcakes? 'Cause Cause I feel like trend has fallen off to a large degree, [00:49:00] right? So, uh, what's your, what's what's your perspective? ' Cause obviously you're doing very well the cupcakes from your trailer.

Amber Stokstad: I think that trend started to fall away even before I started anything, but I've never been about trends, so I don't really follow too much. But I- you want a sweet treat, you want a sweet treat, and I'm there. like if they wanna order something that they know what they want to order and they'll order the cupcakes with their cake or just the cake, and that's however they wanna do it.

But when I'm out and about and they want a sweet treat, and it depends on what they're in the mood for, and some people, they're like, "Ugh, I wanted something salty." That's okay. Go find something salty. You don't have to buy from me.

David Crabill: But but obviously, you know, it's it's whatever is selling and whatever are, uh, have uh, have demand for gonna determine the direction you're going. Um, and people do the cupcakes, right? Do you find that that most people are choosing to buy cupcakes over, say, your [00:50:00] push pop, uh, or cake cake pops or what... You know, I have a variety treats. Like, what do people typically get? Um, 'cause 'cause they, all cost, right? Right? So what are

Amber Stokstad: yeah. Um, the cake pops are definitely third. Cake push-ups and ca-cupcakes, they, they'll vary. It, um, depends on the event and how kid-oriented. If it's very kid-oriented, those push-ups will fly like crazy. If it's in the middle or just not really oriented either way, it could be a major mix between the two.

If they haven't seen it before, they're, like, really intrigued and think it's super cool and wanna just try it. Uh, and others have had it, and that's all they'll have now is they like the fact that they get the cake and buttercream in each bite. Um, as I, I like to tell them, like, "It all depends on how you like to eat your cake.

Some people like a lot of frosting and, like, want the ratio that they can [00:51:00] control with having a cupcake. You got the buttercream on top, you got the cake on top, bottom. You can make a sandwich. You can just take a bite and get however much you want that way. Or with the mini cake, you get, like I said, the cake and buttercream in each bite.

You get that perfect ratio. Cake pop, it's all mixed together. So it all depends on how you like to eat your cake."

David Crabill: But I know also do custom cookies too, right? Right? Like, have you tried selling those your trailer?

Amber Stokstad: Uh, well not from the trailer, from other events. There are so many other cookiers out there, and honestly a lot better than me. Uh, I'm still learning and dabbling in that area, and I don't necessarily advertise as mu- or advertise that at all anymore. They're on my, um, menu for ordering, but I don't advertise that I do them.

Um, I have a lot of cookier friends. They... There's so many people out there doing them that [00:52:00] focus solely on cookies that in the time it takes me to do them, I, I'm happy to let them do that as well.

David Crabill: you have any or much competition in your area for what you do?

Amber Stokstad: I hate that word. Competition is so, it's so negative. But no, not really. Um, There are people who do what I do to some extent. They're, uh, rarely at the same events, and even if they are, they're different. We're different, and we always end up becoming friends. And,

and we give each other tips, and I've met a few that like we've talked online, we've met each other on Facebook from seeing different events posted and things.

And then eventually we meet each other finally at an event that we finally get together, like, "Oh my God, it's finally nice to meet you face to face," and see all the different things that they do. They... Yes, they're doing [00:53:00] cupcake and I'm doing a cupcake, but they're still so different. Whether it's different flavors, different style of doing it, uh, different ingredients.

It... There really isn't competition, it's just different preference

David Crabill: I think this this is something that been a part of success that, know, you are very community-oriented person, right? Like, you're you're always involved in events. know you sponsored conference. You really wanted the conference succeed. Um, and, and, know, you're just, just, you're making friends right, right, you're doing all you're you're doing shows or what, have you. You. Um, so so it seems like that's been a big part success that you're doing doing a lot of collaboration, a lot of networking. Mm-hmm. Um, h- have... do you have stories or examples of how, like, a specific collaboration has helped boost your business?

Amber Stokstad: I think in the very beginning, [00:54:00] my, um, friendship with Tina Cakes really helped me get out there. She, I forget the event that we actually even met at, but she told me about one of my favorite events at White Peony, and it's a huge event, and she got me in there, and that has been un- until recently my most successful show I ever do.

I get so many people out there, and I've met so many wonderful people there. And it, she just always is referring me to different things. And, like, she does cakes too, obviously, Tina Cakes. Like, I mean, she does rum cakes. It's different, but we still do cake. And she immediately took me under her wing and showed me the ropes, like, and how to do these vendor shows and get in on them, and we just...

And now we help each other out in different ways. And then there's, um, uh, Angel from Angel's Heavenly Treats. You saw me hanging out with her at the conference. She's one of the ones I've [00:55:00] met on Facebook first and then eventually met in person. Come to find out she was intimidated by me. She saw all my stuff and was intimidate...

I'm like, "Honey, no. Oh my gosh." And, like, we do different things. We're not competition. Don't... No. And now we're just really good friends. We hung out that whole time at the conference, and oh, I've been working with the Granite City Bazaar Bazaar and Becky Jackson on that.

And she does a lot of things for the Pride community and things like that. And I know that's not everybody's jam, and that's okay. And but I do like to help out with that because I think you should be kind to everybody. Everybody has their reason to live their life the way they wanna live their life, and that's all I'm gonna say about that.

But in working with her in all these events I've done with her, she's now got me, um, doing a, um, doing a cookies for a blood drive for the Red Cross that's through her, that they're all

working together as [00:56:00] well. And so I'm working with that. Um, trying to think. There have been so many.

David Crabill: Well, this causing to about smiles. You know, You clearly are just very passionate, just very passionate, passionate about supporting

Amber Stokstad: Yes.

David Crabill: people, right?

Amber Stokstad: Yes. I love getting the pictures back from doing Icing Smiles. I think I've done eight of them now. And, oh, and I do donations to different, like, charities and things like that. I'll reach out, I'll send them gift certificates. I sponsor the kids', um, school and logo on the shirts, that kind of thing.

Oh, Under the Hood, um, is a amazing food truck out here, they are the nicest people you will ever meet. And I just found out that... Well, we were at another event together and she goes, "Girl, you've been keeping busy." I'm like, "Yeah, that, that's what I do."

And she goes, "Just wait till you go national," with a wink. And I'm like, "What the heck do you mean by that?" And she goes, "I, [00:57:00] I, I might know people in New York who have friends with the Food Network and may have put some winks out there." So that might turn into something. Obviously, going to the conference and meeting you and doing this podcast. Um

David Crabill: this podcast is not at the level of network, not close, right? Right? But I could totally see you being on the Food Network someday

Amber Stokstad: But it's still a big thing. It's a new step. Like, it's something else out there, and it's just another way of just meeting with people and doing different things and getting the name out there and getting my creativity out there more. I don't know

David Crabill: So so what do you feel like is pushing you keep, like, making it it bigger and bigger and bigger? Like, y- y- it sounds like want to be on the Food Network, or you would like on Network. Some people you why

Amber Stokstad: Well, i,

David Crabill: want it to go big?

Amber Stokstad: I'm a [00:58:00] mix. It sounds super exciting. Like, I would love to be able to do some of that. Like, I wanna be in a challenge once just to see what it's like like that. Like, I watch them all the time, and I love it, and that's actually how I found out about Icing Smiles was from Is It Cake? There was a guy on there talking about it, and I had to look it up.

I'm like, "Oh my God, I need to sign up and do this." And I love it, and but, like, it also terrifies me. There's a time limit. I have to know exactly what I'm doing. I, I don't usually know what I'm

doing. My hands do their thing, and I figure it out later. So I, I'm kind of a mix on that. We'll, we'll just see how it goes.

David Crabill: Well, what are what are your plans? as as you look ahead, I know trailer's a a relatively new and a new addition to your business, as you look next year or or so, um, where where would you like to see the business go?

Amber Stokstad: The only future, uh, prospect I have contemplated [00:59:00] is looking into eventually, and like, and I don't even know if it's a year, it's probably much further, but like an actual... Like an ice cream truck where you drive from the front, but you sell everything from the back, so it's all in one, 'cause that's the only thing I don't like about the trailer is the hitching and un-hitching a- and worrying...

And it's come off a few times. I've blocked traffic a few times. I don't like that aspect. Um, so I would like to do that someday, and if I did do that, then the next step would be, I think, turning the current trailer into a commercial kitchen so that I could, I could bake out of that and have access to that, and upgrade my license, and do a few more things, and be able to do third-party selling and things like that.

But that's, that's... Yeah. I'm not looking into doing like a, um, storefront or anything anytime soon. I like being home with my [01:00:00] boys and being able to work around them, and not having to run off somewhere else to go do my baking and all my things, as much as sometimes it is nice to do in silence. But no, I like being at home

David Crabill: Could you potentially see this growing into a storefront someday?

Amber Stokstad: Maybe when they're much older

David Crabill: Well, i, I, fi- the out the plan. You know, you're gonna do fair year. You're in a in a better right? And you're And you're gonna many profits, can use those profits to buy ice ice cream truck, right? That's, that's how it's gonna go.

Amber Stokstad: We'll see. We'll see.

David Crabill: Yeah. Well, you know, y- y- you this with business ambitions whatsoever, it's off this big thing. I you know, just, I- many thousands upon thousands of goods have you made over past four four years? I don't even know but, uh, as as you think back on the few years, what [01:01:00] has this business meant to you?

Amber Stokstad: I'm still in awe over so much of it. Like, I have imposter syndrome massively. I see my flaws in certain things, and like most people don't even see them, but I feel like there's a flaw in almost everything I do. and I just like, I worry constantly.

I'm like, it, is that batch as good as the last batch? Are they gonna still think it's as good as that? Like, do they come back? And then like, I'm also not good at taking compliments that well. I, I

mean, I appreciate them, don't get me wrong, but I don't know how to respond to them so well. I blush and I like get all weird.

But it really does mean the world when, like, people will send me pictures of their event and the child smiling or the recipient smiling or how it just made their day. And i- if anybody... Like, I don't want people to cry, but when they cry in a good way, I mean, it means a [01:02:00] lot.

It just does. And it j- I had somebody yesterday, like, she bought one of my cupcakes and then came right back and bought another one and goes, "That was the best cupcake. That was the best thing I ever put in my mouth," she said. And I'm just, like, in awe of things like that, and the fact that I still get that and I don't...

That's part of why I'm not looking to do a storefront, is I don't wanna lose the quality of what I do. I don't want somebody else making my recipes. Like, people are like, "Delegate to your husband more. He can do this." I'm like, "But I don't know if it'll be the same, and it's not my hands doing it." I am contemplating teaching him how to pipe, though.

David Crabill: to if you want to keep growing it, right? There's like,

Amber Stokstad: it is.

David Crabill: getting around that

Amber Stokstad: I know. I'm just trying to figure out where. We did talk about [01:03:00] him learning how to scale my ingredients yesterday, so that might be a possibility

David Crabill: Well, it feels like you're you're growing significantly enough that if you you don't soon then you'll eventually burn out

Amber Stokstad: I am, I am at very high risk of that, honestly. And I learned a lot from Michelle at her, uh, class, and her, um, some of her past videos regarding burnout have magically started appearing on my feed more often, and I just feel like her going, "Yeah, come on. Get to that delegating. Figure it out, girl." I'm working on it. Working

David Crabill: I, I'm sure you'll it out. Well, it has been great talking you. Now, if somebody somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

Amber Stokstad: I'm on, uh, Facebook is my primary, um, social media. But I am on Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn I didn't really think about as being a [01:04:00] social media, but I saw something the other day about it. I am on there. Not active, but I'm on there. Um, email, um, everything's at Atha Cakes. My email has changed though, and it's amber@ahtacakes.com.

Another thing I learned from the conference is to not have a Gmail email.

And my website's ahtacakes.com I think that's all. I'm everywhere

David Crabill: All right, we'll put links to those in the show notes, and thank you so much for the on the show and sharing with us today.

Amber Stokstad: Thanks for having me, David. I loved it.

David Crabill: That wraps up another episode of the Forrager Podcast.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/171.

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And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my 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.

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