

MEANS AND MATTERS PODCAST

EPISODE TITLE: Flour Power: Lessons From a Baker's Battle with Long COVID

GUEST: Hannalee Pervan, Chef and Owner of One House Bakery

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Hannalee Pervan: *[00:00:02]* There was an egg shortage. There was milk shortage. Some businesses are starting to gouge prices. Just the idea of parents having to risk, you know, in their minds, risk their lives to go out to get eggs was just an absurd thought to me. So the only option in my mind was, OK, we do all we can. And you know, we put our heads down and we feed our community.

Leah Thomas: *[00:00:27]* Welcome to the Means and Matters podcast, presented by Bank of the West. I'm Leah Thomas, environmental advocate, creator of Intersectional Environmentalist, Bank of the West ambassador and your host.

My guest today is Hannalee Pervan, chef and owner of One House Bakery, located in Benicia, CA. Since she was a young girl, Hannalee wanted to be a baker. She trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Ottawa, and went on to build an impressive resume that includes Porto's in Los Angeles and Bouchon Bakery, which supplies The French Laundry. In 2018, she leapt, opening the bakery with her parents as co-owners. Hannalee and her team make all their delicious items from scratch, using an in-house mill to produce fresh flour to highlight the best flavor, with the intention of building community through food.

I appreciated Hannalee's openness in our conversation about the significant shifts she made to her business operations when COVID-19 hit, as well as her personal journey of dealing with the effects of long haul COVID.

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Leah: *[00:01:44]* Hi Hannalee. Thanks for being here. So to start, I'd love for you to describe your bakery. Take us inside One House Bakery with the hustle and bustle and the sights and sounds – what's the experience like in your bakery?

Hannalee: *[00:01:58]* It's almost 4000 square feet, so it's a very big building. You know, it's just open. It's bright, has big wood beams. It's a working bakery. Everything that we make is made, you know, in one house so you can come and see the flour being milled and you can see, you know, the meat being butchered. And I just wanted people to understand like what goes into our food. I want them to be safe and happy. And obviously, COVID was not a thing when we first opened, but I wanted the bakery to be somewhere where people, our customers felt like they were at home. You know, if they want to stay and sit up in the balcony for 14 hours, it's fine with me. Like, you know, you don't have to buy something every hour.

Leah: [00:02:45] Well, that sounds so lovely, and if I ever make it up to the Bay Area or am going in that direction, I hope that I can stop by. So you wanted to be a baker and own a bakery from a very young age. Now, here you are having accomplished both. I'd love to hear more about how you made your childhood dream a reality.

Hannalee: [00:03:05] My mom said even when I was even younger, it's just all I wanted to do was be a baker. I don't even know, like, where the idea first came from in my head when I was a kid. I was always baking with my mom and my grandmother, so it probably was planted somewhere when I was very young. But yeah, pretty much from 10 years old or on. That was my singular focus.

Leah: [00:03:27] It's so cool when I meet people who knew from a really young age what they wanted to do because I feel like with me, I kind of bounced around everything from an astronaut to an environmentalist to a singer, and I'm still figuring it out. So you'd been open a couple of years and then COVID hit. A lot of business owners across the country were pivoting to adjust to a new reality, and many restaurants cut back on what they offered. But you did the opposite. You began selling pastries, staples and developed more takeout meal options. Can you tell me about some of these decisions and some learning lessons along the way?

Hannalee: [00:04:05] When COVID first started, some of the people that I knew, the other businesses said, 'You know, you should shut down. You have so many employees. There's no way you can do this.' And I just tried to have empathy for our customers and try to put myself in their shoes and understand the fear that they were having. The majority of our customers are women and are parents. And I was starting to think like, OK, like you're a mom, you're a dad, and all of a sudden people are telling you that you can't go to the supermarket. It's not safe and you can't go to restaurants, it's not safe. And, you know, just myself, I started thinking, like, if this were me, where would I be getting groceries? Where would I be getting food? What type of comfort would I be seeking during this time?

And for me, the answer was always food. Like, I need to provide my people, my community, my staff-- I need to make sure that everybody is fed. Everybody has access to staples. There was an egg shortage. There was milk shortage. Some businesses are starting to gouge prices. Just the idea of parents having to risk, you know, in their minds, risk their lives to go out to get eggs was just an absurd thought to me. So the only option in my mind was, OK, we do all we can. We wear gloves, we wear face shields, we wear masks and we disinfect everything that goes out, everything gets bagged. And you know, we put our heads down and we feed our community.

Leah: [00:05:39] So during all of this, did you ever think about shutting down?

Hannalee: [00:05:43] Oh yeah, I definitely thought about it. We actually shut our doors a couple of weeks before it was mandated by the state to do so just because I wanted to keep my staff safe. And that was pretty much the only way I thought I could do it.

When we shut the doors, an online site where you could buy stuff wasn't even really in my mind yet. And then the day that we closed, we got so many phone calls that it broke our phone

system. So we posted my dad's cell phone number and my cell phone number. We both handed them over to our retail staff and then they were handwriting tickets and taking credit card information over the phone and processing it. So that was a few days of that.

And then essentially, I needed to teach myself how to set up an entire online store. I got that done overnight. And then the company tells me that they can't print tickets to the kitchen or the barista. So people can go online and buy food, but they can't print tickets. And that was it, and you're going to have to handwrite all the tickets. So then we spent another, I think it was three or four days hand-writing tickets. I had three or four people, literally just on iPads, hand-writing tickets, giving them to the kitchen. I mean, we're talking like three 400 tickets at this point

You know, I'm in the back crying, telling my dad that, you know, this is impossible. And you know, my dad being my dad was like, absolutely not. Like, this is absurd. You know, they can send a man to the Moon, but you can't print a ticket to the kitchen. So, you know, he went all Dad on them, and he comes back down like an hour later and he's like, 'They're going to figure it out tomorrow.' So they figured it out the next day.

And then essentially from that point on, it's just been setting up new registers at the door. So we have a space for online orders can come pick up or you can buy at the door now. We have obviously the register for a phone call order still and then the online system. So it's just been a lot of learning. It's, you know, it pushes your business probably three to five years ahead of schedule where you thought you were going to be. You know, this is the only thing I've ever wanted to do my whole life, and there was no Plan B. This is it. You figured it out or you failed.

Leah: [00:08:09] Tell me about your family support and involvement in the business.

Hannalee: [00:08:16] My parents have been my number one supporter since day one. They always told me that I could do whatever I wanted. Just make sure you're the, you know, the best damn, whatever that is. My parents, you know, they immigrated from Canada to help me with this, you know, they left everything behind because they wanted to support me. They've poured their entire life savings into the business. My husband and I put our life savings into the business, which was not a lot, but it was, you know, worked hard for. When COVID hit the idea of my parents losing their life savings and myself losing my dream, you know, there was no other option than to move forward.

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Leah: After a short break, Hannalee and I talk about how, despite her business surviving during COVID, her personal journey with COVID had only just begun.

[Music]

Leah: [00:09:30] You survived amazingly in 2020 and the business came back stronger. But then on the One House Bakery Instagram, you shared a personal post about complications you had after contracting COVID-19. I ended up getting a breakthrough case of COVID a couple of

months ago, and it was the worst and you were very brave for sharing with your community. Could you tell us about what that experience was like and why you decided to be open about it?

Hannalee: [00:09:57] Initially, I thought I was just having allergies. I was just kind of stuffy and my nose was stuffy and I didn't have a fever. I didn't have any problems breathing. I wasn't coughing. And then all of a sudden my taste was gone. My smell was gone. And that was it. So, you know, I obviously shut the business down. I went and got tested and it came back positive.

I immediately get all of my staff tested. Everybody is paid. The idea of not getting their wages is just absurd. So Mom, Pops and I pay out of our pocket to the entire staff. We decide that we're going to shut down for the whole week because we don't know how it works. If you know, if somebody is exposed, like how long does it take for symptoms to show up? There's just so many things that we don't know at this point. We got two different companies deep clean because, you know, I'm everywhere in the bakery. I'm in every department, I'm talking to everybody.

It turned out nobody else had it, luckily. And then the first month, second and third month goes by, I still can't taste or smell, you know, I'm starting to get nervous and starting to panic and you know, my husband saying, 'Oh, I looked at some articles like, it's happening to other people. Don't worry.' And then my taste and smell slowly started coming back, but it turned out that it started coming back wrong.

So like, I would taste say, like an orange and it would taste like pecans. And you're like, I know what oranges taste like deep down in my bones. Like I, I obsess over ingredients and I obsess over flavors and I obsess over where these flavors hit me on my taste buds and which taste buds are, you know, is it activating and how does it feel when it goes down my throat? And what is the roof of my mouth feel when I eat? Like these are the things that, like I obsessed over my entire life. And now I couldn't even tell the difference between strawberries or raspberries.

Leah: [00:12:02] As someone who relies on taste and smell for so much of your work, you must have felt incredible fear or sadness. How did you keep going?

Hannalee: [00:12:12] It was very, very challenging to go through that and I felt embarrassed and I felt ashamed and I felt broken and didn't want to tell anybody. And I didn't want anybody to know what was happening because I thought, maybe it would affect the bakery negatively. You know, my job as a chef is, you know, to develop recipes and to taste things. And it's like I think that, you know, there's a period of probably weeks and weeks and weeks where I just cried and cried and cried. And my staff just got very used to seeing me at the bakery, crying and working.

And so I mean, I was sitting on the oven one day and talking to my savory sous chef, Zac, and I told him, like, 'I'm going to tell everybody.' And you know, and I, I genuinely thought people were going to have a negative reaction and I thought people were, you know, going to be like, Oh God, like, you know, you're still working like, you know? Are you contagious? Like, you know, all of the the stupid ideas that people have about COVID still. And I do know I talked to my mom and dad and made sure that they were OK with it, because it's not just my decision. They're my

business partners, and if there was any negative backlash, I needed them to be OK with me making this decision. But I did the post. I told everybody that, you know, I've been struggling with this, but I have an incredible team. They've essentially become my palette. It's just. I didn't want to be ashamed about it anymore.

Leah: [00:13:53] I know exactly how you feel. I hid having it for a really long time, even though there's nothing to hide about it. We're in a pandemic and the fact that you were able to power through is really inspiring and I'm sure will be really inspiring for our listeners as well. So, you recently returned from a trip to Spain. And part of the reason for your trip was you wanted to reconnect with your sense of smell. Can you talk about that process a little bit more and what it's been like to kind of reacquaint yourself with smell and taste?

Hannalee: [00:14:23] My husband came up to me and said, I really think we need to go on a vacation. And I, you know, I initially laughed, told him, that's a ridiculous idea. I haven't left the business in four years. And, you know, what's the point? I can't even taste or smell like it's just going to be a waste. And, you know, he kept insisting and insisting and insisting. And he said, You know, I'm going to get every Michelin starred restaurant I can find in Spain, and we're going to go and, you know, we're going to be safe about it. We're going to do our COVID tests.

So I left on a Sunday afternoon. Yeah, I came home and my husband, you know, he's so excited and he's like, 'Oh, you ready to go?' And I just burst into tears. I think it finally sunk in that I was leaving the business for the first time. And I, you know, he's like, 'You know, this is probably what it's like if you have kids and you leave them for the first time.' And I was like, 'I'm you know, I'm so happy, but I'm so scared.' And you know, I was crying at the airport and FaceTiming my parents and my sous chefs, and I'm like, 'Is everything OK?' They're like, 'Yes, you've been gone for like an hour. Everything is OK.' <laughs>

I had hoped so much that I was going to go to Spain and everything was going to come back and I was going to find my love of food again, and to be honest, there was definitely a few moments that really brought the joy back for food, but overall it was pretty challenging being surrounded by such amazing and incredible food and still not being able to taste it correctly. I have certain ingredients that I struggle with really bad. They taste like rancid or burning trash or like just really, really wrong. And some of the courses like onions and celery and melons, like those are the really bad things for me, and a few of the dinners were like, 'Here's your melon course, and here's your onion course.'

But one of the restaurants, Disfrutar, is probably like the best meal I've had, probably in my whole life, and you know I've been to a lot of three stars in my life, but that was just, I don't know, it was the first time I had felt joy since I got COVID in terms of eating food because it's just, you know, I never know what's what's going to go bad, like what's going to turn to trash, what's going to turn to wood burn like burning smoke. And it like gives you this like anxiety every time you eat. Like what's going to happen, what's going to happen? And I meditated before I went to dinner and my husband's like, you know, even if it all turns to trash, like, at least we're trying. So it took me out of my comfort zone, got definitely some new flavors and some new food

memories that you know, aren't associated with, like, pre-COVID. So it was definitely, it was helpful.

Leah: [00:17:16] Wow, that really sounds challenging to process and I admire your determination to try new ways of kickstarting your taste and smell. I imagine that it can make it hard to work as you're still dealing with the effects every day. How have you been able to run a bakery while you're in recovery?

Hannalee: [00:17:34] I just have an incredible team. I hired a savory sous chef, Chef Zac. He, you know, he runs the hot line now. I had an amazing pastry sous chef, Chef Tiffany. She's been with us since day one. I wanted to do everything on my own and I wanted to be strong enough and I wanted to, you know, just do it by myself and, you know, prove I could do it.

And I just, I think COVID taught me that I need other people. I need to ask for help. It's OK to admit, you know, I'm thirty five or whatever. I don't even know how old I am anymore, but it's like, I need my parents. I, you know, I was just hugging my mom yesterday at the bakery because celery turned to trash. And you know, my staff sees me crying, and they understand that we're humans and we're not robots, and we're struggling through stuff right now, and they understand and they know that I need them. And you know that we're a team, and when they need me, I'm going to be there for them.

Leah: [00:18:40] Where are you at today and how do you reconcile your loss of taste and smell with the joy of owning your business?

Hannalee: [00:18:47] I realize, like every single meal is different, every single ingredient is going to be different from one day to the next. So I just I try to think about it like in this meal right now, right here, what tastes good? What doesn't? Does any of it bring happiness? Like, you know, like, I just try to think of it on an individual basis.

And in terms of like what that means for my business is, you just have to keep going. There's not an option to stop. You know, in my mind, of course, there's always an option, but for me, this is it. And I want to provide my community and my customers, my family, my employees, I want them to feel happiness through food.

I personally don't feel happiness through food right now, but that doesn't mean that I've lost the ability to provide other people happiness through food. I just have to keep remembering what food tastes like and pushing myself to keep creating, even though, you know, it makes me sad that I can't taste it. But I know, you know, watching my staff eat the food and watching the customers and hearing the customer stories, you know, I know that they're still happy. And essentially that was the goal of One House was to provide happiness through food and to support our community.

[Music]

Leah: [00:20:25] I'm going to ask you five questions to close, and you can answer the first thing that comes to your mind. Ready, set, go. OK, so what's the advice that you would give to your younger self?

Hannalee: [00:20:37] Rely on other people. It's OK to ask for help.

Leah: [00:20:41] I love that. What's one thing you do to take care of yourself?

Hannalee: [00:20:45] Hot showers. I sit on the bottom of the shower and turn it up as hot as I can stand it. And I just I listen to my audiobook.

Leah: [00:20:55] What's the best advice that you've ever received from a mentor?

Hannalee: [00:20:58] Probably Chef Octavio at Bouchon. He just, you know, told me to stay positive just to keep pushing, to not give up. He said he knew me and giving up was never an option. He said, 'Just keep looking forward. Keep pushing, keep pushing, keep pushing.'

Leah : [00:21:15] What's a book that's on your nightstand table or one of your favorite books to read?

Hannalee: [00:21:21] I have very bad dyslexia, so I'm not much of a reader per se, and I have zero time, but I'm a huge science fiction nerd and I discovered audio books and you know, I must have listened to one hundred of them.

Leah: [00:21:38] And last but not least, what's a gadget or a device that you can't live without?

Hannalee: [00:21:43] My AirPods. My sous chef got them for me and I'm like, 'Oh, these are. I don't need these, whatever.' And now, like, I'm working and like, it's like reading me text messages and I'm laughing and yeah, I just love them.

Leah: [00:21:58] Yeah, they're the best. Well, Hannalee, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. I really appreciated our conversation and learned so much about what it takes to run a pretty cool bakery. So hopefully I'll get to come visit some time. And thank you again.

Hannalee: [00:22:16] Yeah, my pleasure. Thank you.

[Music]

Leah: [00:22:20] To find out more about Hannalee and the other women we are profiling on our show, visit meansandmatters.com/podcast

Means & Matters is presented by Bank of the West. It is a production of Duct Tape Then Beer and Backbone Media, in collaboration with me, Leah Thomas.

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Thanks for listening.