

All Together Now

Teaser: One woman with a curious title is a driving force behind the successes of countless food producers in Austin. We ride shotgun with her for a day to see how she does it.

It's 11 am on a Thursday, and Leah Lopez is considering curling up in the fetal position on her bakery's floor.

"Our electricity went out this morning, and when Pedernales came out to check it, they told us there's a fire hazard out there," she explains to the crowd gathering in front of her kitchen as she motions toward the people working on the power lines outside.

She's camera-ready, sweetly full of chatter and clearly a little irritated that today's photo shoot won't be going as planned. Lynda Berrios, who works for Whole Foods Market as its Texas forager, is visiting with her community relations manager and their favorite photographer in tow; they're here to catch up with Lopez before the impending Domain store opening and to stage a photo shoot for collateral materials promoting the local businesses Whole Foods supports. The lights are back on for now, she explains, but they'll be out again in about ten minutes, so we might need to get creative.

Better Bites Bakery, Lopez's business, is one of the 300 or so local suppliers Berrios works with on a regular basis. As one of Whole Foods Market's foragers – there are 22 people with that title around the US, each assigned to a specific region – it's Berrios' job to hunt constantly for the best and latest local produce, meats, cheeses, baked goods and other treats made by Texans with a passion for organic foods and, in cases like Lopez's, craftsmanship in the kitchen.

Lopez became a baker out of necessity two years ago. Her career in physical therapy shifted gears when her young son was diagnosed with profound food allergies; what started as an experiment at home when her dairy and gluten-intolerant toddler started asking for donuts became, over time, something of a passion project. Soon thereafter, a small partnership placing her allergy-conscious baked goods behind the Mandola family's Trattoria Lisina counter in Driftwood evolved into a similar agreement with Peoples Rx, and then Whole Foods came calling. Not sure if she was ready to be a full-time bakery owner, she asked Onion Creek Kitchens maven Sibby Barrett for advice. Barrett took Lopez under her wing and gave her the guidance she needed to decide she *was*, in fact, prepared to take on the world outside of her comfort zone. One last nudge from Whole Foods, and her treats are now found on their shelves.

In the storefront adjacent to her kitchen in south Austin, it's clear Lopez hasn't forgotten where she started. Several shelving units are stocked with goodies for sale from the likes of Zhi Tea, Cuvee Coffee, Ebenezer Foods and Bearded Brothers (with whom she's friends, so much so that

she helped them secure their lease in the space next door). Displayed along with them in a place of honor, also very much for sale, are a collection of spice tins from Onion Creek Kitchens.

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Few degrees of separation exist between most of Austin's small businesses, at least where food is concerned, and that's probably not surprising, given the city's laid-back, friendly ethos for which it's become quite famous. But there's a common thread acting as a bit of connective tissue among lots of them. When it comes to the area's food producers, one doesn't have to scratch the surface too hard to find Berrios or one of her colleagues or predecessors underneath it, quietly connecting the dots and helping them help themselves – not to mention one another.

Rachel Malish, Whole Foods' local media and community relations coordinator and Berrios' constant comrade, fell in love with Chameleon Cold-Brew back when she was working for the Austin Film Festival and would enjoy it regularly at Bennu Coffee, which was right next door to her office. She connected them to a friend of hers at the revered grocer's regional office, and that's how the coffeemakers made their way onto Whole Foods' shelves. These days, Malish holds that friend's old position.

More stories of similar, perhaps kismet-fueled, chance encounters and referrals pepper the Whole Foods aisles, including those who have taken advantage of the brand's Local Producer Loan Program, like the popsicle makers at GoodPop and the raw food enthusiasts behind Thunderbird Energetica. In roughly the past five years, Berrios and Malish say, \$10 million has gone directly from their global office to local suppliers around the country in need of funding to automate their processes, secure organic certification or otherwise make it over the hump into broader and better production and distribution. An applicant doesn't have to be a Whole Foods supplier to contend for a loan, but it helps.

From packaging and quality standards to new product ideation, Berrios may as well buy stock in a millinery. Involving herself as deeply as suppliers will allow, she gives guidance as valuable as almost any MBA program would offer – whether it's about pricing, sizing, food trends or a gut feeling about what will work with customers and what won't. In a very real sense, she acts as a mentor for fledgling food makers, preparing them for prime time as they ready themselves for their big debut. It's fitting, in a way, that Austin's quintessential small-local-business-gone-big would make a habit of helping new startups groom themselves for greatness, particularly when it bolsters the grocer's own identity as a staunch supporter of conscious capitalism, which is without coincidence the titular term of co-CEO John Mackey's book, released earlier this year.

"I was an anthropology major in college," Berrios says, "so I love that intersection of data, science and art." Of working in the realm of what she calls "retail, food, love and tasty things," she continues, "I expected to have that dichotomy; that's part of what drew me to this."

At one point in the day, it's off to Central Park for a shoot with Food for Lovers, the vegan queso company founded by husband-and-wife team Chris and Crystal Tate. Between setups, the ebullient couple chats with Berrios about their plans for a line of superfood salsas, and afterward the conversation turns to the availability of specific kinds of local produce. For all the Lone Star State's bountiful harvests, it turns out, a few key items are still lacking in the area and have to be brought in from other parts of the country.

"Cabbage," Berrios says. "We need cabbage."

"For folks who make kimchi especially," Crystal Tate agrees, and she appears to be concerning herself as much with other local business owners' needs as her own. "We'll think about that."

And so it goes -- Berrios planting more seeds. Metaphorically, anyway.

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Back at the bakery, the lights have gone off, but it doesn't really matter. The group gathers around a table in the front where sunlight is streaming in from the windows, creating something of a halo effect around Lopez's curls. Her nerves over the shoot are gone. She seems to have relaxed about the power situation as she places a platter in the center of the table, encouraging the crew to partake in the practically sinless sweets she's prepared for the day. As everyone reaches toward the plate, the photographer holds his camera overhead and gets his shot.

That's the thing about food: it's always bringing people together. And when it's made right -- and, some would argue, *sourced* right -- it fortifies them, too.

--Amy Wilde

Alternate teaser option: Austin's local business community is teeming with success stories of late, but how is the city's quintessential small-business-gone-big helping its younger siblings out?