

MARISSA HOWARD: So do you mind just telling your name, first and last name, and the same, just so we have that recorded?

ALEATHIA SHAKIR SALEEM: OK, I am Aleathia Shakir Saleem, and I am the auntie part of Jayida Ché Herbal Tea Spot.

MARIAH SHAKIR MITCHELL: My name is Mariah Shakir Mitchell, and I am the niece part of our auntie-niece duo that we have going on for Jayida Ché Herbal Tea Spot.

MH: So, I'm sure it's a long story, but what is start of the tea shop? Whose idea, where did this start? [*General laughter*] Quick story, right?

AS: We talk about this a lot. So I did apparently tell Mariah when she was eight years old that I was going to open a tea shop. And so one day—because it was in my blood. It was something that I always did. I always made things with natural ingredients, and we were always sipping tea, making our own tea. So I just said, you know, one day we were just talking, and I told her—eight years old—

MM: I don't remember this [*laughs*].

AS: --that I was going to start a tea shop. But she took me out for tea when she was twenty-five, I think, which was many, many years later. How she remembered that, I don't understand. But she told me, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

And I said, "Oh, yes, this is really nice tea."

She said, "Well, when I was eight you promised that you was going to open a tea shop. Are you going to keep your promise?"

And so my name means "truthful." My name means "honest." And so, with that, my father always told me you have to live up to your word. Three months later, I left my job, and we started a tea shop. I told her if I was going to do it, she needed to do it with me. And I was working at—I had a nice job. I was the assistant director of academic advisement at one of the Georgia State campuses. So I left—it was a good time to leave. So I left that job, and we started Jayida Ché.

MM: So my side of the story [*laughter*] is that I was just taking her out for her birthday to a tea company because I knew she would love it, because, like she said, we love making tea. We love just gathering and talking and just relaxing and self-care. It's just the main pillar in our family that we like to focus on. And so when I said that to her, it was something that we could do. I said, "This is something that we could really, honestly do, like we can make it ours, like really show our history, really show

connection to our community.” And that’s what we end up saying in a lot of our branding is, “Welcome to the Communi-Tea.” And that’s why we have a family table here in our workshop area, see, because we want it to be a place that people felt like they are a part of. Whether you come from a big family or a small family, you’re now a part of our “family,” friends and family. And so that’s how we started, which love, and then—now we’re celebrating five years since—

AS: This is our fifth year.

MH: Oh, wow—congratulations

MM: So we’re super excited, thank you. We made it through a pandemic.

MH: Well, there’s a lot of self-care that needed to be done. [*General laughter and simultaneous comments in agreement*]

AS: Well, we kept our doors open—did we ever close the doors?

MM: At the one location we ended up closing—because all of our locations were a little bit backward. Both of our locations are part—well, both of our past locations are partnered with other companies. And so one was Endulge [sic] Cupcakes, who really got us our foot in the door, because a lot of places, my aunt will say later, it was hard to get a space. She went out looking for this space. I was young. I was probably twenty-three, twenty-four when we started. And I barely knew anything about real estate, one, and then commercial real estate? So I was like, “That’s your department, you got it.”

AS: And so what we did, when we found that we couldn’t get a building, we started asking people that managed their own building, businesses, not large, not like a Publix or a Kroger or something like that, which was an idea that we had, but small businesses. And so we found a couple, and we asked Endulge Cupcakes, and they said yes. And the reason that they allowed us to do that is because somebody helped them. And it’s just a part of that giving back and that helping somebody else achieve. So yeah, that was how we got started.

MH: And how did you end up in the spot where I met you, at Community—

AS: So we were there—we were at Endulge, living our happy lives, doing our own thing. And so these two customers kept coming in. They was coming in all the time. And every time they’d come, they’d say, “I need you to open up a counter in our space. We’re getting ready to open up a restaurant,” and that was the one you interviewed, Ms. Jamilah. She kept coming in for tea and coffee with us all the time.

And so we finally sat down with them, and we agreed to open a counter, because our model, we found that it worked for us to be a business inside of a business. And so we opened up a counter inside of their restaurant. And that helps keep our overhead low, helps us as a small, small business. I don't know that if we were in our own space, when the pandemic started, that we would still be open.

MM: Yeah, we would definitely have to pivot much, much more than we had to do. I agree. But one thing about being in that space, that my aunt was like, she was—when they spoke, spoke with us, we were still like, “Mm, OK,” like we can do it. But one thing that really swayed us was that it was in our community. It was something that was familiar and that there was—growing up [inaudible], there wasn't a coffee shop in our community that was in walking distance of our high school and elementary school and middle school. There was only big stores. There was no coffee shops, big or small. And so now being there, it's a blessing, because now we get to have the school children come to us. We also have parents who can rest before they pick their children up from afterschool programs, and business owners. And so we get to meet with the people. I know I get to talk more with the people I saw as elderly in our community, and I get to know more about them now that, as an adult, and I care. I mean, I cared when I was younger; but I care more now. I get to have more connections, and that's really one thing, we get to simply connect and really bring wellness and self-care as a focal point in our community, I think, like from the Community Café.

AS: I think it's been—we have definitely benefited from being right there in that space, because a lot of our family members will say, “I haven't seen so-and-so in a while,” but because we're at the tea shop, we see a lot of people that, you know, if you're not coming there, you won't see them. Because we stopped having our services when covid hit. We stopped having our services there, but people still came; they were so connected. And so we got to see people coming through that a lot of times, you wouldn't see.

MM: By services, you mean Jum'ah, like the prayer service?

AS: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, the prayer services. And then also when we had that first one location, a lot of our community members would see us and say, “I'm going to your tea shop. I'm coming to your tea shop” and never made it. So when we opened up over there, we told them, “No excuses. We're right here.”

MM: Right here. Just park your car and walk inside. And now we even, through the pandemic, we now have a feature on our website, we can pick up your orders, you can ship it nationwide, international. I mean, that's why we got this space, because those things picked up. And we wanted to be quick for people to get their stuff within a week or ten days of ordering. We're not Amazon, we're not a big—what you get is us. We are the shippers. We are the people doing the website, with a few people helping us behind the scenes. But mainly it's us two here, writing our thank-you notes and making sure the order is correct, and checking things off. And being our customer service, by emailing customers and helping them out, too. So being there has helped us grow and increased the amount of people that we get to sip and connect with again.

MH: And you had mentioned that you had attended W. D. Mohammed?

AS: We both did.

MH: I didn't realize that it was around decades ago.

MM: Oh, yeah.

AS: Yes. I mean, it—I went there—since—I know I was—I'm sixty-one. I was there, I know I was a teenager. Even preteen, because I did middle school there. So it's been a while.

MH: I had no idea.

AS: Yeah, it's been a while.

MM: But it was a different name, wasn't it?

AS: The Clara Mohammed Schools

MM: Yeah

AS: The Clara Mohammed Schools that they were then, but yeah, it's the same space, same building.

MM: Really?

AS: Mm-hm

MM: Oh, I thought—in my head, I always imagined y'all—at our school we had to take Islamic studies and the history of the community. In my head [inaudible], “Oh, they were somewhere else—” Wasn't one of them off of Bankhead?

AS: Initially, yes, we were on Bankhead. But then—

MM: Then they transferred to here.

AS: Yeah

MM: Got you.

MH: So what was it like being Muslim in DeKalb County in the 1970s, '80s?

AS: Back then? And I'll tell you about my college years, too. It was very interesting. So, the thing is, we were a small community. And we were bused there. So at some point, if we had to catch a bus or do something else and get with the other people, then it became a little bit different because we were protected. We were—it was a—like—

MH: An enclave?

MM: Family, yeah

AS: And so when you go outside of that, you do have people talking about—I know—in the summertime, this is—I know I heard this. "I know you're hot. I know you're hot—"

MM: Or when you're fasting.

AS: "—with all of that mess on." Yeah, so, and they talked about us with the scarves and with the long clothing. Mariah played—they played sports. And they had to wear long pants. They couldn't wear the shorts. And they wore scarves. And we fast one month out of the year. During that month of fasting, if we're at, like, J. A. Fellow or something like that when we're doing our afterschool programs and all of that, and there's a meal served or a snack, and you don't eat or you don't drink, and they're wondering what is wrong with you. So yeah, it was a little different, and we had a lot questions to answer. But I think what helped is being prepared and understanding why, not just going through the motions, but understand why you're doing these things and how it connects back to you growing up to be a better person or you understanding that there's a higher Being, those kinds of things. So if you can connect back to the why and that bigger piece that goes along with that, the words don't hurt. But at the time, you have to answer those questions. And sometimes it was helpful, because people weren't doing always to be mean. Sometimes they were doing it because they were very inquisitive. And how we responded mattered, too. So it was on us, too.

MM: And I was going to say, like, adding on, I think from, like growing up, and after 9/11, because I was only in fourth grade when that happened, and so you don't have to fast when you are—you have to hit puberty, and so when you do start fasting, like as a, you have to do it as a rite, then you really do have to know what are you

doing, but also connecting people and teaching people. I think it's a learning experience, especially because, like she said, we were fasting at practice time. We didn't to break fast. Like sometimes, we have to do it all together, like they would cook us meals, because practice would end at six. If it's fall and winter, that's when the sun sets, and so you get to eat. But then during the summertime, you're moving or you're in college, and so it may be August when you're moving, and you don't get to eat until nine. And so I think it was—being able to bring people together and like, really give dawah, which is educating people about the religion, about our life. And then other people would join in, too. We had family and friends who aren't even Muslim, but they just were like, "Let me just try," because it's not just about—it's about fasting for God and seeing what you can restrain yourself from. And remembering that, it's kind of giving yourself discipline. And it's not about starving yourself. And it's other—the food is the easy part. I always tell people, the food is the easiest part about the fast. It's really refraining from saying bad words or like being more focused and really directing your thoughts to be more positive, which I think all of us can benefit from, because we can live healthier lives. But we can really—if we can control our mind, I mean, that's a powerful thing. And so I think that was it that kept us focused.

MH: So was there a mosque that you attended?

AS: Yes, the one right next to the restaurant. That was, later on, like she mentioned, Bankhead Highway was where, when I was young, that was my place. And so it was on Bankhead Highway at first, and the school was there, too. And then—I don't know what year it moved—but it's been many, many years that we moved to that location, and we were right there in that location, right next to the restaurant that you came to. And then the school, too. So the mosque—oh, no, initially the mosque was at our school. It was in the upstairs of the school. And then it moved—we bought that property up the street.

MH: And so all those other businesses around it sort of formed—

AS: We own the plaza. We own the whole plaza. And so the Masjid rents all of those spaces out to whoever comes for that lease. So that's—all of those businesses, even the—we don't own the property that the liquor store is on, but we have a relationship with them, because clearly we're not going to sell liquor, but we have a relationship with them. And we even got one of the bills that was passed, we were

instrumental in having liquor not sold on Sundays in our area. So just to have some restrictions as to who's in the neighborhood, what happens in the neighborhood, that parking lot is safe, you know, those kinds of things. So yeah, the Masjid owns that property and manages that property, maintains it.

MH: OK, and it helps foster this community. And that's something that I keep hearing you mention, with the tea and how important it is to serve your own community. But also the emphasis that I've heard recently is bringing others in, too, who may not be part of the community.

AS, to MM: You want to start?

MM: Yeah, one, we love it. Honest, like, I miss it when I'm not at work. Like, sometimes, going to the tea shop, we're like, "Oh, we've got to go to the tea shop and work." As owners you're like, "I can't be behind the counter," but I honestly miss the customers and sipping and connecting. Especially with us starting off with our first location at Endulge. That wasn't within the Muslim community directly. We got to get a lot of other customers who are non-Muslim. And so now, when we shut that location down and we mainly have it at the Masjid off of Glenwood and Fayetteville Road, a lot of our customers now, like, respectful of—they know what Friday is, they know from two to four is going to be busy. They may not—they know it's going to be packed. And some of them had to learn the hard way, and then we had to send out emails, get educating people about that, which I think was something that was a great learning experience. Also we know Ramadan is going to be one of our slower months being in that community, because no one's drinking and eating during the daytime. And so just letting our community know, our Jayida Ché community know, during this month, you're going to get this, things that will be changing, if it is, we'll have a specialty tea to teach you how to do stuff. And so I believe that bringing everybody together is good, because we get people—our community, who knows me since I was a young one. "Hey, Mariah, who was that talking to you? I think this"—and I'm like, "No, I know them from this." And so it gives everybody a chance to—

AS: They're protective.

MM: They're very protective [*laughs*] in our community. But also, within that, we have other customers, like Sylvester is one of the main ones that comes to mind. He has learned to come to the conclusion that he is like our big brother, my big cousin, and so he's not in the Muslim community, but he definitely—if they're talking to me,

somebody who knew me when I was younger from the community, he will step in and like, “Do you know them? Do I need to say something?” But he’s only known me for four or five years, but—and so I think—

AS: An even like Sagan. Sagan’s a Caucasian girl who started coming to the tea shop at the cupcake shop. She lived in that neighborhood in Ormewood. And she was like, twelve, and she loved tea. She would come, and she would buy tea for her friends and just loved tea, got to know our menu. We wanted her to work for us. And we didn’t know that she also wanted to work for us, so we waited three years, and she was the first one to make the move. [*To MM*] Did we make the move?

MM: I think she mentioned—her birthday. So we get to know our customers by knowing their birthdays—they come so often. And I think she was saying, “My birthday’s coming up, and I’m turning fifteen.” And I was like, “Oh!”

AS: Then you can work! [*Laughs*]

MM: And I was like, “What was you planning on doing at fifteen?”

And she was like, “I do want to get a job.”

And I said, “Well, are you [inaudible] work for the tea company?” And her mom was with her.

And her mom was like, “If that’s OK.” And her mom was like, “No, she actually was about to ask you.”

AS: And she said that she had been waiting to get to the age to ask. And she actually asked—on her first day with me, she said, “OK, can I call you Auntie?”

And so just that type of community and that type of love, and even just—when we hire people, we let them know that this relationship is not just about Jayida Ché. We ask, “What are some of your goals? How can we help you?” Because we’ve both gone to college, we’ve both run businesses and done other things, so we want to see how is it that we can help. So just that kind of thing, we—even our team is a part of our community.

And you asked the question about serving the community, I think one way that we serve them, more than serving them tea, is definitely the education part that Mariah mentioned. They want ginger tea. “I want ginger,” and that’s all they know. But we’re teaching them about these herbs, and we’re teaching them that this connects back to our ancestry. This goes back to all of our ancestry, because they lived off the—they foraged. They lived—they knew what bark on that tree, that that was bad, and that



was good, and this was good for the skin and whatever. And so we're doing some of that type of educating. And we see people coming in that are just getting to know tea, and they're looking. And one person said, "I'm going to try every tea up there." You know, so I think that kind of fulfills our purpose, because our purpose wasn't just to sell tea. It was to do that education piece to connect to the community, to even be able to give back to the community, but also to broaden that "communi-tea," you know, bringing people together in a way that helps us understand that we're all just one people. We're different individuals, but we're all one people, and that there are so many more things that is the same about us as opposed to what's different about us.

MM: And I love what you said. And "Jayida Ché" means "good tea." I don't know if you said that. So being good is not just for the tea to taste good--of course, that's like our number-one goal—but it's to do good. So do good within your body, what you need for wellness, but also make you get the energy or give you that pep in your step or tea meets you where you are, so that you can be a better person to add to the community, to be an active Samaritan, a good Samaritan in the world, as a general whatever, community you're going into. And one funny thing that we're always saying is, we don't, of course, hire just Muslims. It doesn't matter what faith you're in, as long as you guys like tea. [Inaudible comment] Do you drink tea? And we can teach you everything else. But I love how even our non-Muslim team members, they learn how to give the greetings, they learn what "Alhamdulillah" means, which is "all praises to God." They learn those things, and they take it upon themselves, because being inside the Muslim community, just like we say, "Hallelujah," or "Oh, my God," or "Jesus," like anything like that, they learn to say what we naturally say, because like, oh, yeah, "Alhamdulillah," "Inshallah," we'll just brush it off. But it's a thing, like, you know, "What's that mean?" And then they'll start saying it. And they'll start texting it to us, like, "Alhamdulillah" for this and that. So I think bringing that whole piece together, it's what really, really warms our heart. I think I can speak for both of us when we say that.

MH: So you have a tea shop in the South, and I think that there's lots of different—just like you were saying, tea brings everyone together. I think everyone has an opinion on tea, and it's—you know, around the world, though, there's so many different types of tea, and it's interesting how it all does bring together. But your mentioning how only ginger tea—here, it's always sweet tea.

MM: I'm going to say sweet tea and ginger tea—

MH: Sweet tea and ginger tea, so how are you changing that narrative about tea, teaching, and saying that there's different qualities of tea?

AS: Mm-hm. And even just like, there's someone that they get hooked on the lavender tea, for example, and they come in: "I want lavender. I want lavender tea."

We say, "Oh, we got forty teas over here."

MM: Exactly—

AS: And one of the questions we ask is, "What do you want your tea to do for you?"

MM: How can your tea meet you where you are?

MH: I don't think a sweet tea would ever--would do it.

MM: Exactly

AS: And we ask, "How do you want your tea?" And so we are doing the education. We are helping people get out of that, "I just want ginger," because—and I think one of the reasons they do that is because that's all they knew.

MM: They didn't know—

AS: And we—there's—and we have to learn about this stuff. Hakuna matata is a tea that we sell. Hakuna matata means "no worries." It is for relaxation. It is for stress relief. It is for chilling. It is for getting good sleep.

MM: If you [inaudible] somebody, if you're going through a bout where you lost a friend or uncle or aunt, it really does—

AS: Even debt, just money issues. But it helps relieve that. It helps to start that process. It's not going to just wipe it away. You've got to get some money [laughs] if you need money. But some of our ginger teas won't do that, and so that's why we ask the question, "What's going on? What do you want your tea to do for you?" And we sometimes feel like bartenders, [laughs] because people start giving you too much. And I don't want them to give too much. We have a tea called "Aphro-tea-siac." It's for men, and it's for stamina. But I won't put it on the shelf, because I don't want them asking my younger people about—to explain what that tea is going to do. So I'm trying to find a way to release this tea so that people can get the benefits of it, and so it's in one-on-one conversations, more so. But yes, we are working on the education piece. We do it one customer at a time. Sometimes customers within ear-reach will hear that education and hear us talk about detox kit, and we see them walk over and

ask. We have that screen up top that gives some education about the different types of tea and what it will do. Just as people are standing in the other line, they're looking over there, because they're very inquisitive. And we even have children that come in and with their parents' credit cards—little people! "I want my tea. Can I have my tea?" And they know which tea they want. "I want Minty-Mix tea." You know, so it's a process, and it's coming. We have a lot of work to do, but we know that the progress is there. It's already started.

MM: And I know, to go back to your question about like what people always want sweet tea, we are in the South. My dad owns a soul food restaurant here in Atlanta, and so I grew up on sweet tea, and I hate sweet tea. And so we get a lot of customers who come in and are like, "Oh, I just like sweet tea."

And we're like, "OK, your tea can still meet you in that way, but we know that—we've come out with a blend that's similar to sweet tea, it's better, it's not the ones out of the teabags that people are giving you, because that's just dust. But's that's your business if you want to drink dust. But we do have the looseleaf tea that tastes similar, and we can make anything meet you where you are." We can make our tea, so we always ask them, like she said, "What do you want it to do?" We can make it iced and go from there. But we are changing the paradigm of what tea can be for people and not just ginger or mint or chamomile, because they have brothers and sisters and cousins that also branch off and can do much more.

MH: It's interesting. What started this whole conversation is actually that we had a Black History Month celebration last week—two weeks ago—on soul food. And we talked about the history of soul food in DeKalb and kind of changing what's some of the stereotypes are and how certain places are making it healthier, and it's so interesting, I'm hearing the same thing with tea.

AS: Absolutely

MM: Because that's what it is.

AS: But we do talk about—when they say—when somebody says, "Make it as sweet as possible," I could put a gallon—a whole pound of sugar in there, and that makes it as sweet as possible. Let's get to the point where we know two teaspoons of sugar is really enough, and, you know, just go from there. We use organic pure cane sugar, we use organic honey, we try to use good products. We use agave. And so, you know, when they—we're slow—we make a lemonade, to give you this example. We

make a lemonade, and we put—I think it’s like a fourth of a teaspoon—I mean a fourth of a tablespoon—a fourth of a cup of sugar for each sixteen ounce, which is a lot. So I started trying to reduce that just a little bit and not say anything, just keep making the tea and then pack, bottling it up, and customers noticed. OK, they noticed that it wasn’t as sweet. So we’re still working on that. Some customers have started to reduce, because they know “This is not good for me.” Some will come in and say, “OK, my doctor told me this, and so I have to do this.” And so we help them through that. As far as helping, to say, “Here’s how you do that. Let’s not do the latte, let’s do honey instead of sugar,” you know, just kind of helping. But it’s not our job, but I think it’s something that is important to us, because the health of our community is important. That’s one of the reasons why it’s named “Jayida,” which means “good,” trying to do good. And so, yes, it’s important to us, but it’s up to that person. I mean, we can’t reduce your sugar here, and then you go somewhere else and just overdo your sugar. So it’s about education, I think. And it’s about desire.

MH: And part of tea, though, is this slowing down of making it.

MM: Exactly

MH: So how is that important, especially—there’s been a lot of conversation about mental health and, I think, for everyone, but especially in the Black community, too, and mental health and slowing down. How has this especially been during the pandemic? How has it been owning a tea shop or teaching people to slow down a little bit and steep their own teas and—

AS: Absolutely. Even to do good tea, to do a good looseleaf tea, quality is important. And we even, kind of with a blend for—to help repair the respiratory tract. But I want to say this, and then I’m going to let Mariah say something about this, because I think she can answer this question. One of our team members, I was working with one of our team members, and she was taking orders, and I was making the tea. Oh, no—she was—I don’t know. Somehow it got to her saying, “Well, I’ve got all these things to do, and I just don’t know what to do.” And she said, “Everybody’s telling me all this stuff to do.”

And I said, “Who? Who’s telling you all this stuff to do?” I said, “I’m the only one telling you stuff to do.” I said—you know, you just have to talk, you know, you have to know how to help them through—anybody—through that moment, and let them know that you have to self—do some self-care. We used to do Self-Care Sundays with our

customers. We had a class that's—something's happening on Sundays. We're either going to sit together, we're going to make a [inaudible] together, we're going to make sea salt, bath salts, whatever. We're doing something where we're just sitting down and just sipping tea and just chilling. And so I think it's important to just keep saying those words: self-care, you deserve this. Someone told me recently, "I don't deserve vacations. I've never gone on vacation." What? Please. [Laughter] So yes—

MM: How many of them a year do we do? A day trip is a vacation. You do that no matter what.

AS: And so yes, it's definitely—I think it's important that we have seen it, we've seen it. People come in there, and they're stressed. And we allow them to talk. We allow them to ask questions, and some of it, we're not a counselor—I'm a counselor, but that's not my job while I'm there, even though I know how to—I can do it. And so it's all about connecting with resources, too, and having that list of resources. So if it's someone from the community, and there's—I know how to direct them if they need more help, but it's definitely about cleansing. I definitely think cleansing is important. and then just trying to regroup and just thinking about that, just what's in front of me, what do I have to do right now, if you're kind of overwhelmed.

MM: And it goes to the question of saying like, "What do you want your tea to do for you?" So your thing is, we know we need to slow down. And that's why I love looseleaf tea, because you get kind of a double thing with it. Get the—of course, get to taste good stuff, but also get the benefits of the herbs, but while you're making it, we always tell people, "Use your five senses. Take account for the temperature, so you feel the temp of the water. Feel the--look at the leaves, and look how colorful they are in contrast, or if they're all the same color. Some teas all have red stuff in it, or if it has green and purple, take that into account. As you steep it or before you steep it, smell the tea." And then we tell them to go through those different steps, and then while they're sipping it, to just slow down with the first couple of sips. Taste it without sugar—we always tell them that. And there's a couple of reasons I like to say for them, it's because, one, when we think about the herbs being grown and like—or they're just foraged or you just pick them naturally in the world, then you get to say what love or what went through it, what energy, went through that herb for you to get it in your cup of tea. Because one thing about looseleaf tea, we're not grinding it with machines; it's our hands touching it. It's somebody else's family's farm touching that and bringing it

over here, whether it gets imported internationally or it's right here in the U.S. And so just thinking about those things to slow down with. And then at the tea shop—because one of our main things in the pandemic—well, we're still in the pandemic—but early pandemic days, we were shipping out more orders, and so we would tell people how to steep their tea and go through the steps that I just mentioned. But then at the tea shop, before the pandemic and now, people were—we used to have customers when we first opened, “My tea is taking so long.” “When is my stuff going to be ready?” And when is it going to be ready? You have to say, “Good stuff takes time.” And that was like one of the things we started saying to them. I know, because that's what we said when I was—she said to me when I was younger [*laughs*]. So it's just something that I repeat back. Good stuff does take time. To be anything, it takes time to be the best. You can ask any best athlete, singer, anybody in their craft. And so our tea takes time. You're not going to get it at two minutes. We're never going to tell you “two minutes,” because I'll tell you “five minutes,” the least amount, because we're going to steep your tea, we're going to make it.

AS: We're going to stir—

MM: Exactly. We're going to mix it, we're going to take all the steps into account, so that way, when you sip it, you're—it's meeting you where you are. It's bringing you down, it's bringing your stress levels down. It's healing—we're not healers, but our tea does have an effect, herbs just have an effect, drinking warm things or iced good stuff brings you down. It meets you where you are. And so it helps with the mental health, I think, just with that. And people watch us, so we don't have it where it's stuff blocking us. That's unintentional and intentional at the same time, because we're an underfunded company, so we don't get to afford all the things we want, but also it does help with our customers seeing us take the care and put love into their—good vibes, as we say, good vibes into their tea.

AS: And let them know that just exactly what we're doing, they can do that same thing. There is no magic that happens. As so sometimes we even take it over to where they are, you know, right in front of them, so they can see how we steep this tea.

MM: Especially when they get a matcha drink. I love doing matcha in front of people, because it's really a moment for them. But wow, all of that goes into just this cup of tea. And, like, yes, all these steps go into that.

MH: One of the most interesting things I did was actually go to a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, and it's—that's magic.

MM and AS: Yes, it is!

MH: There is something really interesting—

AS: It is so—oh, my goodness!

MM: And it's just relaxing.

MH: It's relaxing—

MM: It's [inaudible—could be “melodic”?]

AS: Just being still.

MH: But there's also a lot of history in the Muslim community, too, of tea. And so how did—is that part of bringing that—some of that tradition into how you prepare it, and—

AS: We haven't connected with that. We go to a Moroccan restaurant, we do that traditional tea. We haven't done it for our customers. But we do that. We go and treat ourselves to that. But—go ahead.

MM: But I will say that we—like, the history of tea has expression in the African-American community, it's that, like, way back—I say “way back then,” but it's really like the '50s and the '60s—

AS: Oh, really? What're you calling me? [*Laughter*] So that was “way back”?

MH, *laughing*: Way back, Stone Age [*laughter, inaudible comments*]

MM: No, no, no, but back in the '40s and '50s and '60s, when it was the civil rights movement, what they would do is, they would meet at tea houses to kind of plan and bring things in. And so we have mentioned that on our Instagram and some of our emails and things where we'll talk about why we wanted a physical space. Because it's easy where we could have just been shipping our teas, and we could have been happy with that, just having a warehouse, low overhead, and doing that. But we really wanted a space within our community. We choose Atlanta. We choose places that don't have as much connection, maybe, like going to schools and really teaching the children about tea, because it was a place to gather during the civil rights movement, to make plans, to be businesspeople, and that's where the real—like, people always say—my dad taught me golf when I was younger, “That's where business deals are made, so you need to know how to do this.” But also business deals and connections are made over a cup of coffee or a cup of tea, because as we're able to just sit and

relax and be more mindful in the moment as well, too, and so I think that's what we're able to do indirectly. We really don't have to speak about it, because it's just something that's so innate in us at this point, where we want to do that. So I love seeing, like, the men that come in after they make prayer or just after they work out or anything, because, over business, bringing their laptops, and the sit "tea-ing." I mean, the pandemic took this, us having a pot of tea. I used to love seeing them have a pot of tea and sip all day with that, because that is what connects us back to our African-American roots and then also our African roots as well, too.

MH: And so where is some of your tea coming from?

AS: It comes from all over. So our goal, when we blend our teas, is to—first goal is organic, and so we have organic producers and distributors that we work with to get probably about 90 percent, probably a little less than that, of our ingredients. Next step is Fair Trade, small businesses, small producers, people overseas that are sending their—even through one of our largest distributors, they receive Fair Trade. So we have the option, if you want to buy this peppermint organic, you can buy this peppermint organic *and* Fair Trade, pay more. We do that. When we can, we do the Fair Trade *and* organic. So it's about where we get those ingredients and how—who put that ingredient there. And then also we look for local. For example, our honey. I think you mentioned something about our honey, next door. So we could buy honey cheaper than that. But we're supporting a small businessman, and he's in our community. Of course, he doesn't live just right here, but he—we see him working in the community, we see him at the farmers' markets, we see him in places where he's trying to just grow his business, and so we support that small business and other products like that. So we do a lot through fair and other places where they're supporting small businesses, or they're bringing small businesses together. So our goal was—it's just to get good ingredients, quality ingredients. We said when we started in our business plan, anybody can make another cup of tea. We're not just another cup of tea. We want to make a better cup of tea. And so we have to spend more, we have to pay more. And so our tea costs a little bit more, and it probably doesn't cost as much as it should, but it does cost a little bit more because of how we're sourcing our ingredients.

MM: It's a farm-to-cup experience that you get with our tea, so we even—we partnered with farms right here in Atlanta in the past to get hibiscus or to get



calendula, where we'll dehydrate it. We've learned to—our pumpkin, we get that right here in Atlanta, even our sweet potatoes. So for Black History Month—Black History Month is every day to us.

MH: It should be.

MM: It should be, and we celebrate us all day every day. But we also are highlighting it with the rest of the world during this time, with our sweet potato chai. And so we call it "Sweets and Roots," because we know there are sweet parts of our roots, and so that's what our sweet potato chai brings to the table. And so our sweet potatoes are from here in Georgia, where we dehydrate them here in our warehouse to bring people a different cup of tea, a better cup of tea. And so even though [inaudible] is the base of it, it's from—it's native to South Africa. So we know that ever sip in that tea tells a story. And so we didn't just go for regular clove that we're familiar with, we went with star anise, because that tells a different story. And that brings a different flavor to that cup of tea for us. And all the other—ginger, cardamom, all those things—and so, I think—

AS: Even with the pumpkin, we—we could have just put pumpkin flavor in our pumpkin tea.

MM: No

AS: But got pumpkins, we cooked those pumpkins—

MM: Yeah, they're not easy—

AS: There was—we couldn't find dehydrated organic pumpkin. We—we couldn't find dehydrated pumpkin, first of all.

MM: It was for dogs. It was—

AS: It was only for dogs. Only for animals, but it had something else in it, and so it wasn't for us. And so we started dehydrating. So from year one, we dehydrated our own pumpkin and put real pumpkin in our pumpkin tea, in our pumpkin chai.

MM: And it makes a difference.

AS: It definitely makes a difference.

MM: Because you can go to some of these other places, if we're on the go—I hate when I travel and I don't bring a packet of our tea, and I'm like, "Oh, I've got to go somewhere else to get tea." If they don't have, like, a local teahouse, then you go in there, and you're like, "Oh, can I get the pumpkin tea?" or pumpkin chai for the fall?"

and you're like, "I'm going to ask for this," and you get it, and you're like, "What a letdown."

AS: "I could've just got tea."

MM: Yeah, I could've just got green tea. I could've got a cup of water. It's awful stuff. I think—

AS: Ingredients are—that's our very—most important—

MM: That's the most important component.

MH: I think it's beautiful how much you're bringing in history and almost your ancestors in this cup of tea—

AS and MM: Absolutely

MH: --and whether it's the civil rights movement or in Africa, in South Africa, the rooibos tea, and it's really—

AS: She's rooibos [inaudible] chai person.

MH: Well, that's the only one I've had so far from you.

MM: So have some more.

AS: How did you like it?

MH: It was good, and one thing that I was going to mention, too, I love seeing like you know, you can look at it, and you can see all the ingredients in it. You can see the whole cloves. And when you're mentioning sweetness and soul food, one of the things I learned is that, you know, with lowering salt and flavoring, but you can add it with herbs and other things, and that's the same thing with sweetness, is that these spices add this kind of sweetness—

MM: Exactly. Add a little bit of cinnamon or vanilla, which is super-expensive, but it does the trick.

AS: We use real vanilla bean in that tea, too, in that rooibos vanilla chai.

MM: Yes, so that it is. And I always tell the public, whenever they say they want something sweet, I'm like, "We can make it sweet. You just tell me what you're going for."

AS: The sweet is the last part. We can do that part.

MM: Yeah, that's the easy add-on.

MH: So do you remember your first cup of tea?

AS: I remember what made me fall in love with tea. I worked for Atlanta Gas Light, and I had been working there for a few years. I was a graphic artist, graphic

designer—no, geodesign—so I did the big maps. And I donate—we, in our family, we was taught we have to give back. Even if it's a little bit, we have to give back. So I was always giving back to United Way and those things. And the president of the company threw a party to celebrate the people that gave back, that was consistently giving back, so they threw a tea party. I said—that's probably when she [MM] eight. [Laughter]

MM: That's probably when she came back and told us!

AS: Oh, my goodness. And so my person—I had one person was serving me. We was at a round table, and it was several round tables. But my server had his white jacket on, had his napkin very neatly pressed across his arm, "Madam," you know, just talking to me, so you know, we just ate food. He said, "Would you like tea?"

I said, "Yes, I would."

And he told me the options, and he said, "Lavender," and I tried the lavender tea. I fell in love with tea when I drank lavender. That was my first time sipping lavender. I fell in love, absolute love with tea when I sipped that lavender. It transformed me. I am—I won't call it hyper, because I'm sixty-one. You're not hyper at sixty-one; you're high-energy [laughter].

MH: Vivacious, full of life--

MM: She can't sit still.

AS: So I am high, high-energy, right? And I'm always—when I was a counselor at the college, I used to always have to drink chamomile or lavender or catnip, something to bring me down to where my students were so that when they came and said whatever they had to say to me—because a lot of times, it was a lot of crazy stuff—you have to not react, you have to, you know, calmly help. And so I got very used to calming myself down. And that was before—that was after I had that lavender tea, years later. But I knew that that lavender tea transformed me then. And I was hyper then, I was really high-energy then. But it did something to me, and I fell in love. That was my first love [inaudible]. And I fell in love! [Laughter]

MM: And my—so, for me, I got—I met tea when I was more in the wellness need. I feel like—I can't remember exactly, but I know that I drank a lot of tea—when I was three. [To AS] Was that when I was three?

AS: She was three or four and got really sick.

MM: Yeah, I had a asthma attack. [Inaudible] a dog, and my parents didn't know. They knew I was allergic, they didn't know how allergic. And so I ended up,

could not breathe, my mother had to rush me to the hospital, but after that, we did a lot of things within the family, like, just to clear the air, like to—because I was allergic to dust, like, I couldn't—spring is coming. I still—every night I lay down, I'm dying—*[laughs]* but we learned how to do other things, like, peppermint. See, we'd have to do—

AS: We'd burn the peppermint oil on the stove, eucalyptus oil.

MM: You take a shower with it. You steam with it, and we drink the tea. So we did so much stuff. So I feel like peppermint, it's like, it's one of my first loves. That's what I probably drink most in the week. I had a cup this morning and so, mixed with other things. But that probably was my first cup of tea, because that is like a wellness thing. It automatically opens up your sinuses and also relaxes your mind and makes you move focused. Because when you have anxiety, like when you take tests, that was another thing I turned to. Like, if I'm taking the SAT with stress—I'm so happy I'm like years and years and years—

AS: Don't have to take that *[laughter]*

MH: Every now and then I think the same thing. I'm like, "How did we do that?"

MM: And every time I passed by the tutor's house when I was in Atlanta, I'm like, anxiety! *[laughter]*

AS: I remember *[inaudible—possibly tutor's name?]*!

MH: And the little bubbles, too.

MM: Yes, and my hands used to hurt. I was like, how did they have me—

MH: How did we have to write three paragraphs on whatever?

MM: In, like, two minutes?

AS: With your anxiety. So I went to take the GRE, and they didn't have mints. So I'm used to mints. So I saw some on one of the ladies' desk. I said, "Can I have a piece of peppermint?"

She said, "I'm not supposed to give you anything. You cannot have anything." I can't--because that may seem like she's helping me. But I'm like, I've got to bring mints. But they wouldn't let us bring anything in with us for the GRE. I need my mints! Yes, because, like, it stimulates the dendrites in the front of your brain and makes you think and remember. If you're stress is there, it helps the dendrites just kind of say, "Hey, I'm in charge here."

MM: And relaxes. Yeah, I don't know how.

AS: Yes

MM: High anxiety

AS: Mint—

MM: Mint was probably my first—

AS: --mint and eucalyptus

MM: --and that's still my first love to this day.

AS: What's yours?

MH: I don't know. I feel like I don't know anything anymore about tea

[*laughter*]. You know, it's—so we recently sort of started to dig into a lot of English teas, and we recently went to London, but we did like the traditional afternoon tea, and that was the same sort of thing of, I mean, you're supposed to just sit there, you know, and just relax for hours. And so I feel like our journey with tea is just starting. Because just realizing that there's so many—just the difference between—well, I was sort of looking at the tea that we brought back, and it was big, and the leaves were so much bigger, and that's how—I feel like I'm just starting. So—

AS: So the good thing is that you're aware. So when I started, I wasn't even aware that I was starting. At least you're aware, and you can kind of take notes and make a little bit more of a—

MH: But I do love coffee in the morning, so I don't know.

MM: Do you like it for the caffeine or the flavor?

MH: For the caffeine, but I've been doing, like, tea, you know, after coffee or in the afternoon and evening.

MM: And there's some teas that can help meet you where you are about the—

MH: I wanted to try the coffee a little later [*laughter*].

AS: So we have a tea that tastes like coffee, it's called Java Ché. And I would definitely try that tea. It doesn't give you the high, high energy, but it makes you feel good. And it does have a lot of benefits, but it tastes like coffee.

MM: And we can add a black tea to it, you can have high caffeine, that won't alter the taste too much, because it can just alter your caffeine.

AS: Yeah—but yeah, try it.

MM: That's what I would recommend.

AS: You could add some to your [inaudible] chai.

MH: That's a good--yeah.

AS: Mm-hm

MH: All right, well, I won't take any more of your time, but this is a wonderful conversation, and thank you so much for sharing your stories.

MM: Thank you.

AS: Now, I do want to add that just—this is one of the things we tell our team: living your dream is important. And just not—because when I work--I've worked for many companies. I've worked for Byers Engineering, Atlanta Gas Light, Georgia Power, Georgia State—I work hard. I give 110 percent. And so to be able to do it for myself and give 200 percent feels so good that I'm not always for another company for them to do well. Because I'm going to have to do that, regardless of where I am. I have to—that's just in me. I have to give it all. And that's to anything that I do. And so being able to live your dream and do that for yourself feels really, really good. Even with the ups and downs, it feels really good.

MH: Mm-hm, and then sharing it with someone else or your community and giving back that way.

AS: Absolutely

MM: Absolutely. It does feel good. Thank you so much.

MH: Thank you

AS: Thank you

MM: We love to talk [inaudible] [*laughter*]

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Claudia Stucke