

A Sweet Story of Entrepreneurship feat. Meghan Phan

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**Tommy:** Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today's episode we have Meghan Phan, owner of the Sweet Piglet Bakery in Randolph, Massachusetts. We'll talk about starting a business with her mother, balancing entrepreneurship with classes, and why she's excited for this year's holiday market. Let's get into it.

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**Tommy:** Hi Meghan, how are you doing today?

**Meghan:** I'm great. How are you, Tommy?

**Tommy:** Good, I'm doing really well. I'm sorry I'm sounding like this, a little under the weather, but we'll power through it.

**Meghan:** It's ok.

**Tommy:** So, how was the Thanksgiving rush? I think that's my first question immediately.

**Meghan:** Yeah, it was honestly one of the busiest holidays we've ever had, and we're super proud of it because we've been able to do essentially more with less. So, we've been understaffed recently, we've had more of a skeleton crew, and yet we've been able to put out more product, market more. Eventually we got to a point where we were much more prepared than previous years. So overall we're super proud of everything that happened on Thanksgiving and then leading up to all the preparation the days before. So yeah, it went really well.

**Tommy:** Yeah, I was gonna ask, so what does preparation look like on a normal day opposed to Thanksgiving or just any holiday where you're gonna be clamoring for a bakery?

**Meghan:** Absolutely. So, a lot of it is trying to schedule, to try to keep a really tight schedule of what we need to do. So, it's me, my mom, and my partner, and we all have our own schedule of tasks. So, for example, three days before we'll prepare all the cookie dough, and then the day before we'll bake all the cakes. So, it's definitely much more, I would say, structured than other days where we can kind of do things as we want at our own pace. So, there's definitely a lot more like rigidity and how we do stuff, but not a huge difference. It's all still very manageable.

**Tommy:** So, do you get a lot more foot traffic during that week? Because you're based in where? Randolph?

**Meghan:** Randolph, yeah.

**Tommy:** Randolph, cool. So, is there a lot more foot traffic?

**Meghan:** Absolutely. A lot of people, some people who check us out for the first time just for the holiday, which is surprising, a lot of our regular customers who are either picking up that

they already pre-ordered or just wanted to see what we have that was special. And then some people who it was just like a normal day for them, and they just stopped by for a drink like they usually do. So, a lot of different people coming in and it's always nice to see everybody.

**Tommy:** Yeah, that's really cool. And I think what's also really cool is like I talk to a lot of entrepreneurs on this podcast at this point, and a lot of them are really just in the online space in some capacity. But it's really interesting to talk to someone who is an entrepreneur for like a brick-and-mortar store. Not even just a brick-and-mortar store anywhere, but kind of relatively close to campus. Like it's not that bad of a drive up to Boston.

But that being said, I remember in our preliminary phone call you were talking about how you have a degree in philosophy, right? So, do you mind giving us a little bit of background on how you got from point A to point B?

**Meghan:** Yeah, so I originally actually started at Northeastern as a math major. And then I kind of fell out of love with it and I had to take a random health ethics class as one of those new path requirements. And it was love at first sight. Like I absolutely was enamored with philosophy. So, I switched eventually, and I kept at it for the rest of my college career. But then sometime in the middle of my third or fourth year, I can't remember, the stars kind of aligned and my mom's friend who owned a like a Vietnamese dessert shop, she said, "I'm going to close my shop. You should open here." And it was just like, it was definitely crazy. We did a lot in a short amount of time, and I was juggling it full-time, being a student, and then opening a shop.

So that was crazy. But yeah, eventually we just got the hang of things. We were open. We were doing well, and I was graduating and there's this kind of history now.

**Tommy:** But what year did you graduate?

**Meghan:** Um, 20, I want to say December 2022.

**Tommy:** Oh, okay. And what year did the shop open?

**Meghan:** 2021.

**Tommy:** Oh, wow. Okay. So, you really were, I mean, I didn't think you were exaggerating, but juggling is probably understating it to an extent. That's crazy. So how did, did your mother approach you in terms of saying like, "Hey, this is an opportunity I have. Do you want to be a part of it? Or was it sort of you were on the same wavelength?"

**Meghan:** So, before we got word of that the shop was going to close. We were already kind of making stuff out of our house. So, we were bringing stuff to friends and friends of friends, and we had a little bit of an online presence. So, we were doing that. And it was always like you and me in this together, me and my mom. So, when her friend told her about the opportunity, it was just assumed that we were going to do this together because we're originally, we were a mother-

daughter team. That was our thing, but it's going a little bit to the three of us, but yeah, it's always been me and my mom for the whole journey.

**Tommy:** That's awesome. That's really cool that...usually you hear stories about family businesses, and you hear how it's passed from one generation to the other, but I think it's super interesting to see two generations kind of collaborate with each other to really launch something. You don't hear about that too, too often.

**Meghan:** Yeah, that's true.

**Tommy:** So, there's also a cafe in the bakery, right? Is it a cafe?

**Meghan:** It's like a bakery cafe. Yeah. So, we have all the baked goods. We make custom cakes, we make desserts for the case, and then we also have a savory and a drink side. So, we sell a lot of coffee, bubble tea. Our most popular drink is probably Thai tea, which is my favorite. And then we also sell some snacks, mostly of kind of the Asian side of things because we kind of keep our stuff. We try to keep the classics for everyone to enjoy, but we also try to put our own twists on things as Vietnamese people.

So, we have a lot of different things from Asian culture. We have Japanese rice balls, we have kind of like a burrito, but it's like a rice wrap with seaweed and you can put in grilled eel, stuff like that. And then we also have sandwiches, which are mostly pretty classic stuff, I would say. We have a smoked salmon, we have a bacon jam that we came up with a couple of years ago.

So yeah, we try to make a lot of things for both people to find comfort in and to just kind of know that it's something they're going to like. And then also a twist on things that they can try something new if they're feeling up to it someday.

**Tommy:** Yeah. No, that sounds really interesting. Honestly, that sounded really great. I don't know. We're recording at lunchtime right now, so I'm already pretty hungry. And a smoked salmon sandwich does not sound like the worst thing in the world. But I'm really curious about the cafe. When you opened the bakery, did you initially open as a bakery and then you were like, "Hey, maybe we should have a cafe aspect of this to diversify?" Or was it really just hit the ground running; we're doing all of this?

**Meghan:** Yeah, we were all in.

**Tommy:** Nice.

**Meghan:** We definitely wanted part of it. So, the drink side, we wanted to try to keep the customer base of the drink shop before us. So, we sold a lot of their stuff, trying to keep the people that were already regulars there kind of hooked in. And then in terms of the savory stuff, my mom has always been pretty enthusiastic about cooking. She cooked for my family and for all her friends in her workplace throughout my whole life. So, it was just natural for us to do both

because we both just generally have a love of food, and we want to share that. So, in every aspect that we can, we try to do that.

**Tommy:** No, I think that's really cool because I really like how you lean into the whole family business thing. But like I said, not like, oh, it's been passed on to me. It truly is, in every sense of the word, a family business. Now, just to kind of go back a little bit to Northeastern, while you were at Northeastern, so you're graduating 2022, bakery opens in 2021, pandemic just happened. There's a lot going on.

Did Northeastern offer any sort of resources that were able to steer you in the right direction when opening a business and at the same time trying to get a degree in philosophy, which is not necessarily the easiest degree, but yeah.

**Meghan:** Definitely on a smaller scale. My professors were very understanding and supportive of the thing I was doing outside of my classes and just having that support from the people that I was seeing like, you know, three times a week. That was really great. From other people in the university, like the markets, especially super, super helpful, just being able to serve like a community that I was a part of for so long and getting to see like professors and students like walk by and find interest and just in some sense, like giving back to my university felt really good.

And then also that helps me being in the market, connect to other people who would eventually order pretty regularly from us, especially the AAC, I think it's the Asian American Center. They order a lot from us. So, connecting with them and being able to provide some sweet stuff for them and being a part of their community as well, connecting to them was really nice.

So that was a big part of Northeastern's help. And then I've been able to connect with alumni relations a little bit, not as much as I probably should, but I've been able to find some resources from them and some guidance on things like social media and managing like a bunch of other stuff. So, we've had some contact there. Yeah, so, it's just like a bunch of mostly connecting with people that Northeastern has been able to facilitate for me.

**Tommy:** Yeah, it sounds like you've been able to really use Northeastern's entrepreneurial ecosystem to the fullest extent. And it's really cool that you're able to reach out to all these different groups on campus, not only give back to them, but at the same time, you can connect with them and just continue to lean on each other, honestly. But I'm really excited, too, that you brought up Holiday Market because that's coming up next week, Thursday, December 7th from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Robinson Tent Quads on campus. Now, what about the Holiday Market? You were at it last year, right?

**Meghan:** Yeah.

**Tommy:** Yeah, so what makes you want to keep coming back? Because it really is like one of the coolest things that Northeastern puts on.

**Meghan:** Absolutely. It's just such a nice thing to be a part of. The atmosphere itself, everyone super excited to check out all these little businesses that started up at Northeastern, having that sense of community of you go here, I used to go here. That's really nice. And also seeing all these other entrepreneurs and checking out what they're doing. It's always exciting to meet new people who are doing similar things.

And then it's just generally, it's just a fun thing to do. I really enjoy markets. I enjoy the prep for it and the excitement leading up to it and just the whole experience. I always look forward to it. Definitely.

**Tommy:** Yeah. It really is a cool experience, and it's really cool seeing all of the foot traffic that's walking through at any given point during the select hours that it's happening. So just wondering too, how often do you see people that find out about your business at the market? And then next thing you know, they're in Randolph like, "Hey, I met you at the market. Got to come back for the bubble tea. Got to come back for the sweets." Does that happen a lot?

**Meghan:** It has happened before. I think it doesn't happen too much because a lot of the people I meet at the markets live on campus, or they live in Boston. And some of them don't have cars to drive all the way to Randolph. So, Randolph itself is not as accessible to things like public transportation. We have had some people who their family actually lives around Randolph, or they've heard of us, not even from the market, but from family. So, they check us out. So, it's not a super common occurrence to see someone from the market in the bakery, but we do actually have a bunch of people who come back to the markets to see us.

**Tommy:** Oh, wow.

**Meghan:** Yeah. So, that's really cool. And sometimes I post on the Northeastern Reddit, and I say like, "Hey, if you give me this code word, I'll give you a free drink with the purchase." And so, we get a lot of people like that who see that post and they have to check it out.

**Tommy:** Yeah. I was going to say that probably works really well, especially for college students. They love Reddit.

**Meghan:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Tommy:** So how many years have you been participating in the market, the holiday market?

**Meghan:** It started, I think 2021 was the first year we did it.

**Tommy:** Oh, wow. So, from the very beginning. So, this will be your third...am I doing the math right? Yeah. It should be third.

**Meghan:** Something like that.

**Tommy:** Yeah. So, this is a little bit of a two-prong question, but how has the market grown from your perspective? But then at the same time, how has the market helped you grow from year to year?

**Meghan:** Yeah. So, the market, I think in comparison to 2021, honestly, I think it's been very consistent. I think the support from alumni relations and facilitating the prep for the market leading up to it has always been really, really helpful, super organized, super supportive. So, in that way, it's been very consistent.

I think there have been maybe more people coming. It does depend a little bit on the location of the market. So, for example, I find that the Robinson Quad tents have more foot traffic. So those are more, I see a lot more people there versus let's say like once it was in, what's it called? It was near like Forsyth and that wasn't as successful just because it was also the time of year.

And then also being at the market, I think it's helped me personally learn how to connect with people. I think talking to people and being really in a situation where I'm meeting a lot of people and potential customers and getting to know them and having different conversations than I would have with, let's say like a new person at the store who's like buying cake for the first time. Like those, the conversation with them versus with a fellow college student who is interested in even learning about my business. That's a very different conversation. So, learning how to have those conversations.

And every time I prepare for a market, it's going to be a little different. Preparing for the Valentine's Day market is definitely different from preparing for the holiday market. So being able to kind of feel out what's popular and what would work for the next market is something that I learned every time.

**Tommy:** Yeah. That's awesome. And it sounds like not only are, like you said earlier, you're giving back to the Northeastern community, especially the entrepreneurial community, but it sounds like in a way that they're also helping you grow your business just through learning. And I think that's probably one of the best takeaways that you can probably get from the market, especially having a business at the market. So that's awesome. Very excited to have you next Thursday, December 7th in the Robinson Quad Tents. Be sure to swing by and say hello to Meghan and pick up whatever treat catches your eye.

But speaking of the treats, do you have a favorite one from your bakery? Is there one that is not necessarily the best selling one, but one that you're like, "Come on guys, this is amazing. You got to buy this."

**Meghan:** I tell people all the time, I would not sell what I don't like. So, I only make stuff that I would want to eat. So, it's very difficult being there every day and trying to resist a bite of the cream puff. My self-restraint has to be very strong for this kind of job. But personally, I love cheesecake. We make this pumpkin cheesecake. It has an Oreo crust and that really hits the spot for me. I also love cream puffs. In our cream puffs, we make with crackling. So, it's like a little

crispy shell on top and we fill it with things like durian, which is one of those Asian fruits. It's very spiky and some people think it smells very strange, but it has this wonderful sweet and creamy texture that goes really well with the crackling top. So, I'm never sick of that. It's definitely tough making stuff and not wanting to sneak a little bite and just use the excuse of like, "I'm taste testing just to make sure."

**Tommy:** Right. I'm sure. I mean, credit to you for having that self-restraint because that is something that I think myself included, not a lot of people are going to be able to do, especially working at a bakery. So, just to wrap this up too, since this is "Northeastern Next," I always like to ask what is next? So, what's next for you? What's next for the bakery?

**Meghan:** Yeah, I think our goal is to just keep learning, keep growing, definitely not to become complacent. I think that's a mistake a lot of people make in different parts of their lives, but we definitely want to make sure we're always taking opportunities to reflect on what we're doing. And even as a family business, we want to make sure that we are connecting with each other, my mom and I, and my partner, making sure we're taking care of each other because this has been a stressful experience for a lot of us. There's a lot of high highs and low lows. And so, we want to make sure that not only the business is healthy, but that our relationship as a family is healthy. So, we just want to maintain that sort of balance and wellness ultimately.

**Tommy:** Yeah, no, I completely understand. And it sounds like you guys are doing a great job of it, from what you've told me and how we've talked before and even just seeing you, especially at last year's market. So, thank you again for jumping on the pod today. I really appreciate it.

**Meghan:** Thanks for having me.

**Tommy:** Yeah, of course. And I'm looking forward to seeing you next week. Once again, anybody out there who's listening, be sure to join us next Thursday, December 7th at the Robinson Quad Tents from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. in Boston. So, yeah, thanks Meghan, I appreciate it.

**Meghan:** Thank you.

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**Tommy:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of "Northeastern Next." Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at [alumni@northeastern.edu](mailto:alumni@northeastern.edu) to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I'll see you the week after next.

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