

Interviewee: Schechter, Lindsey

Interview Date: November 11, 2010

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Interviewee: Lindsey Schechter

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Interviewer: Timothy Wyatt

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Abstract:

Lindsey Schechter is the owner operator of Houston Dairymaids, an artisan cheese wholesaler/retailer. The Dairymaids focus on providing an outlet for local artisan cheeses. Ms. Schechter works in collaboration with small goat and cow's milk cheese producers in Texas, marketing the farmers' products to upscale restaurants and the general public. The interview discusses not only the formation of Houston Dairymaids, but also the problems faced by raw milk cheese producers and the future of both Ms. Schechter's business and the Texas cheese industry as a whole.

Lindsey Schechter was interviewed on 11 November 2010 at the office of Houston Dairymaids 2201 Airline Dr. Houston, Texas. The interview was conducted by Timothy Wyatt on behalf of the Oral History of Houston Project, Center for Public History, University of Houston. The interview is available at M.D. Anderson Library on the main campus of the university.

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Lindsey Schechter: My name is Lindsey Schechter and I am the owner of Houston Dairymaids.

Timothy Wyatt: What prompted your move from Miami to Houston?

L.S.: I first moved from Miami to Houston to go to college. I when to Rice [University]. And left for seven years and then moved back to Houston to start the business.

T.W.: How did you first get involved in the food industry?

L.S.: I have always been somewhat obsessed with food and while... in high school and during college I worked restaurant jobs, I was cooking. Upon graduation I moved to New York City. I dabbled in food writing and I cooked professionally for a number of years.

T.W.: How did you first get involved with the process of cheese making?

L.S.: While I was in New York, I was first introduced to cheese makers. I worked for a chef who shopped at the farmer's market and I was first introduced to artisan cheese makers there. And also writing freelance, I happened to get assigned a bunch of cheese articles in succession; both concerning the political issues involving cheese and cheese making. As I got to know this community better, I was increasingly fascinated by it.

T.W.: What got you involved in Texas cheese making?

L.S.: I decided that I wanted to help American cheese makers and I wanted to feel this gap that I had recognized. Where the cheese makers I was getting to know were in rural areas, but their market was in urban areas. They were having trouble getting their cheese to the shops and the people who were wanting to buy it. So I recognized when I was living in Maine that would be a great role for me. And deciding where the business would work best, I chose Houston, because I lived here before and I was happy here. I did not really do any background research before I moved back and I just hoped, that since the state

was so big, that there had to be great cheese making going on. Fortunately, there was. So I got really lucky.

T.W.: How did you first get involved with Texas cheese makers, as far as, how did you know which cheese makers there were?

L.S.: Monica Pope introduced me to Pure Luck Dairy who is one of our strongest partnerships. Amelia Sweetser, I contacted her first and then it was a lot of word of mouth and of course Paula Lambert of Mozzarella Company, who has been around nearly 30 years now. Then it was just a lot of word of mouth. We heard about farms, we called and asked them if we could visit and then we just showed up at the farm and tasted cheese. Now it seems like everyone is in much better communication and we hear early when new farms pop up.

T.W.: Where did the name “Houston Dairymaids” come from?

L.S.: It was a late night brainstorming session. I knew I wanted, I wanted to strongly identify with Houston, because... And Dairymaids, I don't know. [Laughs]

T.W.: Why necessarily cheese instead of something more prominent in Texas like wine or beef or something different than cheese?

L.S.: Well, for one I love to eat cheese, it's really something I have always enjoyed. I love that people gather, the way you eat cheese, that you sort of nibble and you have the bread and wine and it's sort of a very social food. The other thing I really like about working with cheese, is that a) there is no carnage, no animals are directly sacrificed for cheese making and on every level from the farming to the cheese making to the consumption of it, it's healthful benefits, cheese is a good thing. So I feel good about it in every aspect.

T.W.: As far as cheese production, how does that compare to more prominent cheese states like California or Wisconsin?

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L.S.: I heard someone at the cheese conference this year describe it as a second tier cheese state which I thought was an up-and-coming cheese state. So I think, we don't have, given the size of our state, it doesn't seem like we have the number of cheese makers that we should, but there is definitely a lot of room for more people to start cheese making operations. But I think it's growing nicely. There are signs of it increasing.

T.W.: At these cheese conferences, how does Texas cheese rank as far as... does it compete well with these other cheeses?

L.S.: Yes, it is always very exciting, they have an awards ceremony every year, and it's very exciting to see how many Texans win awards and get called to the stage. I think we are getting recognized on a national level for our cheese making, our great cheese making here.

T.W.: Does that translate into international recognition?

L.S.: No, our chief maker, Brazos Valley Cheese in Waco, just told me he is entering an international competition, other than that I don't, and I think Stuart Veldhuizen actually has been recognized by Flow Food on an international level for some of his cheeses. So far only a handful of American cheese makers have ventured out into the whole export market and I don't know if any Texas cheese makers are thinking about taking it on yet.

T.W.: How long has commercial production of artisan cheese been taking place in Texas?

L.S.: Hard to say. From the companies that are still in existence, Paula Lambert of the Mozzarella Company, was our pioneer, I believe she was, her company is about to turn thirty. She came to Dallas, returned, she spent time in Italy, had mozzarella, returned to Dallas thirty years ago, which I can't imagine, but how the community received her at that point with the idea of hand making mozzarella. She has worked really hard to establish herself, and now is extremely successful. The other, Pure Luck Dairy is around twelve to fifteen years old and the other dairies have all started in the last ten years.

T.W.: How many local cheese makers are there in the state, roughly?

L.S.: Roughly we were, we have partnerships with nine cheese makers, I would say there is probably another ten to fifteen. There's some very tiny producers that only sell cheeses at their local farmer's market, maybe because they have fourteen goats and their local farmer's market. I am sure there are folks we just haven't heard about.

T.W.: Is the industry growing? Or is it staying...?

L.S.: It's definitely growing. There is definitely people either cow milk producers who are dropping out of the milk co-ops, they have been producing fluid milk and selling off to a co-op realizing, and having a real hard time getting by by doing that, realizing they can have a more profitable operation, fewer cows, and better quality of life for the animals and themselves by making cheese. It's such a value added product. There's also, we see a large number of people quitting their straight office jobs and buying small farms. Blue Heron, in Waller County, is a great example of a husband and wife team in their thirties, decided to, with no experience in farming and ... goat cheese and they are four years into it now and have a great success.

T.W.: How does the established cheese community receive these new converts to the business?

L.S.: On the whole, the cheese community is extremely supportive. When I was in Maine and I first started to get to know the main cheese makers, that was one of the things that appealed to me about the community. They would all, in Maine they would get together as a group and teach each other what they knew. It's hard, the knowledge of cheese making is hard to come by because we don't have the cheese making tradition and not everyone is able to go and spend time in Europe to train or even to train at some of the universities here. So there is a lot of exchange of information among the cheese makers themselves. They learn things about cheese making and also about getting around, working with inspectors and regulators, everything about building a cheese room and the care of the animals. So, on the whole, there's a feeling that there's room for everyone, because there really is. The market is still tiny compared to what demand will likely be.

T.W.: How has the Houston Dairymaids been received by the cheese community?

L.S.: The cheese community has embraced us. I think we are all growing together. It's very exciting to see we are watching our businesses change and helping each other. If you are a [unintelligible] cheese maker, meaning you both raise the animals and make cheese on your farm, you have tons of responsibility already from the care of the animals and the cheese making, the cheese ripening. To then have to also be concerned with taking your

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cheese to market and promoting it... A lot of cheese makers don't expect to [unintelligible] it's also, it's often the task that the cheese makers are happy to give up. They are farmers for a reason, they don't necessarily want to be out pushing their product to customers. Those cheese makers are the ones we have really good partnerships because they are really happy to let us take on that role of going around and telling people how great they are. We like it, too.

T.W.: What are some of the problems that local cheese makers face in their business?

L.S.: They have been... In Texas, recently there's been a lot of new regulations. Because this is a relatively new thing, artisan cheese making in Texas, a lot of regulations have been scaled towards large commodity cheese manufacturing. So, it was, some of the laws were impossible for small cheese makers to meet on a financial level and it wasn't feasible. There's also constant controversy around raw milk cheese making and there is a constant fear that that's going to be a label. I think, and the way the information comes out is, cheese makers have a hard time getting the information they need about the regulations and the laws and it's constantly changing. Often times the inspectors themselves don't fully understand what they're doing. When you are entering in and you want to build a cheese making facility, oftentimes the cheese maker doesn't know how to get the information about what they need to do to be compliant with the regulations. That's a big obstacle in the beginning. That's where they look to each other and the people who have already done it and been through it and they try to make it easy on each other in that respect. As far as bringing their cheese to market, I think they have been extremely well received, but the logistics of it can be hard. When they have so many responsibilities at the dairy or at the farm, it's hard to drive however many miles to the farmer's market every week, in time. As long as they can get there and they are making good cheese, their products are really well received.

T.W.: Talking about a good product, what are the factors involved in choosing the cheeses that you support?

L.S.: We always go to the dairy to taste cheeses before we take them on. We primarily, all of our cheeses are made by hand without additives or colorants of any kind. We are particularly happy when it's a farmstead operation, because then we know the cheese maker has control over their milk supply. And all of the farmsteads we work with are committed to not using pesticides and not using hormones, and doing the process as naturally as possible for both their land and their animals. We prefer cheeses that are made with raw milk if they are aged over sixty days. There is a sixty day law in the U.S. Then we are just looking for flavor and because we have so many cheeses already, now we kind of evaluate new cheeses based on how they fit in with the offerings we already have. So we don't do too much duplication.

T.W.: How many cheeses do you offer?

L.S.: Good question. Somewhere in the range of sixty or a hundred. Maybe more. Constantly growing. We just picked up three new cheese makers.

T.W.: In an earlier conversation, you talked about how they treat their animals. Is that a really important factor, as far as, who you choose to work with?

L.S.: It's a huge factor. Fortunately most of these folks have decided to have farmstead operations because often times the cheese, like at Blue Heron, I feel like she's primarily, she makes cheese so she can have goats. The love of the animals is the primary factor and then the cheese making is their way of having the animals. So fortunately we never walked into a situation where we felt like animals were being mistreated and in fact all of these animals get to graze, the farms are beautiful. They have really nice lives.

T.W.: In general, how large are the farms you deal with?

L.S.: As far as animals, our cow's milk producers, it seems like their happy point is around, they're milking about forty cows. They may have another twenty or so that are not being milked. Twenty to forty. And then as far as the goat's milk producers, they typically are milking about seventy, but then again Blue Heron is a lot smaller, twenty or so.

T.W.: How has Houston Dairymaids been received by local Houston food culture?

L.S.: They've embraced us and we're so grateful. Our first approach, we started at the farmer's market, Monica Pope invited us to be at her market at T'afia. Our reception there was great. Chefs visited us and were interested in the cheeses. Then wholesale became our primary focus, because we wanted, we knew the chefs would help us do our job because if they liked it enough to put it on their menus and talk about it to their customers, they were sort of endorsing us and the cheese making. The chefs have been wonderful, really interested and supportive, as well as our retail customers.

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T.W.: Your main business is wholesale?

L.S.: It is. Our focus for the last year has been building retail, which is going to continue to be our focus. Give people more opportunities to buy our cheeses.

T.W.: What are your plans, as far as more education?

L.S.: We are going to start teaching cheese classes out of the warehouse. We have a curriculum for Cheese 101. We found that education is a huge part of our business, both on the Texas cheese makers and what they are about, but cheese in general because it hasn't been a part of American food culture. A lot of people are intimidated, they don't really understand they have been served really bad cheese and they may have had an impression that it's been overripe or mistreated, or whatever, and they have the impression they don't like certain things or they just are unable to evaluate what cheese should taste like, what cheese should look like. So we find the more we can teach about that, the better all around, the appreciation of the cheeses we have. We are constantly, through our website, at the farmer's market we have pictures of our cheese makers and we try to tell their... we are basically constantly telling their stories and educating as we go along.

T.W.: As far as the taste of the cheese, I read an article that described you as someone who approaches cheeses like a wine connoisseur approaches wine. Do you see yourself that way?

L.S.: No, I don't see myself that way. But it is interesting to develop a palate and I have realized that through the years, now tasting cheese on a daily basis you are able to break down flavors, like a wine taster would with wine and that's exciting.

T.W.: Do you think that's an appropriate comparison, as far as cheese and wine?

L.S.: There's a lot of talk about it in the cheese community, because, whereas for a sommelier, there's test you can get certified to be sommelier. So the cheese, the American cheese community is trying to come up with certification programs for cheese. It will be interesting to see how all that comes about. The biggest challenge, I think, is that with American cheese makers, they're all over the map, they're creating new things constantly, they're still working in the general framework of the kind of cheeses that

exist, but they're also creating all the time. Because we are not tied to a cheese making tradition like Europeans are, they can rub their cheddar with coffee and lavender, they can create which is exciting, but it makes it hard to standardize a certification.

T.W.: When you are talking about retail, what is your main clientele as far as retail?

L.S.: It depends on what outlet. At the farmer's markets, it's a lot of people who are very concerned about eating locally, concerned about eating healthful foods and feeding their children, foods without additives and hormones. Our warehouse in the Heights, its Heights folk, who may never shop at farmer's markets, otherwise may not be like your typical Whole Foods customer, they're just excited to have food in the Heights and they're supportive of us for that reason. We also get a lot of folks that, in Texas, the good thing about being here is that people that may not be concerned about eating locally and all the benefits of that may just like what we are doing because it promotes Texas and they're Texans. So there are a number of different reasons. Overall, we hope everyone is shopping with us because the cheese is great.

T.W.: How did you choose this location and this building?

L.S.: I live in the Heights, as well. I drove by this building and saw a "For Lease" sign and was enamored with it because it's been here almost one hundred years and my landlord is the son of the first owner, who built the building by hand. It was an Italian grocery throughout his growing up. They lived in the back and this was their grocery store. Our, what's now our prep room was their butcher shop. I liked that little bit of history attached to the building.

T.W.: You are also located...

L.S.: It's convenient. Airline Drive is produce row, all the produce companies are here and for a very good reason. It's convenient to all the highways. So for our distribution it's great. Also, it's four minutes from my house.

[Tape Stops]

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T.W.: In what ways do you promote your business and the local cheese industry?

L.S.: What are the means we use to advertise? The farmer's market is a great tool for reaching out to a lot of different people on a weekly basis. We also have a website and recently embraced Facebook and Twitter. We work with... But we love working with other similar businesses in the area. We often work with Saint Arnold Brewery. When Brock Wagner of Saint Arnold first found out about us he invited us to start doing events, beer and cheese pairings with them, which has proved to be very successful. Slow Dough Bakery, which is also in the Heights, and Revival Meats, also in the Heights, we all sort of help each other a lot in that way. Because we are all in a similar, we have similar goals. And all of our businesses complement each other.

T.W.: Beer and cheese is... normally you hear wine and cheese.

L.S.: There is a debate in the cheese community. The beer folk are contending that beer is actually a better pair for cheeses than wine, because cheese is acidic and it's salty. Often times a wine, which is also acidic, can really combat the flavors, whereas beer, like cheese, is grain based. Its effervescent and therefore it... if you have a very rich cheese the bubbles in the beer will sort of lighten it up somewhat. It's a lot easier to make beer and cheese pairings than wine and cheese pairings.

[Phone rings. Tape stops.]

T.W.: You said you like Houston, but it seems like a business like yours would be prone to be in an area like Austin. Is there any reason other than the love of Houston that you chose here?

L.S.: Well Houstonians... The reason I really love Houston is because of the people who live here. Who are, I have always found, very open to new ideas. They certainly have embraced ours. There is also a well traveled community here, thanks to the industries that are based here. A lot of European folk that understand what cheese mongering is all about and really appreciate what we do. So I think Houston's diversity lends itself to being a great environment for us to put ourselves in.

T.W.: Do you have any competition, as far as, are there other businesses in Texas that specifically do what you do?

L.S.: Not really. We modeled our business after Neal's Yard Dairy in London who took on sort of promoting English cheeses in London. And there are a couple of other businesses like ours in the country, Cowgirl Creamery in California promotes California cheeses, and Saxelby Cheese Mongers in New York, promotes cheeses of New England, in a very similar way to the way we do it. Not in Texas, yet. There are finally some great independent cheese shops in Texas. There is Antonelli's in Austin and Scardello in Dallas, who do feature a lot of Texas cheeses, but they don't.... We are more of a wholesaler. Whereas they are primarily a cheese shop.

T.W.: There are commercials that promote California cheese and you see some for Wisconsin cheese, is there a Texas cheese union or a Texas cheese organization that specifically has the idea of promoting Texas cheeses?

L.S.: No and we are wondering why the Texas Department of... are why the Texas Department of Agriculture is going to start helping cheese makers they have helped Texas wine makers out. I think California and Wisconsin benefit from having large commodity production coming out of their state and therefore a lot of money. They can kind of support the milk marketing boards and the cheese marketing boards that can produce those kinds of ads. Where in Texas, because we don't have a big commodity craft kind of producer here, in some ways it is a hindrance because the artisan cheese makers cannot ride on the back of the bigger companies as far as the funding is concerned.

T.W.: Do the local cheese makers have a union of their own, or an organization of their own?

L.S.: There is always talk of having some sort of Texas cheese guild and I think it will come about. And we just need a good organizer. There's a lot of... To be a cheese maker, you have to be an extremely.... Our cheese makers are very independent minded and sort of putting them all together and getting them to work cooperatively, not that they don't get along, because they do, it's like herding cats, as they say. Everyone has a lot on their plates individually and so it's hard to take that next step. It's hard because everyone is still such a new company and they are still striving to a place of stability. So it's hard to think on a statewide scale when you are focused on your own business.

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T.W.: You spoke about Paula Lambert, are most of the cheese makers women?

L.S.: Well... we are about half and half. We find that a lot of our goat milk cheese producers are primarily women, and for whatever reason, men seem less inclined to want to work with goats. Women like working with them because they are a smaller animal and easier to manage. Goat's cheeses tend to be smaller, more delicate cheeses. So women gravitate to those. It is easier in a lot of respects. Whereas our cow's milk producers are exclusively men. Paula Lambert, she has a dairy but she buys milk. She produces cow's milk cheese but she doesn't raise the animals. Our farmstead cow milk producers are all men.

T.W.: Do you see any issues between the female cheese producers and the male cheese producers?

L.S.: No. There's a lot of goodwill between the cheese makers.

T.W.: What do you contribute.... You keep talking about that they work together and they're really cooperative with each other. Is it the business that makes it that way or is there some other factor that brings these people together?

L.S.: In part, they know they're sort of fighting a battle. At the end of the day they're fighting the giant, the idea of the giant consignment dairies with thousands of cows who live on concrete never seeing green grass and are milked constantly. That's such a bigger enemy. They are sort of being revolutionary and being combative in the choices they've made. I don't think they spend all their time thinking about what they're fighting against, the ideas they're fighting against. At the end of the day, it would be foolish to look at each other as competition, or enemies, because what they're trying to do is change the ways animals are cared for and raised in this country and create a niche, a new food system. They need other people in a group with them.

T.W.: How does Houston Dairymaids fit into that idea?

L.S.: They didn't fit in the existing distribution, food distribution network. So we are helping them create new paths to their customers. So I like to think we are crucial. We found that it's so much easier for us to promote them. It's very hard to go to your customer with your own cheese and talk about how great it is. Some people are good at doing that. Most

people have a little trouble. And the other nice thing about us doing it is customers will be honest with us and say “You know this is a little bitter, I don’t like that.” And we take that information back to the cheese makers and they can improve based on what we tell them. Whereas the customer may feel more hesitant if they are talking directly to the cheese makers to offer honest criticism. I think in being, communicating on both sides, between the customers and the cheese makers, we are helping them focus on what they are doing right and wrong and improve.

T.W.: How do cheese makers respond to your input, as far as what’s wrong with their cheese or what’s good about their cheese? How do they respond to that?

L.S.: They’re very responsive. They want to hear it for the most part. They don’t always like to hear it, but they want to hear it, they want to improve. They’re always looking to correct mistakes. They’re very open to feedback.

T.W.: Was it hard for you and your company to build this reputation so you could do this or were you received that way?

L.S.: It continues to be hard. It’s a constant...Artisan cheese is so variable. It’s a constant process of...Even cheeses we’ve evaluated and we’ve been selling for four years can come in, a batch can come in dramatically different. We have to make decisions about how we present it to the customers. So it’s a constant, constant communication in order to maintain our credibility with our customers. If we sell them something that tastes dramatically different than it tasted the month before, they had their heart set on because they love so much, we found that it’s o.k. as long as we explain that, “Well this is what happened in the cheese room or the milk quality changed because of the seasonality and therefore the cheese is like this or that.” Then the customer understands why they are getting a different product than they got a few months ago. Otherwise I feel like they may just take it as an inconsistency and a failing. Where it’s part of this notion of the seasonality and the artisanship.

T.W.: You talked about the customers, but what about the farmers themselves? Was it hard getting into that conversation about what’s wrong with their cheese or what problems you see with their cheeses?

[Knock on door. Tape stops.]

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T.W.: You spoke about building a reputation with the customers, but was it hard for you to build that same reputation with the local farmers themselves?

L.S.: It's always hard for me when I have to make the call about a cheese that's not quite right. But from the cheese maker side of it, they always wanted to hear what we had to say and I think they do respect our feedback. A lot of it is because we sell a lot of their cheese. So they want to keep us happy. They understand we are doing something right on our end and so that gives us credibility.

T.W.: You keep talking about selling a lot of cheese, promoting the cheese, do you see your business growing in the next few years or how do you see it?

L.S.: It's definitely growing. We really want to build our retail component and build our education component. To sort of reach out more. It's growing along with the cheese makers. But supply is still a huge issue for us. But we have certain cheese makers, Pure Luck, when it comes in the door it's sold within days. People don't understand why they can't get more of it. Just because there is only so much cheese made. They are such small operations. Whereas Pure Luck doesn't want to grow, they don't want to get more goats, but there's other farms popping up, there's room for them. So I think we are growing along with the cheese making community.

T.W.: How do you see the future of Texas cheese makers and the industry as a whole?

L.S.: Very promising. I think on a national level there's recognition for Texas cheese that there wasn't before. I think if we ever do get organized in some sort of cheese guild, which I do believe will happen soon, it's just going to help build our reputation.

T.W.: Do you see Houston Dairymaids expanding outside of Houston, as far as going to more metropolitan areas like Austin or Dallas?

L.S.: We already go to Austin for our wholesale business and we ship cheese all over the state. I don't know how it would look to move into Dallas or much further. We haven't thought about that. I would really like to do a better job serving our customers here in Houston.

Just in terms of being more available to them. So that's what I'm thinking about now. Dallas feels like, it's a four hour drive, it feels far away. So I think we are going to stay focused on Houston.

T.W.: You talk about how Houstonians have received you rather well, is that the same as the city? As far as city government, have they received you well?

L.S.: The most promising turn for the city government is the new city hall farmer's market that Mayor Annise Parker has fully supported. And it's amazing the difference when the city is behind a project. Just as far as the ease of doing something like the farmer's market. The city hasn't given us any trouble, the normal obstacles that anyone faces when starting their business.

T.W.: Any last comments or concerns?

L.S.: Going back to what I see for the future of Texas cheese making, I just wanted to say that what's unique about Texas and what makes it so promising a future is how good the cheese makers are here. We really have phenomenal cheese makers and they...even without, often times without any sort of guidance, they have instinctively gotten everything right as far as how to, what cheeses to make and how to make them great. And that's why I think it's real exciting.

[End of interview]