

## Ep. 73: HSS in Review: Trailblazers in the Food & Beverage Industry - Transcript

**Leah:** Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories from influential trailblazers and business leaders who have defined and pursued their own versions of success. We hope these stories, celebrations and lessons learned inspire you throughout your own journey.

I'm Leah Glover Hayes, CEO and podcast host of Her Story of Success women's business collective. As many of you know, Her Story of Success recently went through a rebranding process to help us better reflect where our company is today while also preparing us for our Season Next. As we were going through this process, I was reminded of just how grateful I am for the opportunity I have had to interview so many incredible women over the past few years. I firmly believe that even as we look ahead to where we want to go, it's important to remember where we came from and who helped us get there.

So, to celebrate that history, we're launching a new series: Her Story of Success In Review. In these episodes, we will revisit some of our favorite conversations, giving you another chance to be inspired by the amazing women who helped mentor and shape Her Story of Success into the company we are today.

In this week's episode, we'll be playing back some of my favorite moments from interviews with women in the historically-male dominated food and beverage industry. These women have each carved out unique spaces, and they are true trailblazers and inspirations. Beyond their career success, I remember being so impressed by the vulnerability and courage each of these women had, as they opened up about struggles with anxiety, miscarriage and even poverty.

So whether it's your first time listening or you've been with us since the beginning, I hope you enjoy this look back at some of the amazing women who opened their hearts and shared their stories of success with us.

**Mignon:** I had \$5 and a decision to make. And I took the last \$5 that I had and used it to turn it into an empire for my family, got us out of debt, out of brokenness and turned us into the number one bakery voted in Tennessee, as well as we've garnered top 10 rankings in the nation and lots and lots of 'Best Of's' in Nashville.

**Leah:** Today, Mignon Francois is a nationally-acclaimed baker and entrepreneur, thanks to her success as Founder and CEO of The Cupcake Collection. Mignon's journey out of poverty to get to where she is today is such an inspiration to anyone looking to change their circumstances. But even more than that, Mignon is an

incredible example of leading a business with faith and creating a legacy to empower others.

Electricity was unsure, water was unsure, and that was our life. And so a knock came on the door and my neighbor asked me, what was I doing in the dark? I said 'Oh I'm meditating.' And she was like, 'Oh, well, I'll let you get back to what you were doing.' I was just too embarrassed to say, 'I'm sitting in the dark because I don't have lights.' And she said, 'I'll let you get back to what you were doing, but those cupcakes that you've been making in here, I want to give them to all of my clients for Christmas. And so whenever you make some, I will pay you.' But, you know, when people say they'll pay you, they don't mean today. They mean kind of later at some point. And so I knew that I had just been sitting back there with all the money that we had and only had \$5 left, and I hadn't even fed us. And I heard God say, 'but I feed birds.' Like that was the first thing that came to me. Birds don't have the work, but they eat every day. So how much more am I going to eat? So I took the money, and I went to the store, and I bought all the Greek ingredients that I could buy. And I turned that five into 60 that day. And I turned that 60 into 600 that week. And I've been flipping that same money for 10 years, to being, you know, number one in my category and to being debt free, and to the ownership of my home, and my children having graduated from college. And just to being a safe place for other women, like me, who experienced what I have experienced, because I did ultimately go through a divorce after 21 years of marriage.

I learned that God in his infinite wisdom taught me how to bake because not only was I going to bake my way to freedom financially, but to freedom spiritually and individually. And that I was going to be able to open the door for other women who were experiencing that as well. And I found that my position is not really to be a baker. But that my position was to stand in position to hold the ladder of success so that other people could climb safely. But I had to go through it first. I had to provide a safe place. I had to be someone who would tell with transparency, what went on behind the closed doors in my household so that other people could know what they could do if they believe.

**Leah:** While working tirelessly to open a brick and mortar shop in Nashville, earning her MBA and opening a second location in New Orleans, Mignon learned some important lessons about the value of time and the importance of making mistakes.

Your dreams are never tied to mistakes. Mistakes are only tied to plans because you don't know the ultimate plan for your life anyway. Your dreams are never tied to mistakes. Those things just end up being necessary. Because you never hear a person that's successful say, 'Oh, the mistakes.' They always can see how they were necessary.

I've been going around the country, teaching this, that all we own is the minutes that we live in. If we do nothing with the time, we own nothing, because if I walk out of here today, the car that I'm expecting, that drove me over here to be sitting where I left it, may be gone. And the clothes that I have on my back could be singed off in fire. So all I own is the time that I'm spending with you right now to tell someone else about what they could do if they believe that if I could do it, you can do it too. And so owning your now. When you look at it, it's about perspective NOW is OWN, which is also WON. That's how you win, owning your now. And I think that's what happened. That's how we did it.

**Leah:** I love the lessons Mignon shared, because it's so true that having the right timing is so important when building a business.

Jessi Baker understands that better than anyone. When she co-founded Ole Smokey with her husband and two of their friends 10 years ago, she saw it as a small side hustle to her career as a lawyer. But because they started at the right time, Ole Smokey quickly grew to become the most visited distillery in the world, with products sold in all 50 states and 53 countries.

**Jessi:** Now that distillation was legal in these counties, the making of whiskey, the making of moonshine, the making of, of any kind of distilled spirit was legal. That just meant that you were going to pay taxes on it. Right? And so we couldn't have done it, had the state legislature not, not passed that law. And so when they passed that law, Joe, who comes from a very long line of East Tennessee, you know, lineage and people. He had been making moonshine for a very long time, honestly for years, illegally. And so he came to me, I was nursing our youngest child and he came to me one morning early and said, 'Jessi, I think I'm going to make moonshine.' And I remember thinking truly that he had a screw loose. I thought, 'Whoa, I know things are getting hard, but like, do we really want to make moonshine? Are we really going to do that?'

And it really did take me a minute to wrap my head around it. But within, I guess, nine months from that point, we were open, and within six months from that. And we were the first, I guess, distillery to open under these new laws in Tennessee. And when we started this, we, I think we thought it would be a great addition to our income. I don't think we had any idea that it would take over.

**Leah:** When you started, this was a side hustle?

**Jessi:** Yes. Without a doubt.

**Leah:** So he didn't quit yet.

**Jessi:** No, gosh, no. And I mean, I was gosh, trying to do moonshine, make tee shirts and make logos and make our website. And it was so, we were just trying to piece

together something great, honest, genuine that could represent Appalachia and Gatlinburg and the Smoky Mountains in an honest and good way. And I think, that's why the label is brown. We wanted it to look as close to like a paper bag as it could, you know, like, and then we introduced the Mason jar, nobody before us had used the Mason jar for packaging. And I think in the end looking back, I really think it was timing and I think it was branding. And I think people were just at a point where they wanted to see more Southern things, more things that were that kind of Americana and pure, simple expression of culture. And that was what this really represented. And so when we opened, I guess we were within a week, we got into like eight States immediately, you know, to distribute this whiskey. And then six months after we were open, the Today Show came like it was just bananas. There's no other word. It was crazy. And nobody could have predicted, uh, I would like to say we thought it was going to be this huge thing that it is now. And we didn't, you know? We were really just trying to, to do something that kind of made family life a little bit easier.

**Leah:** Even as Jessi was in the midst of one of her most successful seasons, personal tragedy struck. I was so honored that Jessi trusted me with her story and was inspired by her outlook on finding a creative outlet for her grief by writing a cookbook.

I got pregnant unexpectedly in 2017 and lost the baby. And I think this was a way to grieve. And grief is one of those weird things that, who can tell you what's right, or how to go about it? And for me, I needed something to kind of throw myself into, that would be creative and also kind of a tangible expression of, of what I was dealing with at the time. And I wanted to document for my three children, living our moonshine business, what a blessing it's been, but also what, you know, the work we've put into it. And I think people look at it or look at us and think it's so easy. It's all been, you know, handed to you, and it's a wonder, every hair on my head is not white. So, but I say that because I really did. We've spent hours around food in our kitchen, whether it's playing with different things with moonshine or just, I cook a lot and it's kind of my language of love, and that was another way to kind of show love to my kids, but also show the grace and love to myself because, I had had a pretty tough time and some health issues following that. And I think that this was, I don't know that I would have sat down and done it if I didn't, need that time and need, that expression of grief.

As a mom and as a woman, we don't do enough. We're always like it takes a village and we're always kind of the mastermind behind that village. I feel like I am anyway. I organize lives and schedules, and I'm happy to do that, but I think to take time to do something for yourself. And it doesn't have to be like, a massage, it can be a project. It can be work or it can be a run. It can be, whatever makes you feel, you know, strong again. And this was something that I did that made me feel strong. And it also allowed me to spend a lot of time perfecting an art, which I'm already kind of good at, but I love, which is cooking and food and spending more time with the kids and also giving back to a business that's given so much to us. Cause you know, as it's

changed, it's almost 10 years old, which, I mean, I know that's not a hundred years old, but still we've, changed a lot. We've grown so much in 10 years.

**Leah:** Oh, how many seasons have you gone through in 10 years?

**Jessi:** Right! And so for me, it was a way to kind of step back into Ole Smoky in a meaningful, intentional way. And I'm just, I couldn't be more proud of it.

**Leah:** Just like Jessi found healing in the process of creating a cookbook, Laura Lea Goldberg fell in love with food and cooking as an outlet to help her overcome her anxiety.

**Laura Lea:** I'd always been someone who's prone to anxiety and had gotten a ton of anxiety in college. And it had crept in on every aspect of my life. I'd become really antisocial, I'd become very controlling of food when I was in New York, because I felt very out of control with every other aspect of my life. I was working in the mergers and acquisitions department at a law firm. And I started going to the Barnes and Noble that was across from my office. I naturally gravitated towards the cookbooks. And I remember I found Kimberly Snyder's books, and she was one of the first people to really talk about the relationship between food and healing. And I was just completely smitten. I thought it was incredible what she was talking about, and it sort of became my passion project and my hobby.

I at that point had stopped partying. A lot of my friends, we're still doing the whole, like, stay out late, boozy brunch thing, I was totally over that. So as a result, I was alone all the time. And on the weekends I would wake up early, you know, hours before my friends, and I would put on a backpack and just go wandering around the city, and I would try different foods and I would go to the farmer's markets and cook, and I noticed that my anxiety got so much better, and I really felt like a different person.

And so I knew at that point, this was a again and about two and a half, three years into it that I wanted to do this for a living, but it was another year before I really worked up the courage to go for it. So I'll never forget, I was standing on the street corner on a street corner in New York, I guess, twenty-seven years old. And I just thought to myself, why am I acting like this is some huge risk?

**Leah:** What started as a personal journey of healing soon turned into a successful career that has helped countless women redefine health and wellness in their own lives. Today, Laura Lea is a certified holistic chef, recipe developer, writer, and voice behind the website LL Balanced. But Laura Lea's journey to success required her to move past the traditional gender roles she grew up with and forge a new path for herself.

**Laura Lea:** I think that it was the expectations as a woman from the South that kept me from taking this leap of faith into a new career for a while. I think that I didn't want to disappoint my family, I didn't want to disappoint their friends and do something that didn't make sense. And, you know, my parents provided me this amazing education and I definitely felt obliged to that. And I think everyone is uncomfortable with things they don't understand. And the South has remained very traditional in a lot of ways. So anything untraditional, whether people mean to approach it from a place of fear or not, they often do because it's only natural with something that's so foreign. So I think that was really, really part of what held me back for a while. And then I think as I've started my career in the last few years, I definitely think that when people hear woman and cookbook, they just, I think still, actually I know still people just think, I, you know, I'm a domestic goddess who cooks a lot. I mean, I think that's what people think that I do. I don't think people really have any idea what kind of work goes into even just a website. But I'm really trying to come up against that and show this community of this melting pot of women that you can actually do a little bit of both.

**Leah:** Laura Lea's story is extra special to me, because she was actually our first ever podcast guest here at Her Story of Success! She was already a big deal, and she was very kind to say yes to us when we were first starting. So Laura Lea, I will always love you and appreciate you being our first.

**Laura Lea:** I think a lot of people, when they want to start a business, they think understandably, they think about how's it going to make money and how has this become a viable business by the definition of a business. But the way that I like to define business is just creating a product that people need and doing it really well. And so it's just a matter of adding value. And so when I got my cookbook contract, I started every night along with my weird, like funky mantra with all of my stones, and we can get into that, how that happened later. But I started sort of saying out loud, like 'let providing value be at the foundation of everything that I do.' And so that's what I constantly have in my head is, is this actually adding value? Is it making people's lives better, or is it about me? And you need to get away from the stuff that's about you and, look for where that is. And so I started to get feedback through emails, through different forms of social media from people. And it's just, I mean, there are no words to articulate how rewarding it is. I mean, it's the best thing in the world and it just bleeds on itself because people like to share and then it just becomes like a huge community of positive energy. So it's freaking awesome. I love it.

**Leah:** Laura Lea's story is a great reminder that nobody succeeds alone. For Maneet Chauhan, success is a team effort. She credits her parents for supporting her unconventional dream of becoming a chef, and her team that helped make her first restaurant a success.

**Maneet:** I don't think I ever doubted my path. I definitely had a lot of frustrating moments along the path. Right? But I think because I was so focused on what I wanted to do, it helped me carry me through those frustrating moments. Those, when you start off, it's really not a high paying industry. And then you've gone to the best institutes and you're like, 'why am I doing this?' But I think my passion was enough to carry me through that. It kept on getting me back and, putting me on a path to where I am right now.

I just wanted to cook. To me, that's what it was all about because, you get into this industry thinking that, 'Oh, it's about cooking, right?' It was a great outlet for my creativity. Cause I'm like, Oh, let's do this. And let's do that. But along the way came opportunities, which I think, me as a person takes each and every opportunity that comes my way, no matter how bizarre it sounds, for example, open a place in Nashville. And I'm like, you know, I'm in New York who goes to Nashville? And the best opportunities come from exploring all of these opportunities, which the universe offers you're right. You can very easily just, you know, say that, 'Ah, no, I don't think it's gonna work,' but my husband and I, we actually, we explore each and every opportunity that comes our way. And one out of 10 work, but you know what that one which works really works!

When we opened Chauhan, the reason to open Chauhan was that there was nothing of that sort over here. We wanted to go ahead, and give people a glimpse of Indian food, but in a really fun setting, but also in a very approachable format. And that is what is important. Yesterday we were doing a food tasting for a new concept, but for our food tasting, we make sure that not only us, who have grown up in this food, we are steeped in this food. They are things that we are absolutely obsessed about, but we get to the tasting, people who've never had Indian food before. And there is an Indian dish we obsess about. And like yesterday we had Tom and Kevin who, hate it with a passion. Right? But with those are the things that it's important for us to get an entire think tank. This works, this doesn't work. So it needs to be approachable, but still needs to have the heart and the soul of the concept that we are trying to show.

And at the end of the day it takes a team, right. I might be the loudest person, so I might get the most amount of face-time, but it is, is the incredible team who is working, you know, so hard to make this concept successful who believe in it that, gets us to where we are.

**Leah:** Maneet has such an incredible story of moving to the U.S. from India and gaining global notoriety as a chef, Food Network star, and restaurant owner. But another thing I especially love about her story is the way she learned to overcome the "mom guilt" that so many women face. In the process, she realized she can empower her daughter to find her own success.

**Maneet:** To me, what was very important was that I didn't want to lose my identity in the entire process of being somebody's daughter, being somebody's wife, being somebody's mom. Which are amazing things to be. But at the end of the day, you have to be true to yourself. I mean, this is something that I'm passionate about, and this is something which really makes me excited. And I know that if I am happy, the people around me are going to be happy. The one thing which I have completely come to peace with, is that I'm going to always live with this constant guilt, right? It is, you know, it's a part of my existence. I'm fine with it. I am at complete peace with it. Because what you can absolutely do is you can wallow in that guilt, or you can say that, you know what, it's fine. This is a part and parcel of life. Because whatever do you will always feel guilty about something else. If you concentrate on your kid, all the time, you'll feel guilty about the fact that you're not giving time to your business. If you give all your time to business, vice versa. To me, it's, it's really simple. I have started functioning, , compartmentalizing, everything in the sense that when I go into work, work will get a hundred percent of me. It's not going to get 90% of me, but when I'm at home, the kids are going to get a hundred percent of me, right.

To me, this works. Because this is their normal, right? What is normal in today's day and age? it's what we establish as normal. My daughter, when she was six months old, I had gone to India for research on a book tour, her and my Baby Braun, 16 ARS, boom. I am over there. You know, she would travel with me all the time. We were in Seattle, we were in San Francisco. She would come along with me. She sees this. And to me it's important, having a daughter, my oldest one is a daughter. I need her to see that. There aren't any restrictions you can do, whatever you want. The only restrictions are the ones you impose on yourself. It is nowadays that I drop her off at school and you know, when she opens the door, I turned to her, she turns to me. There are no problems, only solutions. I'm like, absolutely remember that when you walk into the school. And so those, the things that I know that as a mom, I am empowering her. And the best way I can empower her is by her seeing me, I want to lead by example. And I think that's what it is.

Thank you so much for joining us today. Maneet, Laura Lea, Jessi and Mignon are all such big inspirations to me, and I hope you enjoyed hearing them today as much as I did. At Her Story of Success, we are on a mission to help women-business owners, leaders and professionals build your tribe and reach your next level of success - connecting you to one another, equipping you with resources and empowering you along your journey. If you like listening to this podcast, I encourage you to share it with a friend or coworker who could benefit from joining our community. We'd also love to hear what you took away from this episode, so leave a comment on our Instagram or LinkedIn or wherever you listen to podcasts.