

### Episode 3: Barbeque and Branding

Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas. What challenges would you face? Who can help you meet those challenges? How do you get in touch with others like you? This is Create Bridges, Arkansas, and we invite you to come cross these bridges with us. Well, today, we're on the Career Bridges podcast series, Arkansas Small Business, Big Rural Impact, and I'm UA Cossatot Media Director, Loren Hinton.

[Loren] Thank you for joining us. Today, we're sitting down with Murriel Wiley, who is the Program Coordinator for the 3Cs region, along with Matt Gilley of Big Gilley's Smokehouse LLC in Asheville. Today's episode is all about Barbecue and Branding, as we'll be discussing marketing for rural restaurants.

[Murriel] Thank you so much, Loren. And we appreciate everyone out there for joining us. And we really just wanted to sit down and discuss these small businesses and hey, everything that's going on, the big Gilley's is a big deal,

[Loren] Matt, as a small business in a rural town, Big Gilley's hosts customers from Ashdown and Little River County, as well as the surrounding areas. But one thing both local residents and tourists passing through have in common is the desire to find really good food.

[Matt] Yes,

[Loren] we all love to eat regardless of where we're from or where we're going and I think we can all agree we enjoy eating well and having a good time with family and friends. So today we're going to explore what goes into creating a product that draws in a wide range of customers and the ways that product is branded. So, Matt, give us the rundown of the background of Big Gilley's Smokehouse.

[Matt] Well, first of all, thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here. Second of all, I've been smoking meat for years. Next thing you know, everybody kept telling me it was good. And I kind of thought, you know, maybe it's just my buddies telling me it's good. And then other people started telling me it was good and I thought we might have something here. I was living down in Fort Worth. I ran a welding business down there. Still doing it, then started smoking meat on the side. Started selling at ten dollars a plate. The next thing you know, it got a lot bigger, a lot bigger. I moved back here and when I moved back here, I decided to go ahead and hone in on it and get everything as perfect as I could get it. You know, the port butts, chicken, the ribs and especially the brisket. I'm a firm believer that if you don't have a good brisket, you don't even really need to be a barbecue shop. That's just me right there. So a little bit of background on it. We've been doing this Big Gilley's Smokehouse style for about two years. We're a food trailer in Ashdown right across the road from Big Jakes. That's actually kind of a blessing right there. I believe that competition is everything. And when you're right there across from 'em, come on with it.

[Loren] complement each other.

[Matt] Absolutely. Back and forth. We're kind-of in the center of town. A lot of people passing through. We've had people from all over. You know, when it comes to the background of us, I love to cook. And like you said earlier, who doesn't love to eat.

[Murriel] I don't know anybody who doesn't love good flavor.

[Matt] Food brings people together.

[Loren] You're right.

[Matt] You know, I mean, even, you know, these trying times that we're going through right now. I've never seen anybody mad eating a brisket sandwich. You know, it just, it doesn't happen.

[Loren] You ought to put that on a t-shirt.

[Murriel] How can you be mad eating a brisket?

[Matt] That's it, that's it.

[Murriel] But I do want to touch on something as far as the size of Ashdown. And you guys being in a rural area. I know in a big city you're going to have guaranteed foot traffic and a large population that's going to be coming into your restaurant. But you guys are in a small location.

[Matt] We are.

[Murriel] What challenges have you faced being in a small town and what have you done to overcome some of those challenges?

[Matt] Every one of that you could find. You know, whenever you start a business, you're going to have a lot of nay-sayers. That's part of it. Why would you start a business in Ashdown, when there's forty-five hundred people there. Why wouldn't you just go ahead and go to Texarkana. I'm not from Texarkana and I'll make that very apparent. I am from Ashdown. I'm from Little River County. When I was down in Dallas Fort Worth for all those years, they would ask me, "Hey, where are you from?" I'm from Ashdown. Where's that? 20 miles from Texarkana. A lot of people will come in and pass through Ashdown and not really, you know, it's it's not really something that's quote unquote "on the map", but we've had some really, really good times. We've had some not so good ones also. The main thing about it is staying steady, like we was talking about, you know, the social media and stuff like that. That's one way that we've overcome a lot is branching out through Facebook. Instagram, used to do Twitter, anything like that. Branding. I go door to door and drop off menus. I mean, we've done anything and everything you can think of.

[Murriel] And I know you'll have a Web site, too, for any one, maybe when you find your Facebook page with a link to the menu. So you can see that menu on the Web site.

[Matt] All you really have to do is put a #BigGilleysSmokehouse on Facebook or Instagram. It'll pop up a lot of things we have on our menu. Our Web site BigGilleysSmokhouseLLC. That's how you kind of take a small town and get it out there for people. And people will travel for barbeque. I know because I used to myself. I drove down to Austin, Little Rock, just all types of different places to eat barbeque because that's what I love. I enjoy it.

[Murriel] And speaking of y'all's barbeque, you have one of the most unique menus I have ever seen. Loren, did you get a chance to see what's on that menu? I mean,

[Loren] The Arkansas Twanky? What is that, Arkansas Twanky?

[Matt] The Arkansas Twanky. I had seen a rendition of it, one of my buddies came up with kind of what we've got going on. But they just didn't have what we like to call the secret. And that's that's really the only thing I can tell you all about it. So it's a jalapeno pepper with all the seeds and the vein taken out. We take 99% of the heat of it out, half of it stuffed with brisket. The other half is stuffed with a cream cheese mixture. It's wrapped with a full piece of bacon. And then we smoke it with a pecan wood. And then there's the secret. And that's it. I can't divulge that.

[Loren] So this is like a health food, right?

[Matt] Yes, it is very much so. I mean, you have all your food groups, meat, and your dairy.

[Loren] Well, I was raised you know, anything that makes you smile has got to be good for you.

[Matt] That's it, once again, you know, the food brings people together.

[Murriel] And y'all have some other really unique menu items that I had never even heard of. Y'all kind of tend to bring different things together for a unique menu item.

[Matt] That's that's what we try to do. I learned a long time ago that you need to really stay consistent. You know, we've only been open for a couple of years, but it's like my dad used tell me, you know, when he goes down the road to get a burger from the place, it's been open for 50 years. He wants it to taste the same way there when he was 16. So we're going to keep our brisket exactly the same thing all the way through. We're going to keep our meats the same. But we are always trying to stay on the cutting edge of something new, something innovative. I might say something on somebody else's post and just try to make that better. It's just always trying to bring the people what they want, the customers. That's really what the business is all about. As Mike ensure that everybody's happy and not hungry. That's one of our sayings right there, we guarantee that you'll never leave hungry or unhappy

[Loren] Well, Matt, you mentioned social media, and what it has meant to your business.

[Matt] Yes, sir.

[Loren] It seems to me you're one of the businesses that has really embraced social media and the clientele it brings to you.

[Matt] Yes. Absolutely. Social media has been a part of this ever since the beginning. But actually learning how to use it has been fundamental in this working. If you do the research on normal restaurants, about 90 percent of them don't make it through one year. That's a hard fact, but it's truth. And looking back for it, learning Facebook, when to post, when to do stuff like this, you know, the marketing side of it. It's also good to go door to door. Old school, eye to eye contact. But the Facebook, Instagram, all that, it puts them out to the masses.

[Loren] So what works for you in that respect? When it comes to social media.

[Matt] People get to know what our special is every day. It's another job. It literally is. And that's what people don't understand when they're getting into this. They don't realize that you run this barbeque shop. You smoked meat. And all this stuff you come up with is your social media platform is totally opposite of that job. So you have to hats. No matter what. All the time you really got three, four or five. But, you know, you have to post that at a certain time so people see it right before they go to work, you

know, stuff like that. It's a learning experience. Facebook has been very essential to the growth of others.

[Murriel] And I believe I saw that you guys have over 5000 Facebook followers. Yet the city of Ashdown has a population you said of 4500.

[Matt] Yes, ma'am. That was a personal goal that I'd set out to get. You know, when they like your page, it's hard for somebody if they're not your friend, to just go like it. Like this. Like that. Me? I'm kind of reserved on all the likes, too, you know, I'll Like my buddy's stuff. But if I'm like, who is Karen's Pampered Chef deal or something?

[Loren] Well, that would be me. {laughter}

[Matt] But it's it's it's one of those things. It was a personal goal for me. It took a little over two years answering Facebook, you know, back and forth, this and that. You know, once we hit 5000, then I want 10. You just keep going. You have to. It's part of the you know, entrepreneur spirit. It's just, you know, striving for the next thing.

[Murriel] OK, so let's say somebody likes your page and maybe they win a give away or they are following you on everything? How do you guys keep people coming back once they've given Big Gilley's a shot?

[Matt] OK. We'll tell you this. Consistency. That's what it is. They know they showed up there and they ate that brisket sandwich. Well, then their family from Houston comes out and they go, "Hey. I know this barbeque spot." You know, they bring all their family up there. They know what they're getting and from right there and then they know everybody's gonna be happy. They also know there's going to be some weird, funky dessert on there. That Fruity Pebbles cheesecake? I'm a big boy. I will sit down and eat like four slices. So you know, you have your nostalgia and, you know, stuff like that. But to me, it is consistency. It's knowing that. Oh Lord, I'm hungry right now. You're going to get the juiciest brisket that you've ever had in your life. It's going to be and I'll never toot my own horn, but the brisket and the pulled pork. Oh, sweet Jesus. It's one of those things. [Murriel] OK. We need to take a food tasting break.

[Matt] Absolutely.

[Murriel] Can we do like a brisket sampling session right now? You know, I should have.

[Loren] Well Matt, what advice do you have for aspiring new business owners here in the rural Arkansas area?

[Matt] First of all, have a plan. When I started this, it was just a little twinkle, just a little thought right there in the back. Those are very scary times learning that you need to incorporate. You know, so none of your personal stuff. And then this and that. You can Google a lot of stuff. But what I would say, looking back through it, and I'm more than willing to help with this. too, because it doesn't really seem like a lot of people want to help you, you know, in this, because you're taking away their customers. You've got to stay the course. You know, I say make it one year and then make it five. You know, make it five. Make it twenty five. Might get 50. You just have to keep going. You have to keep pressing. If somebody needs to holler at me, give me a call. I would love to get them from point A to point B. I've

done it numerous times. I have. I've helped people to get this done because there's not really any fighting. Like I said earlier, you can Google it, but, you know, you need to have you need to save this much up for this, this, this and this. You know, I mean, unless you've got, you know, 30, 40, 50 thousand dollars just sitting around, it's one step at a time. That's how we did it. It's just one step at a time.

[Murriel] It sounds like goal setting is a theme for Big Gilley's. You have your goal for social media followers. And you put giveaways and incentives out there until you get them. And then you guys have a goal for how long you got to be in business. Now you're working towards your five year. Yes ma'am. But what happens when something gets in the way of your goal? And you know where I'm going with this.

[Matt] Oh, yeah.

[Murriel] And none of us predicted this. And it came out of nowhere. And ruined everything. And it was Covid. Yeah. What did you guys do to respond?

[Matt] Look how I got the crew together. And that's that's another thing. I have a really good set of people working for me. I do now. And I have in the past without those people. I wouldn't be here sitting in front of you today. When Covid popped up, I just, I had to get everybody together and I said, listen, it's meat and potatoes time. We need to sit down here and talk. I don't know what's going to go on. I said this way, we're going continue. Just like we have been. And I felt it was just gonna stop everything. Well, we sold out over and over. I had to do another smoke. People are you know, they're they're just so used to making this much potato salad, this much that, you know, an type of salads, hand done. Everything that we push out of there, it takes time. It's not something I just go through and get quick. And I mean, we're getting caught "hey we need more potato salad." Hey I'm having to run back and forth. You can't smoke a brisket in an hour. So we had to ramp up the meat and all that stuff. And we haven't stopped. It's been getting better and better ever since. And I know that's awkward, but we're set up for it. I like to call us a glorified food truck. You can either pull up right there. Get out. Get your food right through the window. You can sit outside, of course, they are six feet apart. You can call us and we'll bring it out to your vehicle. I mean, rain, sleet, sun, shine. It does not matter. We're going to do whatever we have to do to get it done to make sure you don't leave hungry or unhappy, regardless of any anything else that's going on. That's what we're going to.

[Murriel] I wonder if that made the difference with Covid going on. You guys were still able to serve the community because you were already set up for the "to go" option. You know, the curbside pick up. You got your tables outside and you guys were basically already setup for a Covid-safe environment.

[Matt] Yes. Absolutely. We haven't stopped. At first it was a little overwhelming because now we're doing a whole lot more business than we were before. I just looked at it kind of like its growth. Move from here to the next stage. Now we've attained that it is on to the next thing and hopefully all this Covid stuff, you know, hopefully it's over quicker than, you know. it's just hanging around. Lord knows that it's affected a lot of people and I've seen it take some businesses down through there. I mean, I'm more than willing to help any type, anybody who needs help with anything. We've just, we've always been that way. So what's good for us can be good for, you know, anybody helping them out business wise or you know anything.

[Murriel] I think that comes back around to one of the things that comes along with being a rural business. You seem to be more community minded. Let's say, hypothetically, than a big city business

would be. You're already thinking about your neighbors because you've grown up in a small local area and your small town community is business mind.

[Matt] There is no two ways about it. I mean, if somebody comes up to your shop, Billy down the road, and your brisket is not spot on? Well, next thing you know, your uncle knows about it and then your dad quits, eating there.

[Murriel] So your own family's gonna give up on because of what Joe said?

[Matt] I heard your brisket was cut wrong. I mean you can have a bad day and slice it just a little bit this way. And you know the next thing you know, it's like that. So we just do the best we can to do everything perfect. We've had mishaps, but we've learned from all of those and we've made it better every time.

[Murriel] Anything else she would like the folks listening to know about the role business that is Big Gilley's Smokehouse. If you're wanting to try to start something like this, you have got to build some type of support system behind you. We could not have done this without my mom. First of all, you know with the desserts and sides and, you know, doing all that. People who work for you and just you, you have to get up every day and you have to be willing to work 24 hours a day. You're going to be tired. You're going to get two hours of sleep the first couple of months. And then you're gonna start learning how to delegate. And then you're going to always want to do it yourself because you did it yourself for so long. But just on the other side of it, come down and give us a try. I guarantee you won't leave hungry or unhappy. When I was walking him in her earlier, I got a phone call from the barbeque shop and some guys I know from Lockesburg went down there and they didn't know that we had onions in the Smoked Queso. You know, that's fine with me. Give him something on the house. That's part of the whole deal is just making sure that the customer is happy. Because some of these customers are your friends, someone are your family. Some of these people you don't even know. You come on down and give us a try. Probably won't go get barbecue nowhere else. [Loren] But you do that customer right that you didn't know when they came in, they may become your friend down the line, right? [Matt] Absolutely. You know we have had the same guy that comes up. I didn't know him from anybody. And he comes there literally every day we're open, you know, he's a pulled pork fan. Mean, we see him all the time. You know, I've given you techniques on smoking meat, stuff like that. I mean, people really become your friends. And I guess it's food. It brings everybody together. It's been doing that since the beginning of time.

[Loren] Quality control is our middle name.

[Matt] Absolutely. Ya'll have a meal on the house and we got you fixed up.

[Murriel] So it has been an absolute pleasure. And I love sitting down with a local person and we're just excited to keep seeing Big Gilley's grow. And I love that you've given advice to the other business owners out there.

[Matt] Yes ma'am, done the best we can. Thank you all very much for having us. It's been a pleasure.

[Loren] Matt, thank you so much for being here today. Murriel, we're looking very much forward to our next episode of Arkansas Small Business, Big Rural Impact. And today's episode, Barbeque and Branding

- Marketing a Rural Restaurant. I'm Loren Hinton and we thank you for joining us. We'll see you next time.

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