

004 - Sophie Slesinger: How to Thrive in the Food Industry

Grant: This is the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast with Grant Baldwin, episode four.

Voice Over: Welcome to the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast. Each week we want to bring you an inspiring interview or encouraging message to help you find and do work you love. Now here's your host, Grant Baldwin.

Grant: Hey what's up? Welcome to another episode of How Did You Get Into That? My name's Grant Baldwin, and I'm honored, stoked, privileged, and pleased that you decided to hang out with us today, wherever you maybe in the world, whatever it is that's going on in your life, I'm just honored that you decided to spend part of your day with us.

Today we have a great, great interview for you, I'm super stoked to share it with you, we're hanging out with my friend, Sophie Slesinger. Now Sophie is a cheesemonger. I'm going to give you a second to just ponder on that and chew on that, pun intended. A cheesemonger, I wasn't entirely clear what this was either, so I'll give you the quick nutshell, but a cheesemonger is basically someone who's an expert in all things cheese. Like they are literally the cheese whiz.

So it's just a fascinating story about how Sophie got into this, I think you're really going to dig it. A couple of things I'm super stoked about from her story is you'll hear really like how resilient and aggressive she has been in not only figuring out what she wanted to do with her life, but then what she needed to do to make it happen. And I think that's so pivotal and so critical and important for us that we realize that we not only—that we figure out not only what it is that we want to do, but then we take massive action, we're super aggressive in going out and figuring out how to actually make that dream a reality.

So I'm super excited to share her story with you today. She has a crazy story here she goes from like having one of the highest highs of her life and for her career within the food industry, earns the thing that's like a really big deal, and then less than three weeks later getting a massive kick in the gut from life. So you're going to hear about that today.

Also, I want you to hear about how she's—she's really inflexible in just pursuing various options and paths in lives and just figuring out you know not only what it is that she wants to do, but again how to make that happen and I think that's really a lesson that we can all pull from and learn from.

So like I mentioned, today's she's a cheesemonger, but already she'll say that she's kind of looking for some new opportunities and looking how she can continually grow and expand what it is that she's doing. So again, really, really good stuff today. So if you're someone who is not only just interested in cheese, but even if you're someone who's interested or fascinated by the restaurant industry, she shares some different ideas and some different thoughts on different places to find jobs within the restaurant and the food industry and there's just a—I mean if you're interested in the food industry, there's a lot of different directions and paths you could go with that. So Sophie will share some thoughts and ideas on that today.

Hey, as always, make sure that you check out the show notes at www.GrantBaldwin.com/SophieSlesinger, S-O-P-H-I-E S-L-E-S-I-N-G-E-R. So

www.GrantBaldwin.com/SophieSlesinger, make sure that you check that out, but without further delay, without further ado, here's Sophie.

Alright today I'm hanging out with my new friend, Sophie Slesinger, who is a cheese whiz, really is what she is, so we're going to dive into her story, but Sophie, how are you doing today?

Sophie: Good, thanks for having me on.

Grant: You bet. Alright, cheese whiz, I guess your technical title is a cheesemonger. Now when I hear that I think myself and many people listening are like, "What is that? Is that even a real thing?" So tell us what exactly a cheesemonger is. What do you do?

Sophie: I get that a lot. So a cheesemonger is basically someone who sells cheese; that's what we do. People who sell fish are called fishmongers, so same thing, so there's a cheese maker and then there's a cheesemonger, that's kind of the next step in the production line, so I sell cheese.

Grant: Very cool. So—and obviously the question is how did you get into that, which we'll dive in to this whole talk, but what—as a cheesemonger, what does that look like on a day-to-day basis? Are you working for a restaurant or a company? Are you independent? Are you kind of a middleman or how does that play out?

Sophie: Sure. So right now I'm working for a restaurant and a bit independently. So for the restaurant that I work at it, it is—I'm kind of in a lucky position where it's a cheese restaurant, so it is actually a grilled cheese restaurant during the day and in the evening it's a bar with a really nice cocktail, wine, beer list, and then we do cheese plates and some nice cheese-focused smaller dishes. So I'm kind of the chef there in that sense or the cook really is more like it, but kind of just crafting a menu all around cheese and I'm constantly sourcing new cheeses, bringing in new stuff, training the staff about cheeses so that they can sell them to the customers.

You know usually when you walk up to a cheese counter you're like, "I have no idea what to get." So the cheesemonger really should be able to guide you, like you're buying a nice bottle of wine. You talk—might talk to a sommelier at a restaurant. So I'm just kind of there to guide the diner and then I also used to work at a shop where basically—you know help the shopper pick out whatever cheese they would need.

Grant: That's crazy. So how do you learn about all of these—because I mean I think for most of us we're thinking we're going to go to the neighborhood market and there's just a handful of things that we know that we like and beyond that, all the exotic type of random cheeses that exist in the world are just foreign to us and we'd never try them or never think of it. So how do you learn about all the different cheeses that exist out there?

Sophie: I think the best thing to do is just to try new stuff all the time. I've certainly not had all of the cheeses, you know there are thousands and thousands. I used to work for a company called Saxelby Cheesemongers in New York City and they focus on American-made cheeses from the northeastern part of the country, so that was a really a great way to kind of focus in.

And I was able to spend a lot of time trying the same stuff and learning all the nuances of new things coming out of Vermont and upstate New York, Massachusetts, so that's kind of my specialty. And then I had the opportunity to work for a short amount of time at a wonderful shop in Massachusetts called

Rubiner's. Matthew Rubiner, the proprietor, is a real expert, not just in domestic cheese, but international cheese, so I was able to spend a little bit of time tasting some imported stuff that I was a little more unfamiliar with.

But yeah, for the normal cheese eater I would say just get out there and try something new and you know talk to the person behind the counter, they're usually very happy to give you a taste of whatever you like. So that's the best way to start.

Grant: That's crazy though, because it's—I mean it's one thing to be like—like you just say you're a cheesemonger and I was like, "That's super niche in itself," but now you're like, "I'm a cheesemonger with a specialty in northeastern US cheeses."

But I think that's super fascinating for so many people listening that are just like, "I've got this random type of niche hobby thing that I'm interested in and it's super, super specific, and I don't even know that I could make a living from it." But here you are saying, "No, if you need anything about New England cheese I'm your girl."

Are you kidding? You make a living—that's crazy, but obviously it's something that you found a lot of success in.

Sophie: Yeah. Yeah, I think I kind of just stumbled into cheese, I've always worked in food and when I was thinking about how I wanted to work in food I did of started thinking about the supply chain. So it starts with the grower, the farmer, the producer; so I went and worked on a farm, and then I was interested in writing about food, but I was—I didn't want to write about food if I hadn't worked in other aspects, so I went to work at a farmer's market, in a shop, and in a kitchen.

So I've kind of tried to gather all of these experiences so that I had a nice background to pull from when I finally decide in ten years or so what I really want to focus on for the rest of my life. But yeah, just kind of fell into cheese, and what I really liked about that was you get to really work in all aspects of the food chain. So you know it starts with the dairy farmer, then it goes to the cheese maker, then it goes to the cheesemonger, and then it goes to the restaurant or the shop. So I liked how it kind of traveled down that whole path and you could really get into it along—you know any step of the way.

Grant: That's wild. Alright, so let's back up a little because most little girls growing up aren't dreaming of becoming cheesemongers, they're thinking about becoming—I've got three little girls and so they're daydreaming about being princesses and ballerinas and these types of things. So as a kid were you always just fascinated—maybe not necessarily cheese other than just like cheese slices or anything, but are you just fascinated by food in general or where does that kind of come from?

Sophie: Yeah, I mean I've always been a very hearty eater, I think anyone can tell you I'm pretty good at eating.

Grant: So it's either, "I'm going to be a cheesemonger or a competitive eater. I don't really know which."

Sophie: Yeah. And my family is Sicilian, my—I'm half Sicilian, so you know food culture was kind of always all around me, I was always very interested in my family history and a lot of that centered around my grandmother's cooking. So I wasn't really sure if I could work in food, I didn't know really how to do it because I never thought being a chef and I didn't really want to be a chef, but my first job in food

when I was I guess about seventeen was working at a bakery and it was this really, really wonderful French bakery called Praline in Maryland, right outside DC.

And I just kind of realized all these other people that were working in food, but they weren't necessarily chefs or restaurant owners. So that kind of got me hooked in the idea that you could work in food. But yeah, I hadn't thought too much about it growing up. I knew I liked to eat, and actually I was a ballet dancer also, so I had studied that in college as well.

Grant: A ballet dancer that likes to eat.

Sophie: Yeah I know, it doesn't go well together.

Grant: So you've always got like this healthy fascination with food and knowing that you want to do something with it perhaps, but you said you went on to college. Was that kind of the track you were on was, "I want to do something with food, I just don't know what," or you think it was something different at that time?

Sophie: I think it kind of grew out of my studies a little bit. I was an anthropology major and I studied a lot of public health and nutrition and sustainable agriculture. So it was like at first I thought I kind of wanted to do public health, and the idea of nutrition was really interesting to me. And I thought—I had always wanted to go abroad, I was thinking for a little while about doing something like the Peace Corps but then I had a really great professor in college who really stressed the importance of understanding your own place and challenges that are happening maybe down the street from you.

So then I kind of got really into this idea of learning more about agriculture in the United States. And this was I guess 2007ish, this was right around the time that Michael Pollan's getting really big and right around the time that the word—the phrase "sustainable agriculture" is becoming really popular, so I was kind of swept up in that whole—that whole theme I guess, and it just grew from there in school.

Grant: So part of it's just you're kind of in the right place, right time where this movement is really starting to build and grow and it's something you're—it's not just, "Hey, this is growing, so I should jump on this train," but it's also, "I'm interested in this, I'm intrigued by this."

Sophie: Yeah, it just really made sense to me. You know not only do I love food and love learning about it and love sharing it with people, but the whole backstory behind it and the idea of either making something or selling something that will help a farmer really rung true to me.

Grant: It sounds like your challenge was never necessarily knowing what niche or space you wanted to be a part of, you wanted to do something with food, it's just more kind of figuring out how does that translate, what does that look like, because obviously you could do—like even as you alluded to you know you could work on a farm, you could be in a farmer's market, you could be in a kitchen, you could be a chef, you could be a sous chef, you could be a buyer, you could be a sourcer, you could do all of these different things. You just kind of honed in on, "I know I want to do something with food, I just don't know what it looks like, though."

Sophie: Yeah, and I think I was—you know I was really open to that too, and I still am. You know if I had thought about even a year ago that I would be doing this today I would have been like, "No way, that's crazy." So I've always been very receptive to talking to a lot of people, never having just one job, and

just kind of going with the right thing at the right time seems to be, because you know looking back, to me I see a linear path, but if I wrote it out on paper it would be like all over the place.

Grant: That's a big doodle.

Sophie: Yeah, exactly.

Grant: So whenever you're—you're starting to kind of hone in on something with food, but not really sure what it is, what are some of the first steps you take? Is it basically, "I'm just going to start throwing stuff against the wall and seeing what sticks and what I like," or it sounds like you tried a few different things. What were things that you tried? What were things that you liked about some of those things that you tried along the way?

Sophie: Yeah, well I actually—I got two really good pieces of advice right around the time I left school that I still follow to this day and I think are really, really useful. The first was never just do one thing. Which—you know especially in food the pay isn't high, so usually you have to have more than one job, but I would strongly advocate anyone who's interested in working in the food industry, never just do one job. If you want to work at a restaurant at night, awesome, work at a farmer's market on the weekends, and see if you can freelance for someone else in the mornings.

That I think will really help you find out quickly what you like, whether you prefer front of the house, hospitality, or back of the house production. The schedule is like a huge thing in the food industry. You know if you're working at a restaurant you're working—right now I work noon to 10:00 or 11:00 every day. If you want to work at a bakery you're going to be working you know 4:00AM to 10:00 or noon every day for those entry level jobs. So you really need to think about kind of what lifestyle works for you and then I would just try out a bunch of stuff and see what you like best.

And the other piece of advice was to get published, which has been very, very useful. You know there are so many food publications out there and blogs that people read and tons and tons of—you know as the print industry is kind of diminishing the food print industry is not, so there's tons of outlets. I would constantly pitch ideas.

Right when I got out of school I made that a goal, I've always been able to refer to these published writing samples I've had at any job I've applied for and it's been extremely helpful, just because then you have a voice and you have something that a potential employer can look at and kind of see where you're coming from. So I would say those two things are a good start.

Grant: I like one of the things you said earlier about determining what kind of lifestyle you want to have and how that fits into it, because I think a lot of times we approach it opposite of, "I found a job that I like and there's parts of it I may like, but then just the lifestyle or the environment or the place I've got to work, I hate, and therefore it leads me to hate the job."

I was talking to someone earlier on a different interview and they were saying, "You know I've always been interested in this one niche thing, but I started with a big corporation and kind of worked in the cubicle, and then I switched to working with a smaller company at like a little ad agency, and then I went to a small tech startup, and then I started doing my own thing."

And just kind of that thing of like, "I'm going to try a few different—it's always in the same space, the same niche, but I've got to try a few different settings to figure out what works for me."

Sophie: Exactly.

Grant: And some—some people they want—like you said, some people, they want to work the late nights and some people want to work the early mornings, and some people want to work with a bunch of people, and some people are like, "No, I'm totally cool to work by myself all day everyday."

And so just kind of figuring out for yourself like what's the setting, what's the environment that I want to be a part of, and then figuring out again how does this niche, this skillset that I have fit into the setting that I want to be a part of?

Sophie: Exactly. And I think also with like any industry you're probably going to have to compromise something, whether it's the number of hours that you work or the amount of money that you're paid or whatever, so just decide what's acceptable for you, and if you try something and it doesn't work it's ok, it's not the be all end all, there is another job. Sometimes it feels like there is no other job, but there is.

And you know I was recently in New York and thought I would be there for the next couple of years, and now I'm not, and now I have a really great job, and it's ok. You know if you'd asked me last year, "Could you imagine that you'd be leaving New York?" I would have been like, "No, that's totally crazy." So you just have to be, especially when you're young and trying things out, really, really receptive and open to the fact that things may change year-to-year and that's fine.

Grant: Yeah, I like the way you put that, but at the same time you make it sound like really easygoing of, "If you don't like a job, just change jobs, and I thought I'd be in New York and now I'm not." And I think a lot of times, realistically, we just put so much—and I think what you're describing is accurate and I think, really, that's the way it is, if you don't like it switch, it's not that difficult. But I think we put so much pressure on need to have like this massive plan mapped out and know exactly what the next 20 years of life look like.

So how is it do you think for yourself that you've managed to just kind of take some of the pressure off and feel like, "Well I'm going to try this and if I don't like this then I'll try something different, and it's not the end all be all."

Sophie: Yeah, I mean I think—to be totally honest, some of it was definitely forced, I had no choice. So like either—you know a lot of the jobs when I was first starting out, they just—I couldn't sustain my life and pay my rent if I kept doing that job, so I was like, "Alright, I've got to reevaluate." Last year at the end of the summer I was laid off from my job, so I was like, "Ok, I've got to switch gears."

So stuff like that happens a lot in the food industry, there's tons and tons of turnover, unfortunately because of what's acceptable and just there aren't a ton of standards for working in especially the restaurant industry. So sometimes you're kind of forced into it, which I think is really good actually, because it makes you make decisions quickly and just kind of plow ahead, but it can be really easy when—things like that happened, of course I'm like, "Oh my God, this is the worst thing ever."

Grant: Right, and there's so many people I've interviewed and talked to who would say the same thing, like, "When life kind of forced my hand, either I got laid off or I got fired or I got downsized or I got pregnant," or something happened where it's like, "Oh my gosh, I really have to reevaluate what I'm doing today and how this lines up or doesn't line up with the kind of life that I want to have long-term."

Sophie: Right. Yeah.

Grant: It just forces that action upon you versus when you get comfortable it's just really easy to stay comfortable, and so sometimes either life throwing you the curveball or you forcing the curveball on yourself of going, "I've got to shift gears. I've got to do something different." But it sounds like life handed you that opportunity and like you even described, in the moment you were just like, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to die. What's going to happen?"

Sophie: Yeah.

Grant: But then looking back there's so many people I've talked to who would say, "Getting fired, getting laid off, having this massive life catastrophe at the moment, today I look at it, it was like the greatest thing that could have happened to me."

Sophie: Yeah, exactly. So yeah, and I think, too, you can set timelines for yourself. So the food industry's very fast paced. If you're at a company for two years, that's a long time, which can be great, but just setting a timeline for yourself, you know, "Ok, I've been here for a year and a half, two years, how's it going? How do I move up with these people or how do I need to move on?" So just being vigilant with yourself and like constantly resetting your goals.

It's fine to have a goal and a plan, because then you can deviate from that plan and from that goal. So I think just like constant reevaluation of what you need to do to move forward.

Grant: So you're bouncing around, you're trying a few different things, you're starting to kind of hone in on, "Alright, this is what I like, this is what I'm in to, this is what I'm good at." How does the cheese thing come into play? When did you start—was this just like a weird fascination or is this something you started walking on and it clicked? How'd that play out?

Sophie: Well I—so I kind of came into cheese through a different route. So I moved to New York—well, let's see. I graduated college, ended up working at my college, it was 2009 and it there were not a lot of jobs. So I petitioned my college to create a job and to hire to me to do it.

Grant: Ok, hang on. You convinced someone to create a job and then you convinced them to hire you? Alright, tell us more about that that's awesome.

Sophie: So I was in a class that was all about the sustainability goals for the campus and I had this very progressive, awesome professor who—you know you'd pitch her an idea and she'd be like, "Yes. Best idea ever. Do it." So I kind of thought of this hole that I thought was at the university, which was that they weren't getting a lot of new students really aware of all the things that were happening on campus.

You know we had a farmer's market, a high percentage of the produce that we brought in was local produce, we had all these initiatives going on that I didn't even really know existed until like my junior year I think. So I was like, "That's kind of funny. Why don't we get freshmen in on this?" So I wrote this proposal, sent it to the director of sustainability and the director of recycling, and you know all these different people on campus.

And of course they were like, "No, we're not going to do that. We don't have money for this. Who are you, first of all?" And then I just edited the proposal with the help of my professor and just resent it once a week every week for the whole summer after I graduated.

Grant: Once a week every week for the whole summer you're sending some variation or iteration of the same proposal?

Sophie: And I think they were so annoyed that they were like, "Alright, alright, we'll give you the academic school year to do it." And my boss at the time had just come back from maternity leave, so they had this very small budget that they had, you know like a little pocket that they happened to have.

So I was like, "Great, cool." So I did for a year, which was really wonderful, because I was at this institution where I was surrounded by all these different departments and you know older people that I could learn from, and also challenging, just that it was that totally new job that hadn't been done, so kind of navigating that. But then also while I was doing that I wrote a column for food in the local newspaper, I worked at two farmer's markets for a couple people, and I think there might have been something else in there that I'm blanking on now.

Grant: But you're just—again, you're just trying a bunch of different things.

Sophie: I'm just trying stuff, yeah. I was like—

Grant: And even where the opportunity doesn't exist of saying you know, in a borderline stalker way, "No, I want to do this," and so rather than just looking around saying, "Oh, it doesn't exist, so I guess that's not an option." Figuring out, "How do I create that option for myself?"

Sophie: Exactly, and I figured this one professor thinks it's a good idea too, so I'm not totally insane. So as long as I have that one person on my team then we can just kind of poke people until they say it's alright, which actually I think has been kind of a theme of my career so far, now that I'm like—

Grant: Harass people to get what I want—until I get what I want. Nice. So—no, and I think there's absolutely a lesson there of just pure—like I think one thing that stands out for you is you're just a hustler. It's not like, "I'm going to sit back and wait for opportunity arrive." Like, "I'm going to go create it, I'm going to make it happen, and I'll do whatever I need to do. I'll send that email once a week until I can make that happen." Where does that drive come from? Is that something that other students or other people that are listening can like recreate for themselves? How do you make that work?

Sophie: Yeah, I mean I think I—I mentioned earlier I'm a dancer and I studied classical ballet when I was—forever, for like fifteen years and it was a very harsh environment where you're told a lot, "You're not doing a good job at this, you need to fix this," so I kind of don't have a problem with that. If someone says no, I'm like, "Ok, cool, I'll just do it until you say yes."

So I think that's a really kind of important lesson to learn when you're young or you know things—you might not get what you want or even if you're the best it might not work out, and that's ok, because the next time you might be the best or the time after that you might be the best. So I think that's a really simple, but like life lesson that a lot of people learn a little bit later on, like maybe they don't get into their first choice of college or they get fired from their first job after they graduate or something like that. It sounds a little depressing, I don't mean it to sound depressing, but I think if you can kind of get over that quickly and just shake it off then it's much easier for you to just keep forging ahead.

Grant: Yeah, it seems like you just kind of battle—like building up that by just being able to go with that and being ok with it.

Sophie: Yeah, yeah.

Grant: Nice. When did you start working with cheese and how did that eventually lead to becoming an official cheesemonger?

Sophie: Oh yes. Ok, so I worked at my college, then I worked on a farm for a little bit, then I moved to New York and I helped to open a coffee shop. And right down the street from the coffee shop was this wonderful cheese shop and I knew the owner's husband a little bit, he had helped me—he also works in food and helped me when I first moved to the city, and then my boss at the coffee shop was a buddy of hers.

So she used to come in a lot and we would be talking and she actually has a podcast radio show thing about cheese, and it's on this online network called Heritage Radio that's all food and farming and policy programming. And she just needed someone to help her with the show, you know help her book guests and write interviews and stuff. And I had a little bit of writing experience so I was like, "Oh, I'll do this and I'll do it for free," which is another thing, you have to work for free a lot.

So I started doing that and then it was right around the time, it was kind of good timing for me, it was right around the time that her company was starting to do a lot more wholesale business, selling cheese to restaurants, and they had just got a new space. So you know I would be there helping with radio and then it'd be like, "Oh, could you also spend a couple hours this week working on this assignment? And we need—we have this marketing event coming up, could you write a little thing for this?" And so I kept adding more and more stuff and my dad, who's actually a headhunter, always tells me, "You have to make yourself indispensable."

So I kind of just got to the point where I was like, "Oh, this thing happens? Well Sophie does that." And then I just got like 20 more of those things and they were like, "Oh, we need you to work here." So it took some time, it took a couple months, but by the end of it I had a job.

Grant: But it sounds like with this lady, she kind of became a mentor, kind of just took you under her wing and just kind of helped—kind of showed you, "Hey, here's some options, here's a path that you could take." Which I think—again, I think this is a theme we talk about a lot in this show. There's a lot of people we talk to that are going, "I don't really know what I want to do until I see someone else doing it, and they can kind of hold my hand and work with me and show me, 'Here's the steps that you need to take. You don't have to recreate the wheel or reinvent this whole process where this path already exists. Like here's some things that you can do and if you want—if that's the end goal, if this is what you want to become, then here's some things that you can be doing today to start making traction moving towards that.'"

Sophie: Exactly, and she was—she's a wonderful woman Anne Saxelby, if anybody's interested in food you should look her up. She's a powerhouse.

[Audio cuts, 00:28:12]

But do you want to go to this event or would you like to grab a coffee here or—" and just always say yes.

Grant: Yeah.

Sophie: I'm always available, I would love to go to that, I would love to meet that person. Or just ask, "I saw that you just did an interview with this guy, I love his book. Do you think I could email him?" Just like constant contact and being really aggressive about that, and by aggressive I don't mean—

Grant: Sending them an email every week?

Sophie: Yeah, maybe not that intense, but just aggressive for yourself. You know being really diligent about constantly trying to talk to people and meet new people and be in the right place at the right time.

Grant: Yeah.

Sophie: Being in the right place at the right time, sometimes it just happens, but you can also make it happen.

Grant: So, so true. Very well said. Ok, so you're working for this company for a few years, you create this indispensable role for yourself, what kind of happens from there?

Sophie: So basically from there—so I was with them for about three years and we grew this wholesale program and I kind of did all of their marketing and events and you know all the meanwhile I'm learning about all the cheese, because that's what we do, that's what we sell.

And then I had this really wonderful surprising moment where I got an award last June from Zagat, which is like a restaurant rating guide. And they basically put together a list of people, it's like 30 people under 30 years old that they think are doing something cool in the food industry. And I had no idea I was going to get it, it was a really lucky thing, this chef that I was selling cheese to thought of me, like you know trying to think of people he knew under 30.

And then I ended up getting it, so that kind of—

Grant: Now is that just for New York or is that for the whole country?

Sophie: They do it—I think they do it for a couple cities. This was just for New York. I believe they do it in maybe LA and Chicago.

Grant: But still, I mean nothing small. You're talking millions and millions of people and you know literally even in that space, under 30 but within the food industry, there's tens if not hundreds of thousands of people to choose from, so to actually get something like that, that's got to be a game changer for you.

Sophie: It changed a lot, yeah. It really, really did. And it just felt so nice, because you know I had been working a lot of hours for a while after college and I just—to understand that someone else was seeing that was such a gift for me.

Grant: I think that's a great example and just kind of a great lesson from your story where you're doing all of this hustling and busting your butt in all these different ways and connecting and networking with people, and not like you're chasing the award, like, "If I can get that award, this justifies everything." But that other people recognize that and do what they can to get you the award. It's got to feel like a very great, just rewarding feeling, like, "All this work and sweat and energy I've been pouring into everything

I've been doing to just kind of build my network and make this thing happen, this just justifies it all and it validates me in some ways."

Sophie: I was like so floored. I still am like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe that happened." Yeah, it was very, very exciting, but—

Grant: So you win that award, does that start opening doors for you or what does that lead to?

Sophie: Well—yes, it was very interesting. So after I got the radio WTOP news station in DC, where I'm from, called and they did a cool interview thing that I guess they played on the air you know like a day or two after, which was really great. Then three weeks later, I think it was, maybe even less time than that, I got laid off from my job.

Grant: No way. You go from the highest of highs, you just won the Zagat 30 under 30 and now what we have for you is a walking slip. That's insane. Ok, so what's happening in your head then?

Sophie: Yeah, so I was like, "Wow, like this is—" and also in New York there's this like big issue of bed bugs invading people's apartments.

Grant: Yummy.

Sophie: And in the same week that happened at work I got bed bugs in my apartment. So I was like, "I don't know if I believe in signs, but I think I should just—I think I should go."

Grant: "Life hates me right now."

Sophie: My home is a mess, work is no more, and actually I had just started an apprenticeship at—so basically I'm—which we can talk about later, I'm hoping to move towards working in pastry. So I had just started on the weekends doing an apprenticeship in a kitchen, in a bakery, and I had gone for like two days and then I got a call from the owner of the shop that the pastry chef was no longer working at that restaurant. This all happened in the same week, my job, my internship, and my apartment.

Grant: Don't forget those bed bugs.

Sophie: And then the bed—yeah. So I was like, "I think this is one of those moments where you just have to be like, 'Ok, this is happening.'" And I think too in New York it's easy to do that because it's so expensive, so you know if you don't have work you maybe have a couple weeks under your belt of wiggle room.

Grant: If that, yeah.

Sophie: Yeah. I have this cousin through marriage who owns a restaurant with her husband who's French in the Berkshire Mountains, about two hours north of New York City. I had heard about it, never been, I never met her, and I just called her and I was like, "This is what I want to do, I want to learn about pastry, you know everything. I've heard your place is great, is there any way I could just come and I'll do whatever you want for free for like a month?"

And she said, "Yeah, of course. Come on up, it's totally fine." So I spent—I ended up staying there for three months, this was last fall, and I kind of just—I felt like I was chilling out, I was still working like 40 hours a week at the restaurant and then on my days off I worked at this cheese shop at the town over. But I was in these beautiful mountains and it was all new people, a much slower place and I was—you

know the whole day, it was just for me, it was like for me to learn and I was going there on my own volition everyday and they were extremely generous and friendly towards me.

So I did that and then while I was doing that I got a call totally randomly from this guy in DC who said, "I met someone who knows you and I'm opening this restaurant that's cheese focused and I think you should come work for me."

And I was like, "Who are you?"

Grant: Sounds a little sketchy.

Sophie: It sounds weird. So I went to DC, met with him, ended up really liking him, and that's pretty much how I got my job that I have now, which I just started a couple months ago.

Grant: And even now you're doing the cheese thing, but in the back of your mind you're also like looking down the road and intrigued by the pastry stuff and possibly making a shift that direct, too?

Sophie: Yeah, absolutely. So right now I'm basically head of all the food that happens at this restaurant for the evening hours. So I have a lot of freedom. And to me, I kind of approach cheese like pastry, it's typically eaten on its own at the end of the meal and we make all these cool condiments and pickles and jams and candies to go with all the cheeses that we bring in. So I'm able to work on a lot of the skills that I hope to—that I was hoping to get by working in a kitchen in this job, which is really, really valuable to me.

And also you know still work with cheese and I still do this podcast about cheese with some people still in New York. So I still feel connected to all that I built there, which was really important to me, but I'm also able to work on all of these skills that I was hoping to do this year.

Grant: Let's wrap up with this, what would you say to someone who maybe was where you were a couple of years ago and going, "Alright, I have an idea of kind of what I want to do, I'm not really sure how it translates into a career. I want to do something maybe with food or maybe with something totally unrelated, but how do I just kind of begin to hone in and make something happen that I know that I feel like I was put on the planet to do?"

Sophie: I would say there are some good resources out there now, one which I'll plug and I actually do some freelance work for them is GoodFoodJobs is an awesome website that started a couple years ago, and it's tons and tons of listings all over the country of jobs, all sorts of jobs in the food industry, not just restaurant jobs.

And then the other thing would just be to I think be resilient and be aggressive. I'm not a very aggressive—you know my personality's not very aggressive, I'm kind of more shy and soft spoken, but when it comes to getting work I'm pretty good at that, because I'm comfortable contacting people, meeting up with people wherever they are, agreeing to do unpaid work for a small amount of time or bartering different things to get what I need done. Even right now with my job at the restaurant I still freelance for two other companies.

Grant: Yeah.

Sophie: So if you want to go for it really do it, don't do it half way, because you know most people that are working in food are doing it because they love it and they love food, so it is a lot of work, but if it's work you love then you don't mind doing it twelve hours a day.

Grant: Absolutely. Well I love what you said there of just being resilient and being aggressive. That's a great balance there. And I think another thing that you've done really well is just being flexible. You know the multiple times where maybe things just aren't going the way I planned and I'm going from the top of the world to what feels like life is falling apart, and again being resilient and going, "Oh man, that sucks. Alright, we'll just deal with it and let's roll with the punches and see what happens next."

Sophie: Yeah, and build your own network. You know when the Zagat thing happened and then I got laid off I was like, "Well shoot, but at least now after working in New York for a couple years I have this basket of like—the safety net of all these contacts."

Grant: Yeah.

Sophie: And so I talked to all of them and they all helped me, and that will happen for you if you start building it immediately.

Grant: Awesome.

Sophie: Yeah.

Grant: Great stuff, great lessons, and I really appreciate you taking the time to share your story and your journey with us.

Sophie: Yeah, thank you so much.

Grant: If people wanted to learn more about you or pick your brain on all things cheese where can we find you at?

Sophie: I would listen to Cutting the Curd, it is a show on the Heritage Radio Network and I'm Twitter, but I'm not very good at it, but my Twitter is [@SophieSles](#), first four letters of my last name.

Grant: Cool, and we can link both of those in the show notes there so people can check those out if they would like. Alright, I'm going to put you on the spot here. If someone's intrigued by trying some new types of cheese, give us two or three recommendations of something that's going to expand our taste buds.

Sophie: Ok, cool. So right now we're in spring, so there's a bunch of really awesome, creamy goat and sheep's milk cheeses, just coming back into season. So I would get anything that the Vermont Butter and Cheese Company makes, my two favorites from them are called the Cremont and the Coupole, they're these really beautiful small format cheeses.

Let's see what else. There is a great producer in upstate New York called Meadowood Farms that makes some really awesome sheep milk cheeses that are washed rind, so they're a little stinkier, so if you can find those, those are great, too.

Grant: If you can tolerate the stink.

Sophie: Yeah, exactly, with like a cold beer.

Grant: Nice. Alright, well again we'll try to link up those in the show notes as well, so if someone wants to go on and they want to go on their own little cheese bonanza of just plowing through a bunch during the weekend then that's the place to go.

So Sophie, again thank you so much for the time, appreciate you taking it and hanging out with us and we'll talk to you soon.

Sophie: Thanks so much.

Grant: Alright, there you have it, a nice little chat, conversation with Sophie Slesinger, I hope you enjoyed that, hopefully you learned a couple things, and hopefully you were just challenged and inspired again how not only she was able to overcome just some different lows of her career, but also how she was able to just not only continually like pivot and shift and figure out what she wanted to do, but like—how I will keep drilling this in, but how she figured out how to actually make it happen.

So I hope you came away inspired and encouraged by that. Whatever it is that you're chewing on, maybe you want to do something related to food, but you're still not quite sure what it is. Take some of Sophie's advice there and just maybe find someone that you can apprentice under, someone that you can just learn from, just to soak up, because really once you dive in you're really able to figure out these are some things that I'm good at, this is something that resonates with me, some things that click. Here's some other things that I thought I would like, but I got into it and I tried it, it wasn't for me. And that's fine, you've got to be able to try a few different things, so really start to hone in on what it is that you want to do.

Hey, I know I've mentioned it to you a few times lately, but with the launch of this podcast—we want to help promote this and get this to as many people as possible, we want to be able to hopefully invade as many ears as possible, and be able to just share some of these interviews and these stories with people and hopefully inspire others to figure out what it is that they want to do with life.

So one of the things we're doing right now is we're running a contest, you can find all the details at www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest, and here's what we're asking you to do, we're asking you to do three things.

One, we want you to go to iTunes and you can subscribe to the podcast. If you go within iTunes, you search for How Did You Get Into That? Podcast, you should be able to find it, hit the subscribe button over on the left column, that'll download all the episodes for you.

The second thing that we want you to do is make sure that you would leave us a rating and review, so within iTunes you've got that rating and review button towards the top there. If you would just leave us an honest rating and review, what you think of the show, who some of your favorite interviews have been so far. Any type of feedback like that, it not only helps me and just knowing that it's helping you, but also it helps other people who may be become—stumbling across the podcast, someone that may have just browsed through and seen it and are just interested in more about it. So hearing some other people's feedback really, really helps.

And then the last thing, number three is if you would, within the www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest page, at the bottom of the page there's going to be a box where you can put in just your email address, and I

promise we won't stalk you or anything like that, we just want to keep you up-to-date on the show, let you know of any interviews that we have going on, just some new, exciting information of things that are happening. Plus, since we're doing this contest, we're giving away a bunch of different stuff and we're going to do a drawing. You can find all the details again at www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest. If you win, we want to be able to contact you. We've got to let you know that you won so we can send you some stuff.

So make sure that you stop by www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest. Hey, thank you so much for taking the time to listen. If you've listened to this point, I know you're legit. You're too legit to quit, that's why you haven't quit and you continue to listen on. I'm really honored and stoked that you decided to hang out with us and I really enjoy sharing these stories and journeys with you. We've got a lot more, a lot of really great interviews that are coming at you in the coming weeks and months, so stay with us, hang tight and enjoy the journey.

Hopefully you're enjoying your own journey, again if there's anything we can do to help you or support you as you figure out what it is that you were put on this planet to do, please don't ever hesitate to let me know. You can find me on Twitter, [@GrantBaldwin](https://twitter.com/GrantBaldwin), or email me any time, I love getting emails, happy to respond to every email, Grant@GrantBaldwin.com.

So again, check out all the details for the contest at www.GrantBaldwin.com/Contest, and then all the show notes from today with Sophie you can find at www.GrantBaldwin.com/SophieSlesinger. Alright, that's plenty of links for you.

Alright, hey thanks again for taking the time to check this out, we'll talk to you soon.

Voice Over: Thanks for listening to the How Did You Get Into That? Podcast with Grant Baldwin. Don't forget to visit www.GrantBaldwin.com for all the show notes and links discussed in today's episode. We'll see you next time.