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# PBJ Interview: Grand Central Bakery CEO on the pandemic and what's next

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Claire Randall, CEO of Grand Central Bakery  
Leslie Cole, Grand Central Bakery

By [Malia Spencer](#) - Portland Inno

June 17, 2022, 08:26am PDT

*[Claire Randall](#) describes her career path as meandering. Right after college there was a lot of waiting tables and then a stint selling handmade pants at Portland Saturday Market.*

*"I didn't make any money, by the way," she says of her fashion foray.*

*She was, however, very good friends with Piper Davis, whose mother Gwen Bassetti started Grand Central Bakery in Seattle. Davis' brother Ben was gearing up to open the first Grand Central location in Portland and Randall wanted to be a part of it.*

*In 1993 she joined the company and has worked in almost every role except baking the bread.*

*Now CEO, she is guiding it through its next chapter, one that will see it become one of the few organizations to test out [a new type of steward ownership](#) intended to protect it from ever being sold or losing sight of its mission to invest in the local food system and community. We caught up with Randall to talk about this.*

**Obviously, you run the business side of things, but, are you also a home baker?** My business partner Piper Davis wrote (the "Grand Central Baking Book") and she is a brilliant baker. And I love baking out of that cookbook. What I particularly like is that Piper has these sections in the cookbook where they're like workshop tutorials. You can learn all different parts of baking. What was really great for me is there is a whole section on what we call short doughs, these are the pastries like our jammers and our scones. For my family, those are the favorite recipes I make.

**During the initial quarantine phase of the pandemic it seemed like everyone got in touch with their inner baker.**

**What did you think about that?** I thought it was great. If you're wondering if I was worried if it would eat into our customers coming into our bakery to buy bread, I wasn't worried about that. It was the same when we put out the cookbook, the more people that bake and appreciate baking and delicious food the better it is for all of us. (During quarantine) we started selling flour from our local flour vendors. That was a huge hit. We couldn't keep it in stock. That was a connection to support our farmers and support budding home bakers.

**What was your strategy for getting the business through 2020 and the onset of the pandemic?** The leadership and the advisory board, we were meeting every day to talk through whether we could keep the bakery open from a financial and safety standpoint. We came to the conclusion after really intense conversations that it was important that we stayed in business — not just for our employees and the ownership group but for our communities and our farmers. It brings tears to my eyes right now thinking that it would do more harm to the community to shut Grand Central Bakery down than do our best to keep it going as safely as we could.

**Looking at community, Grand Central has a vast footprint with local suppliers. You upped that commitment with pursuing the ownership structure to a perpetual trust. How did that thought process get started?** We were starting, four or five years ago, conversations about succession planning. As you might imagine we do get a lot of calls from people interested in purchasing (the company). We've seen some other kinds of local companies go through that. And on one hand it was kind of intriguing the idea of just selling the company would be clean and easy. But, we were so determined to think of a way that we could keep our mission, vision and values and our way of doing business alive long after we're gone. Right as we were having these conversations [a person named Peter Koehler](#) of Alternative Ownership Advisors, he approached us and we were immediately enamored with the idea (of a perpetual purpose trust). The more we learned about a perpetual purpose trust, the more we realized that this is truly a way to be the best corporate community citizen that we could be.

**Organically Grown Co. is already trust owned, and you will soon be as will Local Ocean Seafoods in Newport. Are you surprised this novel approach seems to be catching on in the Pacific Northwest?**

I'm not surprised at all. I would expect that a lot of California businesses may eventually become interested in this. I think the time is right. We've seen some local companies go through (sales) and some have gone fine with the first round but then they get sold again and I think for those of us who still own our businesses we've been watching and wondering.

**Claire Randall**

**Title:** CEO, Grand Central Bakery

**Hometown:** Boise, Idaho

**Education:** Bachelor's in sociology and English literature, Lewis & Clark College

**Boards:** Hoyt Arboretum Friends

**What are you currently reading:** "Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood," by Trevor Noah

**Favorite type of bread:** Peasant Loaf

**Local sourcing:** In 2021, 55 farms and ranches supplied flour, meat, produce dairy and eggs. Another 31 local companies supplied other goods and services.

**Footprint:** 11 bakery cafes, with seven in Portland, four in Seattle; 370 employees

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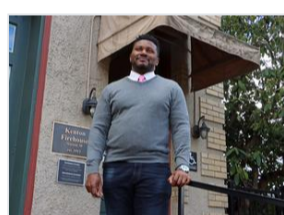
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