



Episode 023: Serenity Carr – Every Bite Counts

- BEN** Welcome to The Barcode Podcast. My name is Ben Ponder. I'm your host. I'm really happy to have Serenity Carr with me today of [Serenity Kids](#). I want to remind everybody that The Barcode Podcast is presented by Titanium CPG Insurance. You can learn more at titaniumcpg.com and Titanium provides a wide range of insurance products and risk management services designed specifically for natural organic food and beverage brands. So, I'm going to toss it over to Serenity. So glad to have you here.
- SERENITY** Thanks. Glad to be here.
- BEN** I've known Serenity since the very early days of Serenity kids. Before we kind of go into your story and lessons learned and things like that. Let's start off with your favorite meal ever.
- SERENITY** My favorite meal ever is one that I cooked and it's a morel mushrooms and a saffron cream sauce on top of a grilled tenderloin filet mignon.
- BEN** Every part of that sounds awesome. Were you following a recipe or were you just kind of jamming?
- SERENITY** Yes. So, I had kind of taken ideas from a pasta sauce recipe that I used to use. So, I moved to Dubuque, Iowa when I was 23 to work for John Deere. And morel season is a big deal up there for especially the foodies. They go out, people take their pillowcases and come back with huge pillowcases full of morels. Some of them sell them to Chicago restaurants for 500 bucks a pillowcase or more. But we ate them all. And the best way to do that, I learned was to get all the bugs. You soak them in salt, you cut them in half, you soak them in saltwater and all the bugs flee or die and float away.
- BEN** Or float somewhere else.

SERENITY Yup, and you kind of dry them on paper towels. And then at that point, I wasn't gluten free yet. So, I would dredge them in a little bit of flour, sauté them in butter and a really light kind of buttery sauce. And meanwhile I'm steeping white wine with saffron. So, you take a few saffron threads. It turns everything in a really pretty color of yellow and the aroma, right?

BEN So, it's a saffron infused wine?

SERENITY It's a saffron infused wine. And then you add the wine to deglaze and then you add your cream sauce. And at the time, I was eating a lot of pasta. And so, I would throw that on top of pasta and it's just divine. I think there's mushrooms, they might be my favorite food. I never really thought about that. And the morels particularly because they're rare and they come once a year. And I just bought some actually at central market a couple of weeks ago and they were so expensive, and they had been dried already. And some of the flavors are lost when they're not fresh.

BEN Absolutely. And they're so savory and complex. And even different varieties of mushrooms bring out the different kind of the woodiness over here or whatever.

SERENITY Mm-hmm (affirmative). And these ones are kind of actually really mild. So, pairing them with kind of the milder saffron and a little more white wine, not red. And the cream sauce was awesome, and I ate it that way for years. And then I went gluten free and stopped eating pasta. And I'm like, "But what about my morels... and cream sauce?" So, I was like, "You know what, I can just find another way to do that." So, steak's probably my other favorite food.

BEN That's right. I'm waiting for the filet mignon to kind of reenter the story here.

SERENITY Yup, so here it comes. I've never been a vegetarian. I've always loved good meat. My dad was a vegetarian for a while. It caused some problems in the household on occasion, but my mom and I just always really loved it. And so, just a grilled filet.

 And then I was like, "You know what, I put butter on my filets." Right? Not some cream sauce and throw, make my own. So, I ended up, "I'm like, all right, I've got to have this cream sauce." And I was kind of tired of eating it by itself. And so, let it put it on top of my steak. And it was just heaven.

BEN Even the best sauce. You're like-

SERENITY It's missing something.

BEN ... It's not intended to be straight. I'm not drinking this. Yeah.

SERENITY I'm not drinking this.

BEN Even though I feel like I probably could.

SERENITY And that's it. It's simple but complex and I really love experimenting in the kitchen.

BEN You always been that way?

SERENITY Yes. Actually, my sisters and I growing up, invented a game called Secret Recipe. And so, one person goes into the kitchen and whips up something and the other one has to eat it.

BEN No matter what.

SERENITY No matter what.

BEN Was there ever a gross out factor? Or were you always trying to do something good?

SERENITY Sometimes raw eggs went in there. Most of the time I was trying to do something good. My sister was maybe also trying to do something good but failed a few times with ketchup in the rice krispies and stuff.

BEN And so was it kind of like you were learning to be a food critic where you needed to come in and say, "I believe you, it seems like you put some Worcestershire sauce in the rice krispies."

SERENITY That's right, a secret. Because I wanted to uncover what the secret was, and it actually worked. Now I'm like, "What is that thing in this dish that makes it so awesome?"

I'll talk to the waiter. I'm like, "Hey, how do I make this at home?" And sometimes they'll bring me the recipe out. I'll take a picture with my phone. Sometimes I make it, sometimes I don't. But I always get inspired and I mean, Food TV exists now, which is better than the Frugal Gourmet. And so, I get a lot of ideas from that and a lot of times, I'll start with a recipe and make it my own the next time or the next time and the next time.

BEN So, you're a foodie.

SERENITY Oh yeah.

BEN It's like you have been for a long time.

SERENITY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN So now you're the co-founder and CEO of a food company. It's a food company that is really interesting. You had a thesis early on—that as you and your now husband Joe were considering having kids; and you started kind of thinking about that world of baby food, and you had started at that point to experiment with more of a paleo diet. And we'll kind of get to some of the backstory there. And you said, "Well, what if I wanted to feed my child in a way that aligned with how I'm eating and this sort of thing." And that kind of lead you down a path. So, give us the backstory of how you ended up starting Serenity Kids.

SERENITY Alright. Well, it was 2016 and I was at Paleo f(x), which is a paleo conference here in Austin. And I had been with Joe for about a year and a half and we had started talking about maybe having a family someday.

And I got all fuzzy and maternal and I'm like, "Joe, let's go find the baby stuff at the show." Because it's the biggest only big paleo conference around. And so, we went to every booth and didn't find anything, and I thought, "Oh, maybe kids aren't supposed to eat like this. You know, maybe they're supposed to eat what's on the shelf. No big deal." But I'm still curious. And I went up to the CEO of Paleo f(x) and I said, "Hey Michelle, where's the baby stuff?" And she said, "You know, I've asked myself that same question every year." She even almost started a baby food company at one point.

And so, I thought, "Well crap, we'll just have to make all of our own baby food then." That's going to be how it goes. I like cooking anyway, no big deal. At the same time, Joe was in the process of switching careers. He had quit his 90-hour, 100-hour a week startup, because I wanted to spend more time with him. And he was looking for another company to start. And so, he had read Tim

Ferriss's 4-Hour Workweek and he's like, "All right, I need to start a company that makes a product, like something."

He'd been paying hour by hour for services before. And so, we realized he could scale something bigger with a product. And then he went to Austin, which is a huge tech startup scene. And so, he went to a tech startup meet up at the Capital Factory to really try and get clients for his other business. And he came home and he's like, "We have got to start the paleo baby food company." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He's like, "You know, we talked a couple of weeks ago at the show." And I'm like, "Okay, yep. We've talked about paleo baby food." And he said, "It meets these five criteria. I just went to a tech startup thing. We can get investment. It's got a white space, all these things."

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY I'm like, "You're not kidding." Like I really thought he was joking. He's like, "No, I'm not kidding. I think we really need to do this." And I'm like, "But we don't really know how to make baby food. And we've never been in the food business." And he was like, "Well, but you have a background in manufacturing, and I have a background in sales. And so surely those two things can get us started. And what do you think?"

BEN So very complementary skill sets and Joe is very high enthusiasm guy too.

SERENITY He's extremely enthusiastic, which is useful.

BEN Absolutely.

SERENITY Extremely useful. And so, I call the summer of 2016 my "summer of nerdism", because I spent my entire summer with my nose in a book or a blog or a podcast watching videos. Trying to figure out what are ideal first foods for babies. Like I ate mostly veggies, meats, some fruit and some nuts without grains, beans, sugar, dairy. And we did an independent study of the baby foods on the baby food aisle. And out of 468 organic baby foods, 2% or less had any fat in them. And it took me like probably a couple months of reading, and I mean, devouring information on infants and nutrition. And then I realized, "Wait a second, we already have a perfect baby food and its mother's milk."

So, if I can learn more about mother's milk and what it's made of and what the macronutrients look like. Maybe I can figure out what babies should be eating as first of all.

BEN What the closest approximation to that is.

SERENITY Exactly. Right. So conveniently Austin has the largest milk bank in the country. And it was a breastfeeding awareness month or whatever. In August 2016 I'm like, "Joe, we're going on a tour. Let's go tour the milk bank." Because I need to learn more about milk and what's in it. And I can't find very much online. And, still to this day, there's not a whole lot out there. And most of what's out there is funded by formula companies. What's not necessarily available to the public. And so, I did get a presentation from one of the people at the milk bank that kind of showed some of the macronutrients of mother's milk. And it turns out that there's about half carbs and half fat with a little bit of protein as far as the caloric content and most all the calories on the baby food all came from carbs.

And it was mostly fruit. And I got really mad.

BEN True.

SERENITY Because, as like almost every parent, I would think, "Well duh, I should feed my baby what's on the aisle because it's what's on the aisle."

BEN These are the experts. That's their thing. But the reality is that aisle hadn't changed since the sort of low-fat era of the '90s or whatever it was, right?

SERENITY Yeah, exactly. And so, I wrote a book called *Inventing Baby Food*, which starts with the mid to late 1800s and when they would feed babies, what they called, pap. And it was a little bit of flour mixed with milk. Like for moms who either didn't have milk supply or they couldn't find a wet nurse.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY At the time they didn't have bottles and formula. So, your baby would die if you didn't come up with alternate feeding. And so, it was a big deal. And so, then in the early turn of the century, they actually had babies dying from the baby food that they were trying to feed. And it was called death by artificial feeding. And it was a really terrible diagnosis. And the medical community kind of woke up a little bit and they're like, "All right, how do we figure this out?" It's right around the same time the scientific method came to the States from Germany.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY And so, people were like, "Okay, we can do some testing, we can compare things. You don't have more rigorous for study results." And that's sort of how baby foods started. And Gerber's one of the first companies that started, it's been around a long time. They've gone through huge iterations on what they sell. In the '40s and '50s they sold cool stuff like liver and onion baby food and beef broth baby food and all kinds of things that I would love to bring back.

BEN And honestly if you travel around the world a little bit, like in a lot of other countries. Like the baby food is actually much more interesting than it is here.

SERENITY Oh, yes. It's roe. It's fish eggs. It's all kinds of sardines. In France, they do a lot of salmon mousses and things. It sounds awesome.

BEN That's right, very gourmet baby.

SERENITY Exactly, gourmet baby. In fact, I did do a lot of research on other websites. I have a French degree and so I was like, "Can I read French baby food websites? I'm not sure." It turns out I wasn't so good at that. But I was poking around and trying to figure out what other countries feed their babies because what we feed them or what we were feeding them before we came around wasn't exactly ideal from a macronutrient perspective.

And so, I had been a sick baby. I was born a little bit early and I got my first ear infection when I was two weeks old. And my mom. In the '70s the healthiest thing she could think of to be was vegetarian, right? Because that's all she kind of knew. She was like, "All right I'll be a vegetarian. It's the healthiest thing for my baby." And she didn't know. We didn't know that I don't tolerate wheat or dairy, which were the foundations of her vegetarian diet.

BEN That's right. And so, she's passing that through in the breast milk.

SERENITY That's right. So, I got an ear infection in my first round of antibiotics. And that just kept happening because I kept eating wheat and dairy because no one knew during the '80s that gluten intolerance was a thing. There's no Celiac's disease.

BEN Well because your body misinterprets some of those things, it's this auto immune reaction. It sees it as a pathogen. It's fighting against it. It's creating mucus buildup in your ear cavities and all this kind of stuff. And so like, you keep doing that and your body keeps reacting.

SERENITY That's right. So, I remember I was probably about nine. I was living in Terre Haute, Indiana. I was on my waterbed. And I was in serious stomach pain. It's actually not very funny. I was on my waterbed, that part's funny, but I was on my waterbed.

BEN Probably as a nine-year-old. You're like "I have a ride."

SERENITY That's right. Oh, I could not wait for that waterbed. That was the coolest thing I'd ever had. And I'm lying on there, but I'm hunched over with stomach pain, balled up, like usual. It happened maybe every day, at least every couple of days. And I remember I had seen a commercial for like Pepto-Bismol or something, helps your stomach. And I'm like, "Mom, I need some Pepto-Bismol." She's like, "Oh honey, that stuff, it doesn't really work. You know, we're not going to get any of that." And she sort of thought I was a hypochondriac, which is not far from the truth, but also given where I come from.

BEN Sure. Uh-huh (affirmative).

SERENITY And I just remember the thought ran through my head, "Oh, I guess this is just how it's going to be." I'm just going to be in pain for mysterious reasons, not knowing why. Having to miss school, certainly miss playing and just be in a lot of pain all the time.

BEN Miss enjoying moments, yeah.

SERENITY So, I had grown up like that and partly it was because of my food sources and just ignorance, period.

BEN And again, it's a solid Midwestern diet.

SERENITY That's right. Chicken in a biscuit, crackers, lots of pizza, bags of Doritos, all the processed foods, cheese whiz, name it. And I really feel for those kids because I was one. And the kids of today and the parents, they have other choices. We know more than we did back then. We understand about gut health, the microbiome. It's huge. I mean, isn't it something like only 10% of our bodies are actual our own cells and 90% are the microbes and bacteria and viruses and all the stuff that help keep us healthy. It's crazy to think about. So, the microbiome is a really important thing to me, and I want to provide parents who are particularly interested in that with another option on the baby food aisle.

BEN And to give their kids a different and better start.

SERENITY That's right. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN And right now, the ketogenic diet is a really big deal. And so, in that diet, fat is the number one kind of food source, right? It's not only fat, but that's a big part of it. And so like, which is actually closer to how you're describing breast milk and so we get to fast forward a little bit. And you have

this revelation that like, what if we really did sort of a meat forward, a higher fat, higher protein kind of diet for babies.

SERENITY Exactly.

BEN So, you went really deep in the research mode and all of this sort of stuff. Was there a moment that what would become Serenity Kids kind of crystallized in your mind?

SERENITY Yeah, and it was the breast milk and the macronutrients and that's still how we make our new flavors that roll out today. Where like, it's got to have this much fat, it's got to have this little sugar. But then I didn't exactly how to make that up. And so, I did a lot of research. Also, I lived with my sister and her 18-month-old for six months right after college, right when I moved to Austin. And I know how hard it is to feed a kid and a baby specifically because I have two sisters and the one with the baby was going on a trip with her husband to Vegas. And she wanted someone to stay in Austin with the kids. So, my sister and I flew into Austin to watch the baby for the weekend. And she had never taken a bottle before.

BEN Oh, and you had no idea. You were younger, so you didn't know what you had just signed up for.

SERENITY No, I didn't know what was going on. I had no idea what was going on.

BEN Oh, how hard can this be.

SERENITY It's a little baby. Two grownups to watch one baby for the weekend, easy peasy.

BEN Yeah, overkill.

SERENITY Nope, nope, nope, nope. It was insane. She didn't drink anything for 24 hours. And I was like, "Do we call my sister? No, don't call her. She's having fun in Las Vegas. "Like let mama have some fun."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY And so, when we're mixing her milk with all these sweet potatoes, trying to get that in there, but then that made her constipated. And we're like, "Oh, this is chaos."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY And so, getting one bite and I mean I'll always remember we had this big baby fun board with all the little doodads on it. And my sister would shake that in front of her face and poke on it and make it squeak-

BEN That's right, make something spin and all the things-

SERENITY And I would like sneak a bite in from this side.

BEN That's right. That's right. If you can get the baby to laugh for a moment-

SERENITY That! By opening their mouth.

BEN ... and their mouths are opening. Yeah. Uh-huh (affirmative).

SERENITY Yes, totally! Or if you go like this, they sometimes just mimic you-

BEN They reflect it, yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY ... and they'll open their mouth for you.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY Anyway. So, I learned a lot that weekend and so I was like, "You know what?" And I was on the nutrient dense bandwagon. I had been on that bandwagon since 2010 so for quite a while. And so, I was like, "All right, so every bite is really important." In fact, we've trademarked "Every bite counts."

And so, I want each bite that gets into the baby food to be the most nutrient dense. So, I read a lot of nutrient density charts and I knew that ethically raised meats, meats raised on pasture with the animals eating the foods that nature intended them to eat. I knew that they had really great amino acid profiles and fat content and the right kinds of fat content was really important.

BEN They're not stressed out.

SERENITY Exactly, they're just chill animals. So, I knew that I wanted to do a meat veggie combo because I also knew that we wanted to stay fruit-free because there was already a lot of fruit on the aisle.

BEN The market is saturated on that side.

SERENITY I didn't need to make another strawberry banana puree, right? So, but then I remember thinking like it was like a go white blanching the kind of fear. And I was like, "But what if, what if this baby food doesn't exist because babies won't eat it." So, I'm like, "Joe, we have got to find some babies."

BEN Find a baby.

SERENITY "We've got to find some babies, so let's make this baby food." So, we were living in communal living. It was 12 people in one house and we're like, "Okay, we're going to need the kitchen for a minute."

So, we're like boiling all this stuff up, making us baby food. We bought little squeeze packs that you could load. You could load it with a little plunger thing. And make these little baby food squeeze packs, but it was fresh food. So, we had to get it to them that same day.

BEN Quick.

SERENITY So, we worked ridiculous hours, I mean, ridiculous hours to make up the first couple batches and find our friends who had babies. And I will always remember my friend, she texted me a picture of her baby eating our little baby food pouch and she said, "He wouldn't let me take it away. He kept grabbing it and trying to get more out of the pack after it was gone." And I cried.

BEN Oh, you knew. You're like, okay.

SERENITY Because I was like, "All right, this baby wants nutrient dense foods." And that's our best-selling flavor.

BEN And babies aren't necessarily... They're not responding as you witnessed with your 18-month-old niece or nephew? -

SERENITY Niece.

BEN ...That there's no performative aspect of that where they're trying to eat something to appease you. They don't care.

SERENITY They don't care.

BEN They don't care at all. So, if they like it, they want more of it.

SERENITY That's right.

BEN No like, no eat.

SERENITY That's right. And I've had learned that you can't feed a baby something they don't want. And so that flavor is our top selling flavor. We sort of lucked out.

BEN The original.

SERENITY It's the OG. It's chicken pea and carrot with avocado oil and it's pretty great. And so, we found a formula that worked, right? We could get the right macros and fill the white space on the aisle. There also still isn't any really; I mean there's a couple of flavors that are just veggie. I mean, even if there's fruit in it, or even if it says veggie forward, whatever, there's always some fruit in it, almost always. And so, I knew we wanted to stick with meat and veggie combos and maybe adding some oil for that extra fat to get those macros in.

BEN And really good oils. Not just any oil.

SERENITY Really good oils. That's right. We are sticking with 100% olive oil or 100% avocado oil. We use both. Some parents tell us their kid's allergic to avocados, so we might be leaning a little bit more towards olive in the future.

BEN Their both considered good oils.

SERENITY Exactly, right.

BEN But yeah.

SERENITY And for babies, most people start feeding their babies avocados.

BEN Right, because some you can mash them up and all that stuff.

SERENITY That's right. So, we launched with two flavors. It took us... Well co-packing was a disaster. So, getting shelf stable meat, veggie puree into a pouch for babies. It's a high-risk business.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY And if my heart hadn't been in it, if I hadn't been so angry about what was not out there for babies, we would never be here. It was way too hard.

BEN You had to bulldoze through a lot of stuff, yeah.

SERENITY Our first co-packing attempts failed. Our first three trial runs failed. But we were too little for the big co-packers. I mean they took me on a tour, but they didn't want to do business with me. Until we found a proper ops person. So that was our first probably big hire was besides the getting some help with our fundraising.

Hiring our ops person who knew co-packing, who knew how to talk to them, knew what they cared about. So, he could promise that.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY It was really important because -

BEN They needed volumes.

SERENITY That's right.

BEN They needed some other things, yeah.

SERENITY All these numbers. So, it took us a couple of years to actually release the product. So, we actually launched it August 5th, 2018. The same day our baby was born.

BEN Aww. That's a perfect timing.

SERENITY Somehow accidentally perfect timing or imperfect timing or perfect timing.

BEN Well, right. You're a little preoccupied on that day.

SERENITY I was a tiny preoccupied on that day. So, Joe was over there working on his phone when I was in labor. I'm like, "What's he doing over there? Get out here."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY But we launched the two flavors, the chicken and the beef. And those two flavors were the ones that we had come up with and tested it on babies in the summer of 2016. So, we did focus groups, right? I'm like "Beef and broccoli, like what sounds good together?" How can I get these macros to work with the veggies, meats, oils, and-?

BEN Isn't that interesting by the way; I think that's an important point because like innovation... I think people a lot of times assume... I talked to somebody this week and they had this default idea that if they wanted to be innovative, they needed to immediately go to a food scientist.

SERENITY Oh.

BEN And well, again, I'm highly pro-food scientists. In my experience, if you can have a kind of a culinary, and you don't have to be a trained chef necessarily, but just somebody who has that kind of culinary flair, that creative flair in the kitchen. They can usually come up with something that's more creative and more innovative than somebody who's immediately going straight down. That kind of traditional structured scientific path. That's really important to dial in the product later. But you kind of had your intuition that was leading you down a particular path that ended up being more precise than a focus group. You could have spent tens or hundreds of thousands of

dollars on all these focus groups and you wouldn't have found anything better than what you actually found in those first experiment.

SERENITY It was the first delivery, the first round of parents. We've done many since, like driving all around Austin, driving down to the Buda and driving up to Round Rock. because you've got to get babies in a certain age range, right?

BEN That's right. This is not for newborns.

SERENITY Not for newborns, at six months and up. And we wanted early ones because once an older baby starts understanding that what's in the pouch is a sugar smoothie, they're a little put off, by the more savory tastes. So, we wanted even younger than 12 months babies. And so yeah, our top sellers are the ones that we created that summer and we launched with two in August of 2018 and then now we've got 10 on the shelf.

BEN Wow.

SERENITY We've got two different lines. We've got our ethical meats line. That's chicken, beef, wild caught salmon, uncured pastured bacon. Wild bison and pastured turkey. Yeah, all mixed with veggies. And then we've got our all veggie line, which, strategically, we weren't planning to do any non-meat flavors, but the USDA shut down for a couple of months, a few years ago because the government shut down. All our innovation was stuck because we couldn't make any new meat products because the government was shut down.

BEN You can't get approval.

SERENITY We couldn't get approval. And we're getting ready to launch in Whole Foods. And so, we're like, "We've got to do something that's not USDA."

And so, we decided to launch four all-veggie with healthy oils in them. Plus, I also knew that from hanging out with my niece and reading a lot of baby food stuff. I knew that babies, if their pallets haven't been tainted by hyper palatable processed foods. They can intuitively make good food choices for themselves.

BEN That's really interesting.

SERENITY Like there was a study done on orphans, which is unethical today, but it was done in the '40s. These nurses would put 24 different foods in front of a baby and if the baby touched it, the nurse would feed them a bite and record what they actually fed themselves. Babies with colds tended towards the bone broth and the foods that we now know are more healing towards the gut and healing towards those kinds of things. And they gave themselves a wide variety of foods, but they didn't always eat, like their carbs and their fats and their proteins all at the same time. Sometimes for breakfast, they'd eat all protein. Sometimes for lunch, they eat all carbs.

BEN Just like adults do.

SERENITY Exactly. So, I was like, "You know what, I want to give babies those choices."

BEN Yeah, give them options.

SERENITY Yeah. And my 18-month-old today, inside of our pantry, we have a shoe hanger with clear pockets, and we load the pouches up by flavor in those. And I'm like, "Okay, which one do you want?" And she'll pick out one and sometimes she picks the meat ones. Sometimes she picks the veggie one.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY And now that she knows enough about what's inside each one, I let her pick and we just roll with it. Last night, she wanted three of the same one in a row.

BEN Okay, isn't that great and that's alright.

SERENITY And I'm like, "All right, go for it. You can have soup, potato and spinach all night long, girl."

BEN That's right. I love it.

SERENITY And so, I think that babies know a lot more than we think they do. And I wanted to make that option available for them and they sell like crazy. And I actually think older kids and adults sometimes also eat the non-meat flavors. Pureed meat sounds a little grosser to grownups. But pureed veggies.

BEN Although when you try it. Like I've tried your stuff. It tastes really good.

SERENITY Yeah. My favorite comment that we get from baby trade shows from parents is, "Oh, that's not gross."

BEN That's a high compliment.

SERENITY It's a high compliment. I love it.

BEN Most baby food's super gross.

SERENITY It's super gross. Or "Oh, I might eat that." And I'm like, "Kind of tastes like your food chewed all up on your mouth." Right?

BEN That's right.

SERENITY And that's something else that I learned that there are some other, a couple other meat baby foods on the aisle. Meat, veggies, beans and grains and things, but they don't taste good.

BEN Yeah, it's so important.

SERENITY And I just kind of didn't mean for mine to taste good. I didn't mean for them to taste bad. But they're babies, they don't have like super delicate palettes. Like I said, a lot of them, their palettes haven't been tainted by hyper palatable foods; food engineered stuff.

BEN They're like, "Oh, that's clearly saffron infused wine."

SERENITY Exactly.

BEN They don't know.

SERENITY They don't know! And that's one thing we learned in our focus groups is babies don't care that much about the ratio of pea to carrot in the recipe.

BEN No, yeah.

SERENITY But I also realized pretty quickly that ethically raised, well sourced, highest possible colony meats just tastes a lot better.

BEN They do.

SERENITY They taste so much better than other things.

BEN And also, the fats, fat is really pleasing to the palette.

SERENITY It is. And when you're looking at what you can put in a puree, protein's not a really good option in terms of straight puree, right? So, you're left with carbs and fat and what's on the aisle now is mostly carbs because you've got to get one or the other. And I decided that we were going to try. Do babies like fat? And those little focus groups, they just made me so happy.

BEN Oh, sure. Yeah.

SERENITY Duh. I mean, duh, that tastes awesome. Every kid's got caught with a stick of butter in his mouth.

BEN Well, yeah, I mean the Texas State Fair.

SERENITY Right. Fry them up.

BEN It's a sign that people like fats, right?

SERENITY That's right.

BEN Or whatever. So, you really had to fight through because you were doing a really innovative, different, out of left field thing. And that presented a series of challenges, supply chain, etc. And then after a lot of perseverance, you're able to kind of breakthrough. And you ended up launching in all the Whole Foods from nothing, which is super like unicorn unusual. Like how did that go? Was that scary? Was it, you'd never done this?

SERENITY It was terrifying. Are you kidding me? So, it was November of 2018 and I had a three-month-old. And we were working out of our house, me and Joe and we had a couple of contract people. And I remember, I'll never forget this, I was nursing her in the living room and Joe was in his office with the door open because he got lonely.

And he answered the phone and he's like "Caleb, oh hi. Oh, Caleb from Whole Foods." And he just started talking to him and I could understand from his side of the conversation that they were making us this big offer. And I was like, "We only have two flavors right now." And they wanted five. And I mean we had everything in the pipeline, but it was a tight time crunch and we had stuff stuck in USDA and are almost getting ready to be and I'm like, "Is this even going to work?" And I was like, I almost wanted to get up and tell him: "Stop, stop. Don't tell him yes."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY But I couldn't. I had this baby sleeping now at this point. And I'm not waking that baby up. So, there's nothing will wake that baby up, not even me. And so, I kind of took some breaths and I was like, "You know what, I'm the ops person. Joe's our sales guy, he's doing his job. He's selling baby food." And so, the next few months were really stressful trying to get all these products ready for Whole Foods. So, at the beginning of 2019 we were in three retail stores and at the end, we were in over 2000 retail stores.

BEN That's rapid, rapid growth.

SERENITY So, it has been insane. And at that point I was raising a six-month-old to an 18-month-old. Also, crazy. We were working out of our house in November when Whole Foods called and we said, "Yes." And I was like, "Okay, there is a plan that would work. Like all the stars have to align. That they all align, it's going to work." And they conveniently all aligned. But then we realized we needed to have built our team out.

BEN That's right. Because you've got to get out there. You've got to make people aware of this new product.

SERENITY Got to figure this out.

BEN You've got to make it move off the shelf.

SERENITY Yep. So, we knew we needed to hire a marketing person and Joe wanted to bring them into our house to work. And I was like, "Nope, not happening." They're not working out of the house when I've got this baby. She needs a sleep and I've got to rest and Uh-uh. Not going to work.

BEN And he's thinking communal living. Like, it's great. We'll do communal working. What's the big deal?

SERENITY No. So, we got our first office in January of 2019. We hired our marketing person. And we launched in Whole Foods in March and every Whole Foods in the country. And we're like hanging on for dear life. Like, does anyone want this?

BEN Fingers crossed.

SERENITY Will anybody buy this? We had some sales in the three other little stores we were in. We didn't get great data from that. So, we weren't really sure. But then we got started getting our first Whole Foods market reports. One of the best things in my opinion about working with Whole Foods is the data they give you.

BEN That's right. They give you access to your data.

SERENITY They give you access to your data, which is the most important data.

BEN Very helpful.

SERENITY Yeah, and so we started seeing, I mean almost right out of the gate. We were outselling their minimum requirements. They're like their light to seize. And we were already at there. Like, this would be amazing if you could get to this velocity.

BEN Good.

SERENITY We were already there. And so, it just kept going up. And we were like, "Oh my goodness, this is so exciting." But then we had to grow more. Then we got into almost all the UNFIs or two-thirds of the UNFIs. And so, a bunch of little independent stores started picking up our brand that we didn't even know about.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY And so, it's been a crazy ride. Last year we launched seven new flavors, no eight. We launched eight new flavors last year from two. And then we're coming out with some new flavors this year and we're expanding. I can't say a whole lot about it, but into a couple of different formats.

BEN Cool.

SERENITY That's still in the baby section.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SERENITY So, we have finally hired a food scientist for the first time.

BEN Good, good, good. That's right. There is a right time for this.

SERENITY Right time. It's a super innovative product in a conventional format. And so, we're trying to see how much nutrition we can pack into the baby food aisle.

BEN That's awesome. So now as you've grown your team, so you grow the store count and there's a lot more work to do now. So, it can't just be you and Joe doing it. So, you've grown the team and you have an office. You guys made a decision that I think is super cool to provide and it made sense. You had a little baby Della, right? And so, you were obviously had other people interested in the business who were also parents. And you decided to provide onsite childcare, which is very unusual for a startup of any kind, in a food startup in particular.

SERENITY Well, this was Joe's way of bringing me back to work.

BEN It's kind of crafty.

SERENITY I know right! It worked, in January, six months after Della was born. And he's like, "All right, we're like cranking. The business is really cranking, and we've got this office." And he's like, "I want you to come into work." I'm like, "No." Nope. Not going. Nothing's more important than this little thing. I'm not going to leave her all day. Because I don't have to, right? I'm the business owner. I don't have to go to daycare, so I don't have to. I'm not going to. And he's a really creative person, which is one of the reasons this business is successful because he's extremely good at, I won't say getting what he wants, but it ends up being somewhat that.

BEN He's persistent.

SERENITY He's really good at negotiating, like being creative and coming up with different solutions that you might not have even thought about. So, I'm like, "Forget it, I'm not going back to work yet. Give me a couple more months." And he's like, "But what if you could bring her to work?" And I'm like, "Huh, tell me more about that."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY Possibly?

BEN What might that look like?

SERENITY Possibly. What would that look like? He's like, "Well, you know. What if we had..." because we hadn't chosen an office yet. He's like, "What if we pick an office that is a house and then we can have a baby room and bring a nanny in. And then you could still go back there to nurse, and you could still work sometimes, and you can just figure that out." And so, I said, "I might be on board with that."

"Let's get a temporary person and try it out." And so, we tried it out for January, February. And we also did have a person at the time, with a baby the exact same age as Della or a couple months older. And she was wanting to go from part-time to full-time, but would need to figure out a childcare solution for herself,

BEN Which is very expensive. It's time consuming. As you indicated, can be very conflicting for a parent and all of those things.

SERENITY Yup, yup. And so, he sort of pitched it to her. He's like, "What if we did this onsite childcare, would you be more able to come into the office?" And she was working from home at that point. And she's like, "Oh, I think, I think that could maybe work."

And so, a year later, we still have childcare at the office. Those two girls hang out every day.

BEN That's right. They're the interns.

SERENITY And they earn their keep. We were like, "We need a baby food for this photo. Go get one."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY Yesterday, we did some social media photos with snacks. And she's like, "Just have her reach." I'm like, "You can't have her reach. Put something up there she wants. She'll reach for it."

BEN That's right.

SERENITY So, we've got some great photos yesterday.

BEN Great baby hands. No stock photos here.

SERENITY No, you need an Amazon Prime Day photo. We open one of our Amazon boxes, put a baby in it. Hand her a pouch and let her have lunch.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY On the back-porch light. It works great.

BEN That's beautiful.

SERENITY So, it's aligned with our values as parents and moms. And it's also super aligned with our baby food company. And every now and then, the babies will cry or something and the nannies like

"Ooh, I know you've got meetings." and I'm like, "It's okay." These people took this job knowing that their baby's onsite. And it's really mostly just the moms that are like um-

BEN That are self-conscious about it.

SERENITY That's right. Get a little self-conscious or like your mommy Spidey sense comes out when your baby's crying. Like it just happens. Every mom knows that. So sometimes there's that, but we're getting ready to move into a new office because we're expanding our team some more. And I'm looking at your soundproofing stuff and there's some like artistic soundproofing stuff. This like designs and cool colors and we're totally getting that.

BEN Kind of the padded walls.

SERENITY We're totally getting that.

BEN Make sure the sound doesn't travel too much.

SERENITY Yup, because they're concrete floors. And so, I'm like, yeah, right.

BEN So, it reverberates.

SERENITY That's right.

BEN So, what have you learned? This was all new to you. The baby food thing was new to you, the grocery store world. You have a background in manufacturing. You mentioned John Deere and Joe had worked in tech and some other things. But like, if you kind of take yourself back to all the things you didn't know and now all the things that you've experienced. What are some of the key things that have been surprising to you that you've learned about maybe how the food business works that might not have been intuitive to you just starting off, coming from elsewhere?

SERENITY Yeah, so one of the biggest things was just how nice everybody is in the food business, in general. In November Food Navigator put on a kid's nutrition summit. And so, all the small baby food brands were there, and we were all on a panel together. When people are like, "Ooh, it's going to be competitive and sharky." And we're not. In fact, one of them, I was like, "My baby loves these dried peppers that you guys make. Come out with more dried veggies." She's like, "Well, we're working on it. We're working on it. So good to hear that." And not only that, but just in general in Austin specifically. I can't speak for other areas.

But Joe and I have been successful because well, we're pretty humble. We know that we don't know most things, but we know we can find someone who does. And so, we just would get on the phone and be like, "Hey, can I take you to lunch? Are you willing to spend a little time talking on the phone to me?"

We interviewed a couple of food scientists and thought about working with them, but they just ended up answering our questions on the phone and we never had to hire them. They weren't complicated enough questions apparently.

BEN So, people were just kind of-

SERENITY They're generous.

BEN ...pretty generous with their time and insight.

SERENITY People have been extremely generous. Yeah. And I think that that's a really important success factor for our business. When we come up against a brick wall, like our co-packer dropped us. They said, "We think you should call these other three co-packers who I had already talked to." Who had already turned me down. And I'm like, "Who else can I talk to?"

So that happened a month before Joe and I got married in October of 2017. Our co-packer, our third failed trial. They said, "We don't think we can make this product. Call these other co-packers." And I thought, "Well, do we have a business anymore?"

BEN A fear and valid question.

SERENITY We might not, I don't know. So, me and Joe and our other business partner, Ronnie, who's our investment guy all got on the phone for a week solid. We made phone calls. We made dozens of phone calls and we finally found a couple candidates for operations. And it was just through someone who knew somebody who knew somebody who might be looking. And some of the candidates we brought in gave us really good advice. "We think you should maybe try this and this and this." And we weren't sure we would find anybody, but we did. And so, it's just about like you said, the persistence following the chain. And having Joe's excitement around was really helpful for that. When I would be like, "Ugh. I don't want to do this anymore."

BEN Well that's one of the advantages of having a co-founder, the ideal is when you're up, he may be down.

SERENITY That's right.

BEN But then when you're down, he's up. That sort of thing. Yeah.

SERENITY I know for sure I could not have done this by myself. I'm too much of an introverted, nerdy nutrition reader, foodie person.

BEN Somebody on the team has to be that.

SERENITY Someone's got to do that.

BEN That's very valid.

SERENITY Me, I'll do that part. But like going to sell stuff. I mean, I do go to pitches, the big pitches. I go as the mom co-founder but they start talking about, promos and I'm like, "Take it away."

BEN That's right. That's not your area.

SERENITY Not me, not me. I can tell you all about the babies and nutrition and stuff, but nothing about that part.

BEN So, early on you recognized that, "Oh, we're in a community that's generous and that shares some of these insights." And you had the discipline to keep asking, right? And to go to places and to talk to people, have lunch, have coffee, whatever the thing is. And then as you grew, you encounter different phases of this, right?

SERENITY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN So, there's one thing where you're learning, how do I navigate this crazy co-packer situation? Well then you have some of these breakthrough successes and your business changes, right? So, it was all really conceptual and effectively an R&D company for a while.

SERENITY Couple of years.

BEN And then now you still have that component, but now there's a pretty significant sales and marketing aspect as well too. What about aspects of that part of the business do you feel like you didn't know going in that you now see how important they are?

SERENITY Oh man. Retail groceries, so hard. I mean, there are so many fingers in the pie. And if you think about it geographically, it totally makes sense. I mean, there are thousands and thousands of grocery stores in this country. How do they order their products? How do they find out about new stuff? How do they get it all in there? They're not going to get UPS orders from every single company they work with. So, distributors are really complicated. I mean for me, figuring out the finances has been painful. Trying to figure out what I can make it for, how many people need to take cuts before it goes to the retailer.

BEN These are not optional cuts.

SERENITY No.

BEN You're sort of like-

SERENITY You're stuck with.

BEN Yeah, you got to do it.

SERENITY Unless you work directly with the retailer, which is even harder, you've got to hire a whole person to do the work that those distributors would have done, just or half a person. Depending. And so, it's just about kind of figuring out how to navigate each retailer using brokers. So, we do a lot of different kinds of retail and we do a lot of different kinds of online.

We have our own store online. We sell on Amazon online; we sell on Thrive Market online. We sell on One Stop Paleo Shop online.

BEN Which are all very different. Even though they're all online, they're all super different.

SERENITY Different. Totally different margins, totally different marketing strategies. Totally distribution, totally different amounts of inventory requirements. Like we don't sell to Amazon, they sell for us. So that's all of our inventory in their locations.

That's expensive. So really figuring out how to keep our inventory numbers right. It's my current challenge I'm working on.

BEN That's right. There's an inventory holding costs to all of these things.

SERENITY And food expires and we have to sell it to distributors with a certain amount of months of shelf life left and all that.

BEN And they want most of it.

SERENITY They want most of it. So, we have to get it to them quick. But then, like we just had to run a flavor that we have inventory of because of the shelf life. And so, I'm trying to figure out, do we optimize these SKUS? Do we just try to figure out how to sell more? It's a really complicated mathematical and somewhat gut check kind of puzzle. Like we've been able to get our co-packer to lower their minimum order requirements for certain really creative ways and for particularly for just all our moving SKUS.

And so that was like, I'm like, "This is brilliant. We should have done this a long time ago."

BEN Sure. Yeah. It makes a difference.

SERENITY Yeah, it makes a huge difference. I took a little class, I think it was called, getting shelf made or something like that, but I took a little class and it taught me a little bit about kind of the broker network and just distribution and how each retailer... I mean each of them... I don't think we have anyone that has a similar or exactly identical deal. Everyone looks a little bit different, a little bit different of a distributor, way different promo plans. Some have different prices at the upfront because they cover other things.

BEN It's a lot to keep up to.

SERENITY It's really complicated.

BEN And you're constantly kind of negotiating all of those things. As you scale there can be different tiers of pricing and all of these kinds of stuff.

SERENITY And you have to keep that all, I mean you've got your goals, right? So, we're working on our goals for the year. It's the beginning of the year. And we're coming out with what our goals are. And so, we've got our marching orders and we have this really multilayered, multi-tiered faceted way to get there. And we have to make sure that no one is too much this way or too much that way.

We really have to keep some of them here, but if we have one here, then we've got to keep one over on that end to balance everything out. So that we keep making money and have a viable business.

BEN Which is very important.

SERENITY I know, right?

BEN And also, a cool thing about if you get those things right and your margins are right and things like that, you should have a viable business because you're actually selling a product that people are in fact exchanging money for.

SERENITY That's right.

BEN So, you've learned a lot about the grocery business, the baby food business. What have you learned about yourself in this entrepreneurial journey?

SERENITY That's a really good question. Well, I've learned that I can do a lot more than I thought. I never, I mean, in a million years, I never imagined that I would launch a company the same day I was giving birth. I never wanted to have kids. I'm not really an entrepreneur. It sounds like a little weird to say, but I'm not. I worked in corporate America.

BEN And you're fine with it.

SERENITY I was mostly fine with it. I didn't love making tractors because I just couldn't identify with the farming world. And I worked for Dell for a while. I mean I used computers, but I'm just not into them. If I had worked at, I don't know, Kraft or something, maybe I'd be perfectly happy right now and still be doing the corporate thing. I like the certainty of knowing what my goals are and how to do this. Joe was really the more entrepreneurial risk-taker one.

 And I've learned that I can take a lot more risks than I thought I could. And I've learned that I'm much more of a courageous person than I ever imagined. If before I started this company, you'd said, "You're going to have to take all these risks in order to get there." I'd be like, "Heck no, I'm not doing that. There's no way I'm doing that. That's crazy."

BEN Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Well, you don't know, and I feel like that's sort of a gift that we're all naive.

SERENITY Ignorant.

BEN There has to be a certain degree of optimism. I mean, you can be a realist, but there is always like, "But this could go really well" and you don't know, a lot of times if you knew all of the trials and tribulations. You'd say, "Oh, huh." Even if there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I'm not sure it's worth that.

SERENITY Yeah. And I was never looking for a pot of gold. I just wanted a job that, like I did the corporate America thing and my heart was a little sad. When I left there I was like, "I just wish there was something more that I could do with my life." That my heart was really, really invested in and that just really loved working on. That I felt like I was doing good in the world and now I have that, and this is the best job I've ever had. It's the hardest job I've ever had, running a company. I never wanted to be a business owner. I'm not sure. I really love it, frankly. I do.

BEN You're growing into it.

SERENITY I'm growing into it. I love making the product and I love innovating. I mean, are you kidding me? I can innovate and make new products all day long. But I'm responsible for people's mortgages and their food and like it's a lot of pressure.

BEN It's a lot of responsibility on your shoulders.

SERENITY And thankfully I share it, right?

BEN Absolutely.

SERENITY Me and Joe do share it, but it's a lot more responsibility than I ever thought I would be able to handle or tolerate. And I'm working this year on enjoying it.

BEN Oh, that's really cool

SERENITY That's my goal for the year, is to really find a way to have fun with that part and make myself really good at it. And when I'm really good at it, I'm going to have a lot of fun with it.

BEN That's right. And to see it as an opportunity because the more comfortable you get with it, hopefully the better you get at it. And there are going to be all kinds of other opportunities. You

may be able to speak into the lives of other entrepreneurs, other women, other moms, and give them a fresh perspective and some insight that they wouldn't have had otherwise.

- SERENITY It's one of the reasons I like doing podcasts. Because I get to talk about this stuff and really as I'm going along, I'm like, "Oh yeah, there's that." That cool thing I didn't realize 'til just now.
- BEN Well because we experience life in a series of discreet fractured moments. And then really, it's only in retrospect that we add kind of a narrative strands to them. And so sometimes it is useful to have to walk through our journeys a little bit because then you go, "Oh yeah, that happened, and it did in fact lead to this next thing.
- SERENITY It did.
- BEN Because I'm sure in the moment you weren't thinking, oh, you're in the middle of giving birth and you're like, "This is going to be a momentous day in the life of our company." That's not going through your head in the moment.
- SERENITY No, never.
- BEN Right?
- SERENITY It didn't go through, not once.
- BEN And so, as time passes, if you're sitting down over coffee or whatever else with another, let's say, early stage founder and a lot of our listeners are in some either early stage growth stage founders across the consumer-packaged goods landscape. What are some of the go-to nuggets or bits of wisdom that you find yourself frequently sharing with people?
- SERENITY Yeah, for me, the biggest one is make sure you have a viable product that people want to buy. So right before I started Serenity Kids, I was trying to do this paleo coaching. And it turns out people didn't really want paleo coaching. So, I didn't have a viable business. Right. And it wasn't really working out. And so, I think if we could have started in the farmer's markets and talking to customers face to face, we totally would have.
- BEN You had a unique product.
- SERENITY But with our format that didn't work. But I always do recommend go to places where you can talk to people. First of all, I mean, the best thing to do is to make a product that you really want yourself. Because you are your ideal customer and so later on down, you'll be able to talk the marketing language. You'll be able to explain it to people, right? But then after that, you could be a super weird, quirky customer and that no one else wants your thing.
- SERENITY That's right.
- BEN So, making sure that you ask the right questions, that you gather the data as much as you can. For ours, it was a little hard to do, have babies fill out the surveys.
- BEN They just drew a line.
- SERENITY Right? So, I'm like, how do you make a survey for a baby? So, I had to think really hard and try out a couple of different questions and we settled on for the mom to fill out, how did your baby respond when you offered them the food?

And so, they would say he scrunched up his face and then he spit it out or she took a drink and then turned her head away and wouldn't take it again. But most of the time they would say things like, "Well, she tried it, scrunched up her face and then opened her mouth for more the next time."

So, trying to figure out how you measure your customers' feedback is really important.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY Not everyone's dealing with babies or pets or like different kinds of customers or people who don't even... I mean some people don't even know why they like certain things and why they don't-

BEN And that's a really key insight because I think that with you, you had that intermediary of the parent. Who had to interpret what was happening or observe or interpret what's happening. But the truth is we, as consumers, have I think kind of a false confidence that we know why we like what we like.

And sometimes that's true. Some people are more self-aware, but in my experience, more often than not, there are a lot of kind of unconscious reasons why we really do things or like things or buy things. And you can't always simply rely on what people said like, "Oh, I bought this car because I really liked the gas mileage" or something like that. Like is that really why you bought the car, or did it actually say something about you and this sort of thing. So, I think that in some ways the experience that you had, which is challenging, a unique challenge to have a translator.

Maybe made it a little bit more honest, because you didn't have a false sense of confidence. Like somebody else is interpreting a reaction. And otherwise you can give a survey to a consumer or to an adult and they say, "Well, I liked yours because I don't eat sugar or something like that." And you're like, "You really don't eat sugar?"

SERENITY No.

BEN "You sure about that?" Like or you're just telling people, maybe you've been telling yourself, you don't need sugar. So, I think that sometimes like maybe in some respects having that intermediary made it more honest.

SERENITY Yeah. And then I also got to read them, right? And so, we noticed, and I wondered this early on. I wondered, "Is there a correlation between if a parent likes it and a kid likes it?" And it is extremely high correlation. So, we wanted to make things not necessarily that parents liked, but that at least they liked the look of. Maybe they like the smell of, because when you're cleaning up baby spit up or off your arm or food gets everywhere. Like the salmon flavor, it's stinky. I'm like, "Don't get it on the carpet."

BEN That's right. Yeah. Well, and I think there's that anticipatory element too where if babies are reflecting back what's happening on the face of the adults.

And so, if the adult's kind of like, there's trepidation like, "What do you think?" Like that sort of thing versus "You like it?" A wide eye and all that kind of stuff. And the baby's like, "Yeah, sure. Whatever." You can sort of like; it becomes a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy there, I think.

SERENITY That's right. It does. And so, we wanted to make things that... Although I mean we did have a couple, with the salmon in particular, because it's a strong taste. Where the parents are like, "I thought it was so gross, but the baby loved it. It's the only one she really liked or whatever." So, I

think that understanding your market, understanding the occasion when someone might be eating your product. That's really important.

And for me like something I didn't think that much about, but I do now is what exactly do the buyers want and how do you figure that out? You can't always just call your buyer up and be like, "Hey, I'm thinking about making this kind of product. What do you think?" That's not always an option. Especially if you're not connected to them. Or you're thinking of two different products that would go in two different categories on the grocery. I also didn't think about that.

Where do these products go in the grocery like I had ideas and still do for baby food, some kids' food mostly in those kinds of spaces. But the baby buyer and the kid food buy are not the same person.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY So, we have strategically decided to have a very narrow focus and to stay with just things that the baby category manager would buy. The baby food buyer would buy, the same person. Because I don't want to have to be pitching to different people for two different kinds of products.

BEN It gets more complicated.

SERENITY Someday, maybe I will, but it gets really complicated.

BEN I think one key insight is it doesn't get twice as complicated going from one category to another. It might be like five or 10 times more complicated because sometimes even those different aisles, can be different supply chains. There can be different, I mean obviously, different buyers, different temperature states.

SERENITY Exactly.

BEN All kinds of things are happening there.

SERENITY Yep. And so that's why we have all kinds of innovation idea meetings and things. And I'm like, "That's a good one. Putting it on the parking lot." Let's put it in the parking lot. We'll keep it for later and hopefully someday, we'll get to make these cool kid's products. But for now, we're sticking-

BEN You got to focus on it.

SERENITY ... focus because as people who are innovative and a lot of the people who might be listening to your podcast are, right? They're like, "I've got this cool new idea." And it's just about how do you take that creativity and keep it in a container to where it can like safely grow and fuel itself. Keep spinning around and making the one that I like to think of my business as a little pearl, right? I put a little layer on, every day a little, a little layer goes on. And so, it's about being consistent. And I think the most success you're going to have is if you've got all this interview pointed right in this perfect direction, right?

BEN Very focus.

SERENITY Stay super focused because it's really easy to see the next cool thing and be like, "I want to make one of those."

BEN You get super distracted.

SERENITY It happens to me all day long. I love the grocery store. It makes me so happy to go and look around. I spend forever in there looking at the labels, picking stuff up.

BEN That's right. I'm insufferable to go to grocery with.

SERENITY Joe won't go with me. He's like, "There's never a such thing as, 'I'm like, I just need three things.'" He's like, "We're going to be in there for an hour." Like, "No, we won't." "We are." Especially if it's one I don't go to very often I'm like, "Ooh, it's a new thing like this."

BEN Ooh, new assortments.

SERENITY Yeah. I'm like, "This needs a little merchandising, I can't reach, let me just help these people. I'll merchandise our stuff every time I go." They know that as well.

BEN Of course.

SERENITY So, I also think the other thing, loving food is really important. I mean whatever you're going into or if you're not the food lover, find someone who is, right? I mean, I can't imagine not being a food lover, but I'm sure there are people out there who just aren't really into it.

BEN Right, it's just a widget to them.

SERENITY Yeah. Right. And so, it's so much better the fact that I have to taste test. I'm going to have to taste test baby food, which I don't know, it's not that fun for me because I want to eat like steak and stuff.

But the fact that it's food. I'm like, "Okay." It's a little bit easier for me to use my creative tasting skills and skillset versus testing a new USB drive or something that I just don't care at all about.

BEN That's right. Like okay, it's fine. The old USB drive, it was fine.

SERENITY Yeah, I know, right? I know.

BEN So I think that one of the things that you pointed out in a couple of your answers are things that we've talked about a lot here around Barcode and that is, I've seen a lot of entrepreneurs assume that like a successful business comes from an idea. And while, yes, you did have an idea, fundamentally the success that you found that found you in some respects too was because you were solving a problem.

And so, it is rarely will consumers or other people pay for an idea. They will pay to have their problem solved. And that's where you solved... There was a problem that related to sort of the nutrient density in the macro composition of baby food. You solve particular problems like you mentioned for the buyers around, "Oh, what's innovative?"

I'm measured based on a bunch of different things. You're solving a problem for babies, for parents, for grocery people, for all of these folks in your life, in distinct audiences. And that's really what gets people excited. That's when they're willing to part with their own money because you helped me solve my problem. And so, I think it's really important to always go back and remind yourself. And that's again, one of the reasons why I think like the advice that you gave about, you should be your own target focus group or that sort of thing too because it helps you.

It gives you a deeper connection to that problem that you're trying to solve. And so, when you became a mom and then had to experienced firsthand what it was like to try to feed your own baby and where you had attempted to feed your niece before. You had an empathy for that problem that's pretty universal.

SERENITY Yeah, right. I mean, when we made the salmon flavor, I never considered smell until it's all in my baby's hair and I've got to wash fishy salmon smell out of her hair.

BEN That's right, yeah.

SERENITY It's something I never thought about. I never thought about putting beets in a pouch until I'm scrubbing stains out of her onesie.

BEN They're awfully red.

SERENITY They're so red. So, I think that having at least a tight relationship with someone who's your ideal target customer is super important. Like I thought for sure that I would make most of Della's baby food. I haven't made any.

BEN Because you're doing it all.

SERENITY I just thought, "Oh, fresh is better, right?" Not, from a nutrition perspective, fresh is better and I know that. And as far as priorities go, I got a whole warehouse full of really amazing baby food that I work my butt off to make.

BEN That's right. That's right.

SERENITY And she loves. So, I'm like, "Meh." I mean she's on our plates and stuff now.

BEN Of course.

SERENITY But still, she's on a couch kick for some reason. She ate six yesterday, which is I think, I mean it's insane. I don't think she's ever eaten that many. Maybe she's just getting lazy and didn't want to chew. So, there's someone else I can think about.

BEN That's right.

SERENITY Who knows?

BEN How do I get them focused on the next stage?

SERENITY Uh-huh (affirmative). Who knows?

BEN Well this has been really delightful. I just want to thank you Serenity for sitting down. It's been fun to watch you and Joe, and the company grow from really kind of an early conceptual stage to your rocket ship taking off all over these places, going from three retail stores to 2000 in such short time. And again, having this, that's a good thing. But ultimately like do people love it? Do they buy it? Is it moving off the shelves? And it is and that's also kind of where you have a successful business and it gives you more opportunities.

So, it's been really fun to be able to witness that trajectory.

SERENITY Thank you. And thank you for all your help along the way.

BEN Oh, it's been my pleasure. I just want to remind all of our listeners. If you're getting a lot out of these conversations, what we're trying to do here is really kind of give you a sneak peek behind the curtain. When it comes to what does it really look like to build a consumer-packaged goods startup and brand. And sometimes those are pretty seamless, neat stories and sometimes they're messy and lumpy and we aren't really sure what's happening and that sort of thing. It's probably true more of the time than the former. But hopefully if you're getting something out of this, and I know that you are seeking community. And wherever you live, you're reaching out to other startups and other entrepreneurs, feel free to share The Barcode Podcast with your friends and other people who are kind of in the trenches with you.

And if you wouldn't mind rating, reviewing, that always helps people discover and find what we're doing. And you can always go to barcodestartup.com/podcast or any of the other links on the homepage and kind of check out more of the resources that we're trying to build out for you as a startup founder. Thanks again for joining us. Thanks to Serenity and we'll talk to you next time.