

**All Up In Your Business**  
**CS's taco prowess + Nat's takes on who/what might be coming**  
**Jay Socol, Natalie Ruiz**  
**Nov. 10, 2021 (recorded in early October)**

Jay Socol:

Hey everybody. And welcome to All Up in Your Business. I'm Jay Socol.

Natalie Ruiz:

I'm Natalie Ruiz.

Jay Socol:

And Natalie today, we are going to focus our discussion on what most people have the most interest in, and that is new places to eat and drink.

Natalie Ruiz:

Speaking my language. I like it.

Jay Socol:

I'm glad we are because we haven't done this in a while. So I think we have a fair amount to cover. Right. So before we get into what is coming, you want to give a quick overview of some of the things that have recently opened.

Natalie Ruiz:

So some of more recent additions Velvet Taco is a new one that just opened in Century Square, very popular franchise throughout the country.

Jay Socol:

So tried it yet?

Natalie Ruiz:

I have not tried it yet. Some folks in my office have, but I have not tried it yet.

Jay Socol:

It's excellent.

Natalie Ruiz:

Is it?

Jay Socol:

It is. It's very good. It's going to do well.

Natalie Ruiz:

Very nice. You know when you think about College Station, we tend to have a large national influence when it comes to some of our restaurants, but we're really starting to see a lot of very local, specialized places here in College Station. You know, when you look up and down University Drive, you've got The Republic, Primrose Path, I mean, that are really... Wade Barkman, a local guy, created those, both of those establishments have done really well, that you only find here in College Station. Also, along University Drive we've had three new restaurants open recently, Five Guys is one, I think that's on Grant's list of best burgers in town.

Jay Socol:

It is, it is on his list. Correct.

Natalie Ruiz:

And then two breakfast places, brunch places and Snooze and Toasted Yolk, they're on University Drive. They're both doing well. But, we have Minuti Coffee as well, a little bit further down in the old Starbucks location that has awesome coffee. They don't have the Socolatte just yet, but...

Jay Socol:

I'm working on it. I'd like to establish a Socolatte as a universal drink, universal local drink at all the coffee places in College Station. You think that's too much?

Natalie Ruiz:

A little much.

Jay Socol:

Okay. All right.

Natalie Ruiz:

Only in SoCo, we could do that. So speaking of South College Station, Gringo's is under construction. That is one restaurant that was a thing then wasn't a thing and then came and is now under construction. So I'm really excited about that.

Jay Socol:

So it's actually coming out of the ground?

Natalie Ruiz:

It's coming out of the ground. They just poured their parking lot a couple of weeks ago and they're moving forward full steam ahead.

Jay Socol:

Any clue, and I know there are lots of variables, but any clue what their goal is in terms of timing of opening?

Natalie Ruiz:

No, and to be honest, everyone's really shy about putting those dates out there currently because of supply chain issues in the construction industry. And just not knowing and having trouble getting supplies and staffing is also an issue as well. So just universally people are shying away from giving me dates as to when they think they'll open.

Jay Socol:

Okay. I got the hint. Stop asking

Natalie Ruiz:

Stop asking Jay.

Jay Socol:

Okay.

Natalie Ruiz:

You know the Caprock area also Downtown Uncorked is coming in. They'll do a wine and whiskey bar there as well. And then they also have a small restaurant as part of the Caprock development. They haven't announced the name yet, but they will be soon, a little smaller concept restaurant and then Pinspirations, a local art studio. You can go in and create your own art, kind of all in that same walkable area there in Caprock that'll soon be open. And then you have Jones Crossing, always has a ton of opportunities when it comes to food and drink. Another Broken Egg has done really well at that location. We have Crumbl Cookies, the signs up, they're hoping to open later on this year.

Jay Socol:

Okay. I have to stop you there. Because we occasionally announce on social media, welcome to business X that's made an announcement. We have never gotten a reaction like we did to Crumbl. So I've never been to a Crumbl, but it must be a thing because people reacted in such a big way. I mean it may not have been Costco level, but in terms of a place to eat, oh my gosh. People went crazy about that.

Natalie Ruiz:

Well, we need to be first in line, Jay.

Jay Socol:

I think we do

Natalie Ruiz:

As soon as they open.

Jay Socol:

Make that happen.

Natalie Ruiz:

I agree.

Jay Socol:

You know people.

Natalie Ruiz:

I do. I know a few people, but no, we're excited about Crumbl Cookies. Also, I don't know if you've noticed recently that a lot of our retailers are getting more involved when it comes to events, Jones Crossing recently hosted a fun run that, that they have a little pavilion out there where they have community events. We've done some similar with Century Square and getting folks in and dining around and different events to get folks into these areas where there are multiple restaurants, multiple retailers, and generate some buzz as part of that.

Jay Socol:

Now what about Cook Shack? That's on the horizon isn't it?

Natalie Ruiz:

Cook Shack? Yeah, also on University Drive. I've never eaten at one but they're a ribs and chicken, kind of chicken tenders type of place. Looks awesome online but they're currently under construction in the old Pei Wei location on University Drive.

Jay Socol:

Okay. I like that. Anything else in terms of on the horizon that you can talk about? I know you are aware of some possibilities, but anything that's safe enough to talk about?

Natalie Ruiz:

Not yet. And I think I say this every time I'm on here in the next few months we'll be able to release a few more. There are some vacant restaurants in town that are getting a lot of attention, but no deals have been signed just yet.

Jay Socol:

So I hear this, I know you hear this and I see it on social media a lot, people say I want a fill in the blank here and the reality is I think that just about anything you can put in the blank has either looked at us or plans to look at us. Is that a fair thing to say?

Natalie Ruiz:

No, that's a very fair statement or the third possibility, which is we've reached out to them about locating here. I get residents reaching out to us all the time. Have you reached out to a Waffle House? Have you reached out to this Tex-Mex place in north Texas? You know that's some of folks' favorites right here in town. So we do have a lot of folks looking and wanting a College Station location in my mind it's just a matter of time before they're able to find an existing location or build new.

Jay Socol:

Okay. That makes sense. Now we talked about Velvet Taco a little while ago. Can we talk a little more in deeper fashion about tacos?

Natalie Ruiz:

Yes, let's do it. I'm always ready to talk about at tacos.

Jay Socol:

I spotted something just a few days ago. It was a list called the 2021's, Best Texas Cities for Tacos, which is intriguing, but is also weird because the source was a website called LawnStarter. So I don't know what lawn care has to do with tacos, but what they did in fact, in their words, I've got it in front of me. They said, we looked for cities with wide access to taqueria, national taco championships, awards, high consumer ratings and taco festivals. We even consider Google search volumes for tacos to gauge local taco love. So what do you think number one was?

Natalie Ruiz:

Oh, what city was number one? San Antonio. Maybe?

Jay Socol:

San Antonio was number four. So it went Austin round rock. Interesting. Dallas, San Antonio, Houston. That's the top five -- College Station comes in at 11.

Natalie Ruiz:

That's kind of impressive.

Jay Socol:

These are out at the 100 largest cities in Texas. College Station comes in at 11. So let's go down that list a little bit. Number 77 is Farmers Branch. 78 is Bryan, which is interesting because they've got some great taco places.

Natalie Ruiz:

They do.

Jay Socol:

79 Baytown.

Natalie Ruiz:

Stop it.

Jay Socol:

Home of a couple of our city manager time. And then dead-last on the list...Huntsville.

Natalie Ruiz:  
Really?

Jay Socol:  
Really. So your thoughts about College Station clocking in at number 11 on LawnCare's website list of best Texas cities for tacos.

Natalie Ruiz:  
Hey, listen, we've got some great taco places here in town. No doubt about it. I mean, you and I have talked about this quite a bit. Not only with Velvet Taco coming in, but Mad Taco has a great variety of tacos in town. We also have one of my gas station favorites, Garpez as well as La Familia, that's located here in town and then the one on Wellborn Road, Taco... I just lost it.

Jay Socol:  
It's not Crave? We've got a bunch that are...

Natalie Ruiz:  
We do.

Jay Socol:  
-locally owned. We've got some chains. It's a good mix.

Natalie Ruiz:  
It really is.

Jay Socol:  
Yeah, you should be able to find your taco fix in College Station ranking number 11.

Natalie Ruiz:  
Absolutely.

Jay Socol:  
What did I miss in terms of places to eat, places to drink? Did we need to visit anything in the Northgate area or have we done all that we can do?

Natalie Ruiz:  
You know, there's a lot of great places in Northgate. With coming out of COVID and opening back up, Rough Draught is open again. There are a ton of locations to be able to do to go and have a drink and have a great time here. Northgate is one of those locations also with south College Station with the Angry Elephant and Walk-On's, those are two of my favorite spots and we've got a pretty active scene here in terms of food and drink in College Station, I think.

Jay Socol:  
Okay. And maybe some announcements to come.

Natalie Ruiz:

There's always announcements to come. Absolutely.

Jay Socol:

Okay. Because you said some of these vacant properties, people are coming to kick the tires.

Natalie Ruiz:

They are, we're getting a lot of people kicking tires, and I think some of them are going to land fairly soon. Okay.

Jay Socol:

I'm holding you to it.

Natalie Ruiz:

Okay.

Jay Socol:

What is the latest, what is the latest you can tell us about Costco?

Natalie Ruiz:

Everything's extremely smooth. The one hiccup that we've seen post COVID is to the supply chain and the construction side of things. So just making sure that all the materials are available, making sure that subcontractors and bids and all are, are turned in and we're able to address those construction costs. Cause part of that, part of the infrastructure out there will be shared between Costco and that remaining 28 acres. And so as part of this, we're participating in that infrastructure that will benefit that 28 acres when it's sold. So that, that has been the one hiccup in all of this, just kind of coming out of COVID and knowing that there's issues with the supply chain, whether it's steel that has gone up in price, whether it's some of the plastics that, that are part of the construction, all of that does concern you. And so it's taken us a little bit more time to work through those issues, but in terms of being able to complete and close on the deal, we're right on schedule.

Jay Socol:

Once they do have all the materials that they need, am I right to say that they can put this thing together pretty quickly?

Natalie Ruiz:

The typical Costco once they pull the trigger on construction, they have 120 days that they have it down to a science when they start construction and when they complete it and have the store occupied and ready to go, they have the same methodology they use all over the country. And so they're going to make sure when they start construction, they have everything lined out. Every contractor, every permit, everything is perfect so that no one's going to hold them up, but them.

Jay Socol:

So the, the whole place it's built, it's stocked, the staff is trained. They're ready to roll.

Natalie Ruiz:

Exactly.

Jay Socol:

That's amazing.

Natalie Ruiz:

It's a massive undertaking, but it's something that they've perfected.

Jay Socol:

And it's well over a hundred thousand square feet, right?

Natalie Ruiz:

Yes. Just over a hundred.

Jay Socol:

That's large.

Natalie Ruiz:

Yep, that's a lot of construction.

Jay Socol:

Anything else in turn, since we're talking about down in the Midtown area, anything else we need to know about that area? And what's coming?

Natalie Ruiz:

On the industrial piece, we've gotten quite a bit of interest on primary jobs, and I know we're going to talk about that a little bit in a different section, but on the industrial side, there's a lot of folks that are interested in that area because of its location. And because that centrally located in town accessibility to Highway 6 and also close to housing and schools nearby. So there's a lot of interest there. The 28 acres that the city will retain once we sell to Costco is located there at Corporate Pkwy right next to Christ United Methodist church. Also in October, there'll be a contract to work with a broker to put that on the market, to sell that to one end user that would develop that remaining commercial piece. So when you look at the next 12 months in that Midtown area, to me, that's where you're going to see some of the biggest changes in terms of a new Costco and new retail development in that area.

Jay Socol:

That's exciting.

Natalie Ruiz:

Yeah.

Jay Socol:

And a new water tower in proximity.

Natalie Ruiz:

That's right.

Jay Socol:

Do you know how excited people are about a water tower?

Natalie Ruiz:

You know, I saw something on social media the other day, a joke about it being built upside down, and it took me a second. I'm like, wait a minute, that doesn't make sense, but yeah, people are pretty pumped about the new water tower.

Jay Socol:

They are, it's going to happen. It is finally going to happen. And I've been asked if like, bleachers are going to be set up if it's going to be a spectator event. And unless you plan on watching something in slow motion for about seven or eight hours, it is not a spectator event because that's what it's going to be. So we'll talk about that later. We'll get closer to it. So let's move up the highway just a little bit. And this is kind of a random question, but I wanted some insight in terms of the whole area that includes Wolf Pen Creek Park and Post Oak Mall, because I think there are probably some visionaries on staff and in council who would like at some point to see that whole area evolve in some way, come together in a different way than maybe it has been for a while. Can you talk at all about what is believed to be a better use for that particular area of College Station?

Natalie Ruiz:

So we we've had conversations with the mall for years, the local representation and the ownership out of Tennessee and we've talked about, as some users have gone out and new ones have come in and kind of what the long term plans are. So I think just immediately, we're going to see some changes because the Macy's building is up for sale. You still have of the other half of the old Sears building, there were Conns is currently, that is for lease. And so there are some negotiations that are happening at that location currently that I hope to be able to announce in the next few months. Once the lease is finalized and then on the Macy's building, initially in talking to the broker, I think we were all the little concern because it's over a hundred thousand square feet.

Natalie Ruiz:

It's a very large two-story building, for anyone to take down. Especially in today's retail environment, but there's been a lot of interest in that building. And they are currently negotiating with someone on purchasing that building, can't really release who it is and what they're just yet, because they're still negotiating. But I think ultimately when you look at the

mall and you look at Wolf Pen Creek and the amphitheater, the trail system, the existing Grand Station, that's located there for bowling and laser tag and arcade. When you look at that bigger picture in my mind, I think it makes sense that's our entertainment district, more of a family driven entertainment district. One of the things that we've really tried to focus on this last year coming out of COVID as well is programming Wolf Pen Creek a little bit more. I mean, we saw Cody Johnson there last month and I mean, it was sold out.

Jay Socol:

That was a big crowd.

Natalie Ruiz:

It's a huge crowd. So if just thinking about it from a, from a residence perspective, right? I mean, what if we could program Wolf Pen Creek in a stronger way at the existing amphitheater? And if we had some more entertainment uses there that could really try tie in to the mall in, in a much bigger way, that's just something that we're looking at from a bigger comprehensive planning aspect at this point.

Jay Socol:

So some continuity, some synergy to where that whole area kind of makes sense as a destination area. Not just, that thing over there, that's where I'm going.

Natalie Ruiz:

Right. How, how do we tie all that into the mall? Which used to be a much bigger destination. It still is a destination, but it used to be much bigger. How do we partner and work together on making that a stronger destination? For folks here in our community and outside a more of a regional draw.

Jay Socol:

Okay. So now do we go back to light manufacturing and R&D and all that kind of stuff?

Natalie Ruiz:

We can, so from a manufacturing primary job standpoint, we partner with the Brazos Valley Economic Development Corporation. So that's a partnership between the two cities, the county and Texas A&M there, there is also a private business owner group that is really close to becoming a full funding partner as part of that, there are local business owners that are supporting that organization. So when we do primary job recruitment, it is on a regional level. It's not per city. It's everything in Brazos County because the end users looking for workforce. And you've really got to look at that from a broader perspective when it comes to that. So there's three big areas, right? Launch, locate, and grow. So launch is our startups, a lot of that information has started here at A&M through different research.

Natalie Ruiz:

There's locate a new business coming in and then grow, an existing business that's growing that maybe we're assisting with additional resources or just support when it comes from there. So

when you look at just this year, since January, just in 2021 in the last nine months, we've seen significant growth. Now, I don't know if that is pay end up demand, but we've seen significant growth just on the countywide, but from the college station perspective, since January one, they've announced another 475 full-time jobs. And just over \$25 million in capital investment, that's just in a nine-month time period that's announced. One of the big ones is Kelsey Seybold that recently located here. They're in the professional services side of business and there's about 200 jobs that they've announced. It'll be part of that. But we've also seen about 50% of those announcements being more in the manufacturing side of things.

Natalie Ruiz:

And so that's really interesting coming out of the pandemic and seeing more on the manufacturing side, whether it's vaccines, whether it's pharmaceuticals or just traditional manufacturing. That's part of that. We've also seen quite a bit of uptick in the biotechnology side. We've had several companies and fact this year alone, we've had nine new biotechnology life sciences companies make announcements. Matica is one of those companies that just broke ground recently at Providence Park. They are a biotechnology company that will have an initial 100 jobs at that facility. They are also in the process of looking for additional space because they're already growing here as well. So that biotech life sciences industry side of things is really starting to grow here in College Station.

Jay Socol:

And I assume it's a situation where the more of these that we actually get in College Station, the better our chances are of getting additional ones, is that fair?

Natalie Ruiz:

You know, it's the same with industry, as it is on the retail side. When you go after and you recruit companies, the quality of those companies have really stepped up the last few years. And we're seeing that on the industry side as well. So you may only land one of every 10, but if the quality of those companies keeps going up and you keep getting shortlisted for some of those bigger companies, that's all great news for our entire county.

Jay Socol:

Talk about how things like Aggie game days, other events, and even Christmas contribute to the economic success of College Station. So with that in mind, you get to tell me what direction you want to take this as it relates to big events.

Natalie Ruiz:

So I guess let's start with game day. Last year we didn't have a full football season and our local businesses, especially in the hospitality industry really felt it. Our hotels, our restaurants, when visitors come to town, when you've got anywhere close to a hundred thousand people that come in one day for an event, they generate a ton in terms of sales tax dollars and fueling our local businesses and restaurants and hotels. So not having a full season last year really impacted our local businesses. So that's something that I think we're a little more appreciative of this year, if that makes sense from being fully open to folks, wanting to get back out and

enjoy game day, enjoy events. And so we've really planned some special events this fall, now through Christmas, just celebrating being back in college station in a big way.

Jay Socol:

Well, tell me about some of these events.

Natalie Ruiz:

So Christmas and College Station is a big part of that. We have a lot of the students that leave over the Christmas break, and we have a lot of visitors that are going to be at Santa's Wonderland last year. They had over 300,000 visitors just south of town. So we wanted to partner with them in a big way to get all of those visitors, or as many as possible into our hotels and restaurants and shopping here in college station. So there are some larger strategic partnerships like Santa's Wonderland. And then there's also some smaller events where we try weave and additional opportunities for folks to be able to extend their stay.

Jay Socol:

Now I know the council has expressed particular interest in filling up Wolf Pen Creek Park, and the amphitheater there with additional events. Have you found it, maybe looking easier to develop our own sort of events in that facility or to go out and recruit others to host their event there?

Natalie Ruiz:

You know, one of the most recent successes that we had was the Cody Johnson concert, sold out maximum 7,500 tickets, did really well. Now that was something that we just supported as a city. We provided our park staff was out there, making sure everyone was safe, had a great time. The facility was all set up. So in my mind, it's a lot easier to establish those partnerships with a Cody Johnson that has a reason to be here. Now, we have had some conversations with his concert promoter that has other acts that we could follow that same template and maybe have a few more concerts at Wolf Pen Creek. That is something that we're really focusing on as a city in providing more music opportunities through that avenue. But then also working with ChiliFest on these Friday Night Light events. If that's something that could also be successful, we would love to see a series of concerts and things to do in Wolf Pen Creek.

Jay Socol:

So I guess the idea is to position ourselves to where we can go actively recruit some of these acts that are probably making a swing through this part of the U.S. anyway.

Natalie Ruiz:

That's right.

Jay Socol:

Try to pull them in and have a night on stage at College Station.

Natalie Ruiz:

Exactly. There are a lot of acts that are traveling through Texas, whether it's Houston, Austin, Dallas, that could make a quick stop here in College Station. And also, in conjunction with that, we've been working very closely with A&M at and Reed Arena. They've gotten much more active when it comes to creating events and facilitating events at Reed. So being able to partner with someone like A&M Athletics and being able to do ticket giveaways and get folks that are going to be here for that event, staying in our hotels and in our restaurants is a win all the way around.

Jay Socol:

So I was looking the other day at some of the preliminary numbers from the U.S. Census, from the latest census. And of course we're growing, of course we have just a lot more people here than we did the last census. And that's no secret to anybody, but I think our international population is increasing. I think we are starting to look a little bit different in terms of who we are as College Station residents. Are there conversations with your group or maybe with other organizers of events about maybe attracting or hosting a different type of event in College Station? Are we to a point where we are able to either entertain or draw audiences that maybe we couldn't do 10, 15, 20 years ago?

Natalie Ruiz:

You know, I think being home of one of the largest universities in, in the United States, with Texas A&M and like you had mentioned, our international population has grown quite a bit. There have got to be some additional opportunities, whether it's training entertainment, shopping, if there are some additional opportunities there that we can facilitate as a group. One of the thing that's very interesting that we were following up on recently is there's a lot of international travel that's happening back in the United States and Texas is one of the top destinations for that. That international traveler is looking for that experience of a smaller town. And the amenities that a smaller town could provide that I think we're a good fit for that. So we're doing some deeper research to find out what is that traveler looking for and how do we reach that traveler before they're here in the United States? So it, in my mind, I think there are some international opportunities. There certainly are from an economic development perspective, but at least in my mind, there's got to be some from a travel perspective as well that we could capitalize on.

Jay Socol:

And if it's more than a business trip, if it's truly a vacation, then you want to some time, so you're not just traveling the whole time and you only have two or three days at wherever you're going. And so you're right. If you can convince somebody at least spend a day and a night here, or two nights here, or something, if they're trying to get that authentic Texas experience.

Natalie Ruiz:

Exactly.

Jay Socol:

Yeah. We may be onto something there.

Natalie Ruiz:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, we have world-class facilities here and we also have amenities that a lot of larger towns have, but without some of the negatives that come along with that as well in terms of population and density. So when it comes to being able to have a local symphony, being able to have the museums that we have, I think there's some opportunities out there that once we're able to identify that traveler and their needs, I think we could cater to a bit better.

Jay Socol:

Don't you think folks from other countries would love to see an alley completely full of bottle caps?

Natalie Ruiz:

Why wouldn't you?

Jay Socol:

Wouldn't that be a great attraction?

Natalie Ruiz:

Exactly.

Jay Socol:

Can't find that anywhere else.

Natalie Ruiz:

That's exactly right.

Jay Socol:

In terms of events, anything else that you want to share in terms of things you're working on, some partnerships you're trying to put together or anything of that nature that we can kind of look forward to that's beyond the typical football game, now it's basketball season?

Natalie Ruiz:

Christmas in College Station's going to be the biggest coming up. The kickoff for Santa's Wonderland is November 13th and so we're working with them on that initial kickoff and opening up for business. But we are continuing to partner with Texas A&M Athletics, Reed Arena's rolling out some new events as well. They're actually rolling out one or two for the holidays that haven't been announced just yet, but will soon. And then also being able to focus on some of those larger national events, the track and field competition that is the national event that's lined up in 2022, The Games of Texas, that was just announced for '25 and '26. Those are all huge when it comes to impacting our local economy and bringing in thousands of people from outside of our area to shop and dine and stay in our hotels.

Jay Socol:  
Sounds like a pretty good thing.

Natalie Ruiz:  
Yeah, it's a thing.

Jay Socol:  
Did we hit everything on your list that you wanted to talk about?

Natalie Ruiz:  
I think so.

Jay Socol:  
Okay.

Natalie Ruiz:  
I'm sure I forgot something.

Jay Socol:  
Well I'm sure you did.

Natalie Ruiz:  
I always do.

Jay Socol:  
We'll plug it in later. So then that'll do it for this edition of All Up In Your Business. Again, please rate recommend to your friends and family. We'd appreciate that. If you're interested in bringing an event here. Right?

Natalie Ruiz:  
Right.

Jay Socol:  
If you want to start an event or just think there's a good idea that we need to think about, start out with Natalie contact her and how do they do that?

Natalie Ruiz:  
Through our [visit.cstx.gov](http://visit.cstx.gov). Is that right?

Jay Socol:  
Yeah, it sure is.

Natalie Ruiz:

I'm sorry. I always want to throw an extra ad in there, or just give me a call 979.764.3753.

Jay Socol:

Perfect. Thank you, Nat.

Natalie Ruiz:

Thank you.

Jay Socol:

All Up In Your Business is a production of City of College Station with technical assistance from Brazos Multimedia. It was written by me, Jay Socol, and very little help from Natalie Ruiz.

Thanks a lot.