

MARIAN MURPHY
Bartender – Bristol Bar & Grille – Louisville, KY

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Date: January 14, 2008

Location: Bristol Bar & Grille, Bardstown Road location

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 30 minutes

Project: Louisville Barroom Culture

[Begin Marian Murphy Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Monday, January 14, 2008, and I'm at the Bristol in Louisville, Kentucky, with bartender, Marian Murphy. Marian, if you wouldn't mind stating your mind stating your name and your birth date, please?

00:00:13

Marian Murphy: My name is Marian Murphy; birth date is October of 1954.

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AE: And how long have you been a bartender?

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MM: Let see;, [nineteen]'89—I'd say about twenty-four years, about—about like that.

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AE: Where did you start?

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MM: I was a bartender in Florida for approximately, I'd say, five or six years, and then I moved to Louisville in 1989, and I've been here since then—at this restaurant.

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AE: And the Bristol is—it was opened in [nineteen] '77, is that correct?

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MM: Yeah, we just had our thirtieth anniversary this September. So now we have four stores, and we're getting ready to open another one in Jeffersonville, Indiana, in a couple months.

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AE: So what got you into the—into bartending as a career in Florida?

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MM: In Florida? Well, let's see. When I graduated from college, I was in Lexington at UK [University of Kentucky] and, at that time, jobs were hard to come by. **[Laughs]** And so I went to the local Cork 'N Clever and worked there for a few years, and then they opened a store in West Palm Beach, Florida, so I transferred down there. And when I was in Lexington, Kentucky, I—I was a server, cocktail waitress, manager; I did everything there. And then when I transferred to Florida, I was a cocktail waitress for a few years, and then they opened up another brand new store and I bartended there at—it was called Tequila Willie's; it was a chain out of somewhere in California, really nice place. And so I bartended there and at another restaurant before I moved here. So I'd say five or six years in Florida.

00:02:03

AE: And what was your kind of learning curve in Florida behind the bar, if I may ask?

00:02:08

MM: Learning curve—basically, you train on the job, so what—what normally happens **[Laughs]** is somebody quits or they're short some—you know, for a shift and they—they put you behind the bar and start training, so that's the way it started. And every restaurant is

different. You know, you don't—you probably wouldn't want to bartend at every restaurant, so you might rather be a server at one and, you know, but I always wanted to do it and tried it and liked it, so here we are.

00:02:42

AE: And so when you were bartending in Florida, did you develop—I mean since you've been in the industry for such a long time, did you—would you say that you developed kind of a style there or a rhythm there or a confidence there that you brought back to Kentucky?

00:02:55

MM: That might be. I never thought about it like that. But one restaurant I worked in Florida, it was a great big horseshoe-shaped bar, and you were in the middle, and you were kind of closed in and there were twenty-four or twenty-five seats around you, and you just kind of had to learn to smoothly go from one to the next, you know, so you did kind of have to develop a—a method to it. And I think you just incorporate all the different things you learn from each restaurant.

00:03:28

AE: What was that restaurant with the horseshoe bar?

00:03:31

MM: That was called the Full House; it was in Lake Worth, Florida, and they had—it was kind of a card theme and they had a—a big wheel in the bar and they spun the wheel every hour, and every chair was numbered and if the wheel landed on your number, you got a free drink *[Laughs]*. It was wild. It was wild.

00:03:52

AE: So do you have some stories from those days that stick with you?

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MM: None that I can repeat. No, I'm teasing. From there—hmm, I can't—it's actually been so long ago I've forgotten almost all of those—those people. Had some great, there was a real—it was similar to a Cheers type of bar, this one, and where everybody knew everybody. It was all locals, so you knew what everybody drank and what everybody did for a living, what time they were going to come in, you know. It was that type of place, so it was interesting.

00:04:35

AE: So what was the clientele like? Were they—you said they were regulars but were they like retirees or local—?

00:04:39

MM: Some—some retirees, a lot of businesspeople—insurance people, [*Phone Rings*]—I got to get the phone. I can't remember anything from Florida.

00:04:54

AE: Do you remember what kind of drinks you were serving or that were popular there?

00:04:57

MM: Now that has changed a lot. In the days when I learned how to bartend, you know, Old Fashioneds were big and Manhattans and Grasshoppers. People don't drink Grasshoppers anymore so, you know, there's all these new-fangled kamikazes and all kinds of new drinks now

that—that I've had to learn. But I had a good basic training, though, from the Cork 'N Clever; we had a real good training program there, so I learned all my drinks there.

00:05:30

AE: Do you remember something that stands out from your training that you've really kept with you all these years behind the bar?

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MM: I would say personal attention is the most important thing. I mean, you can go down the street and have a drink that we don't even make here, and people don't mind telling you what's in it; you don't have to know every drink and every ingredient of everything. Just personal attention is the—is the biggest key; everything else you can—you can figure out as you go along.

00:06:12

AE: What would you say about your personality kind of suits you to that—to that job to be behind the bar and to talk to people on a daily basis and really get to know them?

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MM: Yeah, that's key. And we have spent—at this restaurant we have a lot of people who have masters degrees and we have one, he's got a doctorate in literature, so we—but it's the personality that you—you either have to have a knack for this type of job or you don't, and I know a lot of people who are just—just can't—can't hack it. You really have to have a knack for it.

00:06:51

AE: Some patience, I imagine?

00:06:53

MM: Yeah, patience. You have to have—you have to be a good listener.

00:06:56

AE: And so then explain the—the segue from working in Florida to coming back to Kentucky and working here in Louisville.

00:07:06

MM: Well my—my family was living here ,so I moved back to take care of some ill family members and I came—this was the first place I applied, and I’ve been here since then—since 1989.

00:07:18

AE: Was there something other than just a job opening that brought you here to the Bristol? Was it a reputation or kind of the style of the bar?

00:07:26

MM: My sister-in-law is from Louisville. I’m not originally from Louisville, so she suggested coming here. I walked in the door and been here ever since. So it’s a real nice—real nice atmosphere here.

00:07:41

AE: Can you explain that a little bit?

00:07:41

MM: Well, we have a lot of locals from this area. We have the other stores. One is way out in Prospect. We have one downtown, and we have one at the east end, but this one has more of a neighborhood feel to it, so we get a lot of the regular—same regulars everyday—everyday. So you get to know them and what they like, what they don't.

00:08:10

AE: Okay. So you were talking about regulars that come in. Can you talk about some of what they like to drink?

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MM: Sure, we have one gentleman comes everyday at 11:00 and has a Maker's Mark Manhattan, up. Of course Maker's is really big—is really big here. Let's see, what else—Woodford is a big popular bourbon here. Of course all bourbons and—and in the winter we sell a lot more bourbon. But right now we have—we are doing at least a year-long promotion on wines, and we have like a real upscale wine list that we're selling at retail prices, like you would get at the liquor store, and it's going over real well. So we sell lots and lots of bottles of wine, and they recently passed a law here where you can buy a bottle of wine, and if you can't finish it, we can seal it and staple the receipt to it, and you can take it home. As long as it—the cork is in it and the receipt is stapled, it's legal for you to take the rest home, so that's been a—people really like that and we're selling lots of wine. Years ago, it was lots and lots of bourbon and water, Manhattans, Old Fashioneds, Rob Roys and—and we're selling a lot more wine than we

are liquor now, so it's completely reversed—even since I've been in Louisville. So that's the trend now.

00:09:46

AE: And so what have you had to learn about wine and—and selling and serving?

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MM: Well our manager at the downtown Bristol is almost through with his Masters Sommelier; he is phenomenal. So he—he does the wine list for all the stores, and we've all taken classes from him, and he really, really knows his stuff. So I have to do all the ordering, and so I have learned a lot just from that, you know. But he—he can take two glasses of wine blindfolded and tell you what kind of soil they were grown in. He's that good. Yeah, he's that good. You ought to interview him.

00:10:30

AE: Well and so if we could go back to the cocktails, do you—do you miss a time when you were making more cocktails and—and serving less wine? Do you like that part of bartending?

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MM: It really doesn't matter to me, either way. It's kind of interesting, I think, to learn about these new wines and there's so many, you know—all the Australian and New Zealand wines are really big now, so it's just kind of interesting. And another thing I'm really enjoying is, for a while, every wine had corks in it; now they're going to a lot of the screw top and, you know, there was some resistance to it, but I think, in the end, everybody is going to like it because

you're not—we're not getting a lot of spoiled wine and no more mold on the corks, and I think we're going to end up going with a lot of screw tops, so I'm happy about that.

00:11:22

AE: And you have to open a lot, so that makes your job easier.

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MM: Huge wine opener. And some—some mornings, you know, I have to open forty bottles of wine, so I like these screw tops.

00:11:35

AE: So could—would you say, since you had some experience bartending in Florida and then bartending here in Kentucky, I think, you know, generally—generationally and kind of where we are and—in the timeline of the 20th Century that—21st Century that drink tastes are changing across the board. But do you think that there is a regional difference in what you were making and serving in Florida and Kentucky?

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MM: No, I don't really think so. I think it's more a timeline. That is the time when people were drinking real bourbon and water, scotch and soda, Manhattans, martinis. Now, martinis are still really big. But I mean very rarely do you hear anybody ask for a Rob Roy. I doubt if any of the younger people who work here ever heard of one. So no, I think it's just the way the fad is moving; everybody is going to wines. It's interesting. I like to learn new things so—.

00:12:34

AE: Well is there a cocktail that you particularly like making that if somebody comes in and orders it, you get pretty excited about making it?

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MM: Well the fellow that orders the Maker's Mark Manhattan, up, every—says I make the best one of everyone here. That's what he says. *[Laughs]* So—

00:12:49

AE: What do you think makes a good Manhattan?

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MM: You have to put just the right amount of vermouth in it because, if it's too little vermouth, it doesn't have that flavor to it, so that's the trick.

00:13:01

AE: And are you a drinker yourself?

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MM: Very little. I do have a glass of wine on special occasions, but that's about it. Uh-hmm I guess it's like—I mean, now it's not true of everyone, but I guess if I worked in a bakery, I wouldn't want to eat donuts everyday. So. I mean I do taste new wine so that I can learn the difference, you know, between Pinot Noir or a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but I just don't drink much.

00:13:34

AE: Is there something that people surprise you with that they come and ask you that you've not made before?

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MM: A lot of the young people go—will go to like—there will be a brand new bar open, and they'll have a signature drink, and we won't have a clue what's in it so, you know, I don't mind at all asking them, "Well tell me how to make it, and we'll make it for you." But there's a lot of that that goes around. And even, you know, down the street, one—one restaurant may call the same drink by a different name than what we will call—you know. A lot of people have different—like Café Gates, it will be different recipes in every—every restaurant, so—.

00:14:13

AE: Do you, when you're not working, do you go around—I mean you're not a big drinker but do you frequent bars in—in Louisville at all?

00:14:20

MM: I frequent restaurants. I'm getting older. I'm not too interested in going out to the bars anymore, [*Laughs*] but I do eat out now and then.

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AE: What about—do you have kind of a line on the history of bars and bartenders and drinking in Louisville and—and like the hotel bar history and things like that?

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MM: No. I'm not from Louisville, so I don't know much of the history here. I know that Brown Hotel downtown is—has a great history. They started Hot Brown and—but I—. [*Phone Rings*]

00:15:00

AE: So you mentioned that gentleman who comes in who is a regular that gets the Manhattan up—Maker's Mark Manhattan. Would you say he obviously comes to you because he thinks you make the best but outside of him? Do you—would you say that you have like a following that your service brings a lot of people in? And, if so—you're nodding yes. So would you describe what that is?

00:15:20

MM: Oh, we—I serve lunch to the same people everyday. I'd say there are maybe thirty or forty regulars that either live around here or work around here and they—we see them almost everyday, which is really nice because it's—I don't know. It—it—it's like a family. You know everybody, where they work, what they do, you know their kids, and it's really—it's a lot more personal that way.

00:15:53

AE: So what does that mean to you to to generate a relationship with a customer like that, where you know about their families and you know so much about who they are?

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MM: Well, personally, it's interesting, you know, knowing people's backgrounds. And I have one fellow who has a—a construction company and he comes in almost everyday, and I know two of his sons and his—his daughter-in-law, his grandkids, [*Laughs*] and, you know, they bring

me this wonderful Christmas present with their pictures all over it every year. It's really—it's really kind of touching. So that's—that, to me, is the most fun part of it—developing relationships with people that you see all the time. That's the most fun.

00:16:47

AE: Is that something that keeps you in the industry?

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MM: Yes, definitely. Definitely.

00:16:52

AE: How long do you think you'll stay bartending?

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MM: [*Laughs*] As long as my knees will hold up, I guess. It's hard on your legs, standing all day. So I don't know. My husband has a collectibles/antique business, and I help him with that, so we'll see.

00:17:15

AE: Was there a time when you worked night shifts here, and you kind of rotated into the day shifts?

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MM: When I first started here, I worked nights and weekends, and then within a couple months, the bar manager moved to Florida, so I took his job, so I just work—ever since then, I've just worked days.

00:17:35

AE: But you're the bar manager, in general, also?

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MM: Yeah. So I have to do all the ordering and the deliveries and deal with the vendors and all that kind of stuff, so it's—it's a lot more practical to—to deal with them during the day, than it is—you can't—you can't get anything done at night. So it worked out for me. I like—I'd rather work days.

00:17:54

AE: And did you—did you say you went to college? Did I ask?

00:17:57

MM: Yeah, I went to University of Kentucky—Psychology. [*Laughs*] My mother said I'm finally using that degree.

00:18:06

AE: Exactly. I was going to say, bartending is a perfect job for a psychology major.

00:18:12

MM: Though I can't really say I've used it that much, I guess. I don't know. It—it came in handy, yeah, but—

00:18:25

AE: Can you describe anything in particular about studying psychology that you fold into your work behind the bar?

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MM: I wouldn't say anything specific. Of course, we did a lot of group therapy work at—in college and learned, you know—learning to listen is the biggest—the biggest key. You can't fix everything, but you can always listen. *[Laughs]*

00:18:55

AE: Well and have you—what's your opinion of the mythology of the Old Fashioned being invented in Louisville?

00:19:02

MM: Never heard that.

00:19:05

AE: No? At the Pendennis Club?

00:19:06

MM: Pendennis Club was an all-boys club downtown. I've heard a lot about it, but I don't know any history of it so—hmm.

00:19:18

AE: Well is there something else, in addition to your Maker's Mark Manhattan, that you make that you think that you add a little personal twist to?

00:19:27

MM: I like to make rum runners because I used to live in Florida, and we would go on the weekends to the Keys and they had great rum runners, so I learned how to make those. And if someone just cannot come up with anything that they're really dying for, I'll make them a rum runner.

00:19:45

AE: Can you describe how that's made?

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MM: It's rum and blackberry brandy, cream de banana, little grenadine, little lime juice, and 151 [rum] and, you know, sometimes I'll add a little pineapple juice. It's really good. The banana and the blackberry together really make it. It's good.

00:20:11

AE: Anything else that is fun for you to make that you can think of off the top of your head?

00:20:19

MM: Well, no. [*To a customer*] Thanks, Rocky, have a good day. Yes, sir—yes, sir. [*To interviewer*] Not particularly. Yeah, we—like I said, we’re selling two-to-one wine to liquor now so—.

00:20:45

AE: Well tell me about these scotches that you have on the—on the shelf up here behind you. It’s quite a display.

00:20:50

MM: Great selection of single-malt scotches. And I’d say twelve, thirteen years ago, it was really big. And then it went through a period where no one was drinking them and they’re—we’re getting a resurgence. For instance, the Lagavulin and the Talisker, both single-malt scotches, and are really starting to take off again. They’re selling well.

00:21:16

AE: Do you actively sell those, or do people come in knowing what they want?

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MM: Most people do know what they want, but we have a little advertisement here for—and it just—every—everything seems to go through phases, and single-malts are back in style right now. And in the wintertime, we sell a lot more scotch and bourbon than we do in the summer.

00:21:38

AE: Is there something else—well, you say that you make a rum runner for somebody who can't really decide what they want. Is there something else that you—you try and sell that you are fond of or believe in or think is a good drink for a particular kind of person?

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MM: Well I try and gauge what—if—if they don't have any clue what they want, you know, I start out with, "Do you want wine, liquor, beer?" And then you go from there. You just narrow it down until, "Well, do you like rum, or do you like fruity drinks?" You know, so you just have to keep narrowing it down until you get a feel for what they want and then—. We have, I think, four books back here of drinks, so we can make just about anything. But, you know, years ago Black Russians and Godmothers and all were really big—Godmother and Godfather—and no one drinks those anymore so—.

00:22:26

AE: What's a Godmother?

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MM: It's vodka and amaretto, and it used to be really big and—.

00:22:34

AE: It's like bell-bottoms; drinks have their—their own era. [*Laughs*]

00:22:40

MM: A lot of—well, we also went through a big martinis phase. We had chocolate martinis and apple martinis and you know—that went—it's kind of—kind of gone away now but—.

00:22:53

AE: Is there anything you can attribute to those kind of trends in beverages? Do you know where that comes from?

00:22:58

MM: Sometimes it comes from TV. I'm not sure if the kamikaze did but people see—people see someone on TV drinking a certain drink or ordering it, and then the next thing you know every—they have to have it and it's—the whole city. That's part of it. Or what their friends are drinking or you know—

00:23:24

AE: Is there anything that you really don't like making that's kind of a pain or you just don't think it's a good drink?

00:23:29

MM: Yeah, we don't have frozen drinks here, and I'm real happy about that. **[Laughs]** When I worked at that restaurant—that Mexican restaurant, we had like eight flavors of margaritas—frozen margaritas—and we did it all day long. So I'm glad I'm through with that phase.

[Laughs]

00:23:44

AE: And that was in Florida?

00:23:46

MM: Yeah, yeah. We had to—first of all you have to blend all the fruit in the mornings, and then you make the fruit margaritas all day long, so by the end of the day, you were really sick of hearing blenders. **[Laughs]** So I'm glad to—not to have to deal with that. This restaurant has—you have customers on both sides and it—it would make way too much noise, so I'm happy about that.

00:24:14

AE: Is there—describe kind of what kind of restaurant this is and what the—the menu is like here.

00:24:21

MM: It's very continental. We have pasta, we have fresh seafood everyday, and, of course, we have everything from burgers to filet mignon and seafood, salads. It's—it's quite a nice mix. And our chef is Belgian and so we have—we have a real good variety and we're not—we're kind of in the middle price range. We're not real expensive but, you know what I'm saying, so we get a real good—. **[Phone Rings]** And there's Regina; ow are you? **[Speaking to customer]**

[Recording is paused for approximately three mintes, while Marian pours Regina a glass of champagne]

00:25:00

AE: All right. We're back, and I was going to ask you if there was anything that you make in quantity for like Sunday brunch or anything, like Bloody Marys, in quantity or anything like that?

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MM: Yes, yes, we do. We use V-8 juice, Worcestershire, Tabasco, spicy mustard, a little pinch of dill, horseradish, and we make our own, and it's really good.

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AE: And is that the restaurant's recipe, or is that something you added to?

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MM: No, it's the restaurant's recipe, and we use carrots instead of celery.

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AE: Hmm. Is there any cocktail or recipe or drink of any kind that you brought here that wasn't here before?

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MM: Hmm, maybe that rum runner. I'm not sure that anyone here—sorry, I'm going to sneeze—excuse me. I'm sure they've heard of rum runners before, but I don't know if they made it quite the same way as they made it in the Florida Keys so—.

00:25:49

AE: Do the employees here have shift drinks at the end of their shifts that you make for them?

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MM: Only the kitchen crew. They get—they get one draft beer. That's—that's the cutoff.

00:26:00

AE: So no mixing cocktails for your colleagues?

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MM: Oh, you meant like free, is that what you meant? No, you didn't—it's not what you meant?

00:26:07

AE: No, I just meant after their shift is over.

00:26:09

MM: Oh, sure, yeah. Yeah, a lot of employees stay around and have cocktails, but even the employees now are going to wine and it's—it's just amazing—this transformation that seems to be everywhere, too.

00:26:31

AE: Now if I can bring in Miss Regina as a subject here, your regular who says—. And that's—that's all I really wanted to mention was that before Regina sat down, really, you had the champagne opened and the—and the glass on the bar.

00:26:50

MM: Yeah, Regina and I have known each other for , um, thirteen, fourteen years, so she's one of our most precious commodities here. *[Laughs]*

00:27:11

Regina: When they do inventory, they count me as a part of it—.

00:27:12

MM: Yeah, we've got you on the list, that's for sure.

00:27:15

AE: So Marian, what does that mean to have kind of customers like that into the fold that are friends coming by, as much as they are, you know, customers at your bar?

00:27:22

MM: Well it makes—it makes the job so much more fun. And, hmm, God, I can't think of anything else to say about it but—so much more personable than just standing at a service bar making drink after drink after drink. You know, this way you get to know people and—. Yeah, it's our social life.

00:27:59

AE: Well are there any final thoughts or words of wisdom about bartending that you'd like to share with the world?

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MM: I'm sorry, I don't have any words of wisdom. *[Laughs]* Oh, yeah—.

00:28:15

AE: Is there something you'd like to see come back in fashion when the trend in drinks changes?

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MM: No, I like to be adaptable and, you know, whatever the next phase is, we hope we'll be prepared for it. I don't—I don't mind change at all. It's kind of interesting. I was telling her how people are drinking a lot more wine than the liquor. When I—fifteen years ago, when I did inventory, we had a much greater inventory and sales of liquor, and it's completely reversed. So it's okay with me. Wine is food, you know.

00:28:55

AE: And I was going to ask you about that, too, if anybody asks you to pair a cocktail with food, and if you could talk about that a little bit?

00:29:02

MM: Yeah, mostly with wine but there are people who ask you what kind of cocktail you know—but we have lots of information here for the servers; we have a whole booklet. And there would be wines paired with every menu item, and so we give that out to every server and bartender, and it's a big help. It's lot of good information on that.

00:29:30

AE: All right, then. Well I appreciate your time, Marian. Thank you so much.

00:29:33

MM: Thank you very much. Nice to meet you. [*Phone Rings*] Sorry I couldn't be more help. I was just—.

00:29:38

[End Marian Murphy Interview]