

SUE NGUYEN
Owner, Le Bakery Café – Biloxi, MS

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Date: July 27, 2008
Location: Le Bakery Café – Biloxi, MS
Interviewer: Francis Lam
Length: 1 hour, 9 minutes
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Ethnicity in the Seafood Industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

[Begin Sue Nguyen Interview]

00:00:03

Francis Lam: Hi, this is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Sunday, July 27, 2008. I'm with Sue Nguyen at her bakery and café, Le Bakery in Biloxi, Mississippi. And today we're going to talk about her business and the community that it and she grew up in. Sue, can I ask you to please state your name, age, and occupation for the record?

00:00:25

Sue Nguyen: My name is Sue Nguyen; I'm 32 years old. My occupation is I'm the owner and operator of Le Bakery Café.

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FL: And where were you born?

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SN: I was born and raised in San Diego—I say raised, and actually I grew up in Biloxi, so I consider myself a Biloxian.

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FL: And why did your family come to Biloxi?

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SN: The funny story is they actually went on a cross-country trip. They got on I-10—well 8 to the I-10 and went all the way across to—to Florida. And as they stopped in different towns along the way they, stopped in Biloxi, Mississippi and they thought it was a great little community and then they found out some old friends actually moved to this town, so they pretty much decided to sell their business and pack up the family and move to Biloxi, Mississippi. At the time it was the big fishing and shrimping industry down here and the climate—I think more or less what drew them to here was the lifestyle and the—the sense of community, that they were attracted to, so—.

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FL: And so you said it was a trip like a vacation?

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SN: Uh-hm.

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FL: They could—they could and they stopped and they could a sense of that—sense of the community here?

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SN: Yes. Actually like I said, they—they were on I-10 they took—through 8 that connected 10 and they went across country all the way to Florida. And they stopped off in Houston and all these little towns or towns and for some reason—I don't know exactly why they actually got stopped in Biloxi, Mississippi but again, it was the idea of going fishing and the climate down

here and there was a very small Vietnamese community at the time. It just looked like it was a good place for them to raise kids and they decided to pack the family and move here.

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FL: And could you—can you describe the community that you moved into, like your neighbors and—and your experience during that?

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SN: Actually I moved into a very—it was a very—I would think a very unique, neighborhood but as I grew older and I realized it's probably the charm of living here in Biloxi. We moved down here to this area, the Point Cadet area, and fortunately I was able to move into a very with— families that lived close-by to each other. I grew up next to like the Loftons, the Carusos, the Lesans these are like key families that Biloxi —key Biloxi families. And when we moved into the neighborhood it was a very—it was a very good feeling of having like a welcoming and—and which my family was able to basically integrate in and actually have this southern hospitality, where we learned how to make gumbo and all these other things. And my mom was able to like make eggrolls or fried rice or whatever. So it was great. Like I said I—I really did enjoy growing up in that neighborhood. This is when they first moved down here; so—.

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FL: And do you have any—do you have a specific memory of—of a neighbor or interaction with a neighbor where you felt like this was home where you felt like they shared their place with you and—and you were feeling—?

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SN: Oh most definitely, most definitely; the Loftons were actually my next door neighbors. It was an older couple in which she had—she did a lot of ceramics as an art and her hobby—and she did a lot of cooking. And as a child I would always be at her house. She had grandchildren that were my age, which we grew up, together pretty much, so yeah. As far as specific memories I actually remember being at her house for the family dinners and things like that and Sundays just being a part of—in the kitchen, and seeing her basically in her element in making everything, and I was there helping her. Which is, I guess it was another way of having a surrogate grandparent because transplanting from San Diego, all of my family lives in California. So to have that —Miss Mary across the street from us was almost like having a grandmother there who would, talk to us about things. And she was very religious in the sense of “I’m going to the church” and was very involved in the community also. But as a child being a part of that and—and seeing that I think that’s pretty much helped shape me in a lot of ways of how I am now, so—but yeah.

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FL: And when you were—backtracking a little bit, when you were in San Diego was your family in a sizable Vietnamese community?

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SN: Actually the area that we lived in was not. As a matter of fact all the Nguyens that went to the school that I went to was literally my family [*Laughs*] so I mean it wasn’t—I mean and then again, I was born in San Diego, so maybe it was probably the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants to the States. A lot of Vietnamese people didn’t come until a little late— ‘70s or

early '80s in which, well, my family was already there, right after the fall of Saigon, so—. But yeah, and it wasn't really that big of a community. At the time I guess back in 1975 they—it was a drive to go to different areas to find the Vietnamese community, but I mean now, it's—it's massive so—.

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FL: You mean in San Diego it was massive?

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SN: Yeah; yeah.

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FL: And then when you came here you said there was a small Vietnamese community was already there and certainly that grew over time. What was—?

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SN: Small, I would say small in the amount of people but concentrated in the area, which is down in this Point Cadet area. In which there was already an established Asian market and different things of that nature. A lot of families I think that's the—that was the trend that families would move down here and not just an individual—like extended families would move down here instead of just an individual or just their immediate family. So it was almost like a built-in community that we moved into but like I said I don't think that was the total lure of them coming down here in the first place, so—.

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FL: And certainly the—the story you just told of—of feeling like this was home was—was with a family that was not a Vietnamese family that was—?

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SN: Correct; correct. Again, that was like I said just certain family members within that family, really made it very, very welcoming to us to move into the neighborhood and they were—. It was very—I guess when one neighbor helps each other and I mean that's the feeling that we had. My dad would help over there and they would help us and your typical—. I think this day and age now, a lot of—you live in neighborhoods where you don't even know your next-door neighbors. And I think as a society we've changed, but back in the— back in the days when I was growing up there was a sense of family and—and community in that sense.

00:08:10

FL: When you say society has changed, I mean do you feel like that change is also reflected here in—maybe in Biloxi as a whole but even down here on the Point?

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SN: I think in—in a way, yeah. I think a lot of people society as a whole is disconnected. I think everybody is busy in different ways. Your—of course family structures have changed, you know, as opposed to family units versus now divorce and single parents and whatnot. But I would say in a way—a lot of ways yes; that has changed but then in a lot of ways I would say no because like I said even after the storm the level of concern and the people that you meet along the way as a business, they were concerned about our wellbeing not only because of the business but our

families and our homes, you know, in general. But yeah. I—I think at least here in my business, you know, I do get the sense of—it's very personal because a lot of people do have time to come in and share their stories or their life here, you know?. So I—like I said, I think that was probably the biggest lure of me staying after the storm is because the sense of community that I have here in Biloxi.

00:09:32

FL: Let's get to that business. Why did you decide to get into baking?

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SN: Actually, after my parents moved down here, years later they decided to open—they opened an Asian market with imported foods and whatnot. And throughout the years the business changed—the dynamics of the business changed, and with the passing of my father, that came into more or less what I was doing was taking over the family business. We added in a bakery—like just a little—little bit of baked goods and whatnot in the—in the market itself and from that it just kind of took off on its own. I've always had a passion for cooking. I always grew up in the kitchen with my family having a background in restaurants and whatnot in San Diego. But I would have to say like I said I think it came in as an added bonus to the market; it was something that I was able to do as a passion. But again, the dynamics of the bakery itself, it changed because of the demand, that I had for it, and it just kind of took off on its own. I'm very blessed that this was—it worked out this way; but yeah it's—it's always been a passion of mine, just was able to seize the opportunity by adding it in my market. I just never realized how much that would have changed the business and—and as a whole, which was the market before.

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FL: Uh-hm; meaning now it's—I mean the business is the bakery primarily?

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SN: Correct; correct and that changed like I said before the storm and we changed it into a—a café also just because we were getting a change of clientele and things like that, so—but.

00:11:32

FL: So you mentioned that you grew up in the kitchen because your family had restaurants. You mean in—I assume that means in the restaurant kitchen but does that also mean the home kitchen as well?

00:11:41

SN: More or less it would be the home kitchen, growing up. It seems like with my family it was always—I think food was the—the main I guess—that would be the main show. I mean whether it's tragedy or good times or what have you, food has always been the basis of our family get-togethers and gatherings. I don't think my family knows what it's like to just make a small meal. Then again, I mean I think that comes with my parents who had three kids of their own together and then my father had two—two children in a previous marriage. So you kick those numbers up to five kids, and my parents is seven, and when my cousin who lost his parent, who came over to America without any parents here, my mom and dad basically adopted him so now we have a family of eight. And just even say our family dinners was always an elaborate **[Laughs]** show of—of some sort. And as far as like family get-togethers and whatnot, yeah; I think that's always been a thing for us is a united thing as far as cooking in the kitchen. I think my family has always

made it very entertaining and fun. I—I grew up remembering setting tables and assembling salads or putting together things or and whatnot and all of the children was involved. The majority of us were involved. And if I—if you look back at all of our family functions or even today, whenever I have something going on at the house everybody seems to be involved whether someone is filling up ice for the drinks to getting plates or whatnot. I think it's always been the sense of, I guess participating and maybe that's—I don't know if that's something that's culturally in the Asian community or because that's just the way my family was, so—.

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FL: And who does much of that cooking now? I mean certainly you said everyone is involved but is there—?

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SN: The majority of the cooking would be—would be my mother or I, with the passing of my grandmother and then like I said have cousins and things like that—that come by and everybody seems to have their own areas of expertise, you know? Although there's a lot of times when I get home I'd rather not be the one to cook [*Laughs*] because with being involved with the bakery all day —but.

00:14:09

FL: And where did you learn to bake bread? How did you learn that skill?

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SN: Baking bread actually came as a—a hobby. I actually, like I said, growing up in the kitchen I actually remember making cupcakes from scratch and making cakes—different pastries and whatnot as a child with my grandmother and my mom and then as far as if I liked something I tried to make it or mimic it. So I would—let me take a minute—. As far as learning how to—it's been a trial and error; I mean it was always something I'd take a risk thing and I'm pretty much a self-taught baker. I had absolutely no formal training. I basically learned through experience and in the kitchen and I thought I had something that I could produce on a commercial level. So and it seems to work out; apparently I have the right **[Laughs]** the right recipe and technique, so—.

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FL: And how would you describe the characteristics of the—of the bread that you bake?

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SN: We mainly do a lot of the French breads. The breads are I would say more of the traditional side where it's crusty but yet soft on the inside. It's got a wonderful crumb and flavor to it. I think the lure of our breads here is it's very reminiscent of a lot of different cultures' breads. we get that all the time like “this is just like Cuban bread” or “this is just like the bread I get in Puerto Rico” or this is just like the bread—and everybody—and it's funny because we hear so many different things . I mean we have a lot of Europeans that come in here and they love the crust on the bread or whatnot and of course with the Asian community here the breads that they're used to, of course. So it's pretty interesting how everybody seems to think that our bread was made **[Laughs]** somewhat reminiscent of what they used to have growing up, you know?

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FL: You somehow managed to divine a recipe for Chameleon bread?

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SN: Yeah, exactly—exactly. It's more less morphed into say—but I think that is—I think that is a definite connection: food. I see it all the time as far as like different things that's just basic ingredients. It's just in the manner in which you assemble them and the amounts that you—you add to it, so—. I think that's the universal connection as far as the—you don't have to know a language to enjoy something in food so—.

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FL: And certainly bread is not the only thing you serve here; it's a café as well as sandwiches and—and other baked goods. Can you talk a little bit about some of those items and the ones you're particularly happy with, proud of, and—and why you—you choose to serve those?

00:17:04

SN: To start off with, the café: I think what we do here is like we have our—a Vietnamese Po' Boy that we do which is kind of a Po' Boy as in the southern side of the sandwiches—the hoagies and whatnot. But the Vietnamese side of it would be all of our different types of meats and marinades and even the vegetables that we put on the sandwich. We do that here as far as—it's kind of like bridging the—a gap. I mean, it's almost like a hybrid between the two like the Po' Boy per se, you know? But it's very—it's been very interesting as far as—and we've had such a great, positive reaction to our sandwiches here. I think it's been a way for a lot of people to connect with the Vietnamese community and able to have a taste of Vietnamese cuisine. Very much so everything from the marinades that go with the—the type of slaw that's in the

sandwiches, very fresh ingredients, and as far as our—. What we also do here is a lot of Asian desserts. I think that's—that's been a really good thing as far as an added bonus here because I think my generation and younger have lost that passion for cooking too or maybe even traditional foods, and instead of going home and having to cook a big pot of something that reminds them of childhood they can come here and get a cup of it instead and what have you. So but as far as product— I think every one of the —whether it's pastries, or even the sandwiches and stuff, I would particularly say that I'm very proud of everything that we do here. Only because we tend to cook or flavor foods, or even like the way we spice things up, it always seems to be the way *we* would prefer to eat it, so even like a lot of the desserts aren't too sweet, or the cakes or whatever aren't too—. And it's always been like *our* balance in which- I think once we bring that to the table everybody seems to enjoy. And so I can't really say one thing sticks out more than the other. I think a lot of it— there is a lot of different ones that —particular favorites, and why like, one of the things that we added to our menu was a curried chicken sandwich. Which was kind of a play on the curried chicken that I grew up with as a child as a meal, in which we dipped French bread in. And instead of doing that as a— as a type of soup per se, curry— we decided to kind of basically dock it up and make it into a sandwich instead . And again, that—that was a childhood favorite dish of mine, that I made into a sandwich. So little things like that, but taking different things like a meat pastry that we made here, a different take on it because the way we prefer to cook the meats and whatnot, so—or spices and things like that, so—.

I would say it's been very, I guess all these different pastries and sandwiches and whatnot, I think it's been great because I've been able to learn a lot of techniques from my mother also and able to incorporate that and actually hold onto those types of traditions: the

traditional cooking. And I think had I not started the bakery and the café I probably too could fall in that category of losing that part, you know? Because how else would I have learned or seen this type of cooking had I not learned it from my mother or other—?

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FL: But it sounds like too the way you describe it—even say the curried chicken sandwich, that at least some of the items have a nod to tradition or come out of a tradition but are not entirely traditional, right?

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SN: Correct; correct, kind of like our own flair on that. Like I said, I think that's what makes it a little unique too, is the creative side of that, to be able to take something like a traditional dish and kind of change it into something else. And maybe that's part of the artistic freedom too **[Laughs]** I have being ——. And again it's—it's one of those things where you think wouldn't this be great as— and we go from there. So I think that's fun part of cooking, and baking and stuff is that you do have this sense of, you have the rules that you follow but yet you have this creative side that you can completely make a whole different product.

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FL: And can you talk about some of these—these Asian desserts too? You have a whole section of them here.

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SN: Yes; they're all traditional *chè*, which is like different types of congees—and I want to say very thick porridges and things like that. You would think of like—we do a ginger dumpling and a lot of these things were— based on cooking of, like, Vietnamese desserts which in Vietnam did not have dairy, so you substituted a lot of things but like the coconut milk and things like that so, where you would lack on butter or things like that these were just different types of desserts that I mean, I grew up with because my mother and my grandmother made them. And again it wasn't so simple for me to just pick up the cookbook and try to find these traditional desserts. Now probably I think, but you would think back as far as like with my mother coming over to America here, what was her resources, you know? So it had to be a lot of memory and of course relying on past generations such as my grandmother to pass down these recipes. Perhaps one day I might publish [*Laughs*] some of these; of course I started with the passing of my grandmother I realized how important it was that I was in the kitchen with my grandmother to know the techniques, and the ingredients, and stuff as opposed to, say, my sister who wasn't in the kitchen as often or someone else, so—. I was very blessed to be able to be a part— and—and to document those things, you know? But going back to the desserts, yeah; as far as a lot of the desserts we do here, I think it's—it's a way for people to have a taste of these desserts, traditional desserts and whatnot without having to— to complicate things and actually go and buy the ingredients and try assemble them at home yourself. So convenient-wise and simplistic—and I think once people try the desserts and they—they realize there's different textures and different flavors and notes, and I think that's a lot with Vietnamese cooking. A lot of times when you have Vietnamese cuisine, it's always different notes, whether it's the lime from the chili or the cilantro or whatnot, it's just always different notes and I think even in our desserts it's—it embodies the textures and you can go from something chewy to dipping

something creamy and a slight sweetness to it or, you know? And a lot of things are flavored differently than we would do in American; a lot of vanillas, but our vanillas that we use is like pandan, which is almost like the vanilla of the Orient.

So, I think your—it's familiar, because you—you have tastes of coconut but yet the texture is kind of, and then you have something like peanuts thrown into something in the desserts. And I think that part—I think people who are a little bit on the adventurous side to try—are willing to try the Vietnamese desserts, I think they all end up being very surprised at how all these embody—like the desserts, so—.

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FL: So this is—so let me just enter this idea for familiarity you're talking about here, and certain things that maybe you're familiar with. And earlier, you had said, you had mentioned maybe Vietnamese people of a younger or a newer generation are coming in and enjoying those things in part because they remember them of the flavors of their youth and maybe they don't have the time or the—or the skills to make them at home?

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SN: Or the knowledge correct; right.

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FL: Do you also have many people who are not Vietnamese people coming in and—and trying and enjoying? Because it sounds like these are also more traditional items.

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SN: Yes; yes and we do have a lot of people that are not Vietnamese that come in. We do have a lot of like the Filipinos, different Asian groups that again, it's very familiar or something very similar to it. And yet we have people that like I say the American customers that come in or just different cultures, they're willing to try it because it is something that was so different per se—it's not like a cake or a pie or —. And—and again it—I think what draws them in is to be—to see like oh well that's coconut cream and I like coconut or this, that, and the other and it's—and it draws them into it and yet they find out that it's such a wonderful combination between these—for this type of dessert or what have you, so—.

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FL: Getting back to the fact that this used to be a market, and that you had introduced the bakery part of the market and obviously then took off; can you actually talk a little bit about that evolution? Can you talk a little bit about the beginnings of that business and the clientele and when you started to realize that—that—can you just talk a little bit about that?

00:26:53

SN: Yeah, so say the beginning of the—with the bakery and the café. Tradition—I mean to begin with the bakery was added into the Asian market which we had, primarily. It would be the Asian community and then we had a lot of Hispanics that came through that had certain ingredients that we had at the market. And of course you'd have your, you know, food fanatics that came in and wanted to try different ingredients and whatnot. So by adding the bakery to the market it was kind of like the launching pad there. It was a built—a built-in clientele per se right there. As the bakery and the reputation of the bakery grew and people started coming by for the breads and whatnot you would see different cultures and different echelon of people, you know, from—

and—and economically to racially. It was completely mixed—diverse and I think that was kind of the—the—the—I guess the lure of the bakery coming over to this bakery because you’d get—I think you should get the sense that anyone and everyone is welcome and like I said, I think the—the binder between it all was the breads, and the different pastries and whatnot.

And as far as like the—the changes of it I think it’s a big reflection of how Biloxi is; almost like a melting pot down here, you know? It—it is different groups of people that have come to this area for whatever reason, whether it be jobs, family, or — with the casino industry or even tourists that come by.

00:28:36

FL: When we talked the other day you had—you had mentioned something about first being known about a Vietnamese bakery on Oak Street and then with the sort of pride it sounded like in your voice other people just started referring to you as *the bakery* on Oak Street. And then you had talked a little bit about the name of the bakery. Could you just sort of talk about that?

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SN: Yes. The name of the bakery is Le Bakery. It’s kind of a play on words with my mother’s name is actually Le—it’s spelled L-e; and the joke behind that too—I wouldn’t say the joke behind it—is in the restaurant that we had in California with my—when my dad and my mom ran the restaurant it was called Le Garden which is named after my mother also. So it was kind of like the natural progression for me to actually name the bakery after my mom. So we called it Le Bakery but with French—I guess connotation to it because you would think with the French bread and you see Le Bakery, but yeah I think a lot of people refer to us as the Vietnamese bakery which is, again, yes, we are, Vietnamese but it’s not just Vietnamese food or Vietnamese

bakery items or . It is a bakery, in which we carry different cultures' of types of pastries and breads. Yes; I think that's probably where the confusion lies, when people talk about the bakery. You know, fortunately for us there's only one bakery here; that's us but **[Laughs]** if it was everybody always says yeah the bakery on Oak Street or the bakery down on the Point and I guess that that's supposed to all-embodiment us which is here at Le Bakery, so—.

00:30:17

FL: And again you—a lot of different kinds of people—regulars and customers; do you have any sort of standout customers, standout regulars? I mean even just sitting here with you today I would see people coming in left and right and they would say hello to you with a familiarity.

00:30:35

SN: I would have to say a lot of my customers are very standout. I think that's kind of like the push and drive you have, the passion for your job, and not just your job—your career. I take a lot of pride in our the bakery because yeah, there is a sense of familiarity with people, especially like my—my customers which transcends into friends, you know? Because as you see everyone every day and you're a part of people's lives, I realize the bakery is not just a product that I provide and a service that we provide here. We are a part of people's weddings; we are a part of people's birthdays, your get-togethers, your reunions, your— and I realize that even in death, we are there post— as far as with bakery goods and whatnot and breads and I mean there's so many times when I— unfortunately when I see like one of my customers has passed away and their family members come in and they would talk to us like, “They used to love coming.” This was a part of their daily routine and yeah; you do get that sense of I would say familiarity because my customers are the ones that of course built me, one and two, and again it's amazing how our lives

crossed together and through this bakery. I would say all my customers would be— a lot of standouts. It varies. You have people that encourage you and all these accolades that you, as far as all this encouragement that you have and you take a lot of pride in your products and—and your goods. And just to know that we're appreciated and that they have a choice—an option to go anywhere else and to choose us it's a very humbling experience because at the same time it makes you feel good that they're able to choose us as—as a place to go to. But yet at the same time, we're—we're building more than just a— just a service; we're—we're building a relationship. And—and the best part is a lot of times seeing people, as far as these kids grow up or seeing — one customer who ends up marrying another customer or whatever. **[Laughs]** You know, it's just amazing at how everything seems to intertwine. And I do say every day is a different day at the bakery. It's not a—my job definitely is not hum-drum. It definitely varies every day and I think that's probably—that's the best thing about it is from the different people that come in every day, to different situations that we face every day, whether it's a— problem or whatnot and it's—to me it's a very exciting —. I definitely don't think I have a run of the mill desk job so—.

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FL: So what's your least favorite part of the job?

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SN: Oh the heat, probably the hours, the heat **[Laughs]** especially in Mississippi. It's not the most glamorous job, but it's very therapeutic. I will have to tell you, after the storm **[Hurricane Katrina]** it was I—I even mentioned, I said I think I might actually bust out a tear once I start making bread again. It is a very—it's a very rewarding job for me. To see that what I could take,

basic ingredients and with the knowledge and recipe and technique and then—and then by an end-product and then to be able to come present something like this and have my customers —. And it's—it's nice to have praise to know that “hey you've got the best bread” or “you've got the best this.” And it definitely is something that we— we take pride in so—.

00:34:41

FL: Was it a hard decision to reopen after the storm?

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SN: I would say yes and no. Right after the storm I think we were in more or less a survival mode. I lost my house and we lost the business here and as far as having to reopen, we own the building here and of course you're faced with do you relocate, do you, not come back at all? And at the same time as we're— no matter what we had to start cleaning out the building and whatnot, and then to see the community outpour of like, just basic support where people just drove by. And I had people that actually came by my house to make sure we were okay, because they knew I had lived in that neighborhood and that neighborhood was devastated. I had people write letters because of course the phone lines and utilities and things like that—I had letters and people from just—that lived from different areas to make sure that my family was okay and then the next question after that is when is the bakery opening up? *[Laughs]*

So the decision to come back I think was hard because not knowing the future of this neighborhood and this area was one; and two, as far as like it—it is heartbreaking to see everything that you worked so hard for literally go out the door. And as far as the decision to come back and—and to be back here — you know, I love it here in Biloxi. We had the choice to

leave and we decided not to because this is our life. This is where we're based, so I think it wasn't that hard of a decision to come back per se. Whether it was the wisest decision to come back [*Laughs*] if another storm comes by; I don't know I guess I'll face that as it comes. You know, at this point I really—really can't really plan ahead too much on that, so—.

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FL: How long did it take you to reopen?

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SN: The bare bones of it, it probably took us about four or five months to get back up and running. Even to this day we're not still completely 100-percent full steam, as we were. But again I think the dynamics of it changed, shifted—I think the demands on the bakery is different now than it was before the storm.

00:37:04

FL: When you talk about not being at 100-percent, what—what does that mean exactly?

00:37:08

SN: Well you lose certain people after the storm. People locate as far as your skilled workers and things like that. Whether it was equipment, whether it's the products that we were able to offer back then versus now and what the capacity of that we're able to function as, you know? A lot of our reasons was a letter of wholesaling, and of course all the restaurants along the beach were wiped out along that way. And a lot of the restaurants that we did sell to are completely gone. And then again, the ones that did survive the storm are ordering more than they did to make up

for that, so—. It— it's a different a gauge I guess of progress I guess you could say. I mean it's—how do you compare the two, so—? In one area you're lacking here; you— you gain in another, so—.

00:37:58

FL: Is the menu different now; is the menu—is the menu different now than from before the storm?

00:38:04

SN: I would say the menu has pretty much—pretty much stayed the same. I think we've expanded different combinations, different offerings different—yeah; I would have to say a good bit yes, it has changed, but not too where it didn't identify us. I mean we— I think we still stayed to the traditional, you know, to our core what we set off to do as far as doing like—as far as like lunch and sandwiches. What we wanted to do with I actually provide bread to different restaurants that you have Po' Boys and we didn't want to compete with them, per se because I am the one that is supplying their bread to them. We didn't want to do your run of the mill like different roast beef or oyster Po' Boy because I feel like you can get that at several different restaurants, and great ones. And if you had to tell me okay; which one—where would you go for what I would tell you exactly where I would go for my shrimp Po Boy or where I would go, you know? But again I wanted to do something that kind of signifies this is what we do here at Le Bakery and I think every—one of our customers that actually comes in and even like will become a fan of our bakery it is that because they know when they go to Le Bakery they're getting something different you know, and I think that's the exciting part about it too.

00:39:22

I think that there is going to be— and any type—you're going to have people that might be turned off by our way and then again I think by seeing the different combinations I think a lot of people—it sparks a lot of interest and intrigue from that and they're willing to try —. And once they try it, they seem to always love it. I— so—it's—it's—we try to tell people it's different, like I said but if you have an open mind to try it —.

00:39:50

FL: Can you talk a little—actually so you—so you said it took about four or five months to reopen after the storm.

00:39:59

SN: Uh-hm.

00:39:59

FL: I personally first came to Biloxi about—almost exactly six months after the storm and so you were already open at that time. I recall at that time yours was one of the very few I think I counted four—businesses in all of East Biloxi that was serving food, that were open serving food and at that time when I came in you would constantly see people—it was packed. I mean there were constantly people who were maybe volunteers, or they're sort of relief or workers. Can you talk a little—and there was a sense I think of this place being sort of an unofficial kind of canteen or an unofficial place where—where those people were getting fed day after day after day. Can you talk—did you get that sense yourself?

00:40:47

SN: Of course, of course. You know, after the storm, I mean immediately after the storm and we're into the cleanup mode and recovery mode and trying to get back up and running it was more to the logistics of getting back up and running in this area. You're looking at an area that was completely devastated. All of our utilities, whether it was getting water—water the basic ones to get to this building and then you'd have gas lines that were ruptured and all these different things and for us to actually get—I mean like, how hard was it to get power to this building, gas to this building, water to this building when the whole neighborhood is devastated? What made—the power company will not think that this is important for them to—so yeah; I took a while before we were able to get phone service and basic things. And after that it was a matter of getting deliveries, and it was a matter of getting supplies and whatnot and paper goods and things like that. I mean everything that we depended on was based out of New Orleans—Louisiana. And again that was affected by the hurricane also. So yeah, it took a lot—a while and of course equipment problems or—or even getting equipment down here.

On top of that supply and demand for building materials; and basically finding people to do the work and once we basically like I said it was a bare bone operation [*Laughs*] to get back up and running. You know, for us to open up and provide a place for people to get food was, I would say in the—in the eyes and— whereas for the volunteers and construction workers, it was great because there was I guess few options for them to go to. And after weeks and months of Red Cross food and which I—and the Salvation—with the Salvation Army and then the MREs I think we were a very welcome change, and even though that we offered something that wasn't familiar to people at the time, because we went back to our traditional menu, we were able—we were blessed with people that were open enough to try it, or maybe they were hungry enough to try it. [*Laughs*] That's probably the joke behind that, but [*Laughs*] I think the volunteers and the

construction and the rebuilding, and even people locally here- When we opened, and there was a line out the door for bread, I was completely taken back and I had people tell me, “This is the first sense of normalcy.” And we’re talking about people that actually at the time now were beginning to get FEMA trailers and getting out of tents and things like that and they’re like— they’re finally getting the sense of normalcy—is their daily stop at the bakery. And to be a part of that was very— like I said, it was very—a great feeling, a very overwhelming feeling to know that we were able to—to do that for people, you know? And again we’re very blessed that they chose to come back to the bakery.

But yes, I think the feeling of us being a—a stop for the volunteers and having an option for food, we definitely got that feeling. **[Laughs]** I remember there was just nights that we would just be completely exhausted because there was so many people that were coming through. And at the time we were basically—because I had lost my home every—and my family and stuff too and as far as their houses and stuff, and we had the FEMA trailers and stuff back there. And I actually remember people either knocking on the trailers or banging on the door like late at night because they were just like can we get some bread, can we get this and that? And it was amazing; I mean I can— on one hand you can get very frustrated because this is your downtime, but at the same time you have something that—that great that people are willing to support. So pros and cons; so I guess everything—but I think we tend to see more things on the positive side and I think we—I think with our philosophy here, I think we—we take humor into a lot of things too **[Laughs]**, so it gets you through—gets you buy despite all this disaster and whatnot. Yeah, it was—it was pretty amazing as far as the level that we all took it to, to get back up and running as far as like family, friends, community. And it—and—and we did get that sense of people wanting to help —the fact that we needed utilities in this building and there was people that said

hey you need to get this up and running because we need to have our bakery back. And I think when you have like water—I guess the bridge being out and then, certain parts of the highway was closed, it was very hard to get to this area. And yet up until recently, well it was last year when the bridge actually opened we had all of our customers come from the other end of town to drive all the way around Biloxi just to come to our bakery. So that—I take a lot of pride in that so—. But yeah, and then as far as being the hub for a lot of volunteers and we still get people that come back and visit us and —and I think that’s the great part about. It it’s like you can go back to your homes, after they volunteer but yet they still remember Le Bakery. And I think that’s great when we get postcards or even letters talking about—describing how—what we were a part of their volunteering down here in Biloxi—or the Gulf Coast.

00:46:22

FL: And how is—and now it’s been two years since then, plus; how has that—how has that changed? How has the clientele changed? How has the business changed since you reopened?

00:46:35

SN: Two years after the storm I think again a lot of your recovery workers are not here but yet we’re getting a lot of our familiar faces back because there are people that are moving—rebuilding and moving back to the neighborhood. Then again, we’re having new faces because they’re—we have a new wave of people that moved into these areas that maybe people did not—no longer live anymore, you know? And they’ve left; I’m getting a lot of our regular customers back again with the bridge being open again and having access to this area. Tourists are always the same, it seems like there’s always people that come down here and they remember, oh I’ve been here last time and this, that, and the other and we always get new customers because of

word of mouth. And the biggest change would be like I said this post— cleanup effort —those volunteers that —. But as far as the long-term people that are here committed to the recovery of the Gulf Coast, because even though it's been two years, we're not still—we're not the same Biloxi as we were prior to the storm, you know? And there's still a lot to be done. So I think that's just the nature of— any—anywhere. As more and more restaurants are opening or restaurants are opening— reopening we're getting a lot of that back, so—. In the meantime like I said word of mouth is what continues to help us grow.

00:48:01

FL: Earlier you had joked about whether it was wise to reopen in this particular neighborhood and certainly part of that is because you're exposed to the Gulf, and in case something happens again and in terms of that, but I imagine part of that also means banking on this neighborhood coming back and banking on—.

00:48:22

SN: Right. That's—that's the biggest thing is banking on this—this neighborhood and this area, because although it's an area that I know the— we look at this as —when you look at the casinos which are millions and millions of dollars into this —this area that they're willing to reinvest back into this area, to come back as a visit— it's not going to be an isolated area. But the only thing about it is I don't know if we're going to have the residents that are actually in this, as far as this area—this community right here on The Point, how the dynamics of that is going to change after the storm, because there are a lot of people that are not moving back. A lot of them were older that may have grown; their childhood home is no longer there. So the lure of having just that property to rebuild in this area, I don't know what the incentive is for that.

At the same time I think it opens up a lot of opportunity for a change in the neighborhood, a shift maybe, per se, of what they might rezone areas, or what they might have a mixed-use type of area. Maybe this could be a way for them to rebrand this area. You know, there's a lot of different options for you to want to bank on the positive side, the up-turn on it. Fortunately enough for me I think the brand that we have as far as like with Le Bakery I think we do have a key following of people that are willing to come to this area, so maybe if I could be an anchor store here for other places —businesses to come back to this neighborhood it would be great, you know?

I think it's great per se as a location if when people come down to Biloxi and they want to go to the casinos and they want to go to different areas and they see—I think we're in a great area because this is the area—it seems like the impetus for a lot of different cultures and to go back to that neighborhood and whatnot. I—I definitely think Biloxi will come back as a whole, you know? But as far as like this area of course I think that—that opens up so many different questions but yet like I said with those questions I think more opportunities are —are right here so—.

But whether it's wise to come back? Yeah, I think the big thing is how much—how much can you handle it? What mentally, emotionally, physically can you handle again, as a storm, you know? But you see, I think with us, as far as my family and I look at it as like tragedies and things like that, when you look at the Vietnamese, as far as the people, and I look at my mother and the things that my family believes and stuff and you look at people that can leave and flee communism, to come over to America for an opportunity. And to see that they were able to leave

everything that they knew behind, to be here in America and start a new life and able to live *the American dream* and to say that the storm would be something to knock you out and wipe you out I—I can't see that and I think that's part of like the—the value-set my family has instilled in me. And I'd look at my mother even after the storm and we've lost pretty much everything even to this day where my father was buried, —his gravesite is —that area is gone. And to see that —I just don't see how something like that could have literally make us throw in the towel.

I think also at the same time, when you've been down the only other place you can go is back up. [*Laughs*] You have to get up and I think that was it; it was like you could sit there and cry and be completely devastated over everything that you lost and whatnot. And after you're done crying, you're still going to have to clean up! So I think we all picked up the shovel and started scooping the stuff out, and started dealing with this as —. And I think that part of it —the only part that was disheartening is as we're cleaning out this building, and we're cleaning up, and trying to come back and not really seeing a lot of people back yet, it was kind of hard because we were wondering, “Okay, where is everybody and when are they going to come home?” And again I think a lot of people that came to us they always said, well, as far as telling us that they—they had us in our—their prayers and whatnot and seeing the effort we had to move back— to come back, there's so many people that they told me like just driving by and seeing the sign that I had wrote on the outside of the building just they're like telling me that was the only laugh they got or whatnot. And it was kind of like our thing; as far as we had the sign on the outside —*bread will rise again; it just kneads time*. And it was kind of like there was—had to be a silver lining somewhere. We just tried telling— we'll—we're going to be back but we just need time. And that was the whole consensus; like I think Biloxi was that same way and I think people —I think two years a lot— a lot of the initial shock of it is gone and I think the

survival—the survival but now I think it is going to a sense of normalcy. And like I said, as I see more and more people come back to this area like I said I hope in the long run it was a good choice for us to come back. I just don't see us abandoning this area in which this area is what helped build us.

00:54:09

FL: So getting to the question of that long run, I remember being here actually a few months ago maybe and—and you were telling me that two Chefs from one of the casinos had come in and started asking you questions about one of your recipes and—and you—you got into a conversation about them and it turns out well they were interested in maybe trying to duplicate some of your—some of your recipes in the casino. And— it—and this has been a question since the storm and even before the storm about the effect the casinos are having here, so as—so let me ask you as—as a business person here, as a member of the community here, the community at large as well the as the Vietnamese community that's right here, how do you think the casinos' presence both before and maybe in particular after the storm have affected the community and the businesses here?

00:55:07

SN: I think, as far as the casinos, I think that's a great industry especially down here. It provided a lot of opportunities, jobs. A shift of basically careers of people that are—are even opportunities for people. And it generates a lot of—definitely revenue for this area. I think it goes hand in hand with the community that we have; I think it—like I said as far as like the sense of Biloxi, the tourist area it—that came a part of it too; when you come to Biloxi you go to the casinos but yet

at the casinos it's like when you come to the casinos you get to see a part of Biloxi, and you get to be a part of like this historic area of like the Gulf Coast.

And as far as the shift of things I think now you have your pros and cons. I think as far as what we're saying as far as emulating a lot of different foods I see the casinos catering to different areas that I think—I mean they also see the need to have to—to diversify what they offer there, which is whether or not they need to cater to the Asian community or even have just different types of restaurants or just options for people. And I think that's—that's the biggest thing is like I think the casino and the casino industries down here it provides a lot of options for number one the community here, the people, and the same thing with the casino has that effect as far as like with I guess the—the adverse reaction, I mean the reaction to it. So I think in all—in all honesty I think I think it's a positive thing to be back here and again it's I think it draws a lot of people to this area that probably didn't know about this area before . But as far as I see a lot of good that the casinos have done down here, as far as community-wise, but within the Vietnamese community yeah; I wish there was a little bit more involvement as far as recognizing this community so—.

00:57:31

FL: What—what would that mean?

00:57:32

SN: Well I mean I think they do cater to a certain degree with the type of entertainment that they bring down here and then again trying to get—for the food. But I think on the other side of it is maybe seeing more as far as like charitable side of it or maybe more involvement there, which I

think—I'm pretty sure any type of business that they kind of pick and choose their —. But as far as knowing like which areas were devastated after the storm, and which —and it was this whole community down here so—.

As far as the casino industry itself like I said, I think that would be a great opportunity to have as far as being educated as far as — to be able to have some type of, where they have like Vietnamese workers that work there are able to learn English and the same thing as far as the Americans—to learn Vietnamese, just different things where we've kind of respected each type of culture so. Which I think —I think the casino industry down here does recognize the presence of the Vietnamese people here so—or even the Asian community because I think that is a big part of their clientele.

00:58:50

FL: And also their labor force too right?

00:58:54

SN: Correct, their labor force, definitely. But yeah I think like I said I think it—it does provide a lot of opportunities that were not here beforehand, so—.

00:59:07

FL: But then as—as a business person in the neighborhood do you get a sense that do you ever get a sense that some of the people are coming in and they're maybe in town because they want to come to the casinos, and now they're exploring the neighborhood and seeing what's available in the neighborhood? Because the—the alternative perspective to that is it takes away because

people don't actually try to explore the area. They just go to the casinos and do all the things there and leave, so what—what's your take on that?

00:59:35

SN: I think, like I said, I think if you came down here to gamble you're going to gamble. But if you actually came down here to have a vacation per se, and actually involve yourself yeah, I do see that sense of whether to stay at the casino. But I think after a certain amount of time or whatever I think the lure of what we have to offer here at the City is enough for them to take a car ride to see what else is down here. And again, we are right down the street from the casinos so we're not too far off where people can't explore. And again I think it's been word of mouth; I mean there's so many times when I've heard like, "We're staying at the casino and one of our—we were overhearing that this is where they got their bread" or this, that, and the other and it's like, "We heard about this place and they came down." So it—so my—the way I see it too is yeah; the—the casino brought them down here but they had the opportunity to come down to the bakery and—and that was my—the way I see it .

Can we compete with the casinos? Of course not; I mean that's just a different—I mean that's a whole different—but like I said I think we do add—it's a value-added to this trip that they came down here for, you know? And once they kind of discover us in other words, they come down here and they discover us they always seem to come back and they make it a point to come visit us. Which is a great feeling to know that we've made that much of an impact the last time.

01:00:58

FL: What do you think, I mean certainly there—there is some uncertainty, but what do you think the future holds for your business in particular?

01:01:14

SN: The future holds for our bakery here—of course there's a lot of—like you said, there's a lot of uncertainty. I would like for us to be something that we're branded as far as—a staple of Biloxi, as far as—when you think of like certain things like certain areas if you go and—it's I want us to be branded as an area like okay when you're down here you've got to come by Le Bakery. You've got to pick this up or you've got—. I think I couldn't really sit there and tell you what the trend would be like to see how things have changed throughout the bakery. I think like just say the widely popular *Atkins Diet*, that was supposed to be like the death of all bakeries and we survived that and we survived Katrina, so I think like I said in the long run? Yeah I don't know what the future holds. Like I said, but what I do know is that we have developed a following of fans, people that enjoy our products and from there, I would like to be, like I said we're always a part of people's weddings and celebrations and even the bad times or even the—. And again, I hope to be a part of that and not just in their lives, you know? Like I said, we're—we become that type of partnership with people in the community. I'd like to see this area expand and grow and diversify and again I hope to be a part of that, you know?

01:02:44

FL: Is there anything that you regret or anything you feel like you would have or should have done differently?

01:02:49

SN: Oh there's a whole lot of would have, should have, could have [Laughs] I think in any route. To say I think it's all been a great learning experience. Whether or not I want to learn that experience have that experience again to learn that's a whole different story. But I think everything happens for a reason, and as far as regrets, yeah; we used to be open seven days a week and maybe way too many hours and I think with this post-Katrina I think we realized hey, we need a break before you break down. And I think what I have learned is like a lot of people—people are very understanding of that. I think we had that mindset that we had to be available whether or not we're competing in a 24/7 market. Whether it's a Wal-Mart or the casinos or whatnot. But I think what we have here is a specialized industry, it's a specialized product and I think people understand that the—the level of commitment that we have to the bakery and the products that we have here. That it is a family based business; it is a locally owned and operated business. It's not something that is manufactured; it is something that takes made-from-scratch and these things should be valued and that's—that's the—that is the impression I hope people get when they come through our bakery, that it's a friendly place, that it's —that they are comfortable coming in and that they're willing to try—or even have a new experience and that they're getting a quality product. You know, with that quality product and even the sandwiches and pastries and whatnot, everything that's here was developed with pride and—and the fact that we take every caution to go—to make this product. And it's very involved; and I guess it would be like your blood, sweat, tears, heart—everything that you have into it, you know? And I think I wouldn't have gone through all of this, as far as the—the Katrina and everything else, to cleanup and stuff if I didn't have that passion for this job and this industry and this area and my customers because if it was just a run of the mill job or just my customers and I didn't care about coming back I probably would have just sold the building and get into something else, uh-hm. So

it definitely—I think —and maybe that maybe that’s projected and when people see like the level of commitment that we have here at the bakery. I can only hope, so—.

01:05:23

FL: All right; well thank you very much. Is there anything actually before we go, because if you have time I have time, is there anything you’d like to add, any other thoughts, or any—?

01:05:35

SN: Actually I think we’re pretty much covered a lot. I think I feel like I’m rambling [*Laughs*], but as far as a food community, I think that’s—that’s all part of growing up in the south here. The Gulf Coast has its own characteristics. I think the main thing is the people here is what makes it all worthwhile. And maybe we might have a different pace of life compared to different cities and towns and stuff, but I think the thing that people need to understand is the core values that we have here. And I think that—I hope that is portrayed as a sense of community, a sense of family, a sense of friendship. You know, that we’re all in this together, that we’re that—that is we are united in that sense. It doesn’t matter your economic — your income or your race and stuff; it all comes down to the sense of unity and whether or not food brings that together or situations. But I—I hope people get that sense from being down in this area and in this community.

01:06:52

FL: And actually that—that reminds me also a little bit of the conversation we had before we turned on the microphone—that sense of unity and that sense of coming together. And I was not surprised to hear that you—certainly you do the bread for a lot of the restaurants down here—

Mary Mahoney's but when I had mentioned talking to Mr. Trojanovich of Mary Mahoney's and the Slavonian Lodge and you said you do the bread for them. Can you talk a little bit about maybe specifically how you got involved with them and what they do or—or—?

01:07:27

SN: Well I don't—I can't really say how I—I got involved with doing the breads for the Slavonian Lodge. It's because I had a lot of my core customers from the very beginning, and it was all members of—of the Slovak descent, and a lot of people growing up with that crusty French bread, soft on the inside, and just they had all these invoked memories that they have. And I—they would come in; they're like, "This is the bread I used to have when I was a kid," or "This is what we had growing up," which like again it was very amazing to hear that. And I guess throughout the—the years of having—with the bakery I've developed a relationship with everyone and to know that this is so and so's cousin or brother and whatnot, and it all turns out a part of like this whole community down here or the roots of this area. And with the Lodge they were actually a couple blocks over and whatnot, and this was the bread that they were picking up for their meals there. And again it just became word of mouth and the next thing I'm doing the breads for them. So they were already picking up the bread for this and it just came from where did you get this bread from and you know? And so to be a part of that and then of course once we started doing bread for Mary Mahoney's and then this—this head Chef there is also the **[Laughs]**— of the Lodge so it's kind of all this interconnection through food I guess; uh-hm.

01:08:47

FL: Awesome; well thank you again very, very much for your time.

01:08:52

[End Sue Nguyen Interview]