

ALZINA TOUPS
Alzina's Restaurant - Galliano, LA

* * *

Date: March 28, 2011
Location: Alzina's Restaurant – Galliano, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour, 34 minutes
Project: Down the Bayou – Louisiana

[Begin Alzina Touns Interview]

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, March 28, 2011. I am with Miss Alzina in Galliano at Alzina's. Miss Alzina, if I could get you to say your full name and your birth date, that would be great.

00:00:19

Alzina Touns: Alzina Touns, and my birthday is August 16, 1928.

00:00:27

SR: And can you tell me for the record what you do for a living?

00:00:33

AT: Um, cook mostly.

00:00:38

SR: We're in the space where you cook and where you serve your food. Do you call this a restaurant? It's a little non-traditional.

00:00:47

AT: No, it's like a get-together place, like a kitchen, like your own home.

00:00:56

SR: I think that's a good way to say it. I couldn't have said it better. Well we'll get into this place a little bit more in a while but I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit to start about your heritage—where your family comes from?

00:01:14

AT: My family did come—we're Cajun; come from Nova Scotia. And my other family from my mother's side, Lombas, they were Portugal, and so—and this is the reason I guess because the Portuguese are great cooks and my mother was a great, great cook.

00:01:39

SR: Did she cook Portuguese, or what was her style of cooking?

00:01:43

AT: Cajun style.

00:01:46

SR: And how—do you know how many generations have been, on your mother's side, been from Portugal here in Louisiana?

00:01:54

AT: No, I couldn't say. I know they—it's maybe four or five generations, maybe longer; I don't know. And they don't have too many alive. Her name is—she was a Lombas—L-o-m-b-a-s—and they don't have too many of Lombases in this area.

00:02:13

SR: Wow. Are there many people of Portuguese descent in this area?

00:02:18

AT: Not too many, no.

00:02:22

SR: Is there any kind of Portuguese festival or anything? I mean, there's a festival for everything.

00:02:26

AT: No, I don't think they have that. They don't have enough people for that.

00:02:29

SR: And so your father's family has been here for a long time if they're from Nova Scotia?

00:02:33

AT: Yeah, a long time. Yeah, I don't know how many generations but a long, long time.

00:02:38

SR: Did anyone—did your father or his parents speak French?

00:02:43

AT: Yeah, we speak French—mostly French. We still speak French, yeah. My family, yeah, we still speak French.

00:02:51

SR: Do the younger generations of your family?

00:02:54

AT: Some of them do. Not all of them.

00:02:59

SR: How many children do you have?

00:03:01

AT: Two boys.

00:03:05

SR: And do they live around here?

00:03:06

AT: I have one—my son lives next door to me. And one of my sons has two granddaughters and one of them have a--a daughter and a son, and the other one have one son. One of my granddaughters lives in the same street as my son. And the street is all my family who lives in the street.

00:03:34

SR: And what street is this?

00:03:35

AT: One thirty-second Street—308.

00:03:38

SR: And you're related to everyone?

00:03:39

AT: Everyone, yeah; it's all my family. We're all family that we live in this street.

00:03:43

SR: So you consider yourself Cajun?

00:03:50

AT: Yeah, 100-percent.

00:03:53

SR: And so your cooking here is also Cajun?

00:03:56

AT: Cajun, mostly Cajun, yeah.

00:04:00

SR: So you described a little bit what you call this restaurant. Can you describe for us how this restaurant runs?

00:04:13

AT: I really think it's like a get-together, like family, because if I do one family they don't have no walk-ins. You understand what I'm saying? It's like you book something for this family. I don't mix them with another family so we don't have no walk-in who comes. It's only for that family. It's private. And it's like--it's like their home; they do whatever they want.

00:04:42

SR: So somebody reserves a night for his or her group or family. Do you have a minimum number of people who you'll cook for?

00:04:52

AT: I used to do like 40--50 people, but now I want to do maybe half, from 25 to 30.

00:04:58

SR: Okay, so if someone wanted to come with 10 that's not enough?

00:05:00

AT: Yeah, that's—oh yeah, I just find—. Like six people, if they want to come six people I'll do it.

00:05:07

SR: So you'll cook for six people on one night and then nobody else?

00:05:10

AT: Nobody else and it's only like a family--it's a family thing. You know my granddaughter, she works with me and my--my other member(s) of my family, they come if I need their help. They come with me.

00:05:24

SR: That's nice. What's the percentage of customers that you have who you already know?

00:05:29

AT: It's mostly people from out of town. I used to do bus tours. I really believe I did people from all over the world in this kitchen. And you know I do not advertise it; it's by mouth. But then I was in the *Better Homes and Garden* and this magazine goes all over the world. And *The Times-Picayune*, and then we did the Catholic paper that goes to every family in the Diocese.

00:06:03

SR: How long have you been doing this?

00:06:04

AT: Thirty-two years.

00:06:08

SR: And has it always been this format of private dining?

00:06:11

AT: Uh-huh, yes, ma'am, for 32 [years]. Only by reservation.

00:06:16

SR: Can you tell me a little bit about how--how and why you started doing this?

00:06:20

AT: Well I worked with my husband, I want to say about 20 years. We worked together. I worked with him on his boat, our boat. So after he sold the boat, you know I wanted to keep on working. So my son—this was a welding shop, and he moved to a bigger place, so he told me, “If you want to convert this into a kitchen, I’ll give you the building.” So that’s what I did. I converted this into a kitchen but I didn’t want to do like a restaurant, you know like—. I wanted to do something like reservation[s].

00:07:04

SR: Uh-hm, you must have been cooking for people already for him to have that idea.

00:07:11

AT: Uh, some—not like I'm cooking now but I guess it's all—. Like my mother, her family, they were great cooks, and I'm sure it's in the genes. So that's how I started. You know I didn't want to be doing—I wanted to do some work. So you know in the morning you—you know when you go to bed at night, the next morning you know you have to do this and that. And so that's how I feel, you know that it made my day, by working.

00:07:54

SR: Well what is, or was, your husband's name?

00:07:57

AT: David Doupe. German descended, the Doupes.

00:08:04

SR: Different kind of Cajun?

00:08:05

AT: Yeah, different. Yeah, very differently.

00:08:08

SR: Yeah, and is he still alive?

00:08:11

AT: No, ma'am, he passed away about 18 years ago.

00:08:14

SR: Oh. Was he from Galliano or was he from—?

00:08:18

AT: Yeah, Galliano. I want to say about a couple of miles from where I live.

00:08:24

SR: Okay. You mentioned a little bit earlier that you lived on Grand Isle for awhile. Where did you grow up?

00:08:30

AT: In this area, Galliano, and then when my husband—you know, working on the boat, so we stayed on Grand Isle for a while and we'd [commute] from going to Grand Isle to Galliano.

00:08:44

SR: What do you mean by working on the boats?

00:08:48

AT: Shrimping. So you know I knew quite—this is the reason I know quite a bit about seafood.

00:08:58

SR: Uh-hm. What was that life like? What were your days like?

00:09:03

AT: No one can take that away from you. You know what, like getting up early in the morning, the sunrise, the sunset, the dolphin, all different kinds of fish and all—it was an experience.

00:09:20

SR: I know it's very hard work but it sounds like you like—?

00:09:24

AT: It was hard, yeah, it was hard work. But I like—. Like over here in the kitchen, it's not easy. But I like—you know, I like my work and it's like a therapy when you work. You don't think about what's happening in the world and all. You know you have all set what you're doing. Your mind on cooking and all, so you don't think all about what's going on into the world right now.

00:09:52

SR: When you and your husband were shrimping, did you have small children then?

00:09:58

AT: They were teenagers.

00:10:03

SR: Would they come with you out on the boat?

00:10:04

AT: Sometimes they did, yeah. They--they still love to—you know they grew on the boat and they still like to fish. Yeah, you know they fish and all and they know a lot about the area. And I really believe we have the best fishing area, I think in the world. Grand Isle and around Fourchon and all in Louisiana. I think we live in a great state.

00:10:34

SR: I agree. I'm sure that you've seen a lot of changes in the fishing industry.

00:10:38

AT: Oh yeah. The economy, you know it's not good for the fishing industry now, especially for the shrimpers.

00:10:46

SR: Is that why your husband and you decided to sell the boat, or—?

00:10:51

AT: No, he wanted to retire. He was an age of retiring. So you know he retired; he helped a bit. You know he did the running groceries, this, and that and all whenever I needed things to be picked up.

00:11:06

SR: And when you were shrimping, it sounds like you would spend the night on the boat?

00:11:10

AT: Oh yeah, spend—yeah. The boat was equipped to spend the night on.

00:11:14

SR: So how many days might you be out?

00:11:16

AT: It depends. Sometimes four or five days, maybe a week.

00:11:22

SR: How would you keep the shrimp cool?

00:11:26

AT: The ice.

00:11:28

SR: And how many—what quantity of shrimp could you get?

00:11:31

AT: It depended. You know the shrimping depended what they had, if it was heavy or light or whatever—your catch.

00:11:40

SR: At the heaviest, what could the boat hold?

00:11:42

AT: I'm sure about 30—from 30 to 40 barrels.

00:11:51

SR: I'm not sure what that—

00:11:55

AT: I used to remember all that, but you know the barrel, I think it was like 210 a barrel; maybe 210 pounds.

00:12:06

SR: That is a lot of shrimp.

00:12:07

AT: Yes, it's a lot. It is.

00:12:08

SR: And then would you—

00:12:10

AT: After I caught the shrimp—I knew all the count of the shrimp. I don't know now, I still do work with shrimp, but you know like the small one, the 12-15, 21-25—they have all these counts.

00:12:24

SR: Right, the different sizes.

00:12:26

AT: Yeah, by the pound, yeah.

00:12:27

SR: Did you have to sort them into the different sizes on the boat?

00:12:32

AT: Some. We did maybe when they had the big, big, or the big colossal shrimp—when they were maybe 10 to the pound.

00:12:43

SR: Ten to the pound.

00:12:44

AT: Ten to the pound. Sometimes we caught—they were 5-6 to the pound. They were big like lobster.

00:12:53

SR: Really? And then where did you sell those? Did you sell them directly to the public or did you sell them to the dock?

00:12:58

AT: The dock.

00:13:01

SR: So you must have made some good connections?

00:13:05

AT: Well they had—you know we knew that person for a long time where we sold a lot of shrimp. Now it's different. They have to--to sell it, you know down to the people so they can make a living. It's very—[at] the dock, you hardly get any money.

00:13:22

SR: Right, and was that dock on Grand Isle?

00:13:24

AT: Grand Isle, yeah.

00:13:27

SR: What would you eat--cook for yourselves out on the boat?

00:13:31

AT: We had a refrigerator and all, you know. We did shrimp, fish—well it was so fresh from the water to the skillet or the—. You know the first day we always did étouffée, spaghetti étouffée. You know, like you break your spaghetti and not boil the spaghetti separately. We break it in the—what we did in the sauce.

00:13:58

SR: Oh can you describe that to me a little bit?

00:14:00

AT: You know like you make your tomato sauce, whatever you use, but we used the shrimp and the first shrimp from the trawl. You know we'd throw a trawl net and from that we peeled you know the quantity we wanted to put in it. So and we made the sauce and we add enough stock of water, so you break your spaghetti or you used the short one—you know whatever the one that you wanted—and you let it cook in there. It's like a sauce.

00:14:32

SR: So the—

00:14:32

AT: Top it with bread.

00:14:35

SR: So the seafood and the pasta are cooking in the sauce?

00:14:37

AT: Together, yeah.

00:14:40

SR: That would be your first meal?

00:14:42

AT: Yeah, the first meal--the very first meal and all the fish were so fresh you could fix that right away—fix it and it was still moving, the fish.

00:14:53

SR: Wow.

00:14:54

AT: That's the reason I'm spoiled for my shrimp. Different areas, different taste—the shrimp.

00:15:02

SR: Can you still tell when you get a batch in?

00:15:03

AT: Oh yeah, I can tell from the East or the West or wherever it comes from—or brackish water. The best one is the brackish water shrimp.

00:15:12

SR: Why is that?

00:15:14

AT: I really believe it's different. Maybe where the feed is different—you know what the shrimp feed on or the water, because it's like a gray. They're grayish color.

00:15:32

SR: What is the difference in flavor?

00:15:34

AT: The flavor, it tastes better. Sometimes the shrimp, they have like an iodine taste; so the little brackish [ones], they don't have that. You're making a gumbo so you got to have brackish shrimp. I put a pack of brackish--some of the brackish shrimp.

00:15:52

SR: Oh I can't wait. When you buy shrimp now, do you ask for specific kinds?

00:15:58

AT: I know where the trawl is--where they trawls, so I know where to get my shrimp. I don't get it like at the dock, or at the shed, or at the market. I get it from the--where they--I know their trawl is, the one that's--where they get their shrimp.

00:16:18

SR: So you buy from the actual shrimpers?

00:16:21

AT: Right, yes. That's where I buy it and I know it's a good quality.

00:16:31

SR: Right. When you were out on the boat, who--who were your children staying with?

00:16:37

AT: My children, with my family. But they were--they were old enough to get—yeah, high school, yeah.

00:16:49

SR: Yeah, I just want to say that if we need to pause this at all, that's fine. I can pause it if you need to.

00:16:55

AT: I think I'm going to go check what's cooking.

00:16:58

SR: Okay. Okay, I'm back with Miss Alzina. She was heating up some gumbo and some bread that she--homemade bread, and so now we're going to eat while we talk. And while we were sitting here I learned that her son now has a boat, so shrimping is sort of in the blood I think. How long has he had a boat?

00:17:26

AT: I want to say about five or six years, maybe longer. Time goes fast.

00:17:35

SR: Right. One thing I—and what is your son's name?

00:17:37

AT: Joey?

00:17:39

SR: Joey. I wanted to--I wanted to ask you before I knew about your son how the BP oil spill affected the shrimpers and the fishermen around here? And you were just telling me how--how his life changed for a few months. Can you tell me about that?

00:17:54

AT: Well his life changed because they closed most of the water where you could go trawling. So they couldn't go out, and BP came along with the "Vessel Of Opportunity" [program]. So many of the trawlers and the crabbers and the oystermen there worked for BP, which was money coming in, and I really believe BP treated them real good.

00:18:23

SR: What was he doing exactly?

00:18:26

AT: He was taking the men [to] work and bringing all the--the trash back. There were--they disposed it [at] some places.

00:18:37

SR: Uh-hm, and was he working like every day?

00:18:40

AT: Every day; they worked from 24/7.

00:18:45

SR: Wow, and now he's back on the water shrimping?

00:18:49

AT: Well shrimping is opening here in May so he'll go back fishing.

00:18:57

SR: Okay, that's very interesting. And so I guess for him, he had steady work even though he was out of work and he—you said he basically had a good experience?

00:19:07

AT: He had a very good experience. And most of them--it was a good experience money-wise because they were well paid.

00:19:18

SR: Right, okay. I need to talk about your gumbo, which we have here. *[Laughs]* You can eat a little bit while I'm talking if you want. So we're having a seafood gumbo—Is that what you call it? A seafood gumbo?—and Miss Alzina does not eat salt herself for health reasons but she put some oyster water in there that makes it naturally salty. And can you tell me how you developed your style of gumbo? Is it like your mother's?

00:19:56

AT: From generation to generation. We don't do like--you can see it's not--the roux is not heavy. Sometimes we use--I used about a tablespoon of flour, so but I use quite a bit of onion and I just sauté, sauté until it gets real—that real color. And then I do that the day before. So it takes time to do it, so the next day it's not as long. And I do--you can use--I don't use smoked sausage in my gumbo because it takes away some of the flavor of the seafood. So I use like pickled meat. And then I sauté that with the--the onion until the onion, you hardly can see the onion; the next day I use oyster water which I buy at the seafood market. And the oysters and the shrimp—I use brackish water shrimp and then the crabmeat, which the crabmeat I peel it myself. I peel the crab myself.

00:21:09

SR: Do you buy the crabs alive or already boiled?

00:21:12

AT: Alive and I boil it myself.

00:21:17

SR: That's some labor-intensive gumbo.

00:21:18

AT: Yeah, it is, uh-huh. It is.

00:21:22

SR: And I see you have some crab claws in there as well.

00:21:25

AT: Uh-hm, crab claws, and when you make a seafood gumbo it's expensive too because the oyster, it—you know oyster is expensive.

00:21:36

SR: The shrimp—do you buy those with the head on and everything and boil those?

00:21:40

AT: Yeah, head on, head on, and I peel the shrimp myself too. So it's a labor of love.

00:21:47

SR: You don't shuck your own oysters, do you?

00:21:49

AT: No. I used to but I don't anymore.

00:21:53

SR: So the only meat in here is pickled meat?

00:21:56

AT: Pickled meat.

00:21:59

SR: And so you sauté your onions until they're pretty golden brown, is that it?

00:22:03

AT: Golden brown and then I add a little bit of water to dissolve all that, the onion.

00:22:10

SR: At what point do you add the flour?

00:22:13

AT: It's already made—I make a roux and I keep it in the refrigerator. And I add just what—
just a small—about a tablespoon.

00:22:22

SR: A tablespoon of roux. I thought you didn't use roux but I guess—

00:22:26

AT: Sometimes, sometimes. I don't ever use roux, but like the seafood gumbo, sometimes you
have to use a little bit for the color.

00:22:34

SR: Oh just for the color, huh?

00:22:35

AT: Yeah, but it doesn't—it's a light gumbo. You can use—it's light.

00:22:41

SR: It's very light. I can't detect a roux thickening it.

00:22:45

AT: No, uh-uh.

00:22:47

SR: I think when I ate here one night you said that there was no roux in the gumbo.

00:22:53

AT: No.

00:22:54

SR: But sometimes you do it?

00:22:55

AT: Sometimes. You know when you make a big gumbo you can use a lot of onion but a small gumbo, it—it's too sweet. The onions are sweet.

00:23:07

SR: I see. What color is your roux?

00:23:10

AT: It's in-between. Not light and not dark, dark. It's in-between light and—. I want to say the color of a copper penny.

00:23:24

SR: Okay, so when you don't use a roux, do you think--well, do you think that using the roux changes the flavor at all?

00:23:33

AT: No, because you see you have all that water—oyster water. That's where your flavor comes from—from that oyster water.

00:23:45

SR: So when I ate here in December, was it basically the same gumbo?

00:23:52

AT: Basically, yeah. But usually I could use more onion and it like—onion, it thickens your gumbo.

00:24:02

SR: You don't use any celery or bell pepper?

00:24:03

AT: No celery, no bell pepper, no parsley, no green onion, none of that.

00:24:10

SR: Is that because you don't like those or—?

00:24:11

AT: No, because you know my family, that's the way they work--they cooked. Their time of cooking didn't have no supermarket or groceries and all. They had to raise or plant whatever, or raise their own meat and plant whatever vegetable they were using. So basically they used onion and some bell pepper; they used parsley, green onions, and all. But my family never put any of the pepper or the celery and all in their gumbo.

00:24:48

SR: No, huh.

00:24:50

AT: And their gumbo tastes good without all that other stuff.

00:24:55

SR: I think it probably has to do a lot to do with the freshness of the seafood here.

00:24:58

AT: Oh yeah, and then the—like I said the stock. If you use stock or oyster water or the stock from the shrimp.

00:25:08

SR: Did you use the stock from the shrimp in this one?

00:25:10

AT: No, no. I had some stock, but I preferred—I had enough oyster water to use the water. I had a gallon of oyster water, yeah, so I used that for the—. And I like the taste of the oyster water. It have a good flavor.

00:25:27

SR: Very good. But if you're making a bigger batch and you don't have enough oyster water—?

00:25:32

AT: I use—yeah I make that from—it depends where the shrimp come from. If they sweet, they have a sweet smell, I know I'll use--I'll make my own stock and I put it in the container in the

freezer. So when the shrimp is closed, the season is closed and it's not open, I have that shrimp stock.

00:25:59

SR: What if the shrimp aren't sweet? You don't make the stock?

00:26:03

AT: No, but I make it my business to get some good shrimp. *[Laughs]*

00:26:09

SR: How long will the shrimp be not in season?

00:26:11

AT: December until May—that's [when] the inside water is closed. Out in the Gulf so many miles it's open, but they're all—these types of boats, they don't go offshore. They stay inshore or the beach.

00:26:32

SR: So you can still get shrimp?

00:26:33

AT: Yeah, you still can get shrimp, oh yeah.

00:26:36

SR: The shrimp in here [the gumbo] are pretty small.

00:26:39

AT: Yeah, the brackish water shrimp, it's some small shrimp.

00:26:41

SR: Do they come with a shell on and everything?

00:26:45

AT: The shell, yeah, and you peel—I peel that all myself.

00:26:50

SR: I don't think I've ever peeled a shrimp that small. That's some work.

00:26:54

AT: Yeah, that's some work but my friend that was over here this morning, she told me, "Be sure to call when you have shrimp and you want me to come help you."

00:27:03

SR: That was Miss Pearl or Deborah?

00:27:05

AT: Deborah, yeah.

00:27:09

SR: When I arrived you had three friends visiting you, and one of them helps you frequently?

00:27:14

AT: Frequently, and they wanted to come and work this morning. But basically I did all the work before they came. [*Laughs*]

00:27:21

SR: They were a little disappointed they couldn't help you?

00:27:23

AT: Yeah, uh-huh, they wanted to chop.

00:27:26

SR: When they help you, do you pay them?

00:27:27

AT: Oh no. It's all free because what we do, when they help we don't charge the people. It's for the church and all so we don't charge. And they give their time; I give my time and the kitchen and everything—the expense and all—and they give their time.

00:27:46

SR: You were telling me that earlier. So how many times a year do you have the church here?

00:27:50

AT: Every seven months.

00:27:54

SR: Why is it that timing?

00:27:55

AT: Because it's—the parish has cut so many parish church[es], they have like priests in the deanery—like the deanery meeting. So they have so many priests and it's like they have, what, seven churches? More than seven churches, but it falls—like we have each our turn. And they close two months out of the year that they don't have the deanery. Besides that we take our turns; the parish takes their turn to do their--their—. So, but I offer to cook for them.

00:28:28

SR: So they have a meeting here?

00:28:30

AT: Yeah. No, they have the meeting at the church but they come—when they come, everything is ready for them to eat. So I don't cook at church; I prefer them coming here.

00:28:40

SR: How many are there?

00:28:41

AT: It depends. Sometimes we have between 12 and 20.

00:28:50

SR: So you do that for free. The women help you for free.

00:28:53

AT: Free, yeah. And they—the priests, they like to come over here because they have like a five-course meal.

00:29:02

SR: What did you cook them this last time?

00:29:05

AT: This last time I had for the appetizers, I want to say I had the lump crabmeat patties with—I top it with Brie cheese and I put it in the oven. And we do—I do the croutons and everything; it's all the bread, homemade. And we had the salad—watermelon. We had watermelon over greens. Yeah, it was different, and it was the sweet and the sour; it was good, a combination of the watermelon and the green. And we do our own dressing and all.

00:29:56

SR: What kind of dressing?

00:29:57

AT: We do the house—different dressings, but we did a special one. And what else? We had the soup; we had—I really believe we had the potato, the chunky potato soup, chunky potato soup with the ham. And then we had the whole Cornish hen, the whole Cornish hen with a grilled slice of fresh pineapple—grill it with the grill. We had—I always do cabbage. They love cabbage with pork. And then we had the fried rice. That's all—put all the food on the table. We had fresh lima beans and what? Lo mein, because some of them, you know they're foreigners, so we do some of their food sometimes. And what—I think we had another dish of something. I don't quite remember. We might have had the potatoes in the oven. You know we layer the potatoes and with parsley and green onion and we had the four kind of desserts. That's my—I love to do desserts.

00:31:20

So we had crème brûlée; we had walnut tart, pie; we had the chocolate cake and we had I think the coconut cake.

00:31:37

SR: That is a lot of cooking.

00:31:39

AT: Yeah, uh-huh. They like dessert so they have a choice with the dessert.

00:31:46

SR: Wow. Wow. A lot of that food doesn't sound particularly like traditional Cajun. There's a lot of creativity in your cooking.

00:31:56

AT: It is basically—like smothered cabbage. We have—Irish priests, they love cabbage, cabbage and potatoes, so I try to accommodate each priest. This is the reason I have so much food because you know like they're—we like our Cajun food. And I'm sure they like their type of food that they're basically—. And over here they don't—you know most of them don't cook their ways. Like we have priests from India that like curry, but another priest is from Malaysia. He likes curry. And sometimes I really bake him fish. You know they like it with the head on and all, just fix it and gut them and just stuff them whole. So it's—when I have a fish I like to do something like that.

00:32:48

And you know what I really like, too? I surprise my parish priests; I pack my bag—especially when my son brings me fresh seafood. I pack my bag and I--I ring the bell or knock at the door [and say], "I'm over here today cooking you a meal," and you know he--he gets excited. So he calls some of his priest friends to come and eat. And he always helps me. You know in the kitchen he helps me—wants to do this and that. I guess they appreciate what I'm doing. So I cook them a meal and then I pack my bag and I come back home.

00:33:24

SR: You just surprise them?

00:33:25

AT: Yeah, I surprise them. I ring the bell and I have my bag you know with all my stuff.

00:33:30

SR: That's so great. Well I noticed that on your shelf you have a lot of Asian ingredients.

00:33:37

AT: Yes. He gave me some of the ingredients.

00:33:41

SR: The Malaysian priest?

00:33:43

AT: The Malaysian priest, yes.

00:33:45

SR: And how do you know how to cook some of the curries and lo mein and Malaysian-style fish?

00:33:50

AT: Basically, you know, it's like Cajun because basically they use the same—they start, like we start [cooking] Cajun with the onion, pepper, celery. And then they add that extra—that curry. And people travel all over and they bring me all that—the herb, like the curry. They go somewhere—saffron. I know all—they bring me that. They bring me those ingredients.

00:34:17

SR: And then they describe to you how to cook it?

00:34:19

AT: No, I know how to cook it.

00:34:22

SR: Do you research in books?

00:34:23

AT: Uh-huh, and I have an herb garden for about 20 years. So I know you know basically—but basically I use the herbs that we use around here. Well I use cilantro and this and that, you know. I like the taste of cilantro. So, but they have so many different kinds of herbs.

00:34:47

SR: Is that your herb garden in the truck?

00:34:50

AT: That, you know that little truck is sentimental. When my daddy passed away I didn't want to sell the truck so I told them to bring the truck over here. You know it was in running condition. But now it's not anymore. So what--at Wal-Mart I got 50 sacks of dirt and I poured it in the truck and then I planted all the—you know I have chives and thyme. So I plant it; when I need some I just walk out and whatever I need I just pick. It's fresh.

00:35:23

SR: That was your daddy's truck?

00:35:24

AT: I didn't want to sell it. I could have sold it many times but I didn't want to. I'm a sentimental person. And I wanted to keep what he had.

00:35:34

SR: Uh-hm.

00:35:34

AT: My daddy—you know all that land belonged to him. He worked for \$1 a day. And he stayed on the oyster reef 30 days—27 days—out of the month and he had three days to come home. He stayed 27 days, \$1 a day, so that was like \$30 a month and he bought all that. You know all that land he bought.

00:36:02

SR: What land do you mean?

00:36:04

AT: Over here where we all built—all my family, we—it's all my family, we live on this street.

00:36:09

SR: And he bought all that on \$1 a day?

00:36:12

AT: Dollar a day.

00:36:15

SR: How many children did he have?

00:36:18

AT: Three.

00:36:18

SR: Did he complain about the hard work?

00:36:21

AT: No, uh-uh. I think I'm almost like him. I'm a workaholic, so I really believe you know I inherited that from his gene.

00:36:31

SR: Uh-hm, I think so. We were talking when we weren't recording about your work ethic and how you don't stop.

00:36:42

AT: Yeah, like I used to cut grass—I was still 80--81, I was cutting seven yards of grass. So my son, one day he put his foot down and said, "You're not cutting all these yards." So he sent someone once a week to cut for me.

00:36:59

SR: This was last year?

00:36:59

AT: Last year, yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:37:03

SR: And this was in addition to running the kitchen and—?

00:37:07

AT: Yeah, running the kitchen. When I wanted to get out, that's what I did for entertainment. I'd go cut the grass.

00:37:13

SR: Do you miss it or are you happy for—?

00:37:15

AT: No, really I think I miss it.

00:37:16

SR: You do?

00:37:17

AT: Because the birds, you listen and you hear the birds, and I love to hear the birds sing and the smell of the grass and your work—you know when you go up and down you see your work that you do where you cut the--where the grass is cut and where it's not. So you know I really liked to work in the dirt. You feel the dirt. I don't wear gloves; you know I want to feel the feeling of the dirt.

00:37:47

SR: That's similar to cooking I think.

00:37:48

AT: Yeah, uh-hm.

00:37:50

SR: I know that you are a very religious person. Do you think—is work to you a form of prayer?

00:37:58

AT: I believe so. And I—you know when you're sick, or you know when—. I had an experience with death and I really believe that a person that is deep in their faith, that they come out better than if you don't believe. That's my belief.

00:38:20

SR: Because you—?

00:38:21

AT: I had an experience with death. Before surgery I saw in myself—. I had one kidney and it was blocked, which—I was working. I was preparing food for 25 people. But something hit me and said, "Go get blood work." So I went and I got--I got blood work at 4 o'clock. I had a telephone—I was working, setting everything. I had a telephone call. The doctors were calling: "You have to go to the hospital right away. You need surgery."

00:38:56

So five minutes after, they called back—. You know I guess I ignored that. "You're not—you're still there? You're dying. You have to go to the hospital." So it happened that a friend—. I called, I said, "Let me call my sister-in-law." So I called and she thought I had cut myself or something. She hurried up and she came over, so I told her. Then it happened that one

of my friends that lived about three or four miles from here, he happened to come pick up something over here, so he saw and he said, "Something is wrong." So I told him.

00:39:37

And I—my family, they all work about half an hour [away]. He said, "You have to be in half an hour in Houma; the doctors are waiting for you." So he said, "Get in my truck. We're going to get in my car when we get—." So he called his wife. She said, "I'm going to take her." He said, "You don't have time to take her. We have to be in Houma in half an hour." So you know I was calm and all and driving over there. So they called you know my family [and said] that they were taking me to Houma. So when I got there they had a wheelchair. I said, "What? I can walk." They--they said, "No. You can't." I said, "Really? Well I'm really sick, huh?"

00:40:19

So the doctor was there. He came and said, "If I can't unblock your kidney you're--you're going to die." He said, "In two hours your body is shutting down." So when they put me--they got me ready and all that and I signed myself. But before two of my--both of my granddaughters [came]. I signed myself. When I started someone came. I still can hear that voice. "Do not worry; everything is going to be okay." And you know he--he unblocked the kidney. But the—it's a stone that had blocked the passage.

00:41:07

So you know I got better. But I think it's the will—God's will. Everything that happens, you know it's all God's will. That someone said, "Go get blood work."

00:41:19

SR: Were you feeling poorly?

00:41:22

AT: No, uh-huh. “Go get blood work,” and I had 25 people that was coming.

00:41:30

SR: But you listened?

00:41:31

AT: I listened and I shut the—I shut everything and I went to the doctor and I said, “I need to have blood work.” And they just, you know they—. So they did the blood [work] and then at 4:00 I had the telephone call. If it had been on a Friday, you don’t get your blood results before the Monday. So it happened to be on a Tuesday.

00:41:53

SR: When was this? How many years ago?

00:41:55

AT: About 10 years ago.

00:42:00

SR: So you only have one kidney because one got taken?

00:42:04

AT: Taken with a stone in it. That was about 35 years ago.

00:42:09

SR: Wow. Well you were telling me earlier that you have very low blood pressure but you don't—you can't tell a difference in how you feel.

00:42:18

AT: I had—

00:42:21

SR: And I said your body is a machine.

00:42:22

AT: Yeah, you know I really have energy. At my age, you know most of them aren't going to the grocery. I go to the doctor, they're walking walkers; go to church, they walk with walkers. And you know [at] the--the grocery store they're walking with the cart. And I'm pushing my cart and I look; you know I say I'm blessed that I can do what I can. You know and I remember. I can put a menu in my head like that. Do a five-course meal and put it in my head like that and just go about it what--what I need done.

00:43:02

SR: Well one thing that I noticed was—I've called you a couple times. I called you when I was making a reservation to come here and eat, and then I called you to make an appointment for the

interview, and I couldn't—. Were you writing it down? I couldn't tell if you were writing down the time or if you were just remembering it in your head.

00:43:22

AT: I remember.

00:43:24

SR: I felt like you weren't writing it down.

00:43:26

AT: No, uh-uh. I remember. You know it's in my mind. It's a gift I'm sure.

00:43:35

SR: Do you keep a calendar anywhere?

00:43:37

AT: Yeah, I have a calendar.

00:43:39

SR: At your home or here at the restaurant?

00:43:41

AT: I have one over here and one at the house. I have the same telephone number at the house and here and I don't have no waiting call, no cell phone, no computer. I have my telephone. I'm sure it's over 60 years old. It's a dial telephone. You know you have to dial. This is the telephone that I use and you know they—I think my kids, they get upset.

00:44:09

SR: Because they want you to have a cell phone?

00:44:11

AT: A cell phone, you know when I travel. When I go to Houma, or wherever I go, I don't have no—. They say, "If something—." Well [I say], "I'm going to stop." [They say] "You can't do that no more, stop and—." "Oh well," I say, "If they want to kill me or whatever I'm just going to—kill me right now and I'm there because that's it. I'm not going nowhere with you." And I say, "It will be my time." That's how I feel. I don't want no cell phone. I don't want no waiting call. After I work I don't want to go home and [be] answering calls you know. That's not my type of work.

00:44:49

SR: Right, you—

00:44:50

AT: I think they're miserable. People that have cell phones, they're always—people call them. I see my friend, I know when they come to work they have cell phones. Everybody, they're

always calling them, always calling, calling them for little things, you know, that you can do without.

00:45:10

SR: That's true. So why are you—do you travel a lot to find your ingredients?

00:45:16

AT: Uh, not anymore. I used to--I travel all over the country you know when I was younger to experience different types of cooking and all.

00:45:29

SR: Where do you get--where do you do your grocery shopping for the dinners?

00:45:33

AT: Most of—it depends. Sometimes in New Orleans, Houma, like—or in the area if they have it. But most of the seafood, I get it here because I know where it comes from.

00:45:43

SR: But you have to go to New Orleans for things?

00:45:45

AT: Sometimes, we—you know special things. But I don't go. My granddaughter or my children, they take care of that.

00:45:54

SR: Tell me about your granddaughter. We were talking about that.

00:45:58

AT: I have two granddaughters. One of them is--is more interested in cooking than the other one. They both cook, but one of them, I think it's in her blood. You know she comes and helps me over here.

00:46:13

SR: What is her name?

00:46:13

AT: Jenny.

00:46:15

SR: Could you spell that?

00:46:17

AT: J-e-n-n-y, and she—I'm teaching her how to do, you know, like the chocolate cake. When she goes on the auction block for quite a bit of money and when we auction at church—. And the walnut tart, the bread, I'm teaching her how to do the bread. And she likes--she likes to cook. She's a good cook.

00:46:42

SR: And you were saying that she might take over this business for you.

00:46:46

AT: I want to--I want to give her the kitchen. I want to give her the kitchen. Everything I have in the kitchen, I don't want her to get me a red copper cent for it. It comes from my heart that I'm giving her everything that I own over here.

00:47:02

SR: Does she want to take over this business?

00:47:06

AT: Yes, uh-huh, she does. And the business is established. She can—you know she can do whatever she wants. If she wants to do what I'm doing—. Maybe she doesn't like that, you know. It's different person.

00:47:18

SR: What kind of work does she do now? Does she work with food?

00:47:22

AT: Yeah, she works with food. She went to a food show this week from one of the--the wholesale people wherever they buy. So they have a business that's open 24 hours at [Port] Fourchon; 24 hours a day.

00:47:39

SR: They're cooking food 24 hours a day?

00:47:40

AT: They open 24 hours. They have lunch Monday through Friday, and then on Saturday and Sunday they have—like they have a buffet Monday through Friday.

00:47:50

SR: Have you taught her how to make your gumbo?

00:47:52

AT: Yeah, she knows now what I use for my gumbo because her son, her little son helps—. You know she went--she went to school, so I helped baby-sit him. And he was kind of finicky and you had to strain his gumbo and this and that and all. And he always said, "Mama, your gumbo does not taste like Maw's gumbo." So you know I told her, I said, "Jenny, they have secrets to gumbo." So you know she really—she learned how to do it.

00:48:24

SR: You had to strain. What were you straining out of his gumbo?

00:48:27

AT: He only wanted the sauce. He didn't want like the onion and all of that. He--he ate only the sauce and the rice. He didn't eat the meat.

00:48:38

SR: Or the seafood?

00:48:39

AT: No, he doesn't eat seafood at all. He's 17. Seventeen, and he's six-four.

00:48:52

SR: And he got that big not eating gumbo really?

00:48:54

AT: No.

00:48:57

SR: I don't want you to give away any secrets you don't want to give away, but with your gumbo, what would you--what would you say is your biggest secret?

00:49:07

AT: The time, the love. When you make a gumbo, I don't go work somewhere else in the house. I stay next to it. You know I do things around where my--where I'm cooking my gumbo, like chop stuff or do whatever so your onion don't burn and so it's not bitter. And every once in a while add a little bit of stock, a little bit of saltwater or whatever. So until it dissolves all the--the onions and all, and I do that the day before. Sometimes, you know, it takes me three, four hours to do that but I'm doing something else, so—. You know I don't stay always stirring the pot. Put it on a low, low heat.

00:49:56

SR: It takes you three or four hours to do the onions?

00:50:00

AT: Yeah, do the onions and the—yeah so it dissolves everything and put my meat in it. So and the next day I finish my gumbo.

00:50:06

SR: So do the onions get real, real dark?

00:50:09

AT: Yeah, dark and you know you hardly can see they have onion.

00:50:14

SR: That is a lot of time. That's the--that's kind of like how some people spend that much time making their roux, right?

00:50:22

AT: Yeah. And a roux, you always can make it and put it in the refrigerator for—it can only stay for a month. So what I do you know when I have roux, I always put it in the refrigerator. When I do some stuff, you know sometimes—but very seldom I cook with roux now. When I make like a chicken stew or a pork stew, I'll do the roux—or a shrimp stew.

00:50:50

SR: Is that typical in this area, to not use roux very much?

00:50:53

AT: Not too many people do not use roux. Uh-uh, not many families; just a few families that I know.

00:51:02

SR: And why do you think that you have that?

00:51:04

AT: Because my mother-in-law and my mother didn't use roux. And you know that's--that's the way they cooked. It took them a long time.

00:51:15

SR: Because the flavor came from somewhere else?

00:51:17

AT: The flavor came and very—not too many ingredients.

00:51:21

SR: Well that's the--the thing about your gumbo, is that it doesn't seem like there are very many ingredients but the flavor is so deep. And I don't see any onions.

00:51:33

AT: No, because you know what? I strain all—I didn't strain; I cook it--cook it down.

00:51:41

SR: So the second day when your--your onions and your meats are together, how long does it take to finish it?

00:51:48

AT: Maybe 35--40 minutes. Because I don't cook my shrimp. You know I let it boil, and you know it'll pick up the flavor. When I put my stocks, and then I put my shrimp, and the last thing I do is put the crabmeat and filé a little bit. Use real filé from people that I know that do filé.

00:52:17

SR: Tell me about that.

00:52:19

AT: No, it's very seldom you can see. It's the--the older people that did that, but most of them are passed away. And that was a labor of love, too, because they had to pick the leaf—. I knew one where I bought my filé, picked the leaf, put it in the brown paper bag, and go in the attic and tie it so it can dry. Then he did his filé.

00:52:44

SR: And what did he—so, we're talking about leaves of the sassafras tree correct?

00:52:48

AT: Sassafras, yeah. He had a sassafras tree and it was a labor of love because you have to pick the leaves, dry them, and then after that you have to make your filé.

00:53:01

SR: How did he make it?

00:53:03

AT: I'm sure he used a process or a grinder, because it was very fine. And you know the flavor was deep, like you couldn't put too much because it—. And you know I used to buy four, five, or six jars whenever I bought it so it lasted a whole year. It was--the flavor was deeper than what

you get at the grocery. Because I'm sure maybe what you get at the grocery must mix it with something else.

00:53:35

SR: It's not that flavorful.

00:53:35

AT: No, uh-uh.

00:53:38

SR: Where did you get the filé that you used today?

00:53:39

AT: It's a man that came at my house and he brought me about a dozen jars that I bought from him.

00:53:48

SR: Is he from the area?

00:53:49

AT: He's from the area, yeah.

00:53:52

SR: And that filé is very flavorful as well.

00:53:53

AT: Yeah, it is, uh-huh.

00:53:53

SR: And it's a lot greener.

00:53:55

AT: Yeah, green, and you saw how fine it is. I think it's more work than what they ask for—you know more work. Like crochet is more work than what you can get.

00:54:09

SR: How much does a jar of filé cost?

00:54:14

AT: About between \$2.50--\$3, something like that.

00:54:20

SR: That's nothing.

00:54:23

AT: No, that's what I'm saying.

00:54:25

SR: Yeah.

00:54:27

AT: You know like it's a labor of love. You don't get that much money.

00:54:31

SR: Now when we were here eating for dinner, I--I don't think that there was any filé in the gumbo. You had it on the side.

00:54:38

AT: Uh-huh, on the side. It depends on how much—some people like it a lot and some of them don't. So I put it on the side.

00:54:45

SR: Right, so if you're cooking for a large group you don't add the filé?

00:54:49

AT: Just a little touch of it because it picks some flavor.

00:54:55

SR: And if you see people not adding their own filé, does that upset you?

00:54:58

AT: No, uh-uh. They do—after it's cooked they do whatever they want here. If they want to take over they can finish cooking, too. Do not bother me.

00:55:07

SR: I noticed when we ate here that you were very relaxed about people just mingling and walking into your kitchen. You aren't territorial.

00:55:14

AT: No, and they want to take over to stir they can. Yeah, I really tell you it do not bother me. You know, like I'm a calm person. So I don't have to take pills; I don't have to take this and that. I don't have to do nothing like that—you know like for nervous. I'm just calm.

00:55:38

SR: It was your idea to make gumbo that night that we came. Do you make gumbo frequently?

00:55:46

AT: They request gumbo as an appetizer. And you know they like—people serve themselves three or four times.

00:55:56

SR: Yeah, I know. We should say for the record that when you have these dinners, it's a serve-yourself line.

00:56:02

AT: Serve yourself, and if you want to go three or four times it's up to you—you know as much as you can eat.

00:56:11

SR: We also had requested the seafood lasagna, which I imagine is also a labor of love because there is a lot of crabmeat in there.

00:56:23

AT: Because I peel my own crab, and peeling crab is--is not an easy job. It takes me quite a—you know because I don't want no shell in it. I'm very particular. Even the way the thing—well my friend told you the way they have to chop a certain way. So I'm particular for it. Everyone have a different way of doing things, but when they come onboard they respect my way.

00:56:51

SR: Your helpers?

00:56:51

AT: Yeah, they do. They laugh but they--they respect and I think they learn; they learn a lot.

00:57:01

SR: Right. How many crabs does it take to make lasagna?

00:57:06

AT: I use—where I buy my crab you have to have friends. Where I buy my stuff you know you don't bribe them. You have to have friends. So I'll get the large--the big select crabs. You saw how the big claws are, so a big crab, and I'm sure with about a dozen you get a pound of crabmeat. And you pay like \$2--\$2.50 for a crab, the large crab. And then I boil it myself. I know because I don't put nothing in it, you know just the water, so you add your other ingredients when you do whatever with your lasagna. But that--while you're creating that lasagna, it's a good dish.

00:57:58

SR: Where did you learn how to make that?

00:57:59

AT: Basically myself. You--you experiment with food and you learn a lot. I make mistakes, I know, but you know I write--you know I write it down on tablets so the ingredients that you put, the amount I know, so you don't forget.

00:58:18

SR: So you keep your own cookbooks? I saw a stack of notebooks.

00:58:21

AT: Uh-huh, yeah, I buy composition. I buy composition when it gets—you know during the school year when they start in August, it's on special. I got maybe 20--25 compositions, and I just jot my recipe. Because once upon a time when I was younger I went by the older people, their ways of cooking, and didn't measure. That's how I learned how to do bread from the old people. They did their bread almost every other day. You know they didn't buy bread, so they learned. That was their work, the older generation, older than me—they worked, those people. You know they--they labored.

00:59:08

So even you know the garden—the garden is not an easy job. And they don't get enough money, the farmers, for what they produce. And all these--all the people—. And then they had, some of them had three, four, maybe ten kids. They never complained. They didn't have no washing machine, nothing at all, and they were cooks. They knew how to cook with hardly no ingredients. What they had, that's what they put and learned how to feed a large family. So I learned. I went by their house. I took my composition with me and I jot down what they—you know basically jotted down, and then I could do the recipe. I knew what they put in it.

00:59:58

Like their lima beans, I know they hardly have two--three ingredients and it's good. The lima beans, I know all that with their green beans. I know they don't add all that extra—what they have on the shelf now, the grocery shelf, all these blending ingredients. So some of them, their family passed away and they call me for their--for their recipe.

01:00:28

SR: So these were just people who you grew up around?

01:00:30

AT: No, people that I knew, older people that I went to their house. Like their oyster beignet. I never ate a good oyster beignet like that and it happened one day. She came over here and a few months after she passed away. She said, "I want to write down my oyster beignet recipe; I want to give it to you." And you know the other day her granddaughter, she called me. She said, "You have my grandma's—?" "Yes, I have your grandma's oyster beignet." And I said you know I said that is the oyster beignet that I [ever] ate.

01:01:08

SR: I've never even heard of an oyster beignet.

01:01:10

AT: Oh it's so good, the oyster beignet. So you know you—we do it sometimes when we have white beans or red beans. I know it's good.

01:01:23

SR: You're saying beignet like the fried dough?

01:01:26

AT: Yeah. You add the oysters and then your flour and all the other ingredients that you have, but the flavor is good. It's--it's good. Well it's like popcorn.

01:01:40

SR: Well how little—how big are they?

01:01:40

AT: They're big, but popcorn—you know when you eat one you want to eat—. So it depends on the scoop you want to use to scoop them out. And you can do the crabmeat like that. You know the lump crabmeat, what I used to do? The big crab when we used to trawl. I boiled the crab. I took out the lump of the crab. It was big. But I kept the little—not too break it, the leg; I kept that and you know I passed it in the batter and deep-fried that. You know it was out of this world. So it was—you know I had to do things with my time on the boat when we weren't working. So all these things you know I experienced with all the fish and the crab. But the lump crabmeat there, that was some good eating.

01:02:41

SR: I bet. Yeah, I bet you did learn a lot cooking on the boat, about cooking with seafood.

01:02:47

AT: You know I had the time and it was so fresh, the seafood.

01:02:50

SR: Right, it's inspiring. Have you thought about writing a cookbook?

01:02:57

AT: Well I have two cookbooks. I have enough recipes to do two or three more cookbooks. I experienced a lot with shrimp, with different meat that I mix together. You know it tastes good; it's good.

01:03:12

SR: Meat and shrimp together?

01:03:13

AT: Meat and shrimp, like especially chicken shrimp, it—you know the taste is good.

01:03:21

SR: Well have you done a cookbook before?

01:03:24

AT: I have two cookbooks.

01:03:24

SR: I didn't know that.

01:03:25

AT: Yeah, *Cajun's Joy* and *Cooking*—. When my husband had open heart surgery I did *Cooking for Life* and we did a strict diet. My cholesterol came to 97 and I lost about 50 pounds doing that—you know cooking healthy.

01:03:52

SR: Are they--are your cookbooks in print now?

01:03:55

AT: It is, uh-huh, but I don't take care of that no more. I didn't want to bother with that no more. My son took that over. I said, "Do whatever you want." You know I don't want to—I guess I didn't want the trouble.

01:04:09

SR: Where can I buy your cookbooks?

01:04:11

AT: I don't know where he's put them to sell. It's good not to have all—you know that problem.

01:04:21

SR: Right, so you have the healthy one, and what's the other one?

01:04:22

AT: It's the *Cajun*. The *Cajun* is mostly people that I went at their house and pick—. I don't know how many printing we've been having with the *Cajun Joy*. The old, old people, their recipes—

01:04:40

SR: Is the oyster beignet in there?

01:04:41

AT: No. She gave me that after I did the thing. Then I do the black-eyed jambalaya peas. I did it for that group. They went crazy over the black-eyed—even the chef wanted it so I gave him the recipe; you know I gave him the recipe. You know you're starting your restaurant and all. It would be unkind of me not to give you that. So he pulled a stool and he came out and sit over there; so he jot it down. I said, "You can serve that with your seafood."

01:05:15

SR: Where did you learn that?

01:05:16

AT: Well you know, generations [ago] they used to do that. But I did it where—now they don't want to take time to cook. They did it with the dried--dried black-eyed peas. But I bought the jalapeno canned--jalapeno canned black-eyed peas. So I bought that and I mixed it and you know I just put basically like you do a dressing. But I added the black-eyed [peas] and I cut smoked sausage and very—about pea-sized so it mixed with the peas and all. It was a hit, that, yeah.

01:05:58

SR: I bet. So you're talking about the black-eyed peas that come in the can with the jalapeno?

01:06:01

AT: The jalapeno, yeah. You know what I'm talking about. So that's what I bought. I said, "Let's do that," because people—they want short—. They don't want all these long recipes no more. You know they want something—and I don't blame them. They work. When you—you don't feel like cooking when you get home after your day's work. So you want something real fast. So that's—it takes about maybe an hour to do.

01:06:27

SR: Do you cook for yourself when you're not working?

01:06:28

AT: Oh yeah. I don't eat out. All these restaurants and fast-food, I've never been to these. Like McDonald's and Shoney's, I've never been there.

01:06:38

SR: Good.

01:06:38

AT: Never, never been—very seldom I eat out.

01:06:45

SR: For tonight, for example, what will you eat? Gumbo?

01:06:49

AT: No. You know what I eat? I love—that's my favorite food is a sandwich. But I toast a piece of bread and I'll eat mostly turkey meat. And I have to choose where, —you know I have no salt in it. Well they have sodium but just a small percent, maybe 11--10-percent. So you know I have to watch my sodium. It's not easy to do but you know you got—you have to read labels now.

01:07:20

SR: So you have a sandwich, turkey sandwich?

01:07:22

AT: I don't know if I—I might eat cereal. I like cereal like that from dry. It depends, you know, how hungry I am.

01:07:32

SR: So I know that—

01:07:34

AT: And I don't eat between meals.

01:07:36

SR: No?

01:07:36

AT: I can stay all day long without eating and it--it doesn't affect my body.

01:07:42

SR: You have an amazing system.

01:07:46

AT: When I went this morning, the lady who drew my blood, she started--she said, "Let me tell you, you're an amazing woman." You know it made my day when she told me that. You know it felt good that—. She said, "You are an amazing woman," because they know—the area knows about me.

01:08:10

SR: Well I--I imagine that you have a lot of regulars from town or from around the area. Do you have like weekly—you know people who come in weekly or monthly?

01:08:25

AT: Monthly, I have people who come. I have a group that's been coming—men—for 32 years. Once a month they come.

01:08:33

SR: Are they friends or are they part of a group?

01:08:35

AT: No, they're in the bank business.

01:08:39

SR: Bankers. Oh, okay.

01:08:42

AT: Yeah, Board members, so they come after their meeting. They come over here and eat. It-- they are like family. They--you know they know every—they know all the kitchen; they know everything. And then you know yes, you know they talk, shoot the bull and this and that. I do my work and when they're ready—whenever; I don't tell them. Whenever they want to leave they leave. And you know they talk—you know how men are—they talk politics and this and that I know. So they do not bother me. I don't listen to most of—you know I do my work.

01:09:17

SR: Do they eat different things every month or do they want the same thing?

01:09:22

AT: No, they want different things. But since I'm open 32 years I never missed a group making bread.

01:09:34

SR: You always make bread?

01:09:34

AT: I always make fresh bread, you know from the oven.

01:09:38

SR: Did your mother do that?

01:09:39

AT: Yeah, my mother, uh-huh. The best bread that I ate that I still—you know you remember when you eat something, it stays on your mind? I did the Centennial. It was 200 years and I helped—I did the bread. They had called me if I wanted to take in charge of the Centennial with the bread. And a man and I, we did an oven, outdoor oven. We worked—you know we did an outdoor oven to bake the bread in it. That's the best bread that I ate. Now most of the people had outdoor ovens, you know in the olden days; they didn't have no--no thermometer, this and that. They just—the bread, the crust; I still have that taste in my mouth.

01:10:27

SR: Did you make the outdoor oven or did that exist?

01:10:30

AT: A man and I, we did the outdoor oven. We had a picture and we—[it] basically told you what to do.

01:10:37

SR: Was that the Centennial for this town?

01:10:39

AT: Centennial you know for Chénrière. [Interviewer's note: a hurricane hit Chénrière Caminada in 1893, killing half of the town's inhabitants.] You know you remember the—you read about it I'm sure—the storm and all that killed all these people there so many years ago. And it was the Centennial there. So we did—you know every group had a different things to take—you know, be in charge of. And we did the bread and we sold the bread.

01:11:06

SR: When you work, you make a lot of things that take a lot of time—the bread, the gumbo, your walnut tart. Do you—it's very quiet in here. Do you listen to the radio or watch TV?

01:11:20

AT: I listen to the talk show. They have a talk show around the area, so that's how I get my news. You know I don't go nowhere. I go to church, go to the grocery—but you pick a lot of gossip from the grocery, and sometimes in church, too. So but I go—when I go to church, I go to church about—I'll stay about three hours in church. I go to church early, early and I lead the rosary on the 10 o'clock Mass, and I go at 8:30 in the morning. So you know we do the rosary

about 25 minutes before it's time for the Mass. So you know it's quiet. I'm by myself. So yesterday they had a man that was there and he helped me with the rosary. I led the rosary and he did some of the—

01:12:15

SR: Some of the what?

01:12:17

AT: The rosary, the beads.

01:12:21

SR: I think one of your friends was saying that—do you make rosaries?

01:12:24

AT: They make—she makes the rosaries. Deborah makes the rosaries and Patty, too, makes the rosaries. Deborah do beautiful work. That's—I get all my, you know Catholic stuff from her—rosary and all. That I do.

01:12:41

SR: So you listen to the radio as you work? So do I.

01:12:46

AT: Yeah. You do that?

01:12:47

SR: Yeah, in the kitchen I listen to the radio.

01:12:48

AT: Yeah, I listen to the radio and talk shows and they gossip. You know they gossip, so—and they call in you know. They call in. People call; they call for no reason at all.

01:13:01

SR: Do you ever call in?

01:13:02

AT: No. Sometimes when the herbs—the man who does the garden show, sometimes he doesn't know about the herbs. It's just—I want to tell him, but you know I have experience, so he-- sometimes he doesn't know so I call in and I tell him what to do with herbs and all and how to take care of them.

01:13:24

SR: Right. So is that the radio show out of New Orleans that you listen to?

01:13:29

AT: Over here in Larose.

01:13:33

SR: On your typical week, do you have a dinner every night?

01:13:39

AT: No, not—I used to but I want to work about maybe three--three or four days out of the week. I don't want to every day, yeah. You know what I want to do? I like to crochet. I like to read, and you know if I work I can't do that. I'm tired.

01:13:55

SR: What do you like to read?

01:13:59

AT: Mysteries. I like to read. You know the time that I wanted to live, it was in the 1800s. I love to read about the 1800 and 1700. I know how people struggled and how their life—. When I had my cookbook, I sent a cookbook to Alaska. I received—a few weeks after I received a spoon in the 1800s, their name was Alzina. “Alzina” on the spoon. They wrote a letter. They said, “This spoon belongs to you.” It was in the 1800—that's the time I wanted to live. “This spoon belongs to you, so I'm mailing you this spoon.” And you know I still have the spoon. It's still wrapped.

01:14:53

SR: Who sent you that?

01:14:54

AT: I don't know. Somebody from Alaska sent me that.

01:14:57

SR: Were they customers here?

01:14:58

AT: No, uh-uh. It's weird, huh?

01:15:03

SR: Where did you get your name? It's such a pretty name.

01:15:05

AT: My mother, her best friend, her name was Alzina, and she died. She was very young. And when my—when I was born, that's you know what she wanted to name me, her friend's name.

01:15:19

SR: What was your mother's name?

01:15:23

AT: Anna, like the Mother of Mary.

01:15:28

SR: Uh-hm. I wanted to go back to gumbo for a minute. Do you ever make another kind of gumbo?

01:15:35

AT: Yeah, chicken, okra. Okra gumbo. Something with seafood or with chicken. The okra—when we use okra, it's only okra. And the okra, you got to smother it. We smother it. The Cajuns smother it, smother okra, smother it to death. You know a long, long time. But now I've learned a way that I put it in the oven so I don't have to stir it as often. You have different ways now, technology that you learn from. Their ways—you know it was wood. But I want a wood stove.

01:16:12

SR: You want one?

01:16:14

AT: I want--I want to cook on a wood stove. That's how they cooked, on a wood stove. They put like their soups simmering all day. And then they had like a little oven there [where] they put their bread. My--my parents, I know they cooked on a wood stove.

01:16:31

SR: In your childhood home?

01:16:31

AT: Yeah, so you know and the--the food, I don't know what, but it tastes--it tastes good, better than the the oven. You know now you have the--the temperature and this and that I know with the oven. You put it--if you want 300 degrees, 350 or whatever; they didn't have that at that time.

01:16:51

SR: Right.

01:16:53

AT: I don't think they had thermometers even. You know it was by the look, the feel, and the knowledge. They were—you know many of these people, they never went to school but they knew what they were doing with their hands. My mother was a very intelligent person. She did the trawl, you know for the trawlers that trawled.

01:17:17

SR: She made the nets?

01:17:19

AT: Yeah, the net by hand. She crocheted. She did flowers for All Saint' Day—you know the wreaths and all that. She did all that.

01:17:31

SR: You mean like with artificial flowers?

01:17:33

AT: Yeah.

01:17:36

SR: So she was a real artist like you are?

01:17:37

AT: You know what? The paper that you buy, the crepe paper, I remember she used to buy it. I don't know if they have now—

01:17:49

SR: Crepe paper?

01:17:50

AT: I know she'd color that a different color and then you know she'd turn and she'd make flowers with it with wires and all and it was like roses and all.

01:18:00

SR: So you got a lot of your--your skills from her, and your talent?

01:18:04

AT: She—yeah. She--she was an intelligent person. No education, and she taught catechism, too. And this I learned: I will never enter a side door when I go to church. I was taught [to] enter

by the front door because when you go in, you face the tabernacle; the side door, you face—but when you enter you walk up to your tabernacle. And I always—I was taught like that. And she taught catechism in French. Now you know I say my prayers; I know some of the French, but I forgot. You want me to sing you that little song I know?

01:18:48

[Singing in French]

01:19:34

You know she—they taught us that when we were little. I'm going to say it in English.

01:19:38

Marie the 12th lady, take my body, take my soul. God is my father; the blessed Virgin is my mother. The apostles are my brother. St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Luke, and St. Matthew, the aided justice of God sits at the four corners of my bed, so nothing approach me except my savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

01:20:22

You know they taught when we were little. She taught catechism but she didn't know how to speak English, so she did it in French.

01:20:31

SR: That was so pretty. Thank you for singing that.

01:20:34

AT: Yeah, I like to. Every once in a while I'll sing it so I don't forget it, yeah.

01:20:39

SR: The French is so pretty.

01:20:41

AT: Yeah, it's pretty, the French, huh?

01:20:42

SR: Yeah, I really like that. It really sounds like you got so many of your beliefs and your--your talents from your mom. Do you look like her?

01:20:57

AT: Maybe a little bit. The hair. Their complexion too—you know olive complexion, oil complexion. You see how it's oily; yeah, oily—oily.

01:21:11

SR: Yeah, well, it's glowing.

01:21:14

AT: Yeah, you know it's oily even though I wash my face and all, but after it's all the oils pour out.

01:21:20

SR: Did she ever cook for money?

01:21:22

AT: No, she--she was a giver. She used to cook and her friends used to come and eat. She--she always—she knew she had to have money to pay bills and all but she never cared about a lot of money. Like you know some people, their love is money? Money is the root of all evil. So but she never did care for that.

01:21:53

SR: Well I think you inherited that too. I'll say for the record that when we ate here, we had a lot of food. And I mean we must have had—we had gumbo to start, and then we had roast pork and roast beef and a shrimp dish and a potato dish and homemade bread and jam, lasagna—all with fresh seafood. All with you know freshly picked crab. And then we had the most beautiful walnut tarts, and it was \$35 a person. I can't imagine you made much money on that meal.

01:22:31

AT: No, I don't make too much money, but I'm happy. You know I'm happy; my conscious is clear. You know I have a good—f something bothers me, my conscious bothers me. You know like my friend, one of my best friends, it was a fiftieth anniversary and she knows everything. You know she knows, and her daughter came over here and it was hard to you know—I had to lie. And it really bothers me. I called the priest. I said, "I'm lying." You know a little lie, it's a lie. So I said, "It bothers me." I don't want to talk with her even on the telephone when she called because I was afraid [to] let on that she was going to have a—and they wanted it to be a surprise. So I went to confession and I told him, "I'm lying. And you know, Father, a little lie—

it's a big lie and it comes to a bigger lie. And it's a lie." But he laughed and he said, "That's the way it is I guess."

01:23:35

But you know I didn't—in my conscience it was bothering me. But I have a clear conscience now. You know my conscience is clear.

01:23:44

SR: Did you tell her once the surprise was over that it was bothering you?

01:23:48

AT: Uh-huh. Yeah, I told her. I said, "When you called I didn't want to talk to you because I was afraid I was going to let it out." But she understood you know, and she was so—it was only her family, you know. It was only family, and all the family got together and they came you know. They enjoyed that—seeing all her grandchildren and children and all. And it made her feel good.

01:24:15

SR: Yeah, so it was a lie for the good.

01:24:17

AT: Yeah.

01:24:17

SR: The eventual good. What do you—yeah, eat a little bit. *[Laughs]* How do you feel about the future of the seafood industry in this area?

01:24:34

AT: Well we're going to see—they still have a lot of oil. Even now some places, they have tar balled in their crab cage, so we don't know if--if they're going to close so many areas, where the trawlers can go. It's their way of living, of their life, many of them over here. So we don't know—I guess the future is going to tell it all. You know in the future times—like we say time is a great healer? Time will tell. But hopefully you know that they can do something with their life. So we don't know you know what the future holds. It's something nobody knows. We know the past, but we don't know the future.

01:25:25

SR: Do you have a feeling positive or negative?

01:25:29

AT: I don't know. Like the oyster—it may be years before, I'm sure, before you know they can get back into business. But we still have some—we still have oysters where we can buy. I know it's expensive, but the seafood—you know the shrimp, they swim. We don't know where they're at or what they do if the area is—where they can—. The shrimp, if they can't stay in this area or you know if they have to go somewhere else, so we don't know. It's a big, big thing out there in the Gulf.

01:26:08

SR: Well—

01:26:08

AT: You know it's everywhere inside, outside, and all.

01:26:14

SR: It's so big. What about the future of Alzina's?

01:26:20

AT: Well I don't know. It depends on what God has in store for me. You know and I don't--you know I don't think about it because why should you worry what's going to happen tomorrow? You don't know what's going to happen by tonight. So God said, "Let me do the work and you go on with your life." So whenever he's ready for me, that's it you know. I'm just, you know, take it like it comes. But I hope Jenny—you know Jenny do something over here in the kitchen because I--I find I have peace in my kitchen. You know peace where nothing bothers me; you know peace when you step—you can feel the peace in a house when you step into that house. I feel it when I go some places, so this—[in] the kitchen you have the feeling. I think the reason people come over here is the feeling they have over here when they come in the kitchen.

01:27:25

SR: I agree. I feel so comfortable just sitting here.

01:27:28

AT: It's peace, huh? Like they don't have nothing else out of this—you know the world, it's trouble.

01:27:38

SR: Right, and--and you know this used to be a welding shop.

01:27:44

AT: Yeah, a welding shop where people used to work. And they used to launch a boat right in front. You saw the—well they removed the railing. They had railing--railing for the boat where they launched the boat. They used the welding shop to weld boats and all.

01:28:03

SR: Huh.

01:28:05

AT: Then it was converted into a kitchen.

01:28:07

SR: And you have a bar also?

01:28:08

AT: Yeah, you know the bar—over here they have to bring their own liquor. I don't fool with that. But some of them, they have a little party so they--they do their own stuff, and I don't go see and check even what they're doing.

01:28:21

SR: They mix their own drinks over there?

01:28:24

AT: Yeah, they make their own drinks. They do whatever they want.

01:28:28

SR: But you provide other beverages?

01:28:30

AT: Yeah. The soft--the soft stuff like tea and drinks or whatever. Do you realize it's 40 years and I never tasted a soft drink. Never a soft drink, never a taste of soft drink in 40 years.

01:28:47

SR: How did that happen?

01:28:48

AT: When I lost a kidney I said that was it. I drank only water.

01:28:55

SR: Wow.

01:28:55

AT: No tea, no coffee, no milk—very seldom. When I'm really hungry for milk, that's when I'll have it.

01:29:02

SR: Do you miss those things?

01:29:05

AT: No, not anymore. I don't know the taste—how it tastes. It's like a little baby. When you raise a baby, if you don't give them something salty they don't know any better.

01:29:15

SR: Right.

01:29:17

AT: If you don't give them soft drinks, they don't know—they don't know the taste. They don't know—that's how I feel. I don't know any better. You know the soft drink, it do not bother me. So I drink—you know I drink water.

01:29:29

SR: That probably contributes to your energy level also.

01:29:31

AT: I think--I think it does. I don't—I never put a cigarette in between my—I don't do drugs.

Never did drugs. None of that stuff.

01:29:38

SR: Alcohol?

01:29:40

AT: No, no alcohol; never did anything. You know I think it is—.

01:29:47

SR: It's a clean life.

01:29:48

AT: Yeah, a clean—well you know I have my ups and downs with my body you know sometimes. When you have blood pressure problems, you know, I'm sure it controls your body.

01:30:01

SR: It's just hard to imagine because you look so healthy.

01:30:06

AT: You know I feel [healthy]. I really I do. I feel you know like I want to work. You know I just don't want to sit and—I want to work, but that's how my body is. You know I could be doing this and that you know and working. It's not—it's not good to be like that. You know that you want to do—always work, work.

01:30:32

SR: Well that's why your son won't let you do the lawns anymore.

01:30:35

AT: Yeah, I'm sure. I just be—like I want to be a bum you know for a whole week; you know a bum like go fish on the side of the bayou and do nothing else but fish and be a bum, you know, just throw my line and relax and—. You know that—I want a whole week like that. I even asked the sheriff, I said, "Please put me in jail for maybe a month." He said, "You don't want to go there." I said, "Yeah, give me a key in the morning and I can go to church and then come back." He said, "You don't want to go there." He said, "You know not with the type of people that's—." I said, "I'm telling you." I said—.

01:31:18

Well he said, "If you do something I'll pick you up and you can come to jail for a month." I said, "You don't need to be arresting. I want the experience of going to jail." You know what it is—. "No," he said. "I don't want you there."

01:31:34

SR: I don't think you'd be able to move around enough.

01:31:37

AT: No, that's what he said. "You know to cook—well maybe I'll put you in the kitchen cooking." [*Laughs*]

01:31:42

SR: Yeah, he might do that just to get you there.

01:31:45

AT: I really did. I asked him that two or three times. I said, "Put me—I want to go to jail." You know I'll rest for a month and all and—you know going to jail. But he said, "It's not what you think."

01:31:59

SR: No.

01:31:59

AT: You're going to jail—and now you know what I do? I watch *Lock Up*. I watch *Lock Up* and that's how I learned how long they stay sometimes when they've been on death row and this and that on—in that little room. Can you imagine their mind, what they--they must be going through, all—what—23 hours a day, 24 hours a day, seven and seven? So I pray for them every day; yeah every day, whoever is addicted to whatever. They can be addicted to coffee, drugs. Coffee is an

addiction. Coke, you know soft drinks. Some of my friends, they only drink—they don't drink water. They only drink soft drinks.

01:32:58

SR: Not good.

01:32:58

AT: No, it's not good.

01:33:01

SR: I'm a coffee addict.

01:33:03

AT: Are you, yeah?

01:33:04

SR: I don't drink a lot but I have to have it.

01:33:06

AT: Oh yeah, my sister-in-law, she can't work if she don't have two cups before—when she gets up. She says, "I have to have my coffee."

01:33:18

SR: Well I want to—you've given me so much time. I'm going to wrap this up. And I could ask you a lot more, but I think you've given me a lot.

01:33:30

AT: I hope so.

01:33:30

SR: Yeah, thank you so much.

01:33:34

AT: I hope it will help you in whatever you do.

01:33:38

SR: I know that people will appreciate your story.

01:33:39

AT: Oh they will?

01:33:40

SR: Yeah. Thank you so much.

01:33:43

AT: Oh you're welcome.

[End Alzina Toups Interview]