

BOB CRECHALE
Crechale's - Jackson, MS

Date: March 7, 2014
Location: Crechale's - Jackson, MS
Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 23 minutes
Project: Jackson's Iconic Restaurants

[Begin Bob Crechale — Crechale's]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: Check, check. All right this is Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Jackson, Mississippi. It is 4:37 p.m. on Friday, March 7, 2014 and I'm at Crechale's, off of Highway 80, and I'm here with Mr. Bob Crechale. I'm going to have him introduce himself; Mr. Crechale give me your name and say your name for the record and your birth date please.

00:00:24

Bob Crechale: My name is Bob Crechale and I'm, well, I'm kind of old. You really want my birthday?

00:00:30

RF: If you want to give it.

00:00:30

BC: Twelve, nine [December 9], 1955.

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RF: All right; so what's your role here at Crechale's?

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BC: Well, I've been working here going on forty-four years. You could say I'm the third generation. I'm—I'd guess you'd say I'm the owner with Trustmark National Bank. And I'm thinking about making a career out of it.

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RF: [*Laughs*] So, forty-four years, that's almost your whole life. You started as a young man?

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BC: I did; I did. I started very young. When I was big enough to work they put me to work but I really started work when I was around fifteen—that's when full-time—well not really full-time, when I was big enough to really do a job. That's when I really started—.

00:01:08

RF: And what was your first job here? What did you start—did you start front or back of the house?

00:01:13

BC: No; I was a bus boy for several years and then I was a dishwasher and then I got promoted to be a hostess and then I got to work in the kitchen and I done about every job here. And so it's—for a few years it was about a six-year learning process, like a college education almost.

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RF: Tell me about the—who founded Crechale's? What year was it founded? How far back are we going?

00:01:36

BC: It opened in 1956. My mother Bobbie Ann, she's deceased now, Bobbie. She had remarried, Bobbie Ann McCain and my grandfather Paul Crechale was the original owner of Crechale's. And they opened in 1956.

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RF: And did they open it as—what sort of restaurant was it then?

00:01:52

BC: It was a full service restaurant and I'll have to get you a picture of the master chef and show you Miss Lena Mae Ward. Let me pull it off the wall so you can take a picture of her. She—if any credit she gets a lot of the credit, too. Hang on one minute.

00:02:06

RF: I could—we can look at it after. Okay; well get it now, yeah.

00:02:09

BC: I'm liable to forget it.

00:02:09

RF: All right; we're going to take a short break.

00:02:12

BC: The master chef. This is the master chef who played a big—a very big part in getting Crechale's underway.

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RF: And can you tell us her name again, please?

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BC: Lena Mae Ward.

00:02:23

RF: And so she developed recipes? She was the head cook?

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BC: No; my grandfather had most of the recipes. He had worked earlier in restaurants most of his life. She implemented those and she even improved on some of those.

00:02:37

RF: Where was your grandfather from? Tell us a bit about his origins.

00:02:40

BC: He was from the island of Skopelos in Greece. The first time he tried to get in this country he was caught and sent back. He was able to get back in on the second attempt. And—.

00:02:50

RF: Which port did he come in?

00:02:51

BC: My understanding he hid out in Tampa in his uncle's cigar factory, and they caught him and Immigration sent him back and he finally was able to come in through Ellis Island.

00:03:02

RF: And what was his Greek name?

00:03:05

BC: Krichelos, of course when he came through Ellis Island the Immigration Officer didn't speak any Greek and he spoke very little English and the name got changed. Krichelos is spelled with K and it got changed to Crechale with a C.

00:03:17

RF: Oh, so his last name was Krichelos and his first name?

00:03:19

BC: His first name was Paul.

00:03:23

RF: Okay; and in Greek that would be—it would be Paul?

00:03:25

BC: Yeah; it would be Paul, uh-huh.

00:03:25

RF: So how did he make his way down here? What was his trajectory?

00:03:29

BC: Well he had a restaurant in Chicago, this was in the '20s, and he had a restaurant in Tampa, Florida, and he was driving back from Tampa to Chicago and had a car wreck in Arkansas, Fordyce, Arkansas, to be exact. And he was in—and he almost died in the car wreck. He had a—I guess he had a Norman Stetson convertible, which I don't even know what that is, what he was driving, and he was exceeding the speed limit and the nurse who nursed him back to health—he was in the hospital around six months and of course the extended stay—the nurse became my grandmother.

00:04:03

RF: That's how they met in a hospital in Arkansas?

00:04:06

BC: Uh-hmm; exactly right.

00:04:08

RF: That's amazing. Where was she from?

00:04:09

BC: Fordyce, Arkansas.

00:04:11

RF: Okay; so she was from there? And how did they make their way to Jackson?

00:04:14

BC: Well, they didn't make their way directly to Jackson. Of course he was in the hospital for six months. He lost both of his restaurants. He wasn't there to work them and if you're not there to stay on top of your business you won't have any business.

00:04:24

And you won't have any profit, I should say. And he lost both of them. And he had a brother-in-law that was in Clarksdale, Mississippi, so then which is not far from Fordyce, Arkansas. So he moved to Arkansas—he moved over from the hospital and of course he had lost everything and got his goods and everything from Chicago and Tampa and went to work, and went in business with his brother-in-law in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

00:04:47

RF: So they opened a restaurant there in Clarksdale?

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BC: His brother-in-law had a restaurant and he wanted to help his brother-in-law and they ended up working together and being partners in the restaurant.

00:04:54

RF: And then he eventually moved?

00:04:58

BC: No, not exactly. He moved to Jackson I think—he worked there in the—. **[Aside:]** Can y'all help me. Linda can y'all help me on the front door with the change or something please? Zach we're coming. I'm sorry. And he worked with his brother-in-law for many years and he decided he was going back to Europe to live. So he went back to Europe in the '30s and lived there in the '30s until 1938. When Hitler went to Austria in '38, he decided it was time to leave. He could see war coming so he came back and came back to this country and I think he arrived back in here late-'38 or early-'39, before the War really had really started. And he came—of course he didn't have a job and his brother-in-law was doing fine in the restaurant at the time, so he came down here to Jackson, Mississippi with Mr. John Dennery, who owns Dennery's, was a very fine man and he owned a very fine restaurant. And he and my granddaddy were friends in the old country in Skopelos. They were childhood friends. So he came down here and he worked for Mr. John Dennery, and I have a picture of him behind you right here, taken in 1940. **[Aside:]** Can y'all help on the front door please and make change? Where is Cheryl? **[Sighs]**

00:06:11

This is taken in 1940; that is my granddaddy. Let's see, where are my glasses? That's him right there in the sports coat and Mr. Dennery in the middle and that was the Rotisserie Restaurant. Well my—Mr. Dennery made him a maître d' which is a fancy word for partner, I mean not fancy word—excuse me, fancy word for manager. And he worked for Mr. Dennery and from '40 to about 1955.

00:06:36

RF: And where was this restaurant?

00:06:37

BC: It was by the old Jackson Mall, what they call Five Points. Medgar Evers Boulevard. Delta Drive is what they referred to it back there then.

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RF: All right; so I'm loving the story thus far. So then he moved here and opened his own—?

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BC: Yeah; in 1956, uh-huh.

00:06:50

RF: And he was kind of an older gentleman by then?

00:06:53

BC: Oh yes; he was—he lived to be eighty-seven years old. He was—hold on a minute.

[Aside:] Yes, sir; what have we got? What? No, no; take it out and put it in the utility room for me, okay, please?

00:07:14

This is easy right now.

00:07:16

RF: Okay.

00:07:17

BC: All right, and then so he opened here in '56 and that's how got into the business here.

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RF: And when did he pass away?

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BC: I would have to think about that. I was in—at Ole Miss in college and, I want to say in '76, because I came home and worked every weekend after he died. I more or less inherited his job. I worked every Friday night, Saturday night, and part of Sunday, and went back to school. And when I finished up I came to work here full-time.

00:07:46

RF: And the second generation?

00:07:51

BC: My father John. My father John was the second generation. And he sold me half the restaurant when I was twenty-six years old, because I was leaving and going in business for myself. And if I would stay and work he sold me half the restaurant. And then at age thirty-five I bought the other half.

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RF: So was your father John working here?

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BC: But he—

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RF: So what did you study at Ole Miss?

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BC: General business, so they could call it small business, but General Business is what I got my diploma in.

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RF: So in your late teens and twenties did you know that you wanted to kind of take over or manage or eventually own the restaurant? How did you feel about it or when did you know?

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BC: Well, I sort of realized it when I started coming home every weekend and working that I enjoyed it. And then I didn't really—I looked forward to it; I—it was fun and I was excited about coming home and I would probably say when I inherited my grandfather's job and all the responsibilities and—I enjoyed it.

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RF: So I'm sitting just below a sign that says "The Life of a Restaurateur." And we're talking about—you've worked in this restaurant for—or you've ran it for over four decades. We talked

about your grandfather who ran many restaurants throughout the country. How would you describe the life of a restaurateur?

00:09:13

BC: Well, I will let you read that into your statement. It—as a matter of fact if you read into it, it will be best if you did it.

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RF: Well tell me in your own words, in shorter words, like what would you say a life of a restaurateur is?

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BC: This describes it better than I could ever say.

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RF: Okay; well I'll take a picture of it.

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BC: That would be the best description of it. Now this came from Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

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RF: Oh, okay, okay.

00:09:35

BC: A friend of mine sent this to me from New Orleans, who was working at Commander's Palace there, one of the managers at the time, and he mailed it to me. And so it came on the wall and he and I are friends and so—. That was the best way; take a picture of it is the best way to describe it.

00:09:49

RF: Okay; well let's talk about the location. You've always been here in this present location?

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BC: Well, I've had several of restaurants but this restaurant has always been here at this location. And when it first opened up it was outside the city limits of Jackson. I don't know what year Jackson took this area in. I wish I did, but I don't know.

00:10:09

RF: What was the old town called or this area called?

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BC: Well it was just outside Jackson because next door it originally was a Ford, Deviney Ford Tractor on one side and John Deere Tractor on the other side. It was—we were in the country.

00:10:22

RF: And this area has seen a lot of changes. How have you seen this area change over the past—?

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BC: It's gone from a very—this highway was a business corridor and extremely busy, dominating Jackson. It's not doing that anymore. It's just—we're still busy but not like it used to be.

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RF: And let's talk about the menu. How would you describe the menu?

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BC: Pull the menu out and we'll talk about it. **[Aside:]** Robert, will you hang this back on the wall before I knock it off on the floor. Will you put that one back up there for me, would you please, Robert? The menu is more of American than anything else and it's designed for the people here that eat out. Our menu follows, and a lot of our recipes and flavorings follow, New Orleans in flavor. If you try like a Miami recipe down here it's too hot. California is too bland. You've got to cook and you've got to serve food that people like and enjoy. And they're accustomed to eating something very similar to what New Orleans—we're only two and a half hours away from New Orleans and our food is—most of our recipes are very similar to what they serve in New Orleans.

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RF: So spiced in the New Orleans way.

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BC: Exactly right; uh-hmm.

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RF: Okay; so—

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BC: Prime beef; it's—and most of our fish and everything comes from the Gulf of—out of the Gulf, which is a two and a half ride from them, so we get it delivered daily fresh.

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RF: And what kind of—what's the most popular fish on the menu?

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BC: Now that's a hard question to answer. It changes with almost every night. It—over the long haul we sell a lot of snapper, when we have it in season. We sell a lot of flounder. We sell trout. The flounder sells really good. And of course we sell one fish that's the Mississippi catfish, which I've seen sales in that really good and then sales slack off and—. But they all sell an even amount.

00:12:12

RF: Yeah; and are there any Greek elements or—in the menu at all? Is there anything that goes back to your grandfather's era?

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BC: Occasionally we might do a special, but Greek food—people are reluctant to really—we have a Greek salad with fresh feta cheese and a lot of Greek olives on top of that, but Greek items don't really sell so we cook the items that do sell.

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RF: And do you have Comeback Sauce, the Jackson favorite?

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BC: Yes. Yes we do.

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RF: And how would you describe the flavor profile of your Comeback Sauce, because I've discovered that everyone's is a little bit different? How would you describe yours without—?

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BC: [Aside:] Ask him to hang that up too, Robert, right here would you; the one right here in the front? And our Comeback Sauce is—the recipe, well, really it came out of the—when Granddaddy was in Clarksdale he and his uncle made it and we've basically used the same recipe with small changes and deviations from it but it's basically the same recipe we had in the '30s.

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RF: Okay; and is it—how would you describe that flavor?

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BC: Well—

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RF: Or what is Comeback Sauce for someone who doesn't know?

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BC: It's a salad—it's a spicy salad dressing, very similar to Thousand Island, but just a little spicier, you'd say.

00:13:25

RF: Okay; and what do people eat it on here? Do they eat it on fish, steaks, crackers, everything?

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BC: Basically it's designed for salads but I've seen it eaten on everything, consumed on everything.

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RF: And what—um, we're moving fast here.

00:13:46

BC: I've got to get up at 5:00 because we got to get the deli next door opened up too so—.

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RF: All right; so three generations. What happens in the next generation or the coming decades for Crechale's?

00:13:58

BC: Well, I have three children. Of course I'm an old man. I have three children and the oldest is thirteen and I've got a set of twins that are eleven. The twins show an interest in it; my oldest son shows an interest—my wife is a CPA and—. **[Aside:]** Hey, how you doing ma'am; good to see you. And my oldest child wants to be an accountant like his mother, my wife. **[Aside:]** Hey, Counselor, come on in. Hey, gentlemen, come on in. Good to see y'all. Fine, how are y'all doing? Good to have y'all out.

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But I'm hoping they'll choose another profession. I've enjoyed it but it's hard to make a living doing this.

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RF: So you would encourage that?

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BC: Yeah; I'd encourage them. **[Aside:]** Good to see you gentlemen. Good to see y'all; y'all doing all right? I know that. I'm—if they want to do it I'll be happy for them but I'm going to encourage them to choose another profession. I personally have enjoyed it and I still enjoy it. When I quit enjoying it is when I'm going to close. But my children, you know, I'd like them to

do maybe something else. You know, it's a hard job. It's a lot of work. Most of the Greek children don't want to do this. Mr. Dennery's children didn't want to do it. And a lot of the Greek restaurants are dying out because the children are doctors and lawyers and other professions where they can be at home and don't have to work so hard for a living.

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RF: Why do you think your restaurant has lasted as long as it has?

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BC: That's a hard question there. Good customers, great staff. I got the best staff in the world, from these folks here being over here fifty—been over here fifty years, longer than I have been here. And very blessed to have them. And with the help of God I guess we made it.

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RF: So tell me about your customers. What—who comes in? Who are your regulars?

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BC: Customers from all walks of life. I have—it's not uncommon to see the Governor here and it's not uncommon to see a person who sweeps the street here either, too. We get them from all walks, all levels of income, and all sections of the community.

00:16:01

RF: And do you have people that have kind of a—I remember when I was growing up in my family's restaurant you'd—people had like a—you had your Friday night crowd that came in every Friday, and the Saturday night crowd was different from the Friday and they appeared every Saturday. Do you see that here?

00:16:16

BC: Oh yes; we have some people that eat out here every Friday night and some people eat out here every Saturday night and we have some people that eat here during the week every night and we have some that eat here twice a week. We've had people eat out here—we have several single men eat with us every night of the week that we're open, six nights a week. So it varies. But we do have a—definitely a Friday a crowd and definitely a Saturday night crowd, and most of my—I'd say ninety-five to ninety-eight-percent of my business is repeat business.

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RF: And why is—why would you say Crechale's is important to Jackson, to Jackson's restaurant culture or larger culture? Why is this restaurant so iconic to the city?

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BC: Hmm; I'm—well that's a question I don't know. I'm just fortunate to be able to operate a restaurant and have a restaurant here in Jackson. That's a question you'd have to—I'd have to analyze and get back with you. That's a difficult question to answer.

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RF: Okay; I'll ask you again. You said a few employees have been working here for half a century.

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BC: Uh-hmm.

00:17:17

RF: Can you, you know, give us one of their names and tell us what they do?

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BC: If you put your camera on that sweet lady in the kitchen, the gray-haired one named Mary Thomas, I think she's been here right at forty-nine years. And Mrs. Benton, I don't know where she is—. **[Aside:]** Where is Cheryl? Okay; she's doing my job for me. She's over there setting the bar up doing my job for me. She's been here around probably fifty years—to forty-nine; it might be fifty-one. Her mother worked here before her and, as a matter of fact, she got her mother's job and her daughter worked here for a while too.

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RF: So we just have time for a couple more questions. You're on your feet here six days a week or five days a week?

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BC: Six days a week. I started closing—I'll explain this: I started closing on Monday. My son, thirteen years old, I guess—I cannot remember, I wish I had written it down, he was five, six, or he might have been seven. I think it's five or six, somewhere around there. He likes swimming and indoor pool. Flowood has an indoor pool and he's very—for a Greek he's very fair complected and he gets sunburned. And I always want to take him swimming there and one day a couple times I told him I was going to take him swimming and I couldn't go. Something had come up and I couldn't go. And I told him one day, "Son, I'll be back to take you swimming." And he looked at me with those big blue eyes and he said, "Daddy, are you coming back to take me swimming or are you just telling me that?" So we started closing on Monday for that and I wish I had done it when he was born. I'm glad I did it then.

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That's Mrs. Benton right there.

00:18:41

RF: Well maybe that answered my question. I was going to ask what do you do on your days off when you're on your feet all day working at this place?

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BC: I play baseball. I play basketball. We wrestle. We do everything—go to the grocery store; we just have a wonderful time. Go to the dentist and just be a father on Saturdays.

00:18:57

RF: With your kids?

00:18:57

BC: Uh-huh; I have a wonderful time. It's a great day. I'll tell you something you might think is cute. My mother who is deceased, this would be '81, she was almost a workaholic. When I told her I started closing on Monday and she told me, she said, "Son, I can't believe—." She said, "Son, I cannot believe I raised a boy that lazy." *[Laughs]*

00:19:21

RF: After working in this place for that long it was—?

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BC: "I cannot believe that I raised a son that was that lazy."

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RF: What did she do? What was her profession?

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BC: Well she did this—she was an accountant the same as my wife.

00:19:32

RF: Um—

00:19:33

BC: And she loved tax season, all the extra work.

00:19:37

RF: What do you eat when you're on the floor? What do you have for dinner?

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BC: Oh, I eat everything on the menu because—and I eat around the menu. What that means is I try everything on there. I try it for freshness, texture, taste and make sure it looks good. Food is a very complicated item. It's got to look good to the eye. It's got to smell good. It's got to taste good. And it's got to feel good in your mouth. The only thing that food doesn't do, you don't hear with it, but it occupies four of your five senses. It's got to look, taste, feel, smell good.

00:20:07

RF: Why the prevalence of Greek restaurants in Jackson?

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BC: Why so many?

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RF: Why so many and why do they—why do a handful of them continue to exist?

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BC: Well, when the Greeks came over here they weren't real good at the English language and that was an occupation, restaurants, that they knew how to cook and knew how to work, so that's the occupation they got into.

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RF: So, are Greek men and women, are they good restaurateurs? Are they good cooks? Are they better restaurateurs?

00:20:37

BC: Well I'd say all of the—I'd say not better but they are all hard working. And they're all good at what they do and they all strive for perfection too. Hold on just a second. **[Aside:]** Hi, gentlemen, you need—

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RF: What's the hardest part of running this restaurant? I see you commanding here like—

00:20:53

BC: Well it just captures a lot of your time. You have to be here, whether if you don't want to be here or not you have to be here. It's just you have to stay on top of it. What I mean by that is it's similar to a coach or playing a football game. Every night you have a football game you have to be there. And every night's a challenge too.

00:21:15

RF: So every night is a little bit different?

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BC: Oh yeah; every night is different.

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RF: Yeah; how so? Can you say?

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BC: Well, you know, some nights—days you get your orders on—. [**Aside:**] Can y'all turn that down just a hair? Some days you get your orders on time and some days they don't come in and some days you have certain items and some days you don't. If you have employees getting sick; some employees not sick. Sometimes you might have something go wrong with the pieces of equipment; the air-conditioning could go down, dishwasher could break. It's a lot happening.

00:21:44

RF: So I love the old jukebox in the corner. What's your favorite thing to play or what is most often played here?

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BC: The Happy Birthday song.

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RF: Just "Happy Birthday to you—?"

00:21:55

BC: The Happy Birthday song.

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RF: Beyond that, what is most played?

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BC: It's a wide selection of music that's on the jukebox and it changes regularly. Try to keep the songs in the '50s and '60s era.

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RF: Well, I want to thank you. I think you have to get back on the floor.

00:22:14

BC: Thank you and I want to thank you and I'm sorry we had to cut this short but I really enjoyed visiting you. If you'll let me call you we can talk some more.

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RF: Yeah; we'll try to talk some more and get—

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BC: I've got to get up and go to work though.

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RF: Okay; thank you so much sir.

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BC: Thank you.

00:22:28

[End Bob Crechale — Crechale's]