

FRANK BRIGTSEN
Brigtsen's Restaurant—New Orleans, LA

Date: July 26, 2007
Location: 723 Dante Street—New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 1 hour
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail

[Begin Frank Brigtsen Interview]

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Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, July 26, 2007. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana at Brigtsen's Restaurant, and I'm sitting here with the chef and the owner. And if I could just ask you to say your name and your birth date, please?

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Frank Brigtsen: My name is Frank Brigtsen and my birth date is December 9, 1954.

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SR: Thank you. We're in Brigtsen's Restaurant. How long has this restaurant been around?

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FB: We are in our 21st year; we opened in 1986.

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SR: What did you do before then? Is this your first restaurant?

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FB: This is the first restaurant of my own, yes. Prior to this I was the executive chef at K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen for seven years and met Paul Prudhomme when I was an apprentice at

Commander's Palace in the late '70s, when he was the executive chef there. He taught me how to cook.

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SR: Had you had any culinary training before you were at Commander's?

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FB: No formal culinary training, no culinary school. Everything I know I learned on the job. I started working in food service when I was 18. And had a couple of jobs before I got serious about it as a career, which was when I met Paul in the late '70s and decided to pursue it. And Paul, in our early interviews at Commander's Palace, asked me what I wanted out of life and I mentioned the fact that I thought one day I'd like to have my own little place. And seven years later he and his late wife, K, decided that I was ready to give it a shot. So Paul and K helped Marna and I open Brigtsen's. They lent us the money and gave us all the support we needed to get started.

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SR: I'm curious what took you to Commander's and sort of put you in that sphere.

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FB: Well that's a very interesting question. I—I attended LSU University in Baton Rouge and I worked in food service there—casual food service. And when I moved back to New Orleans, I took a job in a kitchen of a casual restaurant and at the tender young age of 24 I found myself in

a rather precarious position. I had quit my job; they sold the building I was living in and kicked me out. My car died and I broke up with my girlfriend, so I made the call to mom to see if I could come home because I had nowhere else to go. So that's what I did and after two weeks of being at home I decided to—to start rebuilding my life and so I picked up the *classifieds* one day and there was an ad in the paper for Commander's Palace. And it said, "Commander's Palace now hiring Creole chefs or people willing to learn Creole cuisine." And that—that wording is something I responded to because I wanted to learn and I wanted to make it a career. I enjoyed being in the kitchen. And so it was an opportunity for me to get serious about it, and fortunately I was taken on as an apprentice, and the six months that I spent at Commander's Palace was really my culinary school. I got the chance to work every station in the house, learned how to shake a skillet, learned how to produce high-quality food at high-volume, and got my feet wet sort of. And at the time K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen was open as a restaurant but only for lunch. They had been open a few months and K and Paul decided that they wanted to open for dinner. And so one busy Sunday morning at Commander's I was setting up the line for brunch and Paul called me over and he said, *Frank, how do you feel about sauces?* And I said, *Well hmm*—he caught me off-guard with that. And I said, *Well I really like them a lot.* And he didn't—*That's not what I mean*; he said, *How would you like to learn how to make sauces and I'll show you all the nuances that make cooking great?* I said, *Sure, Chef, whatever you want me to do.* So he invited me to come to K-Paul's, which I had never heard of. It was relatively new and I just did what Chef asked me to do. And so it was very—it was very interesting times.

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I went over to K-Paul's and—and Paul at the time was working two jobs really. He would go into K-Paul's early in the morning, like five in the morning, and do the pot cooking for

lunch, and then I would come in at 10:30 and we'd talk over the menu, and then I would do lunch with a helper. And after lunch service I'd clean the stove and—and he'd call and we'd go over the dinner menu, and then I would do dinner by myself with a dishwasher. And it was great [*Laughs*]; it was hard but it was great and a great way to learn. And at the end of the evening—10:00--10:30—Paul would come back to K-Paul's and we'd talk over the day and then we'd start all over again.

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But—but it was a very interesting, I think, confluence of things going on because, you know, it was a very formative time for me as a young cook, and at the same time it was a very formative and historically important time for American chefs in cuisine in general. Prior to 1975 or so you couldn't name an American chef; most of the best restaurants in America were—were run by Europeans. We had food personalities like James Beard and Julia Child and Craig Claiborne, but you couldn't name an American chef. And that all of course changed in the '80s when—when regional American cuisine began to garner the attention and respect that it deserves. And I remember from '80 to '85, that was the total focus of all the food media, particularly food magazines. It was almost cuisine-of-the-month. You know it'd be Low-Country cuisine, Cajun cuisine, California cuisine, so there was a huge national focus on American food as a cuisine. So it was very interesting to be with Paul during those heady days when—when he started to garner attention for what he was doing.

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And I think what he was doing was very important. I think he changed the face of—of the way we eat in New Orleans restaurants. Growing up in New Orleans, and Paul growing up in the country in Opelousas, I—I quickly realized how different we were. Our cultures were totally

different. It was almost, you know—he was almost like from a foreign country to me because he grew up with, you know, home-style Cajun cooking, which he transformed into the restaurant environment, and that was revolutionary in and of itself. Nobody ate jambalaya in a restaurant prior to K-Paul's. It's poor people's food, basically. But he—he showed us how to do that, and you know the rest is history in a way, but he gave me a chance and that—that's why I'm here today.

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SR: I'm just thinking—I was thinking when you were talking about, you, know that Commander's is such a big operation that it almost always has an ad in the paper, you know, for someone—for workers. And that sort of magical pairing could be happening right now, you know: what you and Paul Prudhomme had.

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FB: Oh there's no question about it. I think Commander's has long been recognized as our “culinary training grounds” in New Orleans because the Brennans, to their credit, are professionals and they—they are people-oriented in their approach to this business, and that's really the—a lesson that I've taken to heart over the years. I've—I really deeply feel that although this is a food business, it's really a people business. And that has to do with the people that dine with us of course, but also our staff, the people that work with us, and also the people that supply us and—and so that whole human dynamic chain has to work for us to be successful. And after 30-plus years in the business it—I find that it is the most rewarding part of the business. Making people happy with food is a great way to make a living. Working with fine

people and giving them a chance to have a livelihood and learn and grow is very rewarding. And working with our suppliers, our fishermen and farmers, I think is also a very important lesson to be learned about—about how we eat, what we eat, and what it takes to get food on the table. You know a restaurant is—is much different from a retail shop, for instance, because in a retail shop you're buying product, putting a price on it, and selling it. But in a restaurant we're buying product and there are dozens and dozens of steps that have to happen before it's sold. So it's a labor of love in a way and—and it makes it very rewarding.

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SR: Can you tell me—I'll move onto gumbo for a little while—what was the sort-of paradigm for gumbo in the house where you grew up in New Orleans? And then I'd like to know how working with Paul Prudhomme changed your ideas of the possibilities of gumbo?

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FB: Well to me gumbo epitomizes the unique and wonderful qualities of Louisiana cuisine because it really emphasizes the multi-cultural influences that have—have gone into what we know as Creole cuisine. Gumbo is of course the African word for *okra*, and that's where okra comes from. That's—the seeds were brought over here by slaves. Filé or ground sassafras is a local product that was introduced to us from Native American Indians. And then you have the incredible bounty of seafood that we have in Louisiana that goes into most gumbos. The gumbo my mom made, for lack of a better word I call it a *Creole* gumbo because it had a lot of everything in it: deep dark brown roux, smoked sausage, shrimp, oysters, crabs, and sometimes even chicken. So it was kind of a—a gumbo. It was everything that was available. **[Laughs]** And

it was—it was a meal. You know it’s—to me growing up as a kid, gumbo was not what you see today in restaurants as an appetizer; it was a meal. It was also—and still is I think—sort of social event as well. You don’t make gumbo; you make *a* **[emphasis added]** gumbo. *I’m making a gumbo—ya’ll come over.* So it’s always been to me, again, about people. It’s about sharing and getting together over a pot of gumbo. And you know in—in for instance, in the late ‘70s at Commander’s Palace, Paul was experimenting with the idea of gumbo. Now gumbo is something that’s over 200 years-old here in Louisiana and has a long rich tradition, but it was a point when Paul felt that, you know, a cup of gumbo was too heavy as a starter for a meal because it was, you know, it’s got a roux and it’s—it’s very hearty.

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So for a while we were making a rouxless gumbo: filé gumbo with seafood but with no roux, so the flavors were there without the roux. So the flavors were there without the roux. Now I understood the concept of it but—but frankly I never did like it. And—and at K-Paul’s we did it for a while too, and I had to make it, but I never did like it. And to me, a gumbo implies the use of a brown roux. I mean for us in Louisiana, a brown roux as opposed to a blonde roux or white roux is not just a—a thickener or a leavening agent—or a liaison rather—but it is a flavoring agent. You know when that flour is browned it has a particularly nutty deep roasted flavor that to me is essential in gumbo. But at K-Paul’s what we ultimately transitioned into was filé gumbo, and that was something that—that I did not really eat at home. My mom didn’t make a straight filé gumbo, and by that I mean a chicken and andouille gumbo: no seafood, no okra.

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And so that was the benchmark for—for us at K-Paul’s for many, many years and still is. So here was a gumbo that to me personifies the heart of Cajun cuisine because Cajun cuisine—if

you understand Cajun culture the Acadians were, and in many cases still are, relatively poor people who are trying to feed their family a very satisfying meal with very little money. So if you're Paul Prudhomme's mom, for instance, and you have 13 children and it's time for Sunday supper and your husband is a sharecropper who can't even afford to buy the land he's farming—what are you going to feed your family? You might have 20 people over for dinner every night, so are you going to go to the chicken coup and get 10 spring chickens and make roast chicken for everybody?—No, because those chickens are too valuable to the family farm. They can be sold at market for hard cash. But in the back of that chicken coup there might be an old hen who is kind of past her prime and not laying as many eggs as she used to and not contributing to the family farm. That one old hen and a couple of pounds of sausage can make a big pot of filé gumbo that will feed 20 people. So that to me is the heart of Acadian cuisine. It's—it's a cuisine that's in a way born out of necessity: very humble ingredients, no caviar, foie gras, or truffles; very humble ingredients that are turned into a very satisfying meal, and that's done with seasonings but mostly with technique. And the technique of a filé gumbo is totally unique, and it's something that I find still today—I'm very proud to make filé gumbo. We make it everyday here at Brigtsen's.

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And I'm very proud to do that, you know, and it—it has to do with, I think a lot to do with my approach to the food we serve at Brigtsen's and—and what we're trying to do. What I'm not trying to do is change the world with my food. I'm not trying to recreate the wheel. I'm only here to make people happy, and gumbo does that. And—and I think, you know, for me to be a chef in New Orleans is a very special thing because I'm part of a very long continuum of great cooks and chefs that have kept this cuisine growing and kept it alive, and I think now more than

ever that's important. And I also believe that just because something is 200 years-old doesn't mean it's not good anymore.

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Now my gumbo won't turn up on the pages of—of a food magazine, but that's not why I make it. I'm only here to make people happy with it, and it does make people happy. So that is to me, you know, the way in which gumbo personifies what we do in Louisiana with food. It's a very—it's a kind of dish that you get emotionally attached to and you crave it, and in fact when we were—when my family and I were evacuated after the storm, you know we spent a month in a hotel in North Louisiana, and you know having to eat out every night which sounds glamorous but it's not. I—after a few weeks I told my family, I said, *You know when—whenever we get back into our home with a real kitchen I'm making a big pot of filé gumbo.* That was the one thing I craved more than anything.

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So we finally ultimately—we rented a little house in Shreveport, and it had a kitchen, and so I went and bought the pot and ingredients to make gumbo, but we were in the middle of a heat wave. It was 102-degrees and the kitchen was really hot. I said, *I am not doing this*, so we waited 'til we got home in New Orleans. And—and in mid-October I made a huge pot of chicken andouille filé gumbo at home and—and I called up all of our staff members that were here and we got together at the house [*Emotional*] and it was the best gumbo I ever had.

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SR: Thank you for sharing that with me, with us. I've heard a couple stories like that with gumbo being the moment of coming back together and survival after Katrina—emotional survival.

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FB: Well you know it—it goes to show the real power of food. You know food brings people together in so many ways and it's such a great medium to share with people because of that. Food touches us on so many levels: emotionally, obviously, physically, socially—it brings us together. And spiritually too. Food is not only meant to sustain us but to restore us and to restore our spirits and—and that's something that's ongoing. And another very gratifying part of being a restaurant owner is that, you know, you can give people a couple of hours of joy in their lives. And that—you know after—I don't want to get too morose, but after 09/11 I really started, like many Americans, self-examining and looking at my life and what I do and what—what my place was in the world. And for a while I felt that—that what I did was pretty trivial and didn't really make much of a difference in the world. But—but after a few weeks after 09/11 I started seeing people smile again in the dining rooms and I realized just how important our work is. And coming in to reopening the restaurant after the storm we knew that, and—and were very aware of it. And sure enough, it was overwhelmingly emotional to see all of our friends back here and thanking us for being here and understanding the role that—that restaurants and our food plays in our community and our culture. It's not just eating; it's—it's everything. It's who we are. It's—our food and our music in New Orleans really define us, really identify us as New Orleanians, and that's powerful stuff. There's great food all across America, and it's certainly great food in the rest of Louisiana, but we wanted our home back and—and our food and our restaurants

represented that. It was symbolic of—of our identity, and so it was a very fulfilling role that we played and—and happy to still be here.

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A gumbo is something that I think, you know there is—there's as many ways to make gumbo as there are cooks in Louisiana and what's interesting—you know we talk about emotional attachments to food, and I mean people will argue about how to make gumbo like they argue about football teams, you know. *My gumbo will kick your gumbo's*—you know, and I just think that's fascinating. And a few years ago—I always do a cooking demonstration at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. And so one year the Jazz Fest folks asked me if I would also participate in a panel discussion and I said, *Okay, what's it about?* Well it's going to be about gumbo, and I said *Okay, what's the details?* And they said, *Well it's going to be an hour and a half and it will be you and a few other people.* So I said, *Man, we're going to spend an hour and a half talking about gumbo?* Well as it turned out we could have spent a day and a half talking about gumbo. It was myself and Richard [Stewart] from the Gumbo Shop, and my dear sweet friend, Miss Leah Chase. And we—we were at a table talking and we—we wanted to let people smell a brown roux, so I had my sous-chef onstage making a brown roux while we were talking. And of course the aroma was—was very alluring. But anyway, I started talking about gumbo, my mom's gumbo for instance, and every now and then I'd look over at Miss Leah shaking her head like, *No, uh-um, uh-uh; that's not the way we do it; uh-um, uh-uh, uh-um.* I mean she had, and still has, ways of doing things you know, and—and rules really: *No, we'd never do that; oh we always do this and—*. And I love that. I guess I'm a little more of a rule-breaker, but that just goes to show you the variety and—and the diversity of our culture in the way we approach things.

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For her, for instance, mixing seafood and meat in a gumbo is taboo. I'm not necessarily of that opinion but [*Laughs*]*—*but it's all good. But getting back to K-Paul's, you know we— Chef liked to take advantage of his cooks and their particular talents and skills, and you've got to realize that back in those days, the early days of K-Paul's, we had no recipes—no recipes, no measuring cups, no measuring spoons. The only measuring devices were in the bakery for the bread makers, but we learned to cook by taste and that was it. And it was a great way to learn. Ultimately I discovered the beauty of recipes and their value as a tool for teaching, but—but we learned, you know techniques and flavors by taste. And we had a great New Orleans chef there named Stanley Jackson, one of the great Creole cooks of our—of our city. And Chef knew him for many years, and Stanley made a gumbo there called Seven Steak Gumbo. Now I had never seen this before in my life, but again it was sort of a—I guess mostly based on being poor as well, because you could go to the store and buy what they called seven steak for very little money. And it—and it's a cut of beef, a very weird cut of beef that the bone is shaped like a seven, and you can buy it for dirt cheap. So it was a gumbo made by people without a lot of money, and it's an okra gumbo—a beef and okra gumbo. I mean, now that is something that I had never even considered much less seen. And it also had a jalapeno component too, so it was spicy. But man this stuff was good, and—and again, it was a meal; it was something we served at lunch. So that was an eye-opener to me: I never thought of gumbo outside of seafood gumbo, seafood okra gumbo.

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SR: I think, just for the record, that I've seen a recipe for that in one of Chef Paul's cookbooks.

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FB: Yes, yes. Yeah, I think it was in his first book, actually, and he and Stanley worked on it together. But different approaches and—and that’s the great thing about food: even dishes that are very old, you never quit learning. There’s always something new around the corner with food. And Paul, for instance when he—when he ate gumbo at the restaurant he put a scoop of potato salad in it. Now we all thought that was strange until we tried it, and it was absolutely delicious, and so what a great lunch to have a bowl of gumbo with a scoop of potato salad in it. It’s a meal, and again it goes back to his upbringing: you know, coming from a poor family that didn’t have much money. So you know there’s different approaches to it, and—and to me, I respect that and I think you have to keep an open mind even when you’re talking about very traditional dishes.

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SR: I have heard people say that—I wasn’t around in the ‘70s in New Orleans—but I’ve heard people say that—that they think that Chef Paul changed restaurant gumbo in New Orleans, or sort of the standard restaurant gumbo, and I’ve always had the impression that what they meant was that the roux has gotten a lot darker. I’m not getting that from what you’re saying necessarily.

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FB: Well that—that could be true. I think, you know growing up as a kid, if you went to a restaurant and ordered gumbo, what you got was seafood okra gumbo and the roux was there but

it was not a very dominant feature of it. It—usually gumbos were thick and hearty, but with the okra and the seafood. When Paul helped the Brennans open Mr. B's Restaurant—I think that was probably not the first time, but the first major restaurant that featured filé gumbo the way Paul made it, and that is what they call Gumbo Ya Ya. And that dish is still, I'm sure, Mr. B's signature dish. But that filé gumbo, the Gumbo Ya Ya, made its debut I think at Mr. B's, and so—and it is all about the roux. I mean that—that roux was chocolate brown, and it carries the soup. It's kind of—I shouldn't call gumbo a soup, but it carries the flavor profile of that dish. And you know there's no cheating; you know you've got to make the roux right. And we—we certainly experimented a lot with rouxs at K-Paul's, and I teach this in my classes. But one day I was—I went into work at K-Paul's, and we had—this is in our first year, second year—and we had gotten popular and we had gotten busy and we expanded into the upstairs and opened what we called the Grocery. It was a casual lunch place, but we also did a lot of sausage making and things like that. Well, we were doing probably 800 to 1,000 people a day in the restaurant: upstairs, downstairs, lunch and dinner. And so I went in to do my cooking one day and I was swamped; I was really busy, and I made roux almost everyday in a big rondel, and I had a four-burner stove to do my cooking. So I started my roux, and I looked at the clock and I said, *I don't have time to finish this; I've got too much to do*. So I threw the whole thing in the oven, and it turned out to be the best roux I ever made in my life. And—and other people noticed it too: Chef Stanley Jackson and Chef Raymond Sutton—two very experienced Creole cooks that I learned a lot from—they came over and said, *Look at this*. And it was—it was velvety, it was mellow, it was smooth, no trace of bitterness, and I didn't have to stand there and stir it for a long time. You know you didn't have to baby-sit it. So today that's the way we do our roux at Brigtsen's. I do something—and Miss Leah will get mad at me for this—but I do something that's rather

unorthodox when I make gumbo, and that is most people will put the gumbo pot on the stove and make their roux. And from there they'll add their onions, celery, and other vegetables and stock and build up the gumbo like that, starting with the roux. And that's the old maxim in Louisiana cuisine: *first you make a roux*. Well when I make gumbo, the roux is the last thing that goes in the pot. We—we make the roux separately, and I do that for a couple of reasons. Number one, I like to brown my vegetables—the onions and the celery and bell pepper, if I'm using bell pepper, and you can't brown those vegetables in a roux. They'll steam and sauté, but they won't caramelize and get any color on them. So that's one reason. The other advantage is what I learned by cooking the roux in the oven: if you—if you make the roux separately and let it sit even overnight, most of the oil in the roux will float to the top. It will separate from the flour, and you can discard that oil before you add it to the gumbo. Therefore, you don't have all this unnecessary oil in your gumbo, and that's important because that oil in my opinion actually coats the palate and masks flavor, so that without that oil you're getting much more vivid, clear flavors. And so that's the way we do gumbo at Brigtsen's today. We make the roux the night before, and we do it in the oven and it takes about three or four hours, but you don't have to baby-sit it. So right before we open for dinner service at 5:30 we'll start the roux on top of the stove: heat the oil to a very high temperature, like almost a frying temperature, add the flour, whisk it a little bit, and then throw the whole thing in the oven. And you only have to stir it maybe once an hour, and then by the end of dinner service—9:30-10 o'clock—the roux is done. So it's totally painless in a way, and you get the benefit of a smoother, mellower flavor; it never burns or scorches or gets bitter. You don't have to stir it, and when you come in the next day to make gumbo you can throw out all that unnecessary oil, because the oil is strictly the medium in which you brown the flour—that's the only purpose of the oil: to carry the heat to brown the

flour. So you don't want that oil in your gumbo, and—and believe me: it makes a big, big difference. If you do it the old-fashioned way by starting with the roux and building up from there, some of the oil will come to the top and you can skim it off, but you're still going to have a lot in there and it—and it really does mask flavor. So you see, you live and learn, and this was something I discovered by accident. But it has transformed the way we cook.

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SR: What temperature do you keep your oven at for the roux?

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FB: Three-fifty—three hundred fifty degrees, and it takes about three or four hours. We make about probably three-quarters of roux at a time, and it takes about three and a half to four hours.

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SR: And what kind of oil do you use?

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FB: We use just vegetable oil, which is usually corn and soy. Peanut oil is also very good. And we use all-purpose flour, although we experimented with high gluten flours like bread flour and cake flour, and those are also very good. But we just use all-purpose.

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SR: Can you tell a big difference between rouxs made with the different flours?

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FB: Well the high gluten flours tend to thicken more, and that's why I don't like them, because to me the—the roux is all about the flavor. And this gets back to your question of how Paul changed gumbos in restaurants. We, you know, the ideal of the roux(less) gumbo, for instance, speaks to that, but what actually ultimately happened was we made the gumbos thinner. The chicken andouille filé gumbo that we served at K-Paul's was very thin. But the flavor of the roux was there, so it was not meant to be a meal but an appetizer, and—and that simple step, really, I think made gumbo more attractive and successful as a starter in a restaurant meal. So that—and that's a little thing, but in cooking, little things make big differences. And so you don't have someone having a bowl of gumbo as a starter and then they're too full to eat entrées, much less dessert. So it became—but that little simple change of using less roux to make the gumbo a little thinner made it more appropriate as an appetizer, and it works.

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SR: That's one sort of answer that I've been looking for since—. Thanks. Can you take me through, after you make the roux...If you were going to come in today and make a pot of your filé gumbo, could you take me through the steps of that?

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FB: Yes, I can, and it's interesting because I never—up until about two years ago, I didn't have a written recipe for my filé gumbo. And now I've got recipes for everything I do, but I never wrote it down. The ingredients are very simple, but I wanted to teach it in my cooking classes,

and so I had to step it out and—and describe and quantify everything that I did, and it turned out to be a three-page recipe—not because of the ingredients but because of the process. And again, this goes back to what I talked about before about Acadian cuisine being based in very humble ingredients, but—but in some cases very complex techniques. And so we make the roux, and that's done. That's sitting on the shelf. The next thing I do is put on the gumbo pot and sauté my onions, celery and bell pepper. Now the way I do it, and this is what I learned from Paul, those vegetables are major building blocks in our cuisine, and the main lesson Paul taught me and others is how to extract or build in flavors using those vegetables. I can't tell you how many hours I watched Paul stirring onion, celery, and bell pepper, waiting for him to take the next step. But he took his time, because in gumbo or in any soup or sauce-making, those first steps are the most important. So what I do is I sauté my onions, celery and bell pepper, but not all of them. I add about three-quarters of them, and I brown them until the vegetables begin to caramelize. Then I add the rest of the vegetables—the onions, celery and bell pepper—and those second, that second stage of vegetables is just sort of lightly sautéed until the onions become soft and clear, and that way you're building in levels and layers of flavor. You've got the same vegetables cooked two different ways, and it will give you two different levels of taste and texture.

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SR: Can I pause for a second? So by *brown*, do you mean like slowly caramelized, or do you mean sort of fried?

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FB: Not fried, slowly caramelized. What you're doing is you're—you're cooking out the water in the vegetables, and when that happens the sugars in the vegetables begin to caramelize—the sugar in the onions in particular, but the bell peppers as well. And when the onions begin to turn dark brown you're ready for the second stage of vegetables. And—and again, those second stages—the onions are cooked just until they're soft and clear.

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Now the first stage of vegetables will pretty much disappear in a gumbo; they're overcooked. The second stage will maintain their integrity, and you'll be able to tell that's a piece of onion or celery. And then I add my dry seasonings and filé. Now again, I learned this from Paul: most people in New Orleans [*Phone Rings*], they add filé at the table to their gumbo, and their reason for that is filé produces a stringy texture. When you add filé to hot liquid it becomes very stringy and very unappetizing. But we've discovered that by sautéing the filé with the onions, celery and bell pepper for a few minutes, the stringiness will come and then go, and what you're left with is the base essence flavor of—of the ground sassafras. So I sauté the filé powder and my dry seasonings—salt, peppers, dried herbs—for a few minutes until the stringiness goes away. And then you've got this base which you can build up from there. From there I add garlic, bay leaf, and if—if I'm making—well we make rabbit gumbo, is what we make. I add rabbit stock and bring that to the boil. So what you've got now is a very intensely flavored broth from the caramelized vegetables, from the seasonings, from the filé; you've got a very flavorful broth already and you haven't even added the andouille, the rabbit, or the roux. So each step of the way we build in intense flavor. So while that broth is simmering, we then cook the andouille and the rabbit, and that could be chicken or duck too. The andouille, I don't like to sauté in the pot because I want to get the andouille sausage browned. Browned to me is my

favorite color in food. And in cooking color is flavor, and brown is the color of flavor. So we—we slice the andouille and put it on a sheet-pan and bake it in the oven, roast it in the oven, until it's very brown. The rabbit or chicken or duck, we then sort of braise. We—we season the meat, dust it in flour and brown it in oil, like fried, but not cooked all the way through.

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SR: And what—what size are the pieces at this point?

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FB: Well it's broken down. If you're doing chicken, for instance, you break it down into the eight pieces: two wings, two legs, two thighs, two breasts. The smaller pieces that you have, the more flavors you're going to get because you have more surface area exposed. So we brown it and then take it out of the oil and let it drain, and then the meat goes into the broth to finish cooking. So it's sort of a braising technique, but that browning is very, very important because you—you're adding flavor. You're searing the meat, and also those little browned bits of flour add a lot of flavor to the gumbo as well. So in goes the browned meat, in goes the browned andouille; that simmers for a little while, and then finally, lastly, we add the roux and let that simmer a little bit. You have to let that simmer quite a good bit actually, because whenever you add roux to something—blonde or brown roux—if you taste it right away it will taste pasty and the roux will be a very forward sort of taste, which is not what you want. But after simmering 30 or 40 minutes, the pastiness goes away and the gumbo has a nice smooth, velvety feel, and then the roux flavor recedes to the background. And—and that's the way it should be.

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You know in cooking, many times the last thing that goes into the pot is the first thing you taste. Like if you're making tomato sauce for instance, you make marinara sauce and you say, *Oh, I need a little more garlic*; so you add a little more garlic at the end. When you go to eat the pasta the garlic will be the first thing you taste. But by—by cooking it longer, that flavor will recede to the back and that's what we want with the roux.

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SR: How do you add the roux exactly? Do you just take spoonfuls and drop it in, or is there a trick?

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FB: Well you have to be careful because by now the roux is room temperature, and so we drain the oil off the top. Excess oil you can just pour off, and then we add the roux spoon-by-spoon, and then whisk it to make sure that there's no lumps of roux at the bottom of the pot. And then you have to again let it simmer for a while so that it dissipates and smoothes out a little bit.

00:45:06

SR: And the rabbit, does it stay in kind of big pieces, or do you break it up at a certain point?

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FB: Well what we do for restaurant service is, after the meat is tender we take all the rabbit pieces out and debone it. We take the meat off the bone so there's no bones in the gumbo. If you're doing a home-style gumbo for a meal, you know, you can leave whole pieces of chicken

or rabbit or duck in there, but we—we serve it boneless. But what we do, and this is I think extremely important with gumbos or any soups that we serve at Brigtsen's—you know little things make big differences, and to me gumbos and soups are sort of the Rodney Dangerfields of restaurant menus: they don't get no respect. Most people—most restaurants for instance that make gumbo, they'll come in in the morning and make a big pot of gumbo; they'll add all the seafood or meat to it and that's it, and it's very good. But that gumbo is held all day and served all day and night, and so if you come in to dinner at a restaurant at 8 o'clock and order seafood gumbo, the flavor might be good but all the seafood has turned to mush and it's all shrunk up and you can't even find it. Well that's a sin to me. You shouldn't do that to seafood, and your guests deserve better.

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So what we do is, we heat up the rabbit meat to order. If it's seafood gumbo, we poach the seafood to order. The broth is made and held in a steam table, but not the meats and the seafood, and this way the meat is fresh. If it's rabbit or chicken, the meat does not get overcooked and stringy. You get nice big pieces. And if it's seafood, the seafood is plump and freshly cooked and—and when we serve seafood gumbo to people, they're just blown away. They've never had it like that, and they say, *What's—how did you do that?* Well it's very simple: we cook the seafood to order, and—and to me, gumbo and soups deserve that respect. And it's a lot of skillet we go through but—but the gumbo and the customer deserves that extra step. And what a huge difference it makes too.

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SR: Well how did you decide on rabbit as the meat in your signature restaurant gumbo?

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FB: Well that's a good question, and—and again it goes back to necessity is the mother of invention. We have been—we have been serving rabbit since the day we opened, and we get in fresh whole rabbits from an organic farmer [*Phone Rings*] in Mississippi, and we--we butcher the rabbits: we break them down into pieces, and each piece has to get used. So the hind legs, we bone out and pound out like veal, and—and that part of the rabbit is pannéed: breaded and pan-fried and served as an entrée. The loin of the rabbit—or tenderloin as we call it, but it's really the loin—is boned out and served as an appetizer. So what you're left with is the front legs of the rabbit and the belly. Now the front legs are small, and to debone a fresh front rabbit leg is extremely labor-intensive and the yield is very small. And in the early days of our restaurant, we did do that and we boned out the front legs and we made rabbit sausage with it. But it's so labor intensive that I wanted to find a better way. So I asked myself, *How can we get all the meat off the bone in a simpler way?* And the answer is to cook it first. So we tried a few different things: we—we made rabbit confit by cooking the front legs slowly and in olive oil with herbs and garlic, and it was—it is absolutely delicious, but it didn't sell very well. So then I decided to make gumbo with it, and so by braising these front legs of the rabbit we get a terrific gumbo, and—and it's extremely easy to take the meat off the bone once it's cooked, and so it all made sense to me. And when—when something hits like that, when something makes sense on so many levels and tastes good, then you've got a winner. And so that's our way of utilizing the front legs of the rabbit. And—and quite honestly, filé gumbo or Gumbo Ya Ya is really more of a cool-weather dish. You know a lot of people won't make filé gumbo in the summer. They'll

make seafood okra gumbo. But because we have to use these parts of the rabbit we serve this filé gumbo all year round.

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SR: What about the seasonings that you—that you put in the gumbo? Is there anything—is there any kind of seasoning or pepper that you think is essential to a gumbo, that a gumbo would be lost without?

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FB: Well I think that's a good question, and I think you'll find that most people—I mean obviously garlic. But most people you'll find use bay leaves and thyme as two main seasonings, and I agree with that. I also use—well, in the filé gumbo we use—thyme is the only herb we use, thyme and bay leaf. But for peppers, I think you have to approach pepper for what it is, and it's a very unique seasoning in that peppers stimulate the palate, and in large quantities they cause pain, which is a very huge stimulation. But what I discovered is that every pepper, every type of pepper affects the palate in a different way. Black pepper, for instance, I taste first when I taste a dish; black pepper you taste in the front of your palate, on the lips, the tip of your tongue. White pepper I tend to feel and taste a little further back in the palate, in the throat—even the sinuses a little bit. And cayenne pepper, of course—red pepper gives you a nice warm glow all the way down. So I use all three—black, white, and red pepper—in my gumbo, so that you're stimulating the palate with every bite. It's not a real hot and spicy gumbo that would burn you, but even in small quantities these peppers stimulate the palate, and I think that's part of our approach in Louisiana cooking, is to stimulate the palate. We again like complexity of flavor, depth of flavor

where every bite tastes a little better than the last. We don't like singular flavors, and so by using all three peppers you get that effect. And it makes the food much more interesting.

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SR: And I—that's one of Paul Prudhomme's philosophies, too. It seems like he writes about that in his cookbook?

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FB: Yes, and it's true, and that's where I learned it.

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SR: It's very—I've had your gumbo, and I'll just insert myself a little bit. It's—it's sort of impossible to tell where the flavors are coming from in every bite. Like I can think—your intellectual explanation definitely bears out in the product, I can say.

00:53:04

FB: Well I think—I thank you for that, and I think it's true. You know I think again it's—it's the epitome of Acadian cuisine to me because it's eight ingredients, very simple ingredients, but—but the techniques and the combinations are what make the ultimate gumbo as good as it is.

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SR: Can you tell me a little bit about your family's heritage?

00:53:32

FB: Well the Brigtsen's are—have been in New Orleans for five generations now. [**Phone Rings**] My ancestor, Christopher Brigtsen Rosvald came to Baltimore from Norway. Our family is German-Norwegian; he came into the States and moved shortly thereafter to New Orleans and met a local girl, we believe, and got married. Her name was Marie Grote--G-r-o-t-e. And so that's my—the origins of the Brigtsen family here in New Orleans. And my father, Frank Brigtsen, Sr., grew up in the Dryades Street area of New Orleans, went to Fortier High School, and was a true New Orleanian in so many ways. You know, and until I started traveling I thought everybody ate like this, and it just ain't true. But you know my mom was born and raised in Alabama, and you know she met my father here in New Orleans after World War II. He was a World War II veteran, and mom came here to attend nursing school at Southern Baptist on Napoleon Avenue. And that's how they met. Well, you know my dad obviously encouraged mom to learn how to make New Orleans food, like gumbo [**Phone Rings**], and some German dishes too: potato pancakes, German potato salad, really, really good stuff. And so I felt—I feel now in hindsight how deeply New Orleans was entrenched in my father, and—and my family in general. You know we had French bread at every meal, and—and I just feel that I'm so blessed and lucky to be able to be a part of the Brigtsen family tradition. You know it—it took us six months to think of a name for this restaurant; we actually had a contest, but [**Laughs**] we wound up calling it Brigtsen's. And it—it's good in some ways and kind of troublesome in some ways—troublesome in that we have to get people to learn how to say it correctly. But it's wonderful because it made my family members proud that—you know, my Aunt Betty came when we opened and said, *Uncle Frank would be so proud*, and that's my Great-Uncle Frank, who was our patriarch. And he would be proud and—and so it's great to have that, and it helps people find us. People from my past, you know people I went to high school with—*Oh that must*

be Frank Brigtsen; I went to school with him. So we get little shades of the past, but you know I think New Orleans is something that, you know, it's a place where a restaurant like this can be successful you know. We never set out to—to be a fancy smancy five-star restaurant, whatever that means. In New Orleans you don't have to spend five million dollars on restaurant design and a facility to be successful. If you make good food day in and day out, people will find you and they will support you, and—and I think we've been very blessed over these 21 years to have that. And I know a lot of them are coming for that gumbo. **[Laughs]** I really do.

00:57:32

SR: Well how do you describe the food that you serve here?

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FB: Well you know that was a tricky part when we opened too. People would ask me, *What kind of restaurant are you going to open?* And I—I really didn't have an answer. But what I would say, but what I knew in my heart, was I just want to open a good New Orleans restaurant. Now I knew what that meant, but I couldn't convey it to anyone. We call it “modern Louisiana cuisine,” and all that means is, you know, Creole and Cajun influences are sort of everywhere. But I just followed my heart. You know I followed my own sensibilities, and being born on Napoleon Avenue, my—my sensibilities are New Orleans. And you know it's straightforward food, like gumbo: it's straightforward. We're not overly fussy with presentations; we're—we're all about flavor and taste. And the guys in the kitchen tease me: they call me the King of Brown Food, because you know, again, to me brown is the color of flavor, and my favorite sauce in the world is gravy, you know a natural pan gravy. And so gumbo really clicks with me because it—it

has that same sensibility and direction. It's natural flavors; you don't need a lot of expensive exotic ingredients to do it. You just have to learn the techniques.

00:59:05

SR: Are the Brigtsens Creole? do they call themselves Creole?

00:59:09

FB: My father wouldn't say that; he'd call us Germans. **[Laughs]** But—but we are, you know, and I think growing up in New Orleans I've always felt for instance, although my family's roots are German-Norwegian, I feel for instance if you grow up in New Orleans you've got to have a little Italian in you, you know. The French Market was run by Italians; there's nothing French about it. And that's the beauty of New Orleans culture and Creole culture, is that we are the original fusion cuisine. We have influences from all over Europe, from Africa, from the Caribbean, from—from Native American Indians. We have all that stuff going, and that's why Creole cuisine and culture is so rich in scope and broad in scope. It's never-ending really, and you know it's not just four or five dishes; it's—it's a whole family of dishes that are still evolving and still continuing to—to bring people happiness.

01:00:16

SR: Well I cannot think of another question about gumbo to ask you, because did such a beautiful job of talking about it.

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FB: Thank you.

01:00:23

SR: And I want to thank you for sharing your story and your time with us.

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FB: My pleasure. Thank you for having me, Sara.

01:00:31

[End Frank Brigtsen Interview]