

CHIEFO CHUKWUDEBE
Chiefo's Kitchen – San Francisco, CA

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Location: La Cocina – San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Amy C. Evans

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Project: Women at Work: San Francisco

[Begin Chiefo Chukwudebe Interview]**00:00:01**

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, May 21, 2013. I'm in San Francisco, California, at the offices of La Cocina, and I'm here with Chiefo, who has Chiefo's Kitchen. And we're sitting down for an interview today. If I could get you, Chiefo, to please say your name and your business for the record?

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Chiefo Chukwudebe: My name is Chiefo Chukwudebe. The name of my business is Chiefo's Kitchen. I have a West African catering and packaged food company.

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AE: Okay. So tell me a little bit about your background. Where are you from?

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CC: Huh. Well, I was born in Boston. My mom is from Texas, and my dad is from Nigeria. And soon after I was born, we moved back to Nigeria, hence my name—it means *a new beginning*. My parents were starting over in Nigeria. I was actually raised in Nigeria. The funny thing is, in Africa, you're from where your father is from, regardless of where you're born and where you grow up. So I'm actually from Onicha, which is in another state in Nigeria.

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AE: So where in Texas is your mother from? Let's start there.

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CC: Well, she doesn't claim Texas anymore. **[Laughs]** She says she's from California, but she's from Port Arthur. But she's—but she spent most of her time in California.

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AE: And I just interviewed Fernay [McPherson of Minnie Bell's Soul Movement] whose family is also from Port Arthur. Is there any connection?

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CC: Actually, I didn't know that. I will talk to her about that. I didn't know she was from Port Arthur, too.

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AE: She—she has some family from there. She's a native of San Francisco, but her family is from Port Arthur at least. Anyway, if you have that conversation, let me know how that goes.

[Laughs] Okay. So tell me about your time in Nigeria. I've learned a little bit about you—about you spending some time on a farm there. Can you talk about that?

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CC: Well, the way my dad got us to go back to Nigeria was he—when he broached the subject to us—well I had—we had gone—. Well, I was little, way little, but he asked my siblings what it would take them to move back. And he said that he will buy a piece of land, and he would buy a farm, and he will plant whatever we wanted. So the Dole pineapples were popular in our household at that time, and so my oldest brother said he wants pineapples. So my dad eventually,

when we moved back, he eventually bought like fifteen, twenty acres of land, and he planted it all of pineapples. And we had other fruit there, too. We had bananas, plantains, mango trees—gosh, mango trees, they produce so much fruit [*Laughs*]*—*and a lot of citrus. We—we just had a lot of fruit. And we also had a piggery and a poultry.

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My dad was actually an electrical engineer, so it was sort of—for him, it was his hobby, but his main reason was that he never wanted us to say—I think for him, what annoyed him the most was for us to say we were hungry. So as we were growing up, any time we would say that to him, he would say, you know, “Go next door. You have a house full of mangoes.” Which there were. And we would just—and during siesta, which was required in our house growing up, my younger brother and I, we would pull a whole bunch of bananas into our room, and we’d just eat it during the—during the siesta. And, you know, we just never really—it was—it was fantastic. And then my dad actually—my dad and I, we like to experiment with stuff and he would experiment with different types of wines and vinegars and some of them were great and some of them weren’t, but I actually had—like I could do whatever I wanted with the fruits and vegetables and—or the piggery, too. We also sold them. It wasn’t just for us. We also sold the pigs, the chickens, and everything. But we—it was—it was just great; it was just great growing up on the farm.

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I mean he—he planted the stuff but he didn’t actually—he failed to tell us that we are actually the ones that were going to have to work on the farm. So that was—yeah. [*Laughs*]
Yeah, that was a lot of summer vacations, yeah.

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AE: So how old were you when you moved from Boston to Nigeria?

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CC: Well we—we moved, finally, back to Nigeria—like the first time we went, it was more like a visit. We came back when my younger brother was born and then we went—we moved back, finally, when I was around three. Me and my brother, we're three years difference. So from three until, maybe, well, the plan—my parents—their plan was for us to do elementary and secondary school in Nigeria because my dad believes that the math and science was stronger in Nigeria at the time. And he was—that was his thing. He wanted us to be very strong in math and science. So we—then we would come to the U.S. for our university. However, my dad passed away when I was quite young, when I was twelve, so for the first three siblings, they actually went through my dad's system. And then my younger brother and I, we actually came here before we finished high school.

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So I came back here when I was in the eleventh grade.

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AE: When you say back here, do you mean San Francisco, specifically?

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CC: Well, Texas. I was with my grandmother for a little bit, and then we moved to Milpitas and then to San Francisco, so pretty much in California.

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AE: What was the—what brought you to California. What was the reason?

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CC: My mom loved California, and my brother was already here. My siblings were already here in school. My brother went to—my first brother went to U.C.—U.C. Santa Cruz and then the second one went to Hayward, and the third was in—at Mills. And it was—but we just sensed that it would just be better to keep us all together.

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AE: So I want to go back to—actually, now would probably be a good time for me to ask your birthday because I think I failed to do that. So would you mind sharing your birth date for the record?

00:06:06

CC: It's August 19th—I'm a Leo—1972. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Okay. And so do you have any lingering memories of the first three years you spent in Boston?

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CC: No. I mean I—I—from what—well, you know, it was more like three months because I was born in August and then my—well, my mom and my dad did not grow up around snow, so the first snowstorm that hit, they both forgot that you need to take the shovel inside, so they

opened the door, the next day and they were snowed in. That day, my dad, he was working at— with GE [General Electric] at the time, and he was, “We can’t—I can’t do the snow.” So he handed in his resignation [*Laughs*] and he sat my mom back and said, “We need to go back to Nigeria where it’s sunny.” [*Laughs*] So I was—we were there for three months and we left. No, actually, I think it was like four months, yeah.

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AE: So what are your earliest food memories from Nigeria?

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CC: My earliest food memory was just, in general, was being in love with cherry tomatoes. And that was when we came back here for my brother and my mother, for my birthday, gave me a whole blue bowl full of cherry tomatoes. And I ate, ate, ate, ate, and I got sick, and ever since then, I haven’t really liked cherry tomatoes that much.

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But in Nigeria, it’s just been—you know, food was everywhere. I mean, it was—and the food, it was always timed. There were—we weren’t really allowed to eat street food because my mom, she wasn’t used to it and, of course, because, you know, you don’t know what you’re eating. And I mean just, in general, people don’t eat a lot of street food. But—but they do have—might be—at nighttime they have *suya* [roasted skewered meat] and in the afternoon—in the nighttime they also have, during the season, they have corn. So even though we weren’t allowed to, I did eat when I went to school. There was always this fear that someone would catch me and tell my mom that [I] ate, you know, outside of the house. But, you know I—it was something to—.

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Yeah, so I mean, it was fun. I mean food was—it was just everywhere. We used to—we used to, when I was a little bit older, my two oldest siblings—well, my brother and my sister and myself were left at home with my—when my dad—my mom had come back to get one of us to go back to school and my oldest brother was in school, and my dad used to go up North to get to do his contracts in schools. So he would leave us at—at home for weeks at a time with a nanny. You know, but we would convince our nanny that we were old enough—I was—I was about five, six. That means my sister was seven, eight, and my brother was ten—nine, ten, and we would convince her that we were grown and we could stay at home by ourselves, and she would—she would have much better use at her home. We usually sent my sister because she was the—she—she never lied. **[Laughs]** That was her reputation.

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So I mean, we would convince her to go home, and she would leave us at home and she would go home. You know, it was—it was kind of like, you know, it was, “If you don’t tell, we don’t tell,” you know, sort of thing. So she would leave us and we—leading up to my—to this, you know, my dad’s trip, we would save our lunch money, you know, and we—as soon as my dad traveled, yay! We would—on the way home we would stop at the market, and people knew what we were doing. They knew that we—something was going on because I mean, like, even though we were alone, we weren’t really alone and people kept their eyes on us. So whenever we stopped by this particular store to buy these items, he was like, “You must—your dad must not be here.” And, of course, we would say, “No, no, he’s here.” But they knew.

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But we would spend the night baking. We would bake. We didn’t have an oven, but we would make an oven using sand. We would sink the tins into sand and turn the gas on. Yeah, it

was dangerous, but we would turn the gas on and we would bake our cakes, and we would bake cookies. We just—you know, whatever we wanted to do.

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We eventually were caught. You know, my dad came back before we—he told us and he actually—it was during finals. It was during finals and he actually—because when we heard him coming up, we were like, “Oh, my god.” You know, “My dad is coming up, and we need to clean up,” because the kitchen—I mean that was—that was the exchange. We made a mess. The nanny came, and she cleaned up. You know, just so that we didn’t, you know, we—

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But he came in and he saw this mess and he was like, “My god.” He was like—so he just walked through. My dad was really quiet. He walked through the house quietly, and then he looked at us, of course, pretending to sleep and then he—he was like, you know, he kind of was like, “What happened?” And we had thrown away some stuff because we couldn’t find, you know, space, and he was like, “How come you guys threw away the banana,” you know, and “why didn’t you just save them for me?” And I was like, you know, the young cute and smart—dumb one, and I was like, “Daddy,” you know, “there’s more! There’s more!” And then I got up and I showed him all the other stuff, and he was just staring at us like, “Oh, my god. These children have been doing this.” But he asked us, you know, he asked me, he was like, “How did you,” you know, “when did you guys do this?” And you know, “Where is the nanny?” And I was like, “She’s home,” you know. He’s like, “How long have you guys been doing this?”

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So he actually freaked out, of course. And he called my mom and told her what her children were doing. And my—my mom was happy. **[Laughs]** She was upset, but she was like, “Oh, my gosh,” you know, “these children can actually cook.” So she retired from the kitchen.

She didn't—she was like, “They can cook. I don't need to cook anymore.” And when she got back, she did not enter into the kitchen and, to this day, like, we—we would actually have to request on holidays for her to cook gumbo or to cook cornbread dressing. And that was our—that's our Christmas gift is her making this food. So otherwise, she doesn't cook.

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AE: So this—this sneaking in the kitchen, is that something that was attractive because it was not allowed, or did the three of you just have this passion for cooking, or a combination of those things and something else?

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CC: It was the excitement of doing something that we weren't supposed to do. We knew it was wrong but it was—it just felt—it just felt good. It just felt good. We—we felt good being—I mean, we didn't cook it to eat it. I mean we—because we made—we made too much stuff. I mean, we would take it to school the next day and hand it out, you know, because I mean, you would experiment. I had—I did cakes. My brother did pies. And we would experiment with different—different—whatever we had in the market and was in season at that time. My sister did cookies and muffins and, you know. But we would eat it, but it was more the joy of cooking it—of like doing something that, you know, wasn't—it was sort of forbidden. **[Laughs]** So like, even now, sometimes when I enter the kitchen I kind of sort of get that little feeling like, “Oh, my god, I'm playing with gas,” you know. So, but it was fun; it was fun doing it.

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And my aunts are all—on both sides of my family, they're great cooks. You know, they—they love cooking. And even when I started my business, when I went back, you know,

my aunts, they—they showed me their technique, their secrets that they don't share with anybody else. They're like, you know, "You need to do it right," and, you know, and of course, their way is the right way, so, I—I just sit and listen to what they say and, you know, take whatever tip it is to add onto my own, so—.

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AE: So would you say that opportunities to cook that you had with your brother and sister, did you—did you know then that you would make a career from food, or did you have an inkling of that's maybe what you wanted to do?

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CC: When I was small, I wanted to be a gymnast; that's where I broke my arm. **[Laughs]** I was—I wanted to join the circus and I wanted to be—I wanted to be like 20,000 things at once. And, as I got older I—I realized that, you know, that takes a lot of school and it's impossible to do to be a doctor and a gymnast and an author and, you know, a—I wanted to be an engineer, too. **[Laughs]** But no, I didn't think that it was a career. It was something I did for fun. It was something I did to—when I was stressed out. Even when I was in college I—whenever I was stressed out, I would cook. I liked cooking. I liked—I liked getting people to taste stuff, taste things that they—something that they normally won't. You know, I—I even, you know, growing up, I experimented a lot with items, like sometimes my—even till today, my siblings, when I make something, they're like, you know, "Is this an experiment?" Or, "Is this," you know, "something new?" And most—most of the times, they just say, "Don't tell me what—what's in it or how you made it," and they taste it and they're like—and they usually like it. You know, sometimes they—you know, you go back and you tweak it, you know, the cabbage and the eggs

didn't quite work out—soup. **[Laughs]** But that—but, yeah. But normally it's—it was—it's fun and it's just fun. It was—I didn't—I didn't think it was a career. I actually was going the route of public health before I came back from the Peace Corps, and I decided to go to culinary school while I made it to take the—while I was stressed taking the—what is it the GRE getting into graduate school. And I stressed out, and I was like, let me go cook.

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And the funny thing was, before that, when I was just telling my family what I wanted to do, they—they would keep on asking me, “What—what, again, do you want to do?” And I would explain it. I would explain it. And then, as soon as I called them and I said—you know, I—I was a little bit nervous, you know, saying I wanted to—I was like, “Maybe I should be a chef,” you know. Maybe I—when I called to them that I was going to culinary school, I was a little bit nervous. I was like, maybe they would not think it was a real, you know, real job or am I playing again, or, you know. But as soon as I said that, everybody was like, “Wow,” you know, “that makes sense,” you know. Everybody was like, “That makes sense.” So it just seemed to go from there.

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AE: Where did you go in the Peace Corps?

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CC: I was in Cote d'Ivoire [Ivory Coast] for two years in a little town called Basawa, and I was actually a health volunteer and that was—that was a great experience too.

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AE: And did any of your time there or experiences influence the inspiration or part of your inspiration to cook again?

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CC: Well, I actually thought about starting a business in Cote d'Ivoire. I fell in love with beesap, which is a drink made out of hibiscus. And the way they have it there is that they—they sell it in these little sachets, these little bags of—these plastic bags—and they freeze it. They suck on these plastic bags, and I was addicted to the stuff. And everybody—I mean, I would, you know, if they ever saw me not drinking it, they knew something was wrong. And I was so addicted. So I was talking to some of my friends and because they're like, you know, "This is your staple," you know, "you should have an IV and just—," you know. And I was like, "Well—." And they were like—and I was like, "Yeah, I can—I can. I was just saying, I was like, "Well you could do this." And I had other ideas with beesap—I was like, just have it three times a—a day. And the more I thought about it I was like, you know, that might actually work. **[Laughs]** And at first, they thought it was funny, but when the more I just thought—oh, you could do this and you know morning—I mean just like different things I could have like—way to incorporate it into a meal morning, noon, and night. Then they kind of got silent. They were like, "I think you have something there."

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So I thought about, you know, okay, I'm coming back, but, you know, I was still—you know, I still needed to go to—to school and get, you know, my graduate degree. And you know, continue in the education and—but I mean that's—life changes and it's—this is a lot more fun.

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AE: So what—since you grew up cooking and, you know, having a passion for food and creativity through food, what made you decide to go to culinary school and where did you go?

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CC: Well I went to CCA [California Culinary Academy] in San Francisco and I—I just—I just figured that was the next step. I figured I needed to have something official. I wasn't—I don't—I just woke up one day, and I said, well, where I checked out the schools in the area, and I was like, what is the number one? And I was like, well, that's in New York and the CCA and that was here local. And I always wanted to live in New York, but I—it was—it was, like I said—it was a stress—stress at the time and my family was here. And I had just come back from being away from my family, my nieces and nephews were getting bigger, so I wanted to stay closer so I chose CCA. And I got in very soon after I applied.

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AE: What did you get from that experience?

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CC: CCA was a—was interesting. It was an interesting place. It was—I went at the time when being a chef was popular. It was—it had just become like the—the thing to be. And you know, it—you just got in there, and I think everybody had their own agenda. And I found that, for me, it was just fun. I think like the teachers saw that it was fun, and I would finish what was required for the class, and I'd ask them for more stuff to do. And they—I think I got a lot out of it because I kept on asking them what other things, you know, I could do. And I actually, the—one thing that was required—that was required was to do an externship. So I actually did my externship

here in Campbell by San Jose, but I—but afterwards, I actually just one day just called up a chef in England. My brother—my younger brother had told me about this little town, Ludlow, and it had the most starred restaurants outside of London. And I just picked up the phone and I called one of them, and I was like well, “I am here.” **[Laughs]** You know, “Can I come and work in your restaurant?” And at first he said no, because he had just—he just—he was fully staffed. But then I called the next place that was not that far away, and I asked them and they said yes, so I said, “No problem.” So I got on a plane and I went, and I worked in—my plan was to go to work—to just travel around and do six months in England and six months in France and six months in Italy. And I worked at the first place—well, I wasn’t really working. I was in the kitchen working **[Laughs]**—. They gave me room and board, which was—so I didn’t really need you know—I had it so nice. I just—you know. So I was at the first place for about a month and a half, and then I went over to the—the place I had called and I was like—and I told him who I was and, you know, and he kind of looked at me and was like, “Why are you here?” I’m like, “Because I want to work in your restaurant.”

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So he—he said yes. So that—that was a great experience. He kicked me out of the kitchen. That’s the only kitchen I’ve been kicked out of and had stuff thrown at me. He was a French chef. But—but I always look at that as sort of—like the foundation. It was like the first real, you know, like real experience and it’s kind of like you—I mean, it’s like the first time it actually became not play, you know, because he was very passionate, very serious about his food, of course, and—and kind of—oh, you know, I’m like, “Okay, this is not—.” Because I mean, CCA was—it was—it was still fun, you know, and all the other places were still fun. And that was the first time. I was like, okay, this is—this is serious, you know. **[Laughs]**

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And so I—whenever I think about, like, the starting, I always—even though he did kick me out of the kitchen, that was like the—you know, the start. I mean he kicked me out for the day, and I took it—it was serious and I left town. **[Laughs]** Yeah. Then I went to France. And I—I got engaged when I was in France, so I ended up coming back, yeah.

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AE: Did you get engaged to a Frenchman or someone here?

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CC: No, some guy I met when I was in the Peace Corps, and I met him in the Peace Corps. Yeah, so I traveled back and forth and, you know—.

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AE: Is he an American or is he from West Africa?

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CC: He's from Cote d'Ivoire, yeah.

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AE: Okay, so all of these experiences. Then how did you connect with La Cocina? How did you get here?

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CC: Well, when I came—well, before I left for Europe I started a—it was sort of—it was—again it was still—well, at the time it was still play. I started this—to me it was—I started this business called Table for Twelve and the idea was to have twelve people that didn't really know each other come around in a—somewhere that wasn't a restaurant and I would usually do it in their houses, and I would cook a minimum of three courses. They got a deal. That was like—because I cooked like seven, eight courses for them, and it was stuff that I was learning in school and just stuff—I mean I flipped through recipe books, and I was like this is interesting and, you know, I made like—I would make like tomato sorbet and they were like, you know—just like anything to make them taste it, you know. And they would—any concoction I could do, and they paid to come and they—they enjoyed it.

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And then it actually grew; by the time I actually left for Europe it wasn't Table for Twelve anymore. It was like more a Table for Twenty-One, Twenty-Two. So when I left it was kind of like, you know, why are you leaving? You have this thing that can definitely grow but I—I still—I still felt that I needed to, you know, just go out and see what's out there. You know, the trip was fantastic. So when I came back I—I was thinking about what—what my next step was. I worked in—with some catering companies and then I decided that, you know, if I was going to start a business, it was always there. I was like, well, if I'm going to start a business I need to have a business plan. So I applied to Women's Initiative to do my business plan and then, while we were there, the teacher mentioned La Cocina. I think it had just started; this was 2005—2000—I think it was 2005. But he mentioned that La Cocina was a kitchen incubator, so that became my next—it's like I—I tend to like get an idea where I want to go and I focus on that, you know. And then that was my next step.

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So I finished Women's Initiative, and I had a business plan for the beesap business and but I—meanwhile I got married and had a baby. And then, you know, I was still thinking about my business plan [*Laughs*] and then when—as soon as my daughter turned one, I turned my application in to La Cocina and I got in. And I—she was like around a year and three months when I started with the program.

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And you know, it's been great since then.

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AE: So when you came to La Cocina—because now your—your mission and please restate it because I'm just—I'm paraphrasing, but your mission is to introduce people to the foods of West Africa and to dispel any misconceptions about the food of West Africa. So did, you know, coming here, that that's what you wanted to do, or did that evolve as you started working with the people here at La Cocina?

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CC: When I applied it was—I was to do—well, I really wanted to do food. But I—my—but when I looked at my—my—my menu and I had to do costing for every single thing it was too much. So I was like, okay, let's start with the drink. And then when I get into La Cocina, I would switch to food. So when I came to my interview, I brought the drink, but I also brought a lot of food. So I was talking, and then one of the people I—it was like a panel of like twelve people—well, nine people. It just seemed like a lot of people. And one of the people, he was like, you know, “What are you—what do you really want to do?” So I was like, “Oh, my gosh.” So I was like [*Laughs*]
—so I—I kind of—I was like, well, you know, “I—I—this is what—.” And—and

then they—somebody else said, you know, “Maybe you should do food and then but also do your drink.” You know, “You can do food and the—like, the drink might be limiting.”

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So my—my vision, my view is to bring the best of Africa to the Bay Area. It's to educate people on West African food and not just about the food, but also the culture, about the music, and to—I think—I think the people always like to eat. You know, people—that's one thing that people would always do. My mom has a way of—says that, you know—she says I'm a great business because people, they always get—before that I wanted to be a doctor and she was like, you know, “You choose good professions, like people always will need a doctor, and they'll always need to eat.” So—so, I—and, you know, there are a lot of—there are a lot of Nigerians outside of Nigeria. I think there—I think—I believe they're the most—we have the most people outside in—in Africa, but we don't have a lot of restaurants. You know, my cousin had a restaurant, and her restaurant didn't work. You know, we don't have a lot of—most—most people, when they think about African food, especially here, they think about the Ethiopian food and—and I just thought, you know, why is that? And plus, a lot of the ingredients that we have because we're sort on the same place as South America, across the line, we have plantains, we have yams, we have cassava, so we have the same foods, but it's like why is it not—why is Nigerian food not here? So—or why is it not popular?

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And I grew up eating it, and I think it's fantastic. We use a—a lot of food, we do have our starchy food, our *fufu*, which is made of yam because, you know, some people use—I discovered plantain *fufu* and Cote d'Ivoire, which is lovely with peanut sauce. And they have their own form of *fufu*, but they always eat it with cream—with some sort of soup. And the soup that's where you get—people get their vegetables.

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So my mom always said that, you know—you know, my mom used to say there wasn't any vegetables but—because they grind them up, she was like, “You need to have—.” So our soups in our house—were always chunkier than my—than at my cousin's house. You know, they were—it just didn't look right, you know, for my cousins, you know but—but they were—to me they were delicious. You know my mom would use her—bring her background and put them in like the okra soup—our okra soup was not as smooth as my cousin's—in my cousin's home, but in our home it was, you know—it was great. Or it had more tomato. So yeah, so I—I talked to people about my food. I found that the first year or two was to, you know, people—they would see it and then they would—they have their assumption of it already and they start walking away. And I will tell them what's in it and then I have to repeat it a couple times, and then they're like, “Oh, okay, we—we know,” you know. And in their mind it's like, “Okay, we know peanuts, we know, you know, flour, you know, we know—.” So then they will taste it, and then they will buy it you know because they're like—because they haven't had it before or, you know, like some people I—the couple people—. I will always ask, “Have you tried Nigerian food?” And sometimes they're like, you know—of course, most of the times it's, “No.” And then I'll tell them, “Now, you have—.” You know and you can you know tell somebody else that it's—it's not—you know, it's not whatever it is that you might think it is. It's—it's—it's everyday food, but it's also delicious food.

00:30:38

And yeah, and the great thing about being here is that people are willing to try stuff. They are—they're—they I think people, they—they want to try it and they—it's been—it's been well received.

00:30:55

AE: And talking about, you know, familiarity with ingredients, I mean, that's one of the reasons I want to talk to you because there's so many ingredients in Southern food that come from West Africa and, you know, okra and you were mentioning gumbo and—and peanuts and so many other things. And those connections—but I'm curious, when you were talking about your mother's gumbo, you—and the holidays, you ask your mother to make gumbo and cornbread dressing. So what from her—I mean and you also just mentioned from her background, she's influenced some of the things you make. So is there any connection to Texas or the South in any—in your route from Boston to Nigeria to back to California that is kind of a connection to what you're doing now? Does that make sense?

00:31:40

CC: Hmm, I think so. I—well, um, well what—what I know about Texas, I know from my mom. My mom, she—was she was another adventurous spirit. And, you know, she—growing up, she—her—her goal was to, you know, go to California and she—she—she had a reputation of the one that wanted to get out, you know, that wanted to go—she wanted to go to California. And she went out to—she went to Texas. I mean, she went up to Washington for school and then she—she did the unthinkable: she married this guy from Nigeria. **[Laughs]** And she—she lived in Nigeria for twenty-something, thirty years, so—so it's—so, you know, the—the cornbread dressing, it was just different. I mean, the way that she did it, and she actually—she would use like, you know, I don't know anybody—because I've tried other cornbread dressings, and they don't taste—they don't taste the same. I don't know whether she uses the crayfish from Nigeria or she uses—I don't know what it is because I've never been in the kitchen when she actually cooks because, you know, it's—my mom grew up having to cook—having to cook for her

youngest—she was the oldest girl, and I think that kind of made her not want to cook, you know, and I think that made her happy that we could cook, whereas I grew up not having to cook, but I really wanted to cook. So I think we took it in a different way.

00:33:03

But she used—I haven't tasted anybody else's gumbo that tastes like hers or her cornbread dressing, and so I—I mean I—I'm sure like the—the ingredients, of course, are similar.

00:33:25

AE: Tell me about your mother's gumbo in more specifics.

00:33:28

CC: Well, she would use—it's—it's a process. It's an all-day process, which is you—. But the end-product—I can't tell you about the process, but the end-product, it would have, of course, the regulars, the—she—the best is when she would do it in Nigeria because we would go, and we would get a chicken or two from our farm and they were fresh and the—the fish was fresh. The sausage was—if we made it, of course, it was fresh or—just everything was just fresh.

00:34:00

And the okra was—if it wasn't something that we grew, it was something that somebody picked from their farm that day with the tomatoes, so it was just—it just—it was just so—it was—for me, it was like this—because the way my mom took about it, it took all day long to make it, so I think that I should probably use that with my own daughters, like how long it took to make this stuff because I—maybe she didn't and maybe she took like ten minutes. I don't know but—but it's just like when I looked at it was like, “Oh, my gosh, it's a labor of love.”

Plus, you'd only get it once a year, so it's like, "Oh, my god, it's a labor of love. Look at what she did." *[Laughs]* So just like it—so just spilling over with all these meats and it just—it's just heaven in a bowl.

00:34:41

AE: Do your daughters have an appreciation for cooking?

00:34:43

CC: My daughter, well, she's four, she—yeah, she does. She tries to help me in the kitchen. She wants to help me in the kitchen. She—whenever I—she just started—I just started being able to bring her, like she—some days, if I don't have anybody to watch her, she would come to La Cocina, and the last time I was here she came and I was doing my Whole Foods order and the truck was outside taking the food away. So she—so like I was telling her the process of it, like, I make the food, and the truck comes, and they pick it up and then they take it to the store. So then she goes back to school to the daycare, and she's like my mom—she's just like so proud. It's like, "This is what my mom does." You know, like she goes through the grocery store, and she asks me, "Did you make—every single thing?" And there's so many things in the grocery store. Did I do this, and did I do this? But she knows my label and she—she likes to cook. You know that's—you know she likes to play cook. And she does—she is a really—she's a good eater. She eats so much better than I do. But she's—she's a great eater too.

00:35:42

AE: What is her name?

00:35:43

CC: Makissi, she's four and a half, and she already thinks she's five. She is already the size of a six year-old, so—. [*Laughs*]

00:35:53

AE: Well tell me about kind of your—your business philosophy because, you know, you were talking about everything in Nigeria was seasonal, and it was important to have access and freshness and how you're folding that into your—your business here in what you're doing now.

00:36:10

CC: Well I—I bring the best of West Africa to the Bay Area. I—I use—I try to use the best ingredients I can here. I also—I also do bring my products—the products of Nigeria from home. If I run out, of course, I would buy them here, but I prefer to bring them from Nigeria or Cote d'Ivoire. I bought my beesap from there and from Cote d'Ivoire, and I have my melon seeds and I have my cousins that I call and I ask them for—I give them a time limit of when I would need something and they would—. I know that it's—I—I can gauge when it was picked, you know, because people don't really store stuff there. They—unless it's to be planted they don't really store ingredients—our native foods unless it's something like yam, and yam lasts for, you know, a long time.

00:37:10

But, you know, people got my—anyway, but people—I know that it's—that when she sends it, it hasn't been off the tree or off the—out of the ground for—by the time I get it maybe—it's really quick compared to like if I go to a store I don't—I don't know when it got here, and I don't know how long it got here. So—so yeah, so that's my—my goal is to—just to

bring—just like have people taste it and—when I can. You know, like I—sometimes I’ve found that I have to sort of scale back. People are not used to—somebody told me that they weren’t used to having fish like seafood and like meats in the same—. And I was like, “Everybody eats gumbo, don’t they?” **[Laughs]** But, you know, like I—I use a lot of crayfish, like our crayfish is not the crawfish here. Our crayfish is a little—it’s about this big. **[Gestures]** It’s about—what is that an inch—no, a couple? And it—and it has a very distinctive flavor, and it’s used in a lot of dishes.

00:38:12

So I—.

00:38:20

AE: Well tell me about—you also like to support—I read it on your website that you like to support fair trade and also women-owned businesses in West Africa.

00:38:30

CC: I actually, when I was in Peace Corps I—we started a—I was a health volunteer, so I lived in between the *infirmerie* and the *sage-femme*, which is the—in the villages, all the female—all the nurses were male and all the midwives were female. So it sort of worked that, you know, like you have like the woman to deal with the woman issues and children—child issues and then the man to deal with everything else. So, it worked.

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But with the *sage-femme*, the midwife, I actually—we started a women’s co-op, and that was a—it was a big time of my time there. We—the—the—the reason why we started it was so that the women could have money to come to the hospital, should they need it, you know, and if

they needed birth control, that was a big one. They needed—because they—they will not ask their husband for birth control, so they just keep on having these babies even when—even if their body wasn't up to it. And—or they would not have the babies in the—in the hospitals. And we had a health center. So that's why we started it and—so and it was picking up by the time I left. And I—I—like when I—like when I did my hibiscus, I always—I asked my—I have my goals in the future of what I would like to do, but I always—I always kind of asked like where is the food coming from. I know that like from my—my *egusi* [a melon], I know that my cousin is going to—a woman you know and she's—she goes and she knows and she—she's—she—she knows the person by name. You know and I like—I like that I—that it's helping a certain person and it's not—it's going to directly to that person, which is helping—directly helping the family.

00:40:18

AE: So let's talk about the food that you make and that you sell through Chiefo's Kitchen.

00:40:27

CC: I make—well I do—I do West—Nigerian, mainly. Some of them have influences from—of course from my mom and also from my time in Cote d'Ivoire and also from my travels because I traveled a bit around West Africa and other parts of the world. So I bring all of that into my—my cooking, and I'm always learning. I'm always trying new things. I—depending on where I—I cook, I—like usually for my catering events I do things that are more traditional and more authentic because I love it when I get people that—that give me free rein to do the menu. And then I—they—I could do, you know, I suggest stuff and then they always, you know, they always are receptive. Some places, like if I'm selling to some stores, I can't sell with meat or with fish because of the regulations. But I still manage to bring in the flavors of—of Nigeria. I

want people when they taste my food to taste sunshine or to just taste like—somehow be connected to Nigeria. I always tell people—there’s always a story behind the food. Like one of the things that I make right now for Whole Foods is—is spicy peanut squash. Now the spicy—the spicy peanut is actually my spice mix. It’s a *suya* spice mix that is made from—that originally—it originated from the northern part because that’s where you have the peanuts. That’s where they grew the peanuts, and that’s where they had the beef.

00:42:13

So I mean even growing up, like you see these cows—cows in the U.S. are so spoiled. You just—if you look at their eyes, I mean if you look at a cow [*Laughs*] when—when they have to—they truck them from the northern part of Nigeria, down to the South, I mean I just remember so many times just wandering on the path—there’s bush on both sides and you round the corner and you come like, you know head-on with these—a herd of 200 or 300—muscular—these things are like buffed [*Laughs*]—cows having to walk all the way down. And you just look in their eyes and they just, you know—it’s like, “Move out of my way.” You know, here the cows, you can kind of pet them. You know, it just seems like you can pet them. They’re so cute. [*Laughs*]

00:42:57

But—but that’s where the *suya* spice originated from and I always like whenever I’m having people taste my food I always tell them this so that they can be connected to it. And you know I—they probably—maybe they can envision you know my—I mean it will always stay with me, just seeing those cows, you know, and—and then that’s where the *suya* spice mix—came from. But with that dish, I actually put it on squash. I put it on a kabocha squash, and we don’t have kabocha squash in Nigeria. Actually, we don’t really eat the—eat the squash in Nigeria. We—we use the seeds and sometimes with—depending on the type of squash, they use

the outside for water containers or—or containers to scoop but, at least, in my region, we don't eat the squash. That's something that they feed, you know, the animals with.

00:43:51

But when I first tried it and somebody—it was like it was really good, you know, especially roasted, it was really good. And that's what I—I put it on and again it's a way of—it's not—it's not fully authentic West African, the kabocha, but they're tasting a Nigerian spice mix, which they will not taste if, you know—something. So it's kind of like sometimes it's kind of like you have to trick—you know, not—not really trick them, but you kind of have to like, you know, the goal for me is to get them tasted. And then once they taste it, you just see their faces kind of light up, you know, and it's like, oh, you know, they weren't expecting it. That's what I get a lot; they weren't expecting that.

00:44:31

And then they're more willing to try something else. And then we—we build a relationship from there on.

00:44:36

AE: Now tell me about your black-eyed pea fritters.

00:44:38

CC: Oh the—the *akara*—our black-eyed peas we actually do—black-eyed peas, beans we—we do—we—we grew up—I grew up eating a lot of beans, and I think I'm the only one in my family that actually will eat—. I don't think growing up, there wasn't a food I did not like, which was unusual. I mean, like in my family, they were like, when I talk to my brother, he's like, “Well, we had beans so much.” Well, I didn't like oatmeal. I didn't really like starches. **[Laughs]**

I was a weird child. I liked the vegetables. I liked the fruits. I liked the meat, but not really so much—even though I have some fantastic memories about bread, you know—that’s another story.

00:45:18

But I—beans, *akara*, we again things are timed like in the morning you have women and they come out on the street, the main street and they had *akara*, which is made with black-eyed peas, they mix with onions. Everybody—every person has a special you know like you can—you know which one you want to go to. You—you might pass a couple of people frying *akara* to get to your person because, you know, that that’s the person that you like. And then they sell it—either they sell it with a pop, which is made out of corn, or you go home and you make it. So that was a—and it’s only from like 6:00 a.m. to like, by the time school starts it’s too late, you know, to buy *akara*. So we make that.

00:46:04

We also make something else with beans. We make *moi-moi*, which I sold last year at the—at the [San Francisco] Street Food Festival, which is, again, beans. It is steamed, pureed, black-eyed peas, and the way we did it last—last year, again it was taking *moi-moi*, which from my aunt—my aunt just looked at my side, and she was like, “That’s not *moi-moi*.” And I was like—I was like, “Yes, Auntie, it is.” I was like—I was like—what we did, we just took everything that we put inside the *moi-moi* and we put it on the outside. People are visual. They like to eat. They like to see what they’re eating here. So in Nigeria, we have different things that we put in *moi-moi*. It could be either boiled eggs or corned beef or fish or some people there’s a special *moi-moi* that has like fourteen things that go into the *moi-moi*—fourteen garnishments. So, but what we did we just took the corned beef out of the *moi-moi*, and we put it on the—we had the *moi-moi* steamed-pureed base and put the corned beef with onions, which is also *moi-moi*

and topped it with Nigerian red stew, and I was like, “Well, we need some greenery.” So we put **[Laughs]** chives on it or parsley on it because it looks beautiful that way. And most of the time, I mean like people, you know, *moi-moi* it's something—it's extremely popular in—back home. It's something that, again, Nigerian food is—the ingredients are simple in that it is—everything is fresh. I mean we don't really use a lot of canned—I think the only thing that's canned that we use is canned tomatoes, you know, like usually with our cooking, but everything else is fresh. You know, it's simple in that way, but it takes a lot of time to do.

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Like the beans, you have to soak the beans for a little bit, and then you have to take off every single back. You—you take the skins off of those beans. So it takes time. So you do *moi-moi* if, you know, you love that person, you know, if you're trying to get married, or if you have a favorite nephew or something, you make—you make that. Even *chin chin*, which is another thing I make, it's, you know, you—everything is cut and small and it has to be perfect because people will criticize and people will—I mean they won't criticize. It's just really vocal. They—they state the obvious, so if your food is good, they state it. If it's not, they state it.

00:48:24

So we—so we—so with the *moi-moi*, the same with when I do the black-eyed peas, like people, like, now I just have people taste it, you know, and they—they—like you know, it's something—of course, I ask them if they're allergic to anything before. And they tell me, “No,” and then I'm like, “Just taste it.” When they taste it, and then even after they read the description, they're like, “Where are the black-eyed peas?” And I'm like, “Those are the black-eyed peas.” And then they—I kind of wait and they taste it again, and they're like, “Where are the black-eyed-peas again?” You know, I'm like, “That's the black-eyed peas.” And like I say it two or

three times, and they're like, "Oh, my god." So it's like—then it's like, "I wasn't expecting that," you know.

00:49:04

So it's been—it's been great. I mean it's been—because it's like that's what makes me—that's what makes my job so interesting because I'm doing—I'm getting people to taste and getting them to taste something that they have not tasted before. And I think once they get used to one thing, then I will get them to taste something else, and then we just go from there.

00:49:26

AE: Well, I know you have an order to fill this afternoon but I—I also want to ask you about your red rice because that's a big thing in South Carolina also.

00:49:35

CC: Hmm, *jollof* rice is—is all over. I mean I've been to—the way that people do—traveling from Nigeria because I traveled for our honeymoon we went from Nigeria to, Cote d'Ivoire and we had the same ingredients, but the way people do it—make it is different.

00:49:51

For example, we have the—the soup I make with the melon, the melon seeds, the first time I made it for my husband he was like, "You definitely spoiled this stuff." Because, like, the way they have it in Cote d'Ivoire, it's smooth, like a peanut stew. The way we have it in Nigeria, is sort of grainy. The soup is grainy, and it has a lot of cream in it. So he—for the first couple times he was like, "I can't—you did it completely wrong." [**Laughs**] Of course, when you go to Cote d'Ivoire, I'm like, you know, "You guys, you know you don't—." And you know things, but you—they all have their—some form of *jollof* rice. It's like a—it's a rice cooked in—we

make our stew first, the Nigerian stew, with lots of tomatoes and lots of peppers and onions and we just fry those together and once that's done, we use it for—in our—to make our rice. And jollof rice is, you know—it's a staple. It's a staple. I learned how much of a staple *jollof* rice was [*Laughs*]*—*rice was in Cote d'Ivoire. I actually learned to like rice in Cote d'Ivoire, believe it or not, because we would have rice in the morning, and then we'd have rice porridge in the morning, and then we would have rice and stew in the afternoon. And then to switch it up, you would have *jollof* rice in—at night, which was basically rice cooked in tomato stew.

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So it's—it's a staple. You—there's certain necessities that you expect at a party which—or any gathering, which, you know, Nigerians we like to do. We have a lot of—and *jollof* rice is definitely one of them, and so is *moi-moi*.

00:51:35

AE: Well, it sounds like you're slowly bringing people into the fold and getting them familiar with West African food and what you're doing and who you are. You have an amazing story. What—what do you think the future of Chiefo's Kitchen is?

00:51:49

CC: Um, I would like to have an empire. I mean I—I know. [*Laughs*] It's—I think that's one of the hard parts is—for me is focusing on one thing because, I mean, it's so many things I want to do, and I have a lot of things growing at the same time because it's so hard to leave one branch because it's like your child. You know, you can't leave—leave one out of your business. But I see Nigerian food being the thing. I see it—I see Chiefo's Kitchen being a staple in everybody's kitchen. I see it sold mainstream and I see—I just see it just being—I mean just being something

that is regular, just—not just something that people eat when they're—when they are trying something new or they want to try something exotic or, you know. I just take it as, you know, somebody—this is what they'll have for lunch or, you know, just—it's just—that's just what it is. You know, I see Chiefo's Kitchen—Chiefo's Kitchen will grow as—as much as—or until I'm having fun and if—if I—when I—when—I mean the great thing about having your own business is that you could change whenever you want to. And if I'm sure that when I—I am too grown to—next to my—I need to start like being serious. I think right now I'm more—like I'm starting—I'm enjoying my job, my work, and then maybe I'll find something that I'll probably need to get focused on and be serious. **[Laughs]** But I'm not sure what that is yet because I'm having fun right now.

00:53:28

AE: Great. Well do you have anything to add that I haven't asked or known to ask or a note that you'd like to end on?

00:53:34

CC: Hmm, about—I mean Nigerian food is—I mean it's—we—everything is celebrated around food. I mean it's—and what better way to get to know somebody then around food. I—I mean I just have so many memories of, you know, we'll go to my aunt's house—home and we will get there and we will sit down and, you know, little did we know that they're in the back cooking. You know, they would—you'll see them get up and go to the kitchen and just very calmly and you know a visit is not a ten-minute visit; it's like an hour or two. And then this whole spread comes out and, you know, that they just—I mean somebody went to the market while you

were—as soon as they heard a car pull up. Somebody ran to the market. They got everything fresh. They cooked it, and then it's here.

00:54:18

We—we had an aunt that I did not know because we stayed in the house that—I didn't know until—she was like six-feet, you know, two and she was just like—I'm not tall but she was just like this powerful auntie. She was a very good cook. And but she was very strict, and I didn't know at the time that the way to get her [*Laughs*] was to not eat her food because is like the biggest insult to her is like you do not—. It's like even, you know, we don't—you don't—you don't—you just don't do that. And me—but, to be honest, it never even crossed my mind because the food is so great, you know. And you know, it's kind of the same thing like when I went to—when I was working at that restaurant it was like there's a lot of passion that people put into their food, and it's their way of showing you that they love you. Like, I go back home and, you know, I—I have to beg no one. I'm—I really am full. It doesn't matter if you just ate two or three times, you do have to sit down and eat again.

00:55:11

But—but it's all done out of love. And it's the same with Chiefo's Kitchen. It's all done out of love and, you know, just try it.

00:55:21

AE: Perfect. Thank you so much, Chiefo. I appreciate your time.

00:55:23

CC: Thank you.

00:55:25

[End Chiefo Chukwudebe Interview]