

JOHN PAWLIKOWSKI
Fat Johnnie's - Chicago, IL

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Location: Fat Johnnie's

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 21 minutes

Project: Chicago Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin John Pawlikowski Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Tuesday, March 25th in Chicago, Illinois, on South Western Avenue at Fat Johnnie's, and I'm here with John Pawlikowski. And you're Fat Johnnie himself, yeah?

00:00:13

John Pawlikowski: Hi, how are you? My name is John Pawlikowski, and I'm the original owner of Fat Johnnie's at 7242 Western. I built the place May 12, 1972. I don't what else Amy wants me to say. **[Laughs]**

00:00:28

AE: **[Laughs]** What is your birth date, sir, if I may ask?

00:00:28

JP: August 2, 1948.

00:00:30

AE: Okay. Are you a native of Chicago?

00:00:33

JP: Yes, I was born and raised right in Marquette Park.

00:00:36

AE: And where did your family originate, and how did they get to Chicago?

00:00:39

JP: Right here, 7240 Western. This is my grandma's house right next door to me [and my business]. She had a garden center for forty-eight years. That's how I was raised.

00:00:47

AE: So is your grandmother a first-generation Polish American in—in Chicago?

00:00:52

JP: Yes. Yes, my dad was born here. He was two years old and he was taken to Zakopane [Poland], and he came back here when he was eighteen—from Poland. So my dad is originally right from Poland.

00:01:05

AE: Wow. And—and this was your grandmother's house right here next to your stand?

00:01:09

JP: Yeah.

00:01:09

AE: Wow, that's amazing. Okay, so tell me—tell me about this neighborhood, first of all, where we are.

00:01:15

JP: It was 1965—'66—'64 I went to grammar school at St. Adrian's. It was an all-white neighborhood, and then they started changing it around 1968, '69, and then on the '70s—late '70s—'80s it changed, and now it's an ethnic neighborhood. Everybody lives here. **[Laughs]**

00:01:38

AE: So before we started recording, you mentioned that you were in the eighth grade that you—there—there was a guy that sold tamales and that's where you were first introduced to the Mother-in-Law [sandwich]. Could you talk about that?

00:01:48

JP: He sold a tamale on a bun in—off a push-chart and put it on a bun and called it a Mother-in-Law, and he charged a nickel for that with ketchup on it. And that's where I got the idea of the Mother-in-Law.

00:02:00

AE: Uh-huh. And you said he was Lithuanian?

00:02:01

JP: Yes, he was a Lithuanian American, yes. His name was Pete, if I remember right, but that's going back fifty years, so I don't know for sure. **[Laughs]**

00:02:10

AE: Right. So were the tamales about the same? Because we were talking, too, about the—the places that manufacture tamales, and they've been around for some good fifty, sixty, seventy years.

00:02:17

JP: They've been around forever. And Tom Tom Tamales still is the same as it was. I've been in business for thirty-six years—two years on a street with a pushcart—and there's still—thirty-eight years [later], they still make them the same.

00:02:28

AE: So the—the tamales that Pete was selling, do you think that they were Tom Tom's?

00:02:31

JP: Yes, they were. Yes. You remember the—the wrapper? The wrapper has got a little girl on it, and years ago the little girl was dropping her skirt, lifting her skirt and just recently—just changed that about twelve years ago. They said it's not right; now the girl wears her skirt down.

[Laughs]

00:02:52

AE: Goodness. So and Tom Tom Tamales, just to put this on the record, is owned by a Greek family, and they've been around since about the [nineteen] '30s?

00:02:58

JP: Yes, they've been around a long time. I don't really know all the family members. The ones that—or I knew in my younger years of dealing with them, they passed away already. But now it's through the family—the tradition. There's a nephew there running the place now, I think.

00:03:16

AE: So any idea why Pete called this tamale on a bun a Mother-in-Law?

00:03:20

JP: No idea. It's just something and then I added to it, and now I got a Father-in-Law with a tamale; I put chili on the tamale with cheese. And the Mother-in-Law is with chili. Because when I first had the Mother-in-Law, everybody was complaining that, "You're prejudiced. Where's the Father-in-Law?" So then I put cheese on a tamale with chili and made it a Father-in-Law.

00:03:38

AE: Have you heard about the sandwich in town, the Humdinger, that's a Mother-in-Law with melted cheese on top?

00:03:43

JP: No. I've heard of different people using it different ways, but this is the way we do it.

00:03:50

AE: Okay. And I understand too you have the Mighty Polish, which is a lot more than a Mother-in-Law.

00:03:54

JP: Yes, it's a tamale with a Polish sausage—a tamale sliced in half with a Polish inside with chili, cheese and everything on top. People like that, too. The Mighty Dog is the same way; it's a hot dog and a tamale.

00:04:08

AE: So if I could back up a little bit and ask how you came to be in the hot dog and—and Mother-in-Law—business.

00:04:15

JP: Well that's a long story. [*Laughs*] I started—I worked at Nabisco in 1968, '69, '70, and the truckers went on strike, and our company went on strike. And a Lithuanian man showed me—sold me a pushcart for \$100 and said, “You could sell hot dogs on the street corner.” So in 1970 I started selling hot dogs at 69th and South Damon, and I did that for a couple years, and I told my brother, “We should open a hot dog stand.” Because my brother Frank and I opened this original Fat Johnnie's in May 12th of [nineteen] '72 and he was—oh, he's my—he was my very big brother; he was eleven years older than I was, and we always connived together—made a scam to make money—so we opened Fat Johnnie's. It's just a small trailer, and we did it by city code at that time, and here I am, thirty-six years later, still selling hot dogs.

00:05:07

AE: So it's been a good business for you?

00:05:09

JP: Yes, it has.

00:05:12

AE: So tell me, since you—since this is your grandmother's house that we're sitting in front of and this—she had the lot here adjacent that you put the stand on?

00:05:18

JP: Yeah. She's the one that gave us the lot to—to build the hot dog stand on.

00:05:23

AE: And is the building itself—describe it to me.

00:05:27

JP: It was a trailer, and it's on a foundation with city plumbing and city water and city electricity, but it actually was a trailer, but it was all built by city code.

00:05:38

AE: And it's pretty darned small.

00:05:38

JP: It's very small.

00:05:39

AE: It's about ten by fifteen feet or something?

00:05:42

JP: It's very small; it's a hot dog stand. We don't even sell French fries.

00:05:45

AE: Oh, really?

00:05:44

JP: Yes. It's just a hot dog stand just like you see a man on the corner selling them out of a pushcart. Before you were born they used to be on every corner and this is how we copied them and from that time on we did it that way.

00:05:56

AE: Well now fries are pretty—that's pretty much standard that you get fries with a—a hot dog or a sandwich of any kind [here in Chicago].

00:06:03

JP: The original—the original hot dog stands that came up in the [nineteen] '60s, '70s they had hot dog and the put the fries right on the hot dog and wrapped it with it, and that's the way it was. But pushcarts never have French fries, so we built it on the version of a pushcart. And then American Greek came along, and he started putting French fries in a bag. If you go to Gene and Jude's on River Road, they still put the original—take the original hot dog with the fries right on top of the hot dog, and that's all you get and that's the real deal. That's how it was—how fries were introduced with the hot dog back in the day when I was young. Now I feel real bad; Amy is hot and young, and I'm old. *[Laughs]*

00:06:44

AE: Can you describe for me that original cart that you had—what it looked like?

00:06:48

JP: It was just a pushcart as big as this picnic tabletop, with wheels on it and a steam table with a portable heater underneath and a glass top that I used to make hot dogs. It was thirty-cents [for a hot dog] and sell them one at a time on a corner. We had a lantern—a Coleman lantern on the

front. When it got dark at night, you'd light the lantern with your light, and it was just a little cart.

00:07:07

AE: So how did you make a name for yourself in the hot dog business?

00:07:10

JP: The product spoke—made the name—we just continued to be consistent on what we served and over the thirty-six years, it made its own name. We've been in *National Geographic*, been numerous articles in papers about us—everything. I make a damn good hot dog. That's all I can say. *[Laughs]*

00:07:28

AE: And you use Vienna Beef hot dogs?

00:07:29

JP: We use David Berg, all beef. It's the same—same product but just a little different.

00:07:35

AE: So the—the Mother-in-Law, then, has been on your menu since the beginning?

00:07:37

JP: Since the beginning—Tom Tom Tamale on a bun.

00:07:42

AE: And relative to the—the regular hot dog, how popular is the—the Mother-in-Law or the variations of the Mother-in-Law?

00:07:52

JP: The Mother-in-Law is thirty-percent of the business. The hot dogs and Polish aren't—the tamales, thirty-percent of the business.

00:07:59

AE: And your—your customer base—what—what is your customer base here? Do you have a lot of black customers or are they mostly—?

00:08:09

JP: No, it's 100-percent mixed. Everybody, yeah. Afro-Americans, Greeks, Mexicans, anything you can think of, they come to Fat Johnnie's. **[Laughs]**

00:08:19

AE: And—and I was telling you, too, before we started recording about Mississippi Delta tamales and how—how different they are and that I had one here on Sunday, but it was about ten-times the size of a Mississippi Delta tamale. Have you seen—seen those kinds of Mississippi-style tamales here?

00:08:33

JP: No. Never did see a—I never knew they sold tamales in Mississippi. I thought, originally, they come from Mexico. And I'm very surprised that you're telling me it's big as a cucumber. I never seen a tamale that big.

00:08:46

AE: Yeah, well the one here it was at J's Meat Market, which is pretty new, I think, and I couldn't really tell you where it is, but I think it's on the West Side.

00:08:54

JP: Huh. Yeah, I go around 59th and Kedzie [Avenue], and it's all Spanish through there, and there's a couple of places. Pete's Grocery. And they have the old corn-rolled tamales with corn wrapping on it but Tom Tom is the only one—I use the rolled tamale. And Veteran Tamale is similar, but they've got a bunched tamales. There's two pieces in a package.

00:09:14

AE: So when you first started out, how much was the Mother-in-Law and how much is it now?

00:09:19

JP: I think we sold it for twenty-cents and now it's \$2.00.

00:09:26

AE: And I notice on your menu there just a minute ago that the Mighty Polish is \$4.00. How—how long have you had that on your menu?

00:09:32

JP: That's been on the menu twenty-five years at least. Yeah. That's pretty much the original menu, yeah, after our first five, seven years in business. You know, that's a nice clean paint

around the sign and printing [*meaning the menu*] because you can't get them printed and made up like that no more, and I don't want to change anything.

00:09:47

AE: Yeah, yeah, the hand-painted signs; those are great.

00:09:50

JP: Uh-huh.

00:09:50

AE: So and tell me, talking about the signs, tell me about the look of your place here and how you—you got the signs made and what you—how you wanted to catch attention here on Western?

00:09:59

JP: Really, we just put up signs so they'd know we were here. And back in the day, it didn't take that long; the word of mouth took care of it. And now, you know, this is just—it's here; it's no big sign, no big lights—nothing. But the people know we're here; after thirty-six years, you don't need no signs. [*Laughs*]

00:10:17

AE: And the sign that we're right next to here says *Fat Johnnie's Award-Winning Red Hots*.

00:10:22

JP: Yes, that—that's, like I said, they put us in *National Geographic*, on WGN; we've been everywhere over the thirty-six years.

00:10:32

AE: What does that—that mean to you to be recognized for being a hot dog vendor here in Chicago?

00:10:36

JP: I guess that's a great thing to do. If that's how you want to work and not have a life and just dedicate your life, that would be a great thing.

00:10:45

AE: Yes, so there's—there's so many hot dog vendors here in Chicago and—and people that have—have red hots and Mother-in-Laws and things, what—what makes yours—you said that you have a quality product and it's consistent and all that, but do you think there's something else that makes people want to come to you?

00:11:01

JP: No, the quality product brings them back. If you go somewhere and eat something and you don't like it, you don't go back. And over there, it's people like us. They tell us all the time—there's all kinds of hot dog stands in Chicago; they're all over. And everyone that does it makes a living at it. And it's the consistency; I believe it's the consistency.

00:11:19

AE: I bet you have some consistent customers, too, who are regulars.

00:11:24

JP: Oh, very, very many, yes. Years—a few years back, Mike North on—a famous sports radio talkshow run a contest in the [*Chicago*] *Sun Times* that are going to vote with their favorite hot dog stand and every—for about two weeks it was in the paper, and all the only thing I read is lottery numbers and the sports section and a guy told me, he said, “You know we’re voting for you.” And I kept saying to my son, I say, “Why is these people voting for me? What’s going on?” He said, “Don’t you read the sports section? Mike North is having a contest; they’re going to have a cook-off at Sportsman’s Bar.” It’s a racetrack—for the best hot dog in Chicago. And all the sudden I get a phone call. I’m invited to this cook-off that I was voted like sixth or fifth in the City of Chicago. And I finished runner up. It was a tie, and I got second place to a place that wasn’t in Chicago. It was a suburb of Chicago, so I never made a stink about it but it—it still was an honor to have all my customers vote for me.

00:12:18

AE: Can you just—for when I you know take this story back to Mississippi—can you describe your Chicago hot dog?

00:12:24

JP: It’s a hot dog on a poppy seed bun with mustard, relish, onion, tomato and cucumber. And then there’s another twist to it: we make it with chili and cheese or cheese or just chili, and that’s about all.

00:12:38

AE: Do you make your chili?

00:12:39

JP: No, we don't. We use a commercial-bought chili.

00:12:42

AE: Uh-hmm. Is it mostly a meat chili, or are there beans in it?

00:12:45

JP: It's meat and bean chili, yes.

00:12:48

AE: And you have a tamale in a cup, too, is that right?

00:12:51

JP: Yes, that's a Tamale Sundae. We give that with just chili, or you can get that with chili and cheese and onions, tomato, and hot pepper on that and that's that.

00:12:59

AE: Yeah? If you—if you don't want the bun, I guess, is the way—?

00:12:59

JP: Right. If you don't want the bun, it's in a cup. [*Laughs*]

00:13:02

AE: Do you sell a lot of those?

00:13:03

JP: Yes, we do and they're very, very popular—the Tamale Sundae.

00:13:08

AE: And so the red hots here in Chicago, that's a hot dog?

00:13:10

JP: Yes, the original name for a hot dog way back in the day was called a red hot and—and now you don't see that much; but I still have the name red hot, and young generations think it's something hot. But, originally, back in the day, a red hot was considered a hot dog—back in the '50s and '60s.

00:13:28

AE: Because in the—the Delta—in the [Mississippi] Delta, the tamales are known as red hots a lot of times.

00:13:34

JP: Really?

00:13:36

AE: Yeah.

00:13:38

JP: A regular hot dog is known as a red hot?

00:13:40

AE: No, not a hot dog at all. A hot tamale is known as a red hot.

00:13:42

JP: A hot tamale is known as a red hot.

00:13:44

AE: Yeah.

00:13:44

JP: Wow, that's something. It is very weird. [*Laughs*]

00:13:48

AE: Well I'm going to send you some Delta tamales so that you'll know what I'm talking about.

00:13:50

JP: That would be very nice. I would like to try one; I never had one. [*Laughs*]

00:13:52

AE: Do you like to eat your own Mother-in-Law sandwiches?

00:13:56

JP: Yes, I do. I've eaten all my product all my life.

00:14:00

AE: Yeah?

00:14:00

JP: Yes.

00:14:00

AE: And so when you named this place Fat Johnnie's, was that something that, you know, when you—?

00:14:05

JP: No, that was a story behind that too.

00:14:05

AE: Yeah?

00:14:06

JP: Yeah. My brother and I sat around. He lived in Alsip, Illinois, and we sat around his kitchen and we kicked it—kicked the subject around on a bottle of VO. When the quart of VO was gone, the name of Fat Johnnie's was born. But at first we were going to call her Frankie and Johnnie's because his name was Frank, but everybody back then would think we were gay, so we kicked it around some more and we came up with—I was always a heavy-set man and we kicked it around and we called it Fat Johnnie's, and that's where the name was born in my brother's kitchen.

[Laughs]

00:14:36

AE: And so now you—your son, he works here with you?

00:14:38

JP: Yes, my son has been with me since he—he got out of college at Northern Illinois. He’s been with me all the time.

00:14:44

AE: Uh-huh. What did he study in college, if I may ask?

00:14:47

JP: He’s an economic specialist—economics major.

00:14:51

AE: Okay.

00:14:51

JP: So—

00:14:52

AE: So he’s doing the books for Fat Johnnie’s?

00:14:54

JP: Yeah, he—he has got something to fall back on, if I drop dead. **[Laughs]**

00:14:58

AE: Well speaking of, do you think that the future of Fat Johnnie’s—that he’ll carry it on?

00:15:02

JP: I don't know; I don't know. I can't answer that. I wish he could, but I don't know if he can or not because I don't want him to be—have a life like I had. It's too dedicating; you got to be there all the time.

00:15:16

AE: Yeah. And his name is John also?

00:15:17

JP: Yeah. Pawlikowski—Ted Pawlikowski. His name is Ted Pawlikowski, and he's my first-born.

00:15:25

AE: How many other children do you have?

00:15:27

JP: Three more children. I've got Amy Pawlikowski, Laura, and James.

00:15:32

AE: Do they like eating your food here?

00:15:35

JP: Oh, yeah. They all like my hot dogs. When I come—when I come around the city, they're always liking my hot dogs.

00:15:40

AE: And—

00:15:40

JP: Everybody likes Fat Johnnie's. [*Laughs*]

00:15:41

AE: And so your hours here—

00:15:44

JP: We open at 11:00 a.m. and we close at six o'clock.

00:15:47

AE: Uh-hmm. Have those always been your hours?

00:15:49

JP: No, we used to be open until eleven o'clock at night, but I'm too old for that now.

00:15:53

AE: Yeah? So about how long did you quit that?

00:15:56

JP: Maybe twelve years ago—twelve, fourteen years ago. We used to be—started cutting it down to ten o'clock and nine o'clock and now a lot of people complain that in the summer we're not open until midnight but you can't—I live here now. I'm here twelve hours a day; that's enough.

00:16:09

AE: Yeah. And so then and I understand, too, that you're closed on Sundays during the winter?

00:16:16

JP: Yes, we are closed. We tried—we're closed always on Sundays, but sometimes we open on—in the summer when it's real warm, so people can be happy, because we get too many complaints. *[Laughs]*

00:16:28

AE: So is—is the hot dog business seasonal—seasonal at all or do you have—?

00:16:32

JP: No, we're open—we're open all year. A lot of places close—small places like mine—but we stay open for lunch, and we're open 11:00 to 5:00 during the winter.

00:16:38

AE: But are you, say, busier in the summer than you are in the winter?

00:16:40

JP: Oh, yes, a lot busier in the summer, yeah. You're just lucky you got a nice day to come out. You wouldn't have been sitting out here three days ago. *[Laughs]*

00:16:48

AE: No, no, I wouldn't have. It was much colder than it is today, so—.

00:16:53

JP: It was Tuesday, like she said, and Easter was Sunday; Friday we had four inches of snow on the ground here.

00:17:00

AE: Yeah, we—we have spring happening in Mississippi. Everything is in bloom, so a little different climate up here. Tell me about some other things that are on your menu that we haven't talked about.

00:17:07

JP: Pardon me?

00:17:08

AE: Some other things on your menu?

00:17:08

JP: Our menu is very small. You covered the Polish sausage, the hot dog—that's about it—potato chips and pop and the tamale sundaes and the—the Mother-in-Law and the Father-in-Law. We make a Polish with chili and cheese and make a quarter-pounder with chili and cheese—a Fat One—but you got it all.

00:17:25

AE: The quarter-pounder is a quarter-pound sausage?

00:17:28

JP: It's a quarter-pound hot dog.

00:17:30

AE: Quarter-pound hot dog.

00:17:30

JP: Called the Fat One and we make that similar to the same as—as the small hot dog.

00:17:38

AE: So what do you have to say or what do you think about the—the long history of—of hot dogs in Chicago?

00:17:45

JP: It's a great thing. It was brought back in the—in the Depression time and it's still going. Everybody loves hot dogs—apple pie, Chevrolet, and hot dogs. [*Laughs*]

00:17:58

AE: Well is there anything—oh, I wanted to ask you, too, about your bumper sticker. Is that your truck right there that says—?

00:18:04

JP: Yeah.

00:18:04

AE: I forget what it says now, but it was funny.

00:18:05

JP: I love Fat—“Love at first bite” or something like that, yes. Yeah, we had them years ago. I’d give you one, but we don’t have anymore. *[Laughs]*

00:18:14

AE: That’s a great little marketing tool. So how many hot dogs and tamales do you think you’ve sold in all these years you’ve been in business?

00:18:21

JP: A lot. *[Laughs]*

00:18:25

AE: Too many to count, huh?

00:18:26

JP: Too many to count, right. I’m right with McDonald’s—over a billion. *[Laughs]*

00:18:32

AE: And is your grandmother—she’s passed?

00:18:34

JP: Yeah, she passed three years ago. Yeah, she lived a good life. She lived to eighty-nine—that was my mother—not my grandmother. That was my mother, yeah.

00:18:40

AE: And so what has your family thought over the years of your Fat Johnnie’s business?

00:18:44

JP: They all think it's great, I guess. Some talk to me, some don't. [*Laughs*]

00:18:52

AE: Have you ever had a chance to go around town and—and taste other hot dogs and—and tamales?

00:18:55

JP: When I was younger, I used to go everywhere, and I used to say, “I think I still got a better product than a lot of them.” But you—each to their own. Everybody has different tastes, so I can't be prejudice on that part.

00:19:09

AE: And is there—is there anything else to add about kind of the Eastern European immigrant population here in Chicago and being in the hot dog business? Is there something to that or—?

00:19:17

JP: Oh, I have no idea. I was born right here as American, and I've always been American, and I don't really know. But you watch programs on television and they go back in the [nineteen] '30s and '20s in the Depression and all that. Everybody had a penny or a nickel for a hot dog so—and it just continued that way. Just like potato chips and everything else, you know—just one of them things. And I got in on it, and I'm still doing it. [*Laughs*]

00:19:44

AE: So what did you—what would you say to the people who have not visited Fat Johnnie's in—in—?

00:19:49

JP: Come on out and try us. You'll like us. **[Laughs]** All the way from Mississippi. I've had—I've had people all the way from Ireland here and from Poland; I have people from all over the country here that talk about Fat Johnnie's, yeah.

00:20:02

AE: And what kinds of things do they say about your place?

00:20:04

JP: It's fabulous; it's great. Nobody ever says nothing bad. Yeah, thirty-six years, nobody ever said something bad to me so—.

00:20:14

AE: Well it's a one of a kind place here. And you're across from a car lot and next to a car lot—

00:20:22

JP: Yeah; there were car lots here all the time when I was growing up. There's always been car lots. It's like car lot row here.

00:20:26

AE: Yeah?

00:20:26

JP: Yeah. There's a Dodge dealer on the corner and—.

00:20:29

AE: Do you ever advertise or anything or people just know—know that you're here?

00:20:33

JP: No, just word of mouth, yeah.

00:20:38

AE: All right then, Fat Johnnie. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

00:20:42

JP: You had it all, Amy. You got it all. *[Laughs]*

00:20:44

AE: All right. Well thanks for sitting out here in the wind with me at this picnic table. I appreciate it a lot.

00:20:47

JP: You're very welcome. Thank you.

00:20:50

[End John Pawlikowski Interview]