

**CHIP FLANAGAN**  
**Ralph's on the Park—New Orleans, LA**

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 52 minutes

Project: Ya-Ka-Mein in New Orleans—Louisiana

**[Begin Chip Flanagan]**

**00:00:00**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, May 15, 2013. I am at Ralph's on the Park Restaurant with Chef Chip Flanagan. If I could get you to state your full name please, and tell me what you do for a living, that would be great.

**00:00:20**

**Chip Flanagan:** My name is Chip Flanagan. I am the executive chef of Ralph's on the Park.

**00:00:26**

**SR:** Thanks. Can you tell me your birth date, please?

**00:00:30**

**CF:** December 17, 1968.

**00:00:35**

**SR:** Thank you. And just to get a little bit of background about you, can you let me know for the record where you were born and where you grew up?

**00:00:42**

**CF:** I was born at Baptist Hospital on Napoleon Avenue. I grew up for a couple years in Bucktown right on the lake [Lake Pontchartrain]. Family moved to California, and we came back

and moved to Metairie, and that's still where they live—my parents. I went to De La Salle High School; I went to NYU for college, and then I went to Delgado Culinary for culinary arts.

**00:01:19**

**SR:** What did you study at NYU?

**00:01:20**

**CF:** I was studying fine arts, theater.

**00:01:25**

**SR:** What made you turn to the culinary arts?

**00:01:29**

**CF:** I knew how to cook but I didn't know that not many other people knew how to cook. We always cooked in my family—grandmother, father, even my mother to a certain extent. I remember cooking in dorms in college. Thanksgiving dinner. My friend who is now my kids' pediatrician went to BU, Boston University, and so we used to—on holidays it was expensive to come home, so we would just take a bus. I'd go to Boston or he'd come to New York and we'd always cook the holiday meal, whatever it was—usually Thanksgiving because that was a shorter break. And yeah, so I had an oven and a stove in the dorm and I used to cook turkey.

**00:02:23**

And then I was working in New York at Cedar Tavern as a bus boy a couple nights a week, on the weekends, making money to get me through the week. And then I started drifting

into the kitchen because they would always make me dinner when I would come in—you know, I was like the special guy. And I think the chef's name was Mike. You know, it was pub food but it was great. And I went into the kitchen and that was kind of it, and that stuck with me. And then I came back here and went to Delgado with a commitment to cook, and that's what I've been doing ever since.

**00:03:03**

**SR:** How long ago was that?

**00:03:05**

**CF:** Um, mid-'90s, when I went to Delgado. I think I graduated from NYU in '90. I came back here in '91, '92 —'91, '92—and a year or two after that I went to Delgado.

**00:03:27**

**SR:** Tell me what sorts of things you were cooking for that Thanksgiving meal. Were they Louisiana-type Thanksgiving dishes?

**00:03:34**

**CF:** Oh yeah. I was on the phone with my dad. He used to talk me through these things, you know, and try to give me an oral recipe over the phone. I had to have oyster dressing. That's what his mother, my grandmother—that was her dish, her famous dish. And she's passed now for a while, and she never wrote down recipes, so—. They've gone with her, so I've never been able to make it like she did, [with the] same flavor that she had. So yeah, it was New Orleans-

based I guess. We used to pick up crabs, live crabs in Chinatown, and I used to call him, “Okay, how do I boil crabs? Walk me through it.” “Okay, well get the crab boil.” “Dad, there is no crab boil in New York.” **[Laughs]** So we had to figure out how to make crab boil. And it usually came out pretty good. I had good results.

**00:04:41**

**SR:** It’s funny because the one person who I remember cooking in the dorm my freshman year of college was from New Orleans.

**00:04:51**

**CF:** Maybe that was me. Did you go to NYU? **[Laughs]**

**00:04:54**

**SR:** I did not. And I remember being so fascinated by that. What were reactions of the other people who weren’t from Louisiana in your dorm?

**00:05:02**

**CF:** Well yeah, it was impressive. They were impressed. And that’s when I started realizing, “Well, jeez, you can’t do this? What are you talking about?” And I had another point where I realized I should be in the kitchen. I bought a—I was at the grocery store in New York one day, you know, and it was still a lot of ramen noodles and stuff like that. But I bought a pot, maybe a 2-quart sauce pot-type thing. And I had this roommate one year who burned something in it and it—I don’t know what it was made of, this cheap pot; it took the bottom coating off and it was

flaking and I got really pissed off. And I demanded that he get me a new pot. Don't mess with my pot. I said, yeah, if I'm going to take it to heart that much maybe I should get in the kitchen.

**00:06:03**

**SR:** Well, I don't want to put any words in your mouth, but I can see how there could be similarities between the theater and the kitchen. Do you ever think about that?

**00:06:13**

**CF:** No. Everybody else does. When they hear I have a fine arts degree, "Oh well, you'll be good at this cooking demo because you were in theater school." My God, it was over 20 years ago. I left because I didn't do that. I didn't pursue that because my ego would not have that. I couldn't—it wouldn't be about me. But I had to have a creative outlet, I've realized after all these years. That's sort of maybe why I honed my cooking skills, you know. So in that way it's similar, that you can be creative, but that's about it really I think.

**00:06:58**

**SR:** Are you—

**00:06:59**

**CF:** Have you ever talked to, like, an actor or theater person? If they don't have a script, they don't really know what to say, I find.

**00:07:09**

**SR:** So you're saying that—I'm sorry, but which line of work is better for your ego?

**00:07:20**

**CF:** Oh, you have to have a big ego—all about me—to be in theater and any sort of entertainment like that. Well I'm back of the house. You know, I can stay behind closed doors and cook, and so that's better, yes. And I don't have to worry about my hair and how big my nose is or, you know, if there is a weird hair growing out of my earlobe or something.

**00:07:48**

**SR:** Okay. Where are your parents from?

**00:07:50**

**CF:** They're both from here.

**00:07:52**

**SR:** New Orleans?

**00:07:52**

**CF:** Yeah, they're both from New Orleans. My grandparents were from here. I don't know much about history of family before that; I don't know when they came over. They're both Irish, McDonoughs and Flanagans, so—. Yeah, and now I'm making the ya-ka-mein. *[Laughs]*

**00:08:13**

**SR:** Yeah, can you talk a little bit about how that happened?

**00:08:17**

**CF:** My sous-chef, Jordan, and myself, we have been talking about it for at least a year now because we're always interested in things that are happening here—foods that come through here, dishes that become popular, the flavors that people here like—and so we've been talking about this ya-ka-mein for quite a while and [wondering], “What do we do? How can we do it?” Because we couldn't—you know, it's served on the street in a Styrofoam cup with some salty broth and meats and spaghetti noodles, hardboiled egg. Okay, so—. The first step was getting the stock, the broth, for it, so that's what we started working on. And we started off with real veal stock that we make probably twice a week here—you know, simmer it for two days.

**00:09:40**

And then we infuse it, enrich it, with things like star anise, soy sauce, for that depth and saltiness. It's not salty, but—. We mix it with other stocks; we've done it with, like, reduced duck stock, reduced chicken stock, and it has a nicer flavor. So it's not all beefy. And then we got that flavor that we wanted and then, okay, we have this broth. So then we—then we would reduce it because we're thinking of a sauce instead of a soup. I mean, you know, it's our version; it's not strictly what you would normally get. So we made a sauce out of the stock. So we had that and we liked the flavor.

**00:10:44**

And then we've messed around with pasta—dried pastas, fresh pasta—and we did it at the farmers market. That was our first time bringing it out, you know. We hadn't—I think we did it here, actually, two brunches before the farmers market, and we did it soup-style. And we

treated it like a pho [Vietnamese noodle soup], where we thinly sliced—you know, we partially froze some beef brisket and we thinly sliced it and we'd add that to it at the end so it would cook in the hot broth. And we would do a fried egg on it. And it sold pretty well. And then we brought it to the farmers market more traditionally, you know, soup-style, and again we treated it like--like a pho, and I realized a lot of people didn't know what it was.

**00:11:45**

**SR:** Let me ask you—when you say treated it like a pho, well, can you first say for the record what a pho is and, then tell me—did you call it on the menu “pho,” or what did you call it?

**00:11:59**

**CF:** Well, first of all, pho is sort of the large gigantic bowl of Vietnamese-style soups, you know, reliant on the flavor of the broth. Usually has like rice noodles in it, some sort of meat, you know maybe some Vietnamese sausages or pâté in it, meatballs. You can get all sorts of things—tripe, beef. It's great. It's all over the city now, and it's really caught on, and it's usually delicious. And you finish—they put the raw meat in there at the end, like the brisket, and we were doing it, and they give you a basket of fresh herbs and bean sprouts. So it's something that I love. So we called it—when we did it here as a word-of-mouth special and at the farmers market, we did it as ya-ka-mein. We called it that. And we would have to explain it to every single person. My parents even came to the farmers market to visit, to get some food, and they didn't know what it was. And so I said, “Well, try it,” and they—my dad was astonished by how good it was. And in fact, he just came back in town—he's working out of town right now; he came back in town and they had dinner here I think on Tuesday night and we were running it as the

appetizer special. With a sauce style in a different way. And my mother had it that time and she was like, “Oh my God, this is so good.” So my parents like it, so I get their approval.

**00:13:47**

But yeah, it sold really well at the farmers market even though—I mean, people are at least—those people that go to the market, you know they're looking for fresh food and stuff like that, and they're willing to try it. The only ones who weren't willing were the vegetarians. You can't really make that into a vegetarian dish. I'd have to work on that for another year. So yeah, it was received really well and we're going to do it this weekend at Bayou Boogaloo. We have a booth over there too, and we're going—so the farmers market was sort of our test run to do it at these festivals.

**00:14:25**

**SR:** Many questions out of that. The first time that you ran it as a soup at brunch here, how did it sell?

**00:14:36**

**CF:** It sold really well. Again, we had to—when you do something like this, you have to get all of your servers onboard and you have to let them taste it and you have to talk about it and you have to talk about what you know. And a lot of them have heard of it, you know, and have had it before. So it was kind of—you have to sell them on it, so it was an easy sell for them. And they sold it and it sold really well.

**00:14:59**

And especially here, our clientele, our guests, are locals mostly who come repeatedly, quite often, and so they see us—they're usually the people that get the specials because they're looking for some different things, things that we're doing on a daily basis, so yeah it did sell well.

**00:15:23**

**SR:** Your sous-chef, Jordan—can you tell me his last name?

**00:15:25**

**CF:** Jordan Herndon. Texas pride, pride of Texas, pride of Houston.

**00:15:31**

**SR:** Okay, so he's not from here. So his interest in the dish was developed while he was here?

**00:15:40**

**CF:** Right. He's not from here, but he's got a lot of ties here. He's been here a long time and he was working at—before he started cooking here he was working at Arnaud's, so he's got, you know, that Creole backbone now. His mother lives in Lafayette, so he spent a lot of time here before he moved down here. And he's been here in this kitchen—he's been sous for about a year and a half, and before that maybe a year and a half--two years as a cook. So and before that, Arnaud's, so he's been—he's been here a bit. And yeah, he's seen it too. When he's off—you know, like I used to do on days off, you'd go eat everywhere, you'd explore everything, so that's

what he does. His wife—he's married now—his wife is a--she's actually a sous chef at Bayona also, so there's a common interest there to go explore and taste new things.

**00:16:40**

**SR:** Do you remember where and when you first saw and/or ate ya-ka-mein?

**00:16:46**

**CF:** I remember, it had to be 2000, maybe. A dishwasher at Louis XVI used to always do second lines. His name was Spanky. And he used to tell us all the time, "You got to come," and he'd bring his suits into the restaurant—you know, these crazy all-green suits with a yellow shirt or something. And so he was big into that, so we'd go to the second lines to go see him basically. And I don't know who it was, but somebody was serving ya-ka-mein and we had it in the Styrofoam cup. It's really salty. You know, the egg, the hardboiled egg, was overcooked—you know, coming from a different angle I guess. I can't stand hardboiled eggs that are overcooked. In fact I got a cook last night to cook me 10 of them to bring to the news crew today at Fox [for a televised cooking demonstration], and I just started peeling and cutting them and they're all overcooked. So he's in at 3 o'clock, so I'm going to talk to him about that.

**00:17:57**

So yeah, that was the first time. It was probably 2000--2001.

**00:18:02**

**SR:** So it didn't make a huge culinary impression, but did it make an impression?

**00:18:09**

**CF:** Yeah, well, the impression it made was that there was a line for it. And that's when I started finding out what it was, because before I had it all the—you know, in the city a lot of the warewashers are African Americans. And they bring their culture wherever they go. And these guys were—I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they were saying “ya-ka-mein.” Some were saying “yaka meat,” some were saying “yaka mo.” It was like 20 different pronunciations. And I think the first time I saw it written was on Orleans [Avenue] going towards the Quarter right before the Claiborne [Avenue] overpass. There was a shop on the left side, I guess like a food store—pigs' feet and fried rice kind of thing—and it was written on the sign. And I said, okay; so I pronounced it myself “ya-ka-mein.” That's how it was spelled. And so I would talk to them about it and I'm like, “What are you talking about? What is this called?” I mean why—? [And they would answer,] “He doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't pronounce it right. Spanky don't pronounce nothin' right.” Well, so I finally saw it written, so I went with that I guess.

**00:19:41**

And what was I going to say? And so that's when we would talk about it, and I'd see it and ate it and then people—. You know, it's like when you get a car. Say you get a—I don't know, a Fiat. You've never noticed a Fiat on the street before and then you buy one and then you notice it everywhere. And I'm like, “Everybody owns one of these.” And it was kind of like that. And when your eyes are opened up to it, you're more receptive to it and you hear people talking about it and you ask questions about it and that's when I learned “Old Sober”—you know, you're hungover, that's what you have the next day. So that's when I started learning and hearing about it. And I just recently heard a story—because I don't know the history of it—and I heard a

story which sounded plausible: African American soldiers from New Orleans in the Korean War came back, and they had eaten Korean food and they were looking for something that tasted like that because they liked it. And so they sort of created over time what ya-ka-mein is. That's what I've heard. I've heard a couple other ones, but I don't remember them.

**00:21:04**

**SR:** Why do you think—? So you first tried it around 2000; your eyes opened to it. Why do you think it's now that you're starting to make it?

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**CF:** I don't know. Maybe something has to digest for a while, I guess. I wasn't going to do it at Louis XVI—you know, classic French food. Yeah, I didn't even think about doing it at that point. Maybe because I was like, "Oh, some street food; nah, whatever." But it stuck with me. And every now and again it would get talked about. And then seriously, like I said in the last year with Jordan, maybe because he brought it up; maybe he had an interest in it. And he must have just had it or something, or seen it, or—so he was learning about it. And so that maybe re-sparked my interest in it. And realizing maybe we could take it to another place, a new place you know, like chefs do, and mess with it and change things so it's not really too much like the original I guess. But it's growth of a dish, right?

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**SR:** Yeah, I mean, that makes wonder—you've changed, it and we'll talk a little bit—I want to ask you more about what the presentations are actually like now. But what is your relationship to

the dish? Like, do you feel like you're participating in some like deep New Orleans culture when you make your new version of the dish? Is it an homage, is it a creative project, or has it become something totally new?

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**CF:** Well, I guess after I can do it--after I do it, I can have a philosophy about it, but really when I'm—when Jordan and I were in this and thinking about it and making it, you don't really see the forest for the trees. You don't know that you're participating in the growth of a cultural—a strange new cultural dish. We don't think about it like that. Really, what we have to do, we look for inspiration. And the bottom line is—I wouldn't be working if it weren't true—we got to--we have to sell these dishes, you know. People have to buy them. Otherwise, I got to find a new line of work. So I think that's almost the first stress on you, when you realize, “Okay, well, let's do it. Okay, let's make it good because we have to sell it.” That's our jobs. I mean, there's so much competition culinarily in the world, and so maybe we don't come at it from that [cultural] angle, but after you sit back and think about it—after you do it—you can take those things in. Because I guess it's true, because you're here. Susan from the Picayune [*The Times-Picayune* newspaper] interviews me about it. I go to Jazz Fest and do my cooking demo—which wasn't ya-ka-mein. It was a sandwich, a corned beef sandwich we do for lunch; so many people, as I'm setting up my station for the demo, people just come up to me [and say,] “I read about that last Friday. Oh my God, y'all are doing ya-ka-mein? That is so weird. How do you do that?” I don't know if I've ever been asked that many questions about one thing that we did, you know. So that makes you think it really—it piqued everyone's interest.

**00:25:17**

Daniel Bonnot, my old French chef, years ago—*years* ago—told me that's what chefs do: we take what's around us. Because the chefs back in the day used to cook for the rich, the royalty, you know before there were restaurants or anything. And they would take the food of the people, the peasants, and make it into something else. I don't want to say "elevate" it, but bring a new life to it, I guess—refine it, maybe. And he said that's one of the jobs of a chef: you take what's happening in your culture, in your world around you, which is New Orleans, and you create with that. You know, that's how you have these dishes in France that everybody knows the names of—coq au vin, an old tough rooster braised in red wine; you know, marinated for three days in red wine. Everybody knows it now. And there's a reason it's classic, because they made it good. And there's certain ways of doing it, and that was—that came from the people on the streets, the peasants in France, because they would have to cook for sustenance every day, so they would just grow food, raise--raise animals, and I don't know. So that's a part of it. You take what's around you and you create with it.

**00:26:54**

**SR:** Now that you've kind of figured out that part about making it delicious so that you can sell it and make money and have a successful dish—now do you think about the cultural aspect of the dish?

**00:27:12**

**CF:** Well I—like I said, I have now that people talk to me about it. You know, they approach *me* about it and I know maybe there *is* something to it. Maybe it's--maybe it puts more pressure

on them to make sure it's done correctly in our eyes, in our version of it. So yeah, I do think of it now. I didn't think of that for the year we were talking about it and just batting around ideas.

**00:27:51**

**SR:** Your making this dish here is introducing the dish to a population that I would say primarily—like you said, your parents had never even heard about it before—primarily hasn't encountered the dish before. I've had a passing interest in this dish for many years, and you're the first white person I've met who makes it regularly. Has that happened before?

**00:28:30**

**CF:** I don't—

**00:28:31**

**SR:** In New Orleans, as a New Orleans chef, have you encountered this sort of, you know—encountered the racial divide between foods and bridged it before, that you can remember?

**00:28:44**

**CF:** I think so. I mean, in the kitchen, we—I don't want to sound silly or anything, but it's not about your color really. You know, even the warewashers, they've done it for years and there's a reason. They make their money. It's a steady job. Hard work, but they have an interest in food, and I mean they're the ones—they come up to me and ask me questions: "What are you doing, Chef? What's going on here? What is that? Oh no, I don't eat that, no." There's an interest there because the longer you're in a kitchen it becomes your daily life, you know. You don't separate

yourself from your job at that point really, and so I guess cross-cultural is what it is. I mean, there's black chefs, white chefs; there's black warewashers, white warewashers; gay chefs, gay warewashers. It's just a mix of people, and they're, I guess—people say it's a family in the kitchen, but there's a closeness that happens for long-lasting crew members, between cooks and chefs and warewashers. I mean, there's still a lot of turnover in this business, always, just because you don't need a degree for anything. You can go in a kitchen and get to work. So there's that aspect of it, but the people who stay, there's an interest in each other's lives. You know, there's no prejudice. They talk about food, some soul dish maybe that they eat on a certain day, and I'm like, "Bring it in. Let's make some. Let's try it out."

**00:30:46**

So there is—it's almost a food connection, and learning from each other and not thinking about, "Oh well, this black guy is going to bring me in *his* food so I can try it, and then I'll make my white dish so he can try it." I don't know, it doesn't—I don't see those barriers really in the kitchen.

*[Loud sounds of ice being dumped into the bar freezers].*

**00:31:17**

**SR:** The bartenders are getting ready for lunch. So I'm assuming that there are people who work in your kitchen who grew up eating ya-ka-mein.

**00:31:28**

**CF:** And there are also black African American people in the kitchen that have never had it—have never heard of it. Yeah, so you said before bringing it to a new audience. It's going to be a completely new audience. These people—you know I'm going to have to—right now we're running it as a special. It's going to go on the menu, on the printed menu, very soon; I might have to, like on the flap of the menu, write a history of it or something so they understand what it is. Otherwise the server is going to be at the table forever. But yeah, it's going to be a whole new audience, and hopefully it's well received like Mom and Dad received it. But maybe they just said that because it's me. I don't know.

**00:32:16**

**SR:** Of the people in your kitchen who were familiar with it and maybe grew up eating it, what is—have you had any comments, impressions on how they feel about your new presentation?

**00:32:33**

**CF:** They know; they know we make it special and refined and spiffy and clean looking and pretty. They know that's what we have to do here. But no, they—it's about, we always start with: How does it taste? What's the flavor? I mean, that's the first thing we've worked on with it, the flavor of it. How good is it going to be? We have to make it good. We have to make it the way we want it and the way our palates would have us eat it, so they know it's about that. And they know it looks pretty. That's just what they're used to now.

**00:33:07**

I mean we—you know, you just bridge a gap. We do a fried chicken dish here and we—fried chicken and red beans. That's what I grew up eating here, even if it was Popeye's. But we

take chicken thighs and we wrap them in country ham, and then we—. First of all, we debone it and take the skin off and wrap it in country ham and then put the skin back on the outside and then fry it. And we do a red bean purée and we make some boudin in-house and we do a few boudin balls on it. And it's really—you know, it's a fried chicken dish. It's the best fried chicken dish I've ever eaten. It's really good. And that was a little stretch, getting it on a white tablecloth refined restaurant. But it's been on the menu for like two years now. I've had a guy caught me in the dining room and talked to me, and he hugged me because he loved this fried chicken. So yeah, it started off as soul food, right.

**00:34:18**

**SR:** You literally just made my stomach growl.

**00:34:20**

**CF:** *[Laughs]*

**00:34:21**

**SR:** Can you talk about the current presentation of the ya-ka-mein? You talked about how you refined the broth into a sauce. I'm not sure what you settled on as far as pasta, and you know the protein and the egg.

**00:34:36**

**CF:** We're making some fresh pasta. It's like a wide fettuccini, tagliatelle, because—you know, for the festivals we're using bucatini, dried bucatini, that we're buying because I don't have

enough—I don't have the pasta production to make that much. But we can keep up with what we do in the restaurant for fresh pasta. So there's the pasta. It's in a bowl—excuse me—with the sauce around the pasta, and on top of the pasta instead of beef for this--this version, we're using pork belly, and we came up with a good way of curing and cooking the pork belly sous vide—fancy-shmancy stuff, but it's really a great way to start with it. And then you can do whatever you want with it, so we'll slice it and sear it and put a few slices of it on top of the pasta, and then the egg on top. We've been frying the egg sunny side up, so you have that beautiful—and we've been getting nice fresh farm eggs. So you have that really bright yellow yolk that stands up. And then, you know, we add—we cook shitake mushrooms in the broth—and, again, local. That's from Mississippi. We've been using those mushrooms all the time. And a little hot sauce in it, and you know some green onions, and that's the dish. And now I'm thinking about it, what's the—carbonara, yeah, with the egg yolk in the dish and—.

**00:36:38**

**SR:** And the pork?

**00:36:38**

**CF:** Yeah, yeah. Interesting tie-in right there. I haven't thought about that before.

**00:36:46**

**SR:** Italian tie-in. At the Bayou Boogaloo, will it be the soup style or the—?

**00:36:51**

**CF:** It's going to be the soup style. Yeah, it's going to be soup style with the brisket that we'll add into the hot sauce raw—you know, into the broth raw, and so you get that quick cook.

**00:37:05**

**SR:** So it's almost more traditional when you do it—?

**00:37:07**

**CF:** Yes, yeah it seems like that's--that's the way to do it at these outdoor events.

**00:37:19**

**SR:** It's funny to me because when I first encountered it, I thought it was so odd to buy soup on the street because it's awkward eating.

**00:37:28**

**CF:** Yeah, isn't it?

**00:37:29**

**SR:** But there's something about it that's—even though you have a less awkward way of making it here, it's still like what people respond to more when they're outside on the street, it sounds like, and that's why you're making it that way.

**00:37:42**

**CF:** Yeah, it is. A guy asked me—[he said] we have to serve it with bread because you have the broth, and when you're finished if you have broth left you need bread to sop it up. I said, "Lou, how many hands are you going to have to carry this around—three?" I said it's probably enough right now with the cup and the—. And should I serve it with a spoon or a fork?

**00:38:07**

**SR:** That was my next question.

**00:38:08**

**CF:** Spork. We've talked about sporks. I don't know yet. But we have to make a decision really fast. I would say fork maybe because it's in a cup so you can drink it also; so you can drink the broth. It's I guess like a snowball. You know, you have some with a spoon and then it melts at the bottom so you have the straw for that. No straws, though. We'll just drink it out of the cup.

**00:38:36**

**SR:** Straw could be an interesting innovation. And will you have ketchup, because I've seen that?

**00:38:40**

**CF:** No. We're not going to have ketchup.

**00:38:43**

**SR:** In the restaurant, I suppose it's served with a fork because it's not that soupy.

**00:38:50**

**CF:** Yeah, we do it with a fork here.

**00:38:53**

**SR:** Is it always an appetizer when you serve it at the restaurant?

**00:38:55**

**CF:** The time we did it at brunch it wasn't, but the--the version right now that we're serving at dinner is an appetizer, and I did it really because every June we flip the menu basically and we go appetizer-heavy—small-plate-heavy—and we run three apps and a glass of wine. And everybody that comes to eat here knows about it, and they always ask about it, so you can get a glass of wine, three appetizers: 28-bucks. So I need a lot of appetizers, so that was really the driving force to do it as an appetizer. So after the summer check with me again and we might have a new version.

**00:39:46**

**SR:** A little bit off the ya-ka-mein, I'd love to know your culinary trajectory, because it sounds like you worked in New York in some fine dining kitchens—or, oh, you worked in New York in kitchens or not?

**00:40:00**

**CF:** I started but not really. I was front of house, bussing tables, making cash. You know, I was one of those guys: “Give me the cash. I need the cash for the next week.”

**00:40:11**

**SR:** So you worked at Louis XVI in New Orleans, and then what? And at what point did you wind up at Ralph's on the Park?

**00:40:19**

**CF:** Well, I worked for Daniel Bonnot for many years. I started here in town working for Alex Patout years and years ago on Royal Street. I used to open up like 7:00 a.m. every morning. And then I worked for Daniel over at Chez Daniel on Metairie Road, and then at Bisou in the Warehouse District, which is where Herbsaint is now. Then I went to St. Croix, and I was a chef at a small restaurant down there owned by a Danish couple. He was the chef and she was the manager of the restaurant, and they were older and starting—they wanted to retire. So I went down there for a year—great experience. And then I came back, and that's when I started at Louis XVI. And then during the later years of Louis XVI they opened another restaurant. They redid La Louisiane, which is on Bienville. And Louis XVI was on Iberville, so right in the middle they made a new kitchen so we could do both restaurants off one line out of the same kitchen.

**00:41:40**

**SR:** How did that work out?

**00:41:40**

**CF:** No. No, and then Katrina hit and then it was time for a change. Then I came here. I came here as a sous chef, and been here ever since.

**00:41:55**

**SR:** Thank you for that. I forgot to ask you how you spell ya-ka-mein on your menu.

**00:42:00**

**CF:** I think we're going to spell it "ya-ka-mein." That's how I know it. And I'm sure there's a million ways—I'm assuming there are a million ways since there are a million ways of pronouncing it. But that's what we'll roll with.

**00:42:16**

**SR:** I've had the same experience you had, though, where it took me a while to find it spelled.

**00:42:21**

**CF:** Yeah, maybe everybody was afraid to [*Laughs*] actually be the first to spell it. Because, you know, it's one of those things. You ask one of these guys, "How do you spell it?" "I don't know. Yaka meat, ya-ka-mein, yaka meat."

**00:42:37**

**SR:** What about profit margins? I think people who I've talked to who sell it more on the street, there can be a pretty big profit [*Laughs*]. It's not necessarily that kind of dish for you. Does it

figure into—like does it have the same—when you make it here, do you use the same formula for deciding on how to price it as you would other dishes?

**00:43:01**

**CF:** Yeah, yeah we do. You know, we're looking for a certain food cost. And we write a recipe—all the office work that chefs really, really love. I'm kidding; we don't love it. You know, writing a recipe, costing out every item in the dish with—. Just with the sauce, it's not that cheap. The sauce is kind of expensive with all the veal stock and the reduction of it. I remember when veal bones were 50-cents a pound. Now they're like \$2.00 a pound. So yeah, we use the same formula to keep it in our price range.

**00:43:50**

**SR:** Did you have any reaction from either—in any way—from management, when you first ran it as a special?

**00:43:57**

**CF:** They had the reaction of everybody else: “What is that? What do you—?” We have a new general manager here. He's been in New Orleans for about a year and a half—two years now—but he's from New York, so he didn't really know what it was, so he's getting it. He's getting schooled, as we say.

**00:44:18**

**SR:** You mentioned you have a kid, or kids?

**00:44:20**

**CF:** I have two kids, Jack and Josephine. She just made one and next month he'll make six.

**00:44:29**

**SR:** Have they had ya-ka-mein yet?

**00:44:31**

**CF:** No, they haven't—they haven't. They were in school, you know, during the farmers market, but hopefully I'll get them out to the Boogaloo. But Jack always likes to come here. Actually, I take that back. My wife had it—well, the kids didn't have it; my wife had it. A friend of mine who lives in L.A., we get together once a year. We usually try to do it early in January because it's sort of a down time for me and for him, but we were both working this year. So we got together the first week of April. We came and we sat out here for dinner. My family came so they could see him. And Jordan was working and he sent out sort of the early version of the ya-ka-mein that we're doing now, just as a taste—you know, as an amuse almost—and that was the first taste I had of the reduced sauce. And I said, "This is it; this is it. We got it." And so we had—they had the sauce, the flavor of the sauce that night, and he did it with one little piece of seared pork belly on it. And so I went in the kitchen afterwards, which you're supposed—you know, you come to eat at the restaurant, you got to bring the crew beers, and so I went back into the kitchen and I said, "That's it." I mean that's—we're going to go with this now, this version, this sauce. So my family has tasted it, but I don't think they knew it was ya-ka-mein. But hopefully they'll go to the Boogaloo this weekend.

**00:45:57**

**SR:** Is there any place where you like eating it in the city?

**00:46:01**

**CF:** I haven't eaten it in years. It's a very strong flavor. And now that I have a wife and two children, my second lining is non-existent. And then, so—no, I haven't eaten it in a long, long time. I mean, really, what have I eaten it? Three times, maybe? Back in the early days? That's really it.

**00:46:34**

**SR:** That makes it even more interesting to me, that you're doing it now, because I've noticed—I feel like there's sort of a city-wide, I don't know, collective consciousness of ya-ka-mein now that didn't exist when I first moved here. And I don't know why; I don't know what it is.

**00:46:48**

**CF:** When did you move here?

**00:46:48**

**SR:** 1999.

**00:46:49**

**CF:** Ninety-nine. There is, but there's—you know, again, I don't know if you're like this; everything pre-storm, post-storm. But ever since then [Hurricane Katrina in 2005], there's been more of an appreciation of New Orleans culture by us who live here, I think, that realize you know at any moment that could be it. We're not going to get back here. There's almost a fatalistic view of it after all of this. You know, this is a whole other realm of conversation, but there has been—for good or bad—a magnifying glass on the city and its culture. I mean, you get Treme, the HBO show—I mean I'm glad it was done well, but I'm sure a lot of people think nationally that that's us. And to a large extent it was—it is. But yeah, I think—and you know, there are people in my business, people making big strides that stay here but make big strides nationally—Besh, Link, all these guys, Susan Spicer—but she's been doing it forever. And so they're good representatives for us I think, you know. They haven't shamed us in any way. Their food is great and they take an interest in the culture. And so maybe that helps too.

**00:48:29**

**SR:** Just for the record, *I* know what you mean, but the “pre-storm, post-storm”—we're talking about before and after Katrina?

**00:48:37**

**CF:** Yes, yes. Sorry to all the--to all the strangers out there. Yes, pre-K, post-K.

**00:48:48**

**SR:** Okay. Well, I'd like for there to be time for us to take some pictures, and so we can wrap this up. You've given me a lot of time. If I could just ask you one last question? Could you tell us what you like most about your job and what you like least about your job?

**00:49:05**

**CF:** Least is it's a time-consuming business. Never thought about it until I had a family. I knew it was going to come, but now I'm living it, so it's difficult. You know, basically I'm at 6:30 every day, come hell or high water, and maybe 7:00, but the way I get woken up now is much more enjoyable than an alarm clock. This morning it was a happy girl crawling all over me and jumping on me and slapping me in the face and giggling and screeching the whole time. I mean that's--that's great, but yeah, time-consuming.

**00:49:50**

So what I like best, I'll say what I like best about being here at this restaurant—and I'm not kissing up or anything—but Ralph Brennan, he's sort of the backbone of this. He's pushed me to discover my style, to be creative. I had never had that before. You know, I was always learning technique, doing this, go by the rules; this is what we know. Especially from the French chefs: "No, no; you don't serve that with this. You do this with this." But when I was executive sous chef for a while—and then Gus Martin was here and he left to go to Muriel's—and so there was no chef here for a while. So I sort of had like a six-month audition. And he would meet with me and he would give me his time because he's got a million things to do, and he just pushed me. He pushed me. He'd show me pictures of food and he said, "Don't do this food; just look at it." And he's like, "Think about what you like. Think about it if you need to, and what did you

eat when you were a kid? Why don't you eat that now? What is it—?" So he would push me to be creative and make connections in my mind with me and food. And that was pretty cool.

**00:51:16**

**SR:** That is cool, and maybe that is part of the reason that the ya-ka-mein came out—

**00:51:21**

**CF:** And he's a CPA.

**00:51:22**

**SR:** —on the white tablecloth.

**00:51:22**

**CF:** He's a CPA but he loves food.

**00:51:27**

**SR:** Has he had any remarks about your ya-ka-mein?

**00:51:29**

**CF:** I don't think he's tried it yet. He will. We'll get him in here.

**00:51:34**

**SR:** Okay, well, thank you so much.

**00:51:34**

**CF:** Yeah, you're welcome.

**00:51:35**

**SR:** Chef, I really appreciate it.

**00:51:36**

**CF:** No problem. My pleasure—all right.

**00:51:39**

**[End Chip Flanagan]**