ERIC CORMIER
Lake Charles, LA

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Date: September 11, 2007
Location: Pujo Street Café—Lake Charles, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 1 hour, 6 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail & Southern Boudin Trail

[Begin Eric Cormier-Boudin-Gumbo Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, September 11, 2007. I'm in Lake Charles, Louisiana at Pujo Street Café with Mr. Eric Cormier. And could you say your full name and your birth date?

00:00:13

Eric Cormier: Eric Cormier. I was born October 1st in 1971.

00:00:20

SR: And your position in Lake Charles?

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EC: I'm a reporter for the *American Press Newspaper*. I split my time between covering City Hall, and 50-percent of my other time working as a food columnist.

00:00:35

SR: Okay, and where did you grow up?

00:00:38

EC: I grew up here in Lake Charles. I went to school here all the way through college. Graduated from McNeese State University and left only a short period of time to move into the

deep, deep bayou I call it—Abbeville, Louisiana, where I worked at a newspaper there. [I] worked in Lafayette, Louisiana, in radio, and came back to Lake Charles.

00:00:59

SR: Can you tell me a little bit about your ancestry on both sides?

00:01:07

EC: Well I'm legally, as the federal government says, I'm African American. In Louisiana culturally I fall under the umbrella of—of what they call Creole with a mix of French, Cajun, some Native American, African American, and Spanish. Cormier, being my family on the French side, are from Saint Martinville, Louisiana. My mother's parents—that's my father's parents, his father and—his mother was born on Cane River in a little town called Cloutierville, and she goes by the maiden name of Brevelle. And on my mother's side, she's a Prudhomme with her family originating out of Opelousas, Louisiana. And her mother went by the last name of Day, to which we find our family is up in Chicago.

00:02:06

SR: All right. You definitely cover a lot of the Creole bases—the Spanish, the French?

00:02:13

EC: Yeah, yeah. Our family—kind of like all the Louisiana--especially South Louisiana, especially the area of south of Interstate 10—is definitely a gumbo. We have a little bit of everything in us. **[*Laughs*]**

00:02:27

SR: And so do you—do you identify culturally, if not you know ancestrally, as Cajuns? And—and then can you describe to me what Cajun means to you?

00:02:39

EC: Yes. Our family has deep, deep Creole roots. We have some connections to the Cajun culture because, like with so many families in South Louisiana, you see a—a—in my family a combination of both people of color or black, and people who are white co-mingling and having children. And I'm like a third generation as—child of light complexion. And living in Lake Charles, one of the things that I've learned is that as—I'm 35 right now and I'm getting—as I get older, I'm getting closer to my Creole heritage, especially in Natchitoches, Louisiana, where you have Cane River and then the Creole Heritage Foundation. And also I have family members who are from Saint Martinville, and honestly what's called a little town—a little settlement called Cade, Louisiana, which is right out of Saint Martinville, which is right next door to New Iberia. So when it comes to food, that's where my heritage really comes out, because I—we really truly identify with smothering food and making gravies, experimenting with smoked meats, boudin, wild game, which is if you have—it's something that historically both blacks and whites in Louisiana have always loved whether it be rabbit or venison, wild—wild duck for gumbos and—. So culturally I feel connected, and it's something that I like to define in this section of the state, whereas in New Orleans you have Creoles whose heritages is a little different than on this side of the state because—it hasn't been written down, but there's some folks here in this area who like to call ourselves Prairie Creoles because we come from areas like Lawtell and Saint Martinville

where folks were farming. And they came to Lake Charles for work; that's how my grandfather came here from Saint Martinville when he was like 12 years-old, and that's on my dad's side, the Cormier(s)—came here way back when. And with my grandfather on my mom's side, the Prudhomme, Henry—Harry Prudhomme, he came here with his brother-in-law, [who] we called Uncle Antoine, looking for work right after World War II. And so a lot of African Americans or people of color came here after World War II because of the petrochemical industry, and they got those jobs and they settled here and called this home, and with that came their culture.

00:05:27

SR: Prudhomme obviously—that name brings up the thought of Chef Paul Prudhomme. But there are a lot of Prudhomme(s) in Louisiana. Are—do you think that you have any tie to him?

00:05:41

EC: I don't know. I wouldn't even adventure to say that simply because in Louisiana you never know. You just never know, but my family—my grandfather is from Opelousas; his mom was a Black Cherokee. He never knew who his father really, really was even though who—she knew who the man was and he carried the name Prudhomme, so you never know.

00:06:08

SR: Can you explain to me what you mean by Black Cherokee?

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EC: Oh, basically that's a mix where her—one of her forefathers was a Cherokee Indian and one of her other parents was African. We don't know if she was a slave or a person who was free, but the person who is my great, great-grandmother was a Black Cherokee. And that's just the—one of those terms that just kind of stuck. **[*Laughs*]**

00:06:37

SR: That—one second. So we were talking about the Black Cherokee connection. That was really common in Louisiana, as far as I understand: the—the inter-marrying and having children.

00:06:52

EC: I call it co-mingling. They didn't really inter-marry as much as they enjoyed the benefits. **[*Laughs*]**

00:07:00

SR: Common law maybe. I was going to ask you what—so your, your grandfathers moved here for the—for the petroleum?

00:07:13

EC: Well my [grand]father on the Prudhomme side moved here for the petroleum, and my grandfather on my dad's side, he eventually worked for the Kansas City Southern Railroad, to which my father worked for Kansas City—Kansas City Southern Railroad. And that's where it stopped, because both my brother and I—I'm in journalism and my brother owns a company—

contracting company—and we thought about working for the railroad, but—. The benefits were good with all the traveling, but just it wasn't our cup of tea.

00:07:49

SR: When you were in Abbeville, you—which is closer to Saint Martinville than Lake Charles is—did you have any connections? Did you feel connected there at all?

00:08:02

EC: I actually met cousins of mine who I never knew existed. I was working as a sports writer at the newspaper, and that took me to little towns like Delcambre and Erath, Berwick—even back to Saint Martinville. And all of a sudden I'd run into Cormiers, and we would start talking and they would ask me who my grandfather was and I would tell them. And the story is—is that my grandfather left when he was like 12 years-old, way back in the 1920s—1930s, and really rarely went back to Lake Charles—went back to Cade and Saint Martinville. So I come to find out that he had like—if I remember correctly—something like eight, nine, or ten brothers and sisters, and all these people had a family. And then it's only recently that I realized that they had a 500-acre plantation that they had from the 1800s that I'm just now starting to learn about, and I started meeting these cousins. And a funny story is me and my dad were actually in New Iberia on a business trip, and we went to a—a cafeteria in downtown New Iberia. I forget the name—Victor's. Victor's Cafeteria. And we in line and I have a first cousin, she's standing there—that I didn't even know—and she says, *Brother*? My dad picks up his head and he said, *Who called me?* I said, *That lady called you; she said—she called you Brother*. Well that's what my dad's nickname is, and that's the first cousin he hadn't seen in probably decades. So yeah, I—I felt

connected down there. I'm always—you know there's a difference in the—in the culture that's in Acadiana and what's on the farthest southwest side of Louisiana, but it's only about an hour and a half difference in time. So when I went down there, yeah, I did feel those connections. It's just, it was—it was exciting to meet people and hear the dialects that they spoke, to taste the food that they cooked at home, and along with the friends that I had—my parents had—down there already, so it was like being at home. I just happened to be living, as I said, in the swamp.

[*Laughs*]

00:10:22

SR: And how was the food down there similar and different from the food that you grew up eating?

00:10:28

EC: The similarities are gravy and rice. Sometimes they even call it a sauce. Now some people call it a sauce piquant; Creoles down there, well they just call it a sauce. Some roux, a little tomato sauce, little tomato paste, beef, pork, chicken, smoked sausage—anything that you have in the house; put it over some rice. And what was really cool is that as with here, down there the men do a lot of the cooking. Both my brother and I go to a hunting camp up in Arkansas, and what happens is a lot of folks down from Acadiana—Lafayette, Saint Martinville, that area—they drive up there too. And that's where you really see the—the cooking style: very rustic, very basic, highly flavorful, with any meat that's available with a big old pot. Got to have the big cast iron pot and a big spoon and some sharp knives, and whatever is out there that's walking or swimming is dinner. And to take those real simple flavors and, and jack them up a notch,

that's—that's the thing that I took from living down there. My mom, who I always say is the best pot cook I ever knew smothering chickens, smothering liver, smothering pork, gravies—one of my favorite all-time dishes is basically **[*Phone Rings*]** a—a smothered okra or shrimp and smoked sausage right over rice with tomato base. That's something that it—it has that, a whole lot of similarities that you might find in black—from black families in New Orleans that carry it over and it—it jumped all the way to the other side of the state. But it—the ingredients might just be a little bit different in terms of what the wild game is—what people will eat [of] wild game on this side of the state and the other sides of the state. Especially the more cosmopolitan areas, they might not be putting deer backstrap **[*Laughs*]** in their red sauce. But that's—that's the—that's the thing that I took from being down there, and even from the gumbos: dark, rich rouxs. They do that on this side too. But down there I learned a couple tricks from some old cooks. You know, drop an egg in there. **[*Laughs*]** And thicken that, you know—thicken that up a little bit. Sometimes it's boiled. Sometimes I even saw raw eggs cracked and put in—put in the gumbo. When I would ask—and I was always told, *Just eat it*. **[*Laughs*]**

00:13:25

SR: Okay, I haven't heard this before. So at what point would you—well first you said crack an egg in there. Did you mean crack an egg in the roux, or crack an egg just like—?

00:13:35

EC: No, in the gumbo. And if it—and that happened—a lot of times we didn't have time to boil it, 'cause normally what you'll find it's like one of the restaurants in this area—Big Daddy's, there's on Fridays, I love the fact that they do a crab and shrimp stew and in that stew they put

boiled eggs in it. And also there's something called poor man's stew, where they would take a gravy, crack an egg on the top of it to get protein and stretch that dinner. And that's something my dad told me came from like, you know, the Depression Era, where you took what you could to get those proteins. And I didn't see that until I was like six years-old, when one night my mom had made some stew and was out of meat, and we was just going to scrounge around, and my dad said, *Here*. He took an egg, cracked it, put it on top and threw some cayenne on it—on there and let it cook along with the gravy and ate that over rice with some parsley and green onions. I'll never forget that.

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SR: So when you say your mom made some stew and didn't have any meat—by stew you mean gravy?

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EC: We ate all the meat out of it. It was like a beef stew, if I remember correctly, and we had you know—it's vegetables in it, potatoes and carrots, but we had—that was one of the bad habits that we had was to get in the pot, scavenge all the good stuff, and figuring that we wouldn't have to worry about the vegetables and the gravy, but that night we did. **[*Laughs*]**

00:15:04

SR: What happens when you crack an egg into a gumbo? Does it just sort of dissolve in there and thicken it, or does it—do you see egg particles in the gumbo?

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EC: It's kind of like a—a Chinese dish where the egg cooks in, whether it be a fried rice or a moo-goo gai pan, where it kind of just is taken into the—into the base and for some reason—and I don't know the science behind it, but it thickens. I hope I'm sounding like—.

00:15:39

SR: So we were talking about the egg and the gumbo. Would—would people work that egg into a specific kind of gumbo, just seafood gumbos, or any kind of gumbo?

00:15:45

EC: Any kind—any kind of gumbo and any kind of stew. I thought it was odd too. But I've seen it done more than once throughout my life.

00:15:56

SR: Well I'm thinking maybe I've actually had it before and not recognized it because I wasn't expecting it.

00:16:00

EC: That's a possibility, but one thing that I do know is that if it wasn't broken, I've seen boiled eggs in stews and gumbos too. I guess it's—I was told it's always for the protein.

00:16:17

SR: Can you tell me what kind of gumbo you grew up eating in your house, since your—your mom was the cook in your house? Is that right?

00:16:25

EC: Chicken and sausage, and seafood. One of the cool things growing up is that here in Lake Charles we're about an hour away from the Gulf of Mexico. My dad and a friend of his who was from Michigan would go offshore and shrimp, and they would bring back shrimp all the time, and so we had frozen shrimp, frozen fish—. —Always going crabbing the old-fashioned way with some strings and chicken parts and go to the river and that—you know, chase after the crabs like that. So seafood gumbo, along with oysters, was always the big thing in the house. Now my mom, I vividly remember, would always during the wintertime you would have—she would get up in the morning and cook a chicken and sausage and gumbo, but for those special occasions where we would have visitors home for—for dinner, a seafood gumbo was the way to go. And the thing is, what was really cool is that we all—me and my brother always hoped there was leftovers 'cause like with gumbo, it's always better two, three, and four days later. And seafood gumbo especially with the crabmeat—you have half blue crabs in the gumbo, and after two or three days you keep stirring that pot and all that crabmeat starts coming out into the gumbo so you would—about the fourth day that gumbo was perfect. **[*Laughs*]** All the seasonings were mixed and worked out all the kinks, and the roux was settled and just rested as they say. And so that was—that was always special.

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SR: So the seafood gumbo was more of a special occasion gumbo?

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EC: Right, right. And it's a little more expensive, but the thing about it is we always had big freezers with a lot of seafood in them as a family that came right out of the Gulf of Mexico, so we always had that stuff there. Now when you had to go out and buy it, yeah, it would be a little expensive, but we was always fortunate to always—my parents both worked, and cooking the seafood gumbo wasn't a real, real big deal.

00:18:37

SR: Well not to get off the—the gumbo topic, but where did your mom work?

00:18:42

EC: My mom was a teacher. She was one of the first—she was one of seven African American teachers in the late 1960s to work in Jennings, Louisiana, when they were desegregating. And they were one of the first—it was her along with one of my old math teachers were the first seven to teach in this parish, which is next door. Well when I was born, she stopped teaching, and she didn't work again until oddly enough right after my brother was born. She started working again and **[*Laughs*]** she only recently retired the last couple of years when she was diagnosed with cancer and—.

00:19:37

SR: We just got a really amazing plate of food set before us, which is the reason for the pause.

00:19:44

EC: And it looks like perfectly seared beef with spinach and mashed potatoes with gravy **[*Laughs*]** or a demi-glace of some sort.

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SR: Not a bad dinner. All right, we just finished dinner. We were talking about your mother and her gumbos, and I'm wondering if she—if she put sausage in her seafood gumbo?

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EC: Yes.

00:20:19

SR: Smoked sausage?

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EC: Smoked sausage, but if [we] didn't have it something else. But normally smoked sausage, because gumbo just doesn't taste right without having that smoky earthy taste to it, especially when you have a good, thick, robust roux. And she had a few other little tricks that she did. She has yet to ever tell me; I probably will never learn 'cause my brother actually makes a better gumbo than me, and her gumbo is better than his. And so in the family it's kind of like I'll cook a gumbo, but I don't because I know that's their thing. **[*Laughs*]**

00:21:01

SR: Did she use the same roux for both of her gumbos—the seafood and the chicken and sausage?

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EC: Roux is roux, It starts from flour and grease and that's it. I mean it goes with everything.

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SR: But she would cook it to the same shade?

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EC: Exactly. For gumbo, brown. Her—her gumbo is always a little, I call it earthy brown—just real rich. But, gumbo was a big thing, but her greatest dish is étouffée—crawfish étouffée, and that was only cooked for special occasions. She did not cook it like she would cook a gumbo, which would be any time. Her étouffée was normally for when we had people over at the house, 'cause at my house, since my dad was a cook he had a reputation so people would come to the house to eat, and she would start cooking her crawfish étouffée. For sure we had it in April during Easter season. For sure we were going to have it at least once during the—the late, between Thanksgiving and Christmas season. She would cook it and have a big group of people over and maybe two or three times in a year. To this day she probably makes étouffée twice a year.

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SR: And why is that?

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EC: I don't know. She gained a reputation cooking crawfish out of nowhere. I sat there and watched it and never really understood what the deal was, and before I know it there are people coming from as far as from Marshall, Texas, who are friends of the family who would find out she was going to do the étouffée. Or if they were coming to town, they knew ahead of time that they were eating crawfish étouffée. And in fact, like my godparents who are from New Orleans, Boddy and Greta Blake—Boddy died in fact last year in Houston. He had left New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and he died over there, and he was the—him and Greta were the only ones who could—she would cook étouffée for on the spot. And the story goes with them is this, and the only reason was because my mom and dad knew them since 1971. In fact—well since, yeah, 1971—they were there when I was born in Lake Charles, and they have been friends of the family for years. And that's the only way they could get étouffée. **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: Can you explain for the record what étouffée is?

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EC: Smothered crawfish with a light sauce covered over rice with celery, onions, and bell peppers, and a little bit of flour, just to give it some life.

00:24:00

SR: And the sauce is a roux-based sauce, right?

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EC: A light roux, I believe, what they would even refer to as velouté: a white sauce with just a little color to it. And yeah, I think my—I don't—my mom has yet to tell me what she did, and she wouldn't let me watch. I think she would add a little tomato paste or sauce, but not much, to add the red color and then get that rich, rich, rich look to it—that nice little gloss. Aside from that—that was it. She didn't put any cream of mushroom soup or anything. That's a big thing; now everybody likes to put cream of mushroom soup at home in their crawfish étouffée. I mean that's an abomination if you ask me, and a lot of Cajuns and Creoles would tell you the same thing. But that's—that was her thing—is her thing.

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SR: So you've got to get those techniques?

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EC: Right, I do, but you know what? The thing about good cooks that I've learned writing about them and eating around them, whether they're professional or home cooks, is touch, and if you don't have the touch you can't cook. I like to dilly-dally around with Far Eastern food—Thai, and Vietnamese—kind of grew away from the Creole and Cajun everyday, and I've acquired my own feel for how I like to cook certain dishes. I wish that—wish that I could get that touch that my mom has. I mean, she's like one of those—what I like—what I write about is, I like to call those cooks chicken sages. They have a certain way of creating magic. And chefs, people who are highly trained—I know some who will never get it because it's a—it's just a belief, and you

feel it. You know, it's like going to church and walking out feeling good. When you go to someone's home like that and you eat, and I grew up around that. I mean my dad was a professional cook. My mom was a great pot cook. My grandmother was a good pot cook. I grew up around a lot of African American cooks who way before they were calling them chefs, they just cooked. And love, sweat, and some tears. And that's how my mom cooks, and if I could ever aspire to be—if I could cook smothered chicken like she does with mushrooms and onions and bell peppers, I think I'd be pretty good. **[*Laughs*]**

00:26:41

SR: Your dad was a professional cook?

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EC: He worked in an Italian restaurant, Papania's, which was here in Lake Charles for years. And actually I started going to Papania's when I was like four or five. He would wake me up in the morning. He'd work at the railroad, come in late, about midnight, 1 o'clock; he goes, would wake me up: *Do you want to come with me to the restaurant?* 'Cause he would make the sauce, the spaghetti sauce, the pizza sauce, for the next day, and so I would go with him as a little kid, and that's when—at that time at the restaurant newspaper people used to be in there too. Well I would be with him in the kitchen and he would be doing his thing and I'd get—invariably I'd get thirsty, and the greatest treat in the world was a cherry soda, which was either 7-Up with cherry—cherry juice or a Coke with cherry juice added to it, and I would sit at the bar **[*Laughs*]** at the corner, and he would put me in there and I—and I would hang out with the waiters who were—who to this day were—still remember me now as—as an adult. And I just kind of grew up in the kitchen. I mean it just—I didn't know how natural it was 'til I was 22—23. So that's how I

got a real close association with what goes on—what goes on with seasoning and hanging around food and really learning to love the people who do it: the waiters, the cooks, the sous-chefs. You know, celebrity chefs don't really mean much to me; it's the people who really are sitting in the back peeling the potatoes, washing the dishes—that's where I really feel like I got a connection with them, when I hear their stories and I'm able to tell their stories in the newspaper or in a magazine article, and that's what's important to me because if you—I think people forget. Your food just doesn't come to you on a plate. There's some no-named individual who doesn't even think about it—they know it: they just do something marvelous and create something. They got it from their grandma and their mama, or their dad or uncle, and they're just doing what they do, and that's the thing I really, really appreciate especially about being in this side of the state. There's no pomp and circumstance about eating and cooking. It's survival, and at the same time it's having a good time. And you can't have a good time if the food's not good. **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: So I interviewed David Papania today, who was probably the son of the person that your dad worked for.

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EC: He's—I believe he's the nephew of Mr.—the original Papania's Restaurant and their family has been in the business, God, I think since the 1940s. Interesting stories about them, but I mean I can't go into all that. **[*Laughs*]**

00:29:51

SR: Well it's interesting to me that your dad had a job cooking Italian food.

00:29:58

EC: Yeah. He—and the thing is he—even more interesting is he worked on a railroad and cooked Italian food, but he broke in, first in the restaurant business, and Frankie Papania actually kind of mentored my dad and taught him his Sicilian style cooking. So when I was growing up, I was eating lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs, just real basic home-style Italian dishes; no frills, but very thick and very rich and very good, and that's what—what I got from my dad. And for a short time we actually even had a little—little pizza delivery business that lasted maybe a couple of months, but it wasn't the fact that the pizza was bad. It was just I was like 17; I didn't want to be hanging around—running around town going where Domino's didn't go. **[*Laughs*]** And I would watch him and he tells people all the time, if I went into a kitchen I'd probably be able to cook what he cooked because I just watched it so much. And to this day some of the Papania family members are looking for my dad; they want him to give them the recipe 'cause he's the only one in town with it for the original Papania's sauces. I don't know why he doesn't get off of it, but hey that's him.

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SR: Did he cook that food at home ever?

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EC: He cooked the food at home all the time. So that was very, very natural. A lot of people ate at our house growing up. Our house was like a little small restaurant. People was in there all the time eating. I mean, so I grew up around food.

00:31:50

SR: Because both of your parents were cooks?

00:31:53

EC: Right.

00:31:53

SR: And you and your brother had a—a male role-model in the kitchen. Did your dad cook gumbo, or was that your mom?

00:32:00

EC: Strictly my mom; dad was fried foods, Italian sausage, spaghetti sauces, pizza sauces, pizzas, fried chicken, chicken fried steak with white gravy—stick to your bones stuff, that was him, and he didn't cook no vegetables. **[*Laughs*]**

00:32:21

SR: And back to the—the gumbo for a minute. Your mom, I was going to ask you—did she put okra—? I mean you said she made okra stew. Did she put okra in any of her gumbos?

00:32:33

EC: Never. I didn't realize they put okra in gumbo 'til I went to New Orleans. On this side you have a few people who put okra in their gumbo, but for the most part okra is smothered and that's it. Very few people around here actually—if you look on most restaurants' menus around here, people do not put okra in their—in their gumbo. I don't know why. Personally I love it, but on this end of the state, fried okra, pickled okra, smothered okra, but very seldom in a gumbo. And if it does happen, it's not frequent. I mean it's just—I don't know—I don't know why some people do and some people don't, but on this side of the state, like I say, past Lafayette—even in Lafayette—I never ever actually had too many people putting okra in their gumbo.

00:33:28

SR: Is there anything else—. I mean, I've heard that from other people I've talked to—that okra isn't very prominent in gumbo here even though it sometimes comes up. Is there anything else that you think really distinguishes a Lake Charles area gumbo?

00:33:43

EC: Smoked sausage. We don't do andouille; we do smoked sausage, and that smoked sausage is normally going to be beef, pork, a mix of beef and pork, or a mix of deer and pork, or deer and beef. And slowly but surely you going to have some people starting to put more smoked turkey sausage into their gumbos, so the smoked flavor really is important around here because we have so many small smoked meat producers. You can start right in Vinton, Louisiana, which is 10 miles away from the Texas border, and go clear across Calcasieu Parish and there's—you're going to be inundated with these small little shops where people have smoked ham hocks,

chicken, turkey, turkey legs, turkey wings, and every last one of those things will go into a gumbo. So around here people like that infusion of just that earthy natural flavor to go into their gumbos. And that's the one thing that I find—that I find common. Around here you'll find—and I tend to call it—and I have friends who call it *junk*. Well a person—you will have a gumbo with smoked turkey necks, smoked turkey wings, smoked sausage, some shrimp, some chicken, you know four or five different main ingredients and they're all in—in the gumbo. And even though, I mean I don't personally like that much junk in my gumbo, the flavor is undeniable. It—even if you don't like picking through all the meat, you're going to eat it because the flavor is so rich. And whether it's pecan wood, hickory, oak—all those smokes is what really, really changes the flavors in gumbos on this side of the—of the state. I go anywhere else and I know over here this—the flavor is going to be a whole lot more robust. And that's the big difference that I find on this side of the state compared to other parts of the state when it comes to cooking gumbo.

00:36:18

SR: Is there anywhere that you can think of off-hand, a restaurant that makes a *junk*-style of gumbo? **[*Laughs*]**

00:36:27

EC: No. Most people stay to the basics: chicken and sausage, shrimp and crab. And that's it. And it's only when you start getting out of restaurants and going to people's houses you get a bowl of something, and I'm serious: there could be deer backstrap in this; it could be rabbit. I went to a hunting camp and threw down with me with some smoked wild goose—I mean

geese—and had some smoked sausage and had the nerve to put some rabbit in it and oh, I mean it was great. But it had junk **[*Laughs*]**—just too much stuff in it.

00:37:12

SR: When you make a gumbo at home, are you trying to go for your mom's gumbo, or do you have your own gumbo?

00:37:20

EC: I have my own 'cause I can't duplicate my mom's. If I try it I will fail each and every time. And I try to keep it simple. Bell pepper, celery, onions sautéed in olive oil. And I cheat: I use a roux that's already made. I'm not going to sit up there for 45-minutes stirring in the pot; add that, sausage, maybe some chicken. I mean my wife and kid, they don't really like a lot of stuff in it. And just real simple— or if I do shrimp and crab, just you know, I'm kind of like—again, I don't like a lot of junk in my—in my gumbo. And that's how—how I cook it.

00:38:04

SR: And are you the main cook in your household?

00:38:06

EC: Definitely **[*Laughs*]**. My wife is from Kansas, so I'm the cook.

00:38:13

SR: And that's not unusual in this part of the country even-—even in New Orleans, I think a lot of men are the main cooks.

00:38:21

EC: I'm actually working on a story right now for a magazine about smoked sausage and smoked meats, so I was on the road actually today, and I was talking to what we call old-timers, some old guys and—excuse me—. What they were telling me were these stories about their fathers and grandfathers—and we're talking about the early 1900s—butchering the pig, and the men out there doing cracklings and making boudin, smothering pork steaks, barbequing and the whole nine yards, and that's inherent in this culture. There's one thing that I think that's amazing and pretty cool is that men—and that's on both sides of the color spectrum, black or white—in most communities when it comes to cooking, you won't find a man who's going to run from the kitchen. And the ones who did, then their mama really was a dog-gone good cook; they had no reason to learn. **[*Laughs*]** But every guy I know personally cooks—even guys I went to high school with and their dads and their grandfathers, and really and truly those recipes are passed down. And the thing is, it's not like it's written down. You pick up the recipe watching as a little kid. And it's amazing how much kids pick up when you're five years-old and you're outside with the guys and they're passing around the whiskey bottle and drinking beer, joking, you know and playing the dozens—hanging out outside and the women are inside and—you'd just be amazed at how much you pick up and watch what these old guys do. And to me that's what's pretty cool, especially as a food writer. When I get a chance to go around some of the old-timers who are still alive, and they're at a festival and they're cooking, and just to sit there and watch them, and you feel a kinship with them because they're doing the same thing that you did and

have learned. And it just—you just feel at home. And that's what makes writing about food, what makes watching these people even when I'm not worried about writing about food—you just feel this connection and it's—it's basic, and it's not macho at all. It's just guys who want to have good times and love cooking. And that's—I love that.

00:40:59

SR: I'm—I really appreciate that too from—from a distance, you know. I'm not a participant, but—. So you are responsible for my being in Lake Charles this week because you made a point—you pointed out that this—the Lake Charles area—has been under-represented in our oral histories, which is true. And you have a real pride in your culture here. And I just—I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about that.

00:41:36

EC: Lake Charles is the Parish Seat for Calcasieu Parish, but we're also kind of like the centerpiece for what we call the Imperial Calcasieu Region, which is five parishes: Calcasieu, Beauregard, Allen, Jeff-Davis, and Cameron Parish. And we are right—the southwest-most part of the state. I mean, we're just 20-minutes right from the Texas border. And what's important about this area is that this area, during the Louisiana Purchase, was just kind of hanging out. Nobody—the Spanish, the French, the Americans, they really didn't know what to do with this area; this was just this little—from Many, Louisiana over to Natchitoches, on across the Sabine River, you just had this little area where outlaws, freed slaves, freed people of color, Cajuns—well not Cajuns but Indians, Spanish—whoever was out here was here, and it—it grew as an outlaw type of area. I mean some of the greatest stories about here have to do with pirates and

just an ornery group of people. And from that you have a—a culture that is truly Louisiana. Everybody is represented here. You know, even Atakapa Indians who were first here, who the rumor was they were cannibals, they're here, and they grew and—. What's important to know about here, is that maybe you could even say we're the extremes of Louisiana, the—actually, you're here at a time when we're fixing to play—McNeese State, the University that I graduated from, is fixing to play University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Lafayette is—when it comes to the culinary world of Louisiana, if you're not New Orleans, the next best thing is the Lafayette/Acadiana area. Well we like to think, well that's our cousins or our cousins *[French pronunciation]*, and they don't do anything better than we don't do. And here we probably do have an identity crisis because we're Cajun and Creole, but we're not connected to Acadiana; we're not connected to New Orleans. And what's important for us right now, especially after Hurricane Rita, which was a bigger storm than Hurricane Katrina, is that yeah, we do exist. And probably too long on this side of the state we really haven't really appreciated the thing that we have, especially when it comes to culture and—and the culinary world. And what's happening right now is that there is an effort to not put us on the map per se but to tell the rest of the world, *Hey, we're over here*. You want to go hunting? Fishing? You can't get any better than this side of the State. I know fishermen from Florida who will drive down Interstate 10 through New Orleans and Lafayette to come fish over here. Speckled trout, red fish—they run, and people love it. When it comes to squirrel hunting, rabbit hunting, they come to the Five Parish area. And we, over time, have taken ourselves for granted. Not many parts of the State of Louisiana have such a strong smoked sausage, smoked meats type of reputation. We're right next to Texas, and that influence along with our Cajun and Creole seasoning styles that we got out of New Orleans and Natchitoches and Lafayette have all just kind of combined, and what happens is people treat it as

if—as just something we do, but it's very special. Lafayette has made—has marketed itself off Cajun culture and heritage that we have. Anybody who lives over here is akin to somebody in Lafayette or any of the Parishes where it's called Acadiana, so I think what's—what's important is that Southwest Louisiana is part of Louisiana even though we tend to have a little more Texas-type of what should I say—connection? But we're still Louisiana and we're—we're different, and maybe that's what makes it hard for a lot of people around the state to get to know us a little bit, because we are—we are an ornery group of people. Hurricane Audrey in 19—the late 1940s—killed 500 people in Cameron Parish, which is south of here. Those people that went back after the hurricane and made a life, they were not going to allow nature to take away what they wanted. Hurricane Katrina—I mean Rita—came in; nobody died, but it destroyed the parish, Cameron Parish. Those people are back down there trying to do it. Ornery, tough, oil-patch type of workers: aero-space, shipping with the Port of Lake Charles—it's just a hard-working group of people who don't always get along, but our food and our culture is what keeps us together. It's not just defined like other parts of the state, and that's what we're trying to do right now.

00:47:36

SR: It sounds to me like you—you have sort of dual missions, which [are] to help your own people understand that what they have is special, but then also broadcast it a little bit. Do you feel a—a sort of pull to educate—not educate, but I don't know, open your eyes, open the eyes of the people who are here to what's right in front of them?

00:48:00

EC: I would even say, yeah, I'm working to educate, because if you—what happens here is that we take things for granted, and most people see black cast iron pot cooking as, *Oh well, that's no big deal*. That is a big deal. That's some of the greatest cooking in the world. Things that they do—there are cooks who leave Lake Charles who have worked in Lafayette, New Orleans, and they go over there and they make it. Well the only reason they can is because they have the base—the basics that comes from here, and—. But over time so many people just kind of took it for granted, and now we're at a very critical juncture in our area's history, when 2007 we had a hurricane come in and blow us off—almost off the map. And the question is, *What are we going to do to leave in terms of a—in terms of a reputation or history?* For 100 years in Lake Charles we argued over whether or not we would develop along Lake Charles, the lake. We just passed something, some ordinance, to allow us to do that. I hope another 100 years doesn't pass because—and there's nothing there because we've been taking each other for granted here. And so I'm working along with other people here to make us feel good about ourselves, but at the same time tell the rest of the world, *Hey, come check us out*. We're kind of rough-edged, I'm rough-edged; we're rustic, I'm rustic. I like to say you know we're kind of country, but it's good people, good people who you know they didn't see anything special about what we had because we're just us. And I'm that. Hopefully that changes. In Lafayette it went up to the late '70s or early '80s that they marketed Cajun; otherwise you would never heard of Lafayette. They was smart. Well we don't have Cajun to market because we're outlaws **[*Laughs*]**. Trying to figure out how market outlaws.

00:50:15

SR: That's a challenge, but I think it can be done. I don't want to—we're going to have to wrap this up 'cause we're going to run out of time, but I don't want to end before we talk about boudin a little bit, because I know that that's close to your—your identity, really. Can you talk a little bit about how you and people of this area identify with boudin?

00:50:35

EC: Boudin is us. If you look at the history, you really don't know where it came from. You see the influences of Germany. You see the—the influences of Germany, you see the influence of France, but boudin is kind of like it just kind of happened. And when you research it, nobody can say definitively where it happened on this date. It just, it's here. A joke around here is a lunch for us around here is boudin with a slice of bread and a beer. **[*Laughs*]** I eat boudin for breakfast 'cause most stores that are open—smokehouses or convenience stores that sell boudin—they're—excuse me—are open around 6 o'clock in the morning. You pass 8:00, 9 o'clock, that boudin is cooked; you get it and you go, and you get that waxed paper and you turn to that stuff and it's just simple. It's no—it's not pretentious. It's just a food that you get into your system, and I always tease my friends who come from the northern parts of the country or the far out West or people who have left Louisiana and moved away, had children and those children come back; it's a—you know, and the term I'm going to use is kind of derogatory, but it's one we use freely. It's—you're not coon-ass until you have a piece of boudin. I mean you can eat boiled crawfish or crabs or fry some fish, but you're not a bona fide Louisianian until you have a piece of boudin. I've yet to hear someone say that they didn't like it. The only time I heard something even remotely close was two years ago, some Russian chefs came here as part of an exchange and they fed them some boudin and I was there. And each and every one of those chefs' faces

was red, they were sweating, and you could tell that they were scared to say it was too hot. But the—when I asked, *Well, was it good?* You know, *Da.* **[*Laughs*]**

00:52:55

SR: Meaning *yes*?

00:52:56

EC: Yes, meaning yes, so it's like it's special. You can't define it; you can't even tell where it came from, but it's everywhere. People make it at home. People make it in stores. I just—again, the story I'm working on right now, a guy, he makes 100,000-pounds of—he produces 100,000-pounds of meat every month; 200—2,000-pounds of that is boudin, and that's per week. He's making boudin all the time, Rabideaux's boudin, one of the best in the area. And recipes are different, but the difference that you will find in our boudin compared to what you see in other parts of the state like Lafayette and the Houma area, is that we don't have as much liver. Liver is—liver or not to liver: that's the question. And over here liver really, really—a whole lot of liver, our tastes, our palates don't like a lot of liver in our boudin. If we're going to eat liver we're going to eat liver broiled or, you know, with grits, and that's just how we do it. But boudin is truly a South Louisiana deal even though you'll find it south of Alexandria. But down here it's—again, we take it for granted, but that's our identity. It's like a Philly cheesesteak sandwich in Philadelphia. You come down here you get boudin, and you go to Texas—East Texas—you're going to get Texas hot links, hot guts. Over here is boudin, so that's pretty much it.

00:54:45

SR: I have a few questions with that. First of all, that term coon-ass, which I even have a hard time saying because it sounds so derogatory to me **[*Laughs*]—**but it seems like people in this part of Louisiana call themselves that. People of both races. Is that true?

00:55:01

EC: Well **[*Sighs*]** Cajuns call themselves coon-asses. I've—I'm Creole, I'm black, but I've been called a coon-ass, but it stops there. **[*Laughs*]** You won't really find many people in the African American community who will call themselves coon-asses, but it will be a joke if you have some Creole heritage. Now that's not always, but you know people look at me, in Louisiana they know what my heritage is. When I leave the state I've been asked if I'm Arab; I had a guy from Morocco come up to me thinking—asking me if I was from Fez. And when I'm in California I'm asked if I'm Mexican. When I'm with my friends from Venezuela, they've always told me, *Your family has to be from South America*. And so that—that coon-ass term, especially with my last name Cormier, yeah. I've been—if you're—if you're light-skinned and African American or you're a Cormier or a Thibodaux, people will ask you if you're a coon-ass. **[*Laughs*]**

00:56:15

SR: And we were talking a little bit the other night; I was asking you if you knew any black/African American boudin makers, because I haven't met any on the road who are, you know, owner-operators. And can you tell me what you think about that?

00:56:31

EC: Not many owner-operators that I know of even on this side of the state, but when you asked me that, it hit—it hit me about a day later. Right around the block from where I grew up was a lady who made boudin. And it was pretty good. But for the most part when it comes to retail sales, you don't find a lot of African Americans doing the business, but they make it at home and only for family, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. I always noticed that when it comes to dishes like that, folks like to cook it in the fall, and you always hear people say, *When it ain't hot.* **[*Laughs*]** That's what they say: *When it cools off I'll make you some boudin*; that's what they tell you. So for some reason they just never really got into it, but again the same story I'm working on, I met a guy today who works for Rabideaux's, and he's been working at Rabideaux's for 10-years. He retired from a utility company and he stuffs the boudin.

00:57:27

SR: And he's African American or black?

00:57:29

EC: He's—he's black; he's Creole. I venture to say if you probably went around Opelousas or Lawtell you might run into some folks, but still I think when it comes to the African American community, when it comes to the boudin, I think it's a family thing where they cook it together and they share it with their friends and that's it. Why? I haven't the slightest clue; I haven't even gotten that far. I'm still—I'm still trying to find them myself. **[*Laughs*]**

00:58:00

SR: What about female boudin makers [or] owner-operators? Have you run across that? Because I have not.

00:58:08

EC: There's a lady in Kinder, Louisiana. which is 35-miles away from here. And Kinder is famous because it's the home of—of Coushatta Casino Resort. And there is a place called Chadeaux's. It's a woman who owns the place, and she—she bought the recipe though. I don't know—aside from this old black lady who made boudin around the corner from me, I have never heard of a female boudin maker, black or white. I don't know why. I—well I could assume that it's—it's just a guy thing. You cut the pig outside. You process it. The guys make the boudin, and it's—it's no frills: rice, little parsley, and seasoning and some pork. That's it.

00:59:11

SR: What about your wife? I'm curious whether she's taken to boudin and she's not a Louisiana native.

00:59:18

EC: It's her most favorite thing in the world.

00:59:21

SR: Is that right?

00:59:21

EC: She gets on me if she hears that I'm eating boudin somewhere and I don't bring her any—I'm in trouble. It's her—I mean that's—she could eat boudin every day. That's—and it surprised me. She was born in Kansas. Her dad is Irish and her mom is Filipino, and she likes boudin. I don't—I haven't understood it, but she's a coon-ass. **[*Laughs*]**

00:59:42

SR: She is—she's an honorary?

00:59:44

EC: She's honorary. **[*Laughs*]**

00:59:45

SR: Wow. Well I can say from personal experience that you definitely develop a taste for it. The more you eat it the more it kind of grows on you. Shoot, oh I know: I wanted to ask you about your favorite places to eat—or a few of your favorite places to eat boudin, like if you and your wife were going to go on a hunt.

01:00:09

EC: Starts in Vinton, Louisiana, a place called Comeaux's, which I think has the best boudin in Calcasieu Parish; drive down Highway 90 from Vinton to Sulphur about 20-minutes and go to the Boudin Link; drive into Lake Charles—.

01:00:27

SR: Sorry—Boudin Link or Sausage Link?

01:00:29

EC: Sausage Link; and drive into Lake Charles and go to Hackett's, Abe's, and go on through to Moss Bluff, Louisiana, which is the north part of the Calcasieu Parish—a place called Peto's, which makes the hottest boudin in the state if you ask me. It's red; it is not blood boudin. It's red because of the cayenne. It's kicking. And that's—oh, I end up in Iowa, Louisiana at Rabideaux's, which me and my wife, we drive there at least two or three times a month. And it's just 10-minutes from Lake Charles, but it's out of Lake Charles, and two pounds of boudin with some fried fish and we got lunch.

01:01:17

SR: Wow, that's a good combination?

01:01:20

EC: They have fried fish. You can buy a fillet for $1.25, so two fillets of catfish and two pounds of boudin—it's lunch. **[*Laughs*]**

01:01:34

SR: What is your wife's name?

01:01:35

EC: Erin—Erin. The joke amongst our friends is we're in the Mickey Mouse Club, Eric and Erin. **[*Laughs*]**

01:01:45

SR: Good point. What about your daughter—Carol—?

01:01:48

EC: Carolanne.

01:01:50

SR: Carolanne—does she eat boudin?

01:01:53

EC: She is about like her mom when it comes to boudin. She loves it, but she loves rice and gravy. I can cook rice and gravy with some pieces of steak and—and make a quick gravy. She'll take the meat out and eat the gravy. She loves rice and gravy. **[*Laughs*]**

01:02:15

SR: Can't blame her really. I'm going to wrap this up, but for a final question, can you tell me what it is that you like most about your job? Specifically the food writing part of your job?

01:02:29

EC: I get to tell stories, I get to meet different people, and I love folks in the cooking industry. They are the most real people that you will meet. They have no time to give you a bunch of bull. They got dinner to make, they got to get paid, they got bills to pay. And I guess some of the most interesting characters I ever met came out of a kitchen, and this goes for when I was a kid all the way up to now as an adult. So that's what's cool about writing about food. Watching people eat, it's not—it doesn't really do it for me. When I hear people tell me, *Oh, this great restaurant and this and that*—that really doesn't do it for me. I want to know the people who are at the stove. What's going on with them? What do they like to eat? When they're away from work, how do they like to chill out? That's what's fun. And to be able to tell people and put faces, through words, to the food that we're eating in our city and introduce the people to cooks that they don't know. One of my—I take pride in one thing, by the name of a lady who we call Big Marie. She died last—just recently. Big Marie had been cooking for 40 years and nobody knew about her. She was an old black cook working for the restaurants—as we like to say, making money for somebody else, but never really making what she was worth. And one night—one day I went to a restaurant and she was working there, and I would see her and she was always the one calling the shots, but the owner was floating around and wanting to talk. So we went to a crawfish cook-off, and I saw her there with this team from the restaurant she worked with, and she came over—. Well I went up to ask, you know, *Somebody tell me about this étouffée y'all are making.* And one of the owner's uncles was saying, *Well you know he was just stirring the pot and this and that, this and that*. I walked to the side; she comes and grabs me by the arm and said, *Let me tell you the truth, Honey*. And she let me know it was her recipe, and we developed a friendship, and she let me see some things that she wouldn't let other people see. And I wrote about her more than once, and I wrote about her in a magazine, and I wrote about her in the newspaper. She

died, and I wrote that when she died at least she died and people knew who she was. We all tasted her food, but because owners and restaurateurs who take most of the credit for what's going on, we didn't know who she was. That's why I do this. I'm black, and in a time where cooking is in vogue, a lot of black cooks aren't getting the—the love they should get. It—I would be—I would be foolish to think I could make a career without writing about the people who do it. That's why I do it, and I love it. That's where I grew up. The best cooks I ever knew come from the black community. And that's where I'm at.

01:06:10

SR: Well that's a really good note to end on. Thank you for giving me your time and your thoughts.

01:06:17

EC: Thank you.

01:06:20

[End Eric Cormier-Boudin-Gumbo Interview]