

FERNAY McPHERSON
Minnie Bell's Soul Movement – San Francisco, CA

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans
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[Begin Fernay McPherson Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, May 21, 2013. And I'm with Fernay McPherson in San Francisco, California, at the offices of La Cocina. And Fernay, if I could get you to say your name and tell me what you do for a living?

00:00:19

Fernay McPherson: My name is Fernay McPherson. I am chef and owner of Minnie Bell's Soul Movement. My business is a mobile food—a mobile soul food trailer and catering.

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AE: Okay. And I was on your website last night—last night and that was launched fairly recently. Is that correct?

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FM: Correct. Actually, it will be launching this weekend, the 25th [of May] at the Hayes Valley Proxy in San Francisco.

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AE: What is the Hayes Valley Proxy?

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FM: The proxy is a two-block project in San Francisco on Hayes and Octavia and the—the two blocks consist of mobile food trailers and retail for mobile businesses in the city.

00:01:01

AE: All right. So tell me about your childhood and learning to cook here in San Francisco.

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FM: So I learned to cook at an early age. My mom is from Texas and my great-aunt and grandmother; they all came here from Texas when my mom was a little girl. And, growing up, you know, I always witnessed them cooking large meals in the kitchen, and at the age of about five I learned to cook cakes. Well, actually, I take that back. At about five, I had to grate cheese for macaroni and cheese. And then by nine, I learned how to bake a cake. And by fifteen, I was helping to cook with the big holiday dinners and daily meals. So—and I just love to do it. It's something that I just really love to do and continued on to do it as I got older and went on to culinary school and ended up here at La Cocina to learn how to formalize a food business.

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AE: Do you remember the first kind of cake you baked?

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FM: The first cake I baked it was called a Dinette Cake and my great-aunt Minnie, who is—is my inspiration to cook along with my grandmother, Lillie Bell, she taught me. It was a really a simple cake, but it was from scratch and it was like you just threw everything in the bowl and mixed it up. And that was my first cake. I'll never forget it, and I used to make it every weekend.

[Laughs] I learned—I made it every weekend, so—. That—that was the first cake I learned to make and my first dish was macaroni and cheese, and my mother taught me how to make it.

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AE: And where in Texas were the women in your family from?

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FM: My mother is from a small town called Port Arthur, Texas, and my great-aunt is from—she—she lived in different places, but she lived in Houston when she was young and she also lived in New Mexico. She—she went from Houston to New Mexico to San Francisco.

00:02:58

AE: Okay. So is that—is that how your family ended up here, through your great-aunt? I may have done that wrong.

00:03:05

FM: My mother ended up here with my grandmother and grandfather. They moved out here when my parents—when my mother was a young girl. My great-aunt is actually my dad's auntie, and she was already here. She came before my mother when she was young, so my father is a native of San Francisco. And my mother came from Port Arthur when she was young. And it was due to work. You know, my grandfather finding work here and he brought his family here to live.

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AE: How did your parents meet?

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FM: My parents met in school, in high school. They have been married for forty-six years, and I have three brothers.

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AE: So tell me, with—with family roots in Texas and the women who you learned to cook from being from Texas, does anything from that place inform or inspire what you make today?

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FM: Definitely. My business, a lot of the recipes that I use are traditional family recipes, so they are recipes that I've learned from my grandmother, from my aunt, from my mother, as well. My aunt—you know, my grandmother passed away about ten or eleven years ago, but my great-aunt is still here, so she is someone that I can always call and say, "Okay," I call her my nana, and I say, "Okay, Nana. How, you know, do I make this, you know, the potato salad? How do I—what do I do to make it taste a certain way or—?" And she'll just tell me over the phone, you know, how to do it. And—and I get in that kitchen and—and do what I do and then I'll take it to her to see okay, is this the way it's supposed to be? And she'll tell me yes, no, or you need to do this—something different or this is good, so—.

00:04:49

AE: And I—that answers the question. I was looking at the menu on your website, and you have a lot of Louisiana dishes, gumbo and other things like that—that Port Arthur's proximity to Louisiana is really close. Is that where that comes from?

00:05:02

FM: Yes. Yes, and in Port Arthur, you know, my mother her—her dad was from Louisiana, so a lot of—they ate, you know, dishes from Louisiana, Texas, all of it mixed up together. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Have you visited Texas over the years?

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FM: Yes, I've been to Port Arthur twice, and I've been to Louisiana twice as well.

00:05:27

AE: Okay. And but you were born here in San Francisco, is that right?

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FM: I was born here in San Francisco from the Western Edition.

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AE: So explain the Western Edition.

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FM: The Western Edition—the Western Edition is just a neighborhood in San Francisco like the Fillmore area of San Francisco, so it—growing up, the community, it's a wonderful community and just from hearing the stories that I heard from like my mom and my aunt, it was a—it was a taste of the South on Fillmore. They had all the jazz clubs and the good soul food restaurants and it—it, you know, they talk about these times, and when I listen to them I just picture it, and it's almost like I'm there. And I want to be able to with my mobile food to bring some of that back to the Fillmore with—with my mobile food trailer and the food that I'm offering out of it.

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AE: What does the Fillmore District look like now? Are there still some soul food places and things there?

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FM: They—there are two: one is more of an upscale soul food, and one is more of down home. But it—it's not as many as it used to be and just the mobile food trailer, which is at a different aspect of being able to access the food, you know, for someone that does not want to go and sit down in a restaurant or someone who does not want to pay a large amount at an upscale restaurant where they can just come and grab the food and go.

00:07:00

AE: Even though you're a native of San Francisco, do you consider yourself Southern at all?

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FM: Definitely. You know, my roots are Southern. I loved when I was able to go back and visit and be with my family that's there, so I mean, I'm here in San Francisco, but I'm surrounded by my family that is from the South, so I grew up in—in that type of environment what they grew up in.

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AE: And so the name of your business is Minnie Bell's Soul Movement. Tell me about the soul movement part of that name.

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FM: The soul movement is just the—the mobile part of the business and being able to take my soul food around. **[Laughs]** So that's where the movement—the soul movement came from, and the Minnie Bell's like I said before is my great-aunt and my grandmother was Lillie Bell, so I combined it—their two names and put the Soul Movement onto represent the mobile food.

00:08:01

AE: I love, too, how it implies that your food will move your soul.

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FM: Definitely. **[Laughs]**

00:08:08

AE: So tell me about some of the things on your—your menu. Tell me about some of the soul food things and then also the—more of the Louisiana-inspired things.

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FM: So the catering menu consists of a—of a lot of different soul food dishes, a lot of dishes that I learned how to make at a young age. Some of the dishes I did create myself just to—because we are in California in San Francisco, so I do want to cater to some of those, the—you know the—everyone doesn't eat heavy, heavy soul food. You know we have vegans and vegetarians, and so I do want to cater to that aspect of it as well.

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The—the—like I said, the catering menu is more broad and more dishes. The soul—the mobile menu is narrowed down to food that's kind of easy to—easy to get and eat standing up or—I have a smothered tri-tip sandwich on there. The gumbo is definitely something that is a big hit. *[Laughs]* I have a red bean and rice salad, which is a little different from the traditional red beans and rice. It is with no meat; it's made with no meat, and you can eat it cold or at room temp. I have the—a traditional macaroni and cheese that I learned to make when I was about nine. Banana pudding, so I have some tasty treats. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Tell me more about your gumbo.

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FM: The gumbo, you know, is—is very popular. It's a little lighter than a traditional gumbo. I don't use any pork in it. The roux is not as thick as a traditional roux, so but it has the traditional trinity in it with the bell pepper, the celery, and onions and all the good spices, and it packs a little—little heat, not too much. But and it's served with the steamed basmati rice.

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AE: So what does soul food mean to you?

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FM: Soul food, to me personally, is—is my family. It's just growing up and having those big traditional—having those big family dinners and listening to all the soul music that my parents and aunts and uncles listened to back when I was younger and just, when you say soul food, that's my vision, just remembering when I was a little girl and we had big family dinners. And everyone was dancing and having a good time. That's what soul food is to me.

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AE: So do you think—you were talking earlier about, you know, changing some of your recipes and adapting them to—to meet your customers' wants and needs with the vegans and, you know, more healthy—health conscious people here in California. Is that like a fun challenge to you or is that—does that in any way diminish your family recipes or—or what is that process like for you?

00:11:09

FM: I think it's a fun challenge because I—I don't just take away my family traditions. I just add a little of what, you know—adapt them to different needs in California, so I don't take away from the family traditions. I just add a little additional to—to supplement, you know, the—the vegetarian and vegan eating.

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AE: Tell me about some of the recipes that you've developed yourself.

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FM: So, I developed a red bean and rice salad, which has been pretty popular. People just—I've had it at different expos, giving it out as samples, just to see how people would react to it and—and it—people like it.

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Another one is the banana pudding cupcake. I just took the traditional banana pudding and converted it into a cupcake, and also my banana pudding is a little different than the traditional custard. It's made with mascarpone. So that's one. And then the—the smothered tri-tip sandwich is also one that I created. And I just remember as kids when my mother, she would make smothered—all types of different things—smothered in a brown gravy. And we always had bread to go with it. So I just thought that would be a good sandwich, you know, with the nice, thick brown gravy and sautéed onions and bell peppers on it, and it's really good. *[Laughs]*

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AE: Tell me about your cornbread.

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FM: The cornbread is—it's—it's a traditional cornbread but just with a little creamed corn in it, and just to add a little kick to it, so—. And I also do a hot water cornbread that my aunt taught me to make, and it's her recipe. I just added a few little jalapeños into it.

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AE: Great. So let's back up and talk about your kind of trajectory to this moment and how you decided to go to culinary school to—to pursue food as a career.

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FM: So my—my passion for cooking has been for a long time. I would notice, like when I was in the kitchen sometimes I would just feel so good cooking, like it was almost a form of therapy for me. And my—when I made the decision to go to culinary school, I had just been laid off from my job at AT&T for the second time, so I'm like, okay, why don't I go to school to do something I like doing and then try to make a career of it? So, that was my reasoning for going to school back in 2007 because I just wanted to do something that I love doing.

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AE: Where did you go to culinary school?

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FM: I went to culinary school at the Kitchen Academy in Sacramento, California. It's now the La Cordon Bleu School but it was—back then, it was called Kitchen Academy. And I graduated from there in 2008.

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AE: Tell me about that experience, having learned to cook in your family's kitchen and then—and then that experience.

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FM: The—the experience in culinary school was more like technical and learning technical techniques and things to implement into cooking. I don't feel like I learned how to make any soul food [*Laughs*] in culinary school, but I did learn different techniques to use and, you know, proper temperatures of food and how to properly cool food down and things like that—recipe development and so things like that. But I—I loved it. Culinary school was—it was a blast. I loved it. And I—and I learned how to make a lot of different dishes that just aren't, you know, from my culture. I learned how to make international dishes, so I—I really enjoyed culinary school.

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And from there, you know, I did start a small catering business where I just catered things in the community for the local community center. I did cooking classes with the kids, and then a few years ago I came over to—a couple years ago I came over to La Cocina to learn how to formally launch a business and how I can launch a business to live, you know, to—to run a business to live and not have to work. So I hope to soon be able to leave my job. [*Laughs*]

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AE: And tell us about your current job.

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FM: I—I currently work for the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency. I'm a bus driver, coach operator, so I drive a fifty-foot bus through San Francisco.

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AE: Do you enjoy that?

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FM: No. *[Laughs]*

00:15:53

AE: Bring on the food truck. So tell me if—at culinary school, did you learn anything there that then you took back and—and added to your family recipes and changed them at all?

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FM: Did I change any family recipes? I don't think I did. The—the—hmm, no. I didn't. I didn't change any family recipes. Well, I—maybe the banana pudding, you know. I—I might have changed the banana pudding but—and—and maybe my piecrust for, like, peach cobbler if—very little as far as family recipes. Very little.

00:16:38

AE: Well, tell me how you heard about La Cocina and the opportunities here.

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FM: I heard about La Cocina through another program that I was in called the Fillmore Mobile Food [Vendor Program], and it was a program partnered with La Cocina, Urban Solutions, and the City of San Francisco, which is that program—is how I am now able to launch my mobile food trailer. So from that program, La Cocina pulled me into their program to just learn everything I needed to learn in order to launch the mobile food business.

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AE: Can you share a little bit about that process?

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FM: So the process of the program was a series of classes, and you had to make sure that you attended every class. And the classes just consisted of learning to write your business plan, learning to build a brand, you know, trademarking, recipe development. We did—we did like little activities, you know, to learn how to price your product and things like that.

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A lot of guest speakers came to talk to us about, you know, different aspects of running a business, so—and you—what else did we—? I think that's about—and we received a grant from being in the program and attending all the classes, and the grant helped with me by getting permitting and everything I needed for the mobile food trailer.

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AE: And can you describe the—the trailer to me? It got wrapped yesterday, is that right?

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FM: I took it in to be wrapped yesterday, so it should be finished tomorrow. And it's a—it's twelve feet by eight feet, and it's a full kitchen. It has four burners, an oven. It has a fryer, a grill, three-compartment sink, a lowboy. It—it just—it has everything. It has everything. It's a mobile kitchen. *[Laughs]*

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AE: I imagine you're pretty excited that this day is finally here.

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FM: I am. It's a lot of hard work, so it's starting to pay off now. I'm very excited.

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AE: So what are you going to serve on your first day in the truck?

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FM: Where?

00:18:46

AE: What—what dishes are you going to have on the menu?

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FM: Oh, I'll have the gumbo. I'll have the smothered tri-tip sandwich. I have barbecue and-bourbon fried chicken wings and my sides are the red beans and rice salad, macaroni and cheese, watermelon sweet tea, cornbread. Those are—it seems like I'm missing something, but I know those are the items that are on the menu.

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AE: Tell me how you came to do the watermelon sweet tea.

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FM: Um, I love watermelon, and I had it at the Street Food Festival last year, and it was very, very popular, so it's something that I wanted to continue. And the sweet tea is—you know, all—my food trailer will rotate for seasonal fruits. Right now, watermelon season is coming in, so I'll be starting with that. And it's just very refreshing.

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AE: And I noticed, too, on your website—I have a sweet tooth, so I went straight to the cakes and the cobblers—but you do a red velvet cake and a caramel cake. Tell me about those.

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FM: Yeah, the red velvet cake—something that is really not a family recipe, something I learned to make on my own, but the caramel cake was my grandmother's recipe that she taught me how to make years ago. So we—it's—it's tradition to have at family dinners. You always have to have a caramel cake. And it's handmade caramel from scratch, sitting there at the stove, stirring for about twenty, thirty minutes, so—.

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AE: And is that something that people really know and recognize, or is that something that you have to explain?

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FM: No, I—I think people know about it. I—I've seen it in a few different places, but the difference with my caramel cake is it's actually caramel that's on a cake. It's not like a—a buttercream with a caramel flavoring in it. It's actually caramel on a cake. So I think when

people see that they're like, "Oh, this is real caramel," like this is a real caramel cake opposed to, you know, the whipped cream with just the caramel flavoring in it.

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AE: Is that something you'll just do for catering, or is that something you'll have at the truck?

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FM: It's not something that I'll have at the truck on a regular basis. It probably could be rotated in as like a scheduled dessert, but it—I won't have it every—every day on the truck.

00:21:09

AE: Do you like to cook at home?

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FM: Oh, I have no choice. [*Laughs*] I do. I like to—to experiment with recipes at home. Every time I do come up, you know, I want to practice a recipe at home first and—and I have my family try it telling you what they think. So definitely, I like to cook at home.

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AE: Do you have children?

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FM: I have two; I have a fourteen year-old daughter—a fourteen year-old daughter [Nia Davis] and an eight year-old son [Eric Hooks], and my daughter is like my right hand in the kitchen. She's—she's there. She can chop. She can—she can do a lot in the kitchen.

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AE: How young was she when she got started helping you?

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FM: She was about eleven. She was about eleven when she started helping me, and she caught on really quick. She actually gets up in the morning and she—on the weekends, when everyone is asleep, and she's in there making her own breakfast. *[Laughs]*

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AE: So she enjoys cooking?

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FM: She does. She likes to bake more than—than actually cook but she enjoys it.

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AE: Does she—does she know, kind of, your—your background and your family history with cooking and where these recipes are coming? She's familiar with that?

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FM: She is. She's very familiar with it. She does a lot of events with me, so she—she can probably sit here and do this interview with you as well and—and tell you the same things I'm telling you. That's how involved she is with—with my business and with the cooking.

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AE: That's great. So is she going to get to learn all the family recipes that you came up learning?

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FM: Definitely. She has learned some already. She, too, has learned how to make macaroni and cheese. She's learned to make caramel cake. And she's learned how to make the red velvet cupcakes. We do a lot of red velvet cupcakes, so she's learned to make those dishes.

00:22:57

AE: And what does it mean to you to have something that's so tied to who you are and share it with your community and the City of San Francisco?

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FM: It—it means a lot. I—you know, and—and with just starting in the community, you know, people really like the food that—that, you know, my business put out, so I just feel like it's a good thing to be able to now share it with people beyond the community and—and hope that they will accept it just as well—as the people within the community.

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AE: And did you say earlier that your grandmother has passed, but your great-aunt is still living?

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FM: Yeah. Yeah, my grandmother passed and my great-aunt is still here.

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AE: What do you think your grandmother would say about this new business adventure?

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FM: She would love it. She—she would take all the credit [*Laughs*] because she tends to—when she was here she—everything we did, she would always let us know, you know, this is because of me. So I think she would be very proud. She would be very, very proud. She—I just remember as—as a little girl, she was—told my mom and my aunt like, “You guys are my children, and you should be able to make dinner and dessert every Sunday.” And that stuck with me. And I was very young, and that stuck with me. And I said, “You know what? I’m going to always make sure I do that.” Because my grandmother, you know, feels that that’s what we should be doing as her children, so—.

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AE: So how about that—with your grandmother saying that you should be able to cook dinner and dessert for your family, and then you’re cooking dinner and dessert for strangers is—what—what might you have to say about that?

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FM: I think that's just taking it a step higher, just taking it to another level, you know, of what—what we should be doing within our home that we're now taking out to the world. So I definitely think that that's just taking it to another level and she would—she would be proud of me doing that.

00:24:58

AE: And I've done some interviews with people who have soul food restaurants and the like and just food in general you know, it's such a nurturing gift to share with somebody and especially with something like soul food, I think. Do you think about that when you cook, like who is going to be eating what you're making?

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FM: I do. I—and I think about, you know, how they accept it, you know, if it'll be good enough or—but I'm very confident in my food, and I know that I do put out good food, so—. I know people will enjoy it.

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AE: And one of the tag lines on your website is “healthy and festive soul food.” Tell me what that means to you.

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FM: You know, the healthy—not—not everything is healthy, [*Laughs*] but I don't cook with any pork, so that's just—I cook with turkey. Anything that—like the greens and red beans and

rice, the traditional way it is all used with turkey and the gumbo all used with turkey. So that's just been a little health conscious of how I'm putting out the food with some of it—some of the dishes. You know, some of them are just traditional soul food recipes and something that you have to indulge in every once in a while, not all the time. But that's the—the health conscious part of it is just substituting some things that can add more fat or, you know, calories to—to the meal.

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AE: Have you—I mean I guess you have, through the business program, wrapped your head around kind of quantity and, you know, cooking for your family is one thing, but then cooking for a large group is another. Can you talk about kind of making that transition?

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FM: Well it—it really wasn't a hard transition because learning—learning to cook, we had a big family. You know, my—my cousins lived with us, so my mother always cooked in big quantities. Not as big as some of the events that I do, but it wasn't a hard transition for me because when I learned to cook, I did learn to cook in large quantities. It was actually a challenge for me to break them down to just being me and my kids. It's like sometimes I would make too much, and it's like, okay, I need to, you know, **[Laughs]** to downsize this. So that was actually the challenge for me is downsizing the meals.

00:27:22

AE: That's interesting. I was talking with some of the women that I visited with yesterday about just San Francisco being such a—a place that welcomes diversity and—and new things. Can you

talk about—talk about that—the community of San Francisco and it being a place that has room for a woman like you in business?

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FM: Yes. San Francisco is just a loving community here in the city. You know, you really have people that come out and support small businesses. You—the—the—you know, in my community alone, you know, there's a lot of restaurants and different—lots of different small businesses and they're always packed. There's always, you know, people there supporting the small business. So the city, you know, they welcome you with small businesses. You know, whenever you're launching, you know, you're going to get written up about it. You know, so like the supervisor from our community will be coming to my official launch when I am able to launch, so it's—it's huge support out here. It—it really is.

00:28:34

AE: So you always cooked and wanted to cook and enjoyed cooking, but tell me about having a food truck. What did you think about that being your business?

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FM: Um, I—I think just going out and—and looking at the different food trucks, I was able to observe some of them at SOMA StrEat Food Park and—and also at Fort Mason and some businesses here at La Cocina that are at Fort Mason Off the Grid. And it was—it just felt so right. I was just like, I just love this. It was just—because I would prefer to actually make a meal and give it to someone and just let them go, you know, just more of a casual setting and not so formal.

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So I—I really like—I really like that. I—you know, just being able to see it and witness it I just—it's like I had a rush. I was just like, wow, this is what I want to do, you know. This is what I like to do. You know, doing the [San Francisco] Street Food Festival, it was—it was intense, but it was a wonderful experience. I really loved it.

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So I knew that, you know, mobile food and being out there dishing up food for people to just grab and go was something that I really liked to do.

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AE: Yeah. And the dynamic of a food truck is that quick just, you know, quick interaction with your customers. But are you going to take the opportunity to tell people that these are family recipes and kind of the story behind what you're doing?

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FM: Yeah, I will. I have a media dinner coming up next week to share with the media about my family recipes and just the overall of Minnie Bell's and what I'm doing. And—and you know, I hope to, when I am out there—to be able to interact with—with the customers as well. One thing that I did witness when I was observing food trucks is, I went to one truck and the guy actually came off the truck and came and talked to us and asked us how we liked the food and, you know, was everything okay and gave us a business card. So that's definitely something that stood out to me. So it's definitely something that I would like to do when I'm out there is to be able to go out and talk to the people and thank them for coming and—and having that interaction.

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AE: So tell me how it feels to be a female entrepreneur in 2013 and having this opportunity.

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FM: It's a great opportunity. It's—it's hard, hard work. **[Laughs]** And it—it can be overwhelming at times, but La Cocina is a—a strong support system for all of us here and, you know, without them I wouldn't have been able to do any of this. And I also—I'm also a part of Urban Solutions, which is another nonprofit agency that also has been helping me along the way with this. So it's—it's—it's tough, but it's very rewarding. It's very rewarding. I—I know that soon, you know, I will be able to take it on full time and still take care of my household. So I'm—I'm looking forward to it all happening and—.

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AE: So this probably isn't a very fair question because you're just about to launch, but do you have any visions for the future of Minnie Bell's Soul Movement?

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FM: I do. I—I would like to have, you know, a restaurant but not a formal restaurant, something just more which they have a lot in the South where you just come in and see what you want and have your plate made, kind of like a Panda Express but something on a more nicer scale, you know, a higher scale. But just more casual, just a laid back, casual spot to come to and—and get good food.

00:32:20

AE: What is your favorite meal that you like to eat?

00:32:23

FM: Oh, my favorite meal I like to eat would have to be sautéed collard greens, macaroni and cheese, cornbread, and fried chicken—not something that I get to eat often at all. [*Laughs*]

00:32:35

AE: You did not miss a beat. How about dessert?

00:32:36

FM: Dessert would have to be caramel cake. It would definitely have to be caramel cake.

00:32:47

AE: And do you still make the cake that you first learned growing up?

00:32:49

FM: I haven't—I haven't made it in a long time. It—it's been years since I made that one. I've been doing the One, Two, Three, Four Cake. That's the one I've been doing lately, so—now that you said that, I might have to try it this weekend. [*Laughs*]

00:33:05

AE: All right. Well is there anything that I haven't asked you or known to ask that you'd like to add?

00:33:11

FM: I don't think so. Just, you can find Minnie Bell's Soul Movement on Hayes and Octavia every weekend from 11:00 to 3:00.

00:33:19

AE: All right. Well, I'm really excited for you and thank you so much, Fernay, for coming out here this morning to visit. I appreciate it.

00:33:24

FM: Thank you for allowing me to have this opportunity. I appreciate it.

00:33:28

[End Fernay McPherson Interview]