

GENO LEE
Big Apple Inn – Jackson, MS

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Jackson's Iconic Restaurants

[Begin Geno Lee-Big Apple Inn]

00:00:02

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter on Thursday, March 24, 2011. I am in Jackson, Mississippi, on Farish Street at the Big Apple Inn with Mr. Geno Lee, and we're here to talk tamales. Mr. Lee, if I could get you to state your name for the record and your occupation, please?

00:00:19

Geno Lee: I'm Geno Lee, fourth-generation owner of the Big Apple Inn.

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AES: And your birth date?

00:00:25

GL: October 13, 1965.

00:00:28

AES: All right. And, if we could, just start off by laying a little bit off the groundwork of the background of the Big Apple Inn, as far as you're known for primarily smokes and ears and the SFA [Southern Foodways Alliance] did a wonderful—and Joe York did a wonderful documentary film on the subject [*Smokes & Ears*], which people can find on our website. But if you could, for the Tamale Trail listeners and readers, tell us a little bit about the history of the

Big Apple Inn and the smokes and ears, and then we'll move to tamales? Although I guess the story starts with tamales, so just tell us the story.

00:01:00

GL: Well I guess it started in 19—around 1935, I guess. My great-grandfather came over to the Jackson area from New Mexico. Actually, well from New Mexico by way of Chicago, down to Jackson, he jumped a train—was never legal here in the United States—jumped a train and just rode the train from state to state to state. Ended up in—in Mississippi in the mid-'30s and was working for the railway station, I think, doing a lot of like bridge work and, you know, laying tracks and all and got hurt and needed to find another way to make some money and realized he had a great recipe for tamales and started making tamales and rolling them on Farish Street and selling them on the street.

00:01:46

AES: Now you said New Mexico. Did he come via Mexico City to New Mexico to Chicago or—?

00:01:54

GL: That's what I meant; I meant Mexico City, not New Mexico, yeah. *[Laughs]* *[With sarcasm]* Mexico City is in the United States, isn't it? *[Laughs]*

00:01:59

AES: Yeah. *[Laughs]* So if you could say again your—your great-grandfather's name and where he is from, and if you could say that again with Mexico and how he ended up in Jackson?

00:02:10

GL: Okay. Well, my great-grandfather was originally from Mexico City and jumped the train and came across the Rio Grande somehow and just went state to state just jumping trains and ended up in Chicago and then caught the train and came down to—to Jackson. I guess that was around the mid-‘30s, and worked for the Railway station doing little odds and ends jobs, building viaducts, bridges for the railroad company, you know, laying tracks and got hurt and decided to start selling his homemade recipe—or his mother’s homemade recipe for tamales and started selling them on the street corner here in Jackson.

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AES: And your grandfather’s name—great-grandfather’s?

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GL: His name was Juan—that’s J-u-a-n—Mora—M-o-r-a, but people here called him Big John.

00:02:51

AES: Was he a big man?

00:02:52

GL: Big man, about five-foot-one, five-foot-two, probably weighed about 300-some pounds.

00:02:58

AES: All right. Ate a lot of his mother’s tamales, I presume. *[Laughs]*

00:03:01

GL: Too many [*Laughs*].

00:03:02

AES: Okay. And so did your great-grandfather, Juan Mora, did he travel by himself, or was he with some brothers or siblings or relatives?

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GL: At that time, from what I understand, he was just by himself. I think that when he'd find little odds and ends job, he'd mail money back home. But as far as I know, nobody was with him.

00:03:23

AES: Do you know if he knew anyone, a fellow countryman along the way as he traveled, or did he know anyone here in Jackson?

00:03:28

GL: I don't know if he did or not. I know that during that time there were a lot of immigrants or illegal aliens here at the time. And in fact, the first year he had a lot of—of Mexicans down here who were making tamales. There was another guy down here called Mexican Joe. And he sold tamales, and he was the one that, I think, gave Big John the idea to go on and start doing tamales for himself.

00:03:47

AES: Okay. So in the '30s, would you say—I mean could you kind of semi-confidently say how many tamale vendors there might have been in Jackson around that time?

00:03:58

GL: I really don't know. I do know Mexican Joe. That's the only one that I hear a lot of people talking about.

00:04:03

AES: Okay. And you know in our Tamale Trail documentary project, Mississippi Delta Hot Tamale Trail, you know, there are a lot of questions about how the tamale came to Mississippi and there's, you know, the general hypothesis is that Mexican migrant laborers brought the tamale tradition with them when they came to work the big cotton crops in the [nineteen] '20s and '30s, so that timeline is in keeping with your great-grandfather's story.

00:04:23

But I wonder, you know, the Delta tamale tradition is such a rural tradition and how that story translates in a more, you know, urban, city environment that is Jackson. I mean I understand that Jackson was a lot smaller in the '30s, but can you speak to that all, or is that making any sense?

00:04:39

GL: I mean, I really don't know. You know, I know that the tamales were very big in the south, and I know it's because, like you said, the migrant workers. Now as far as how they got to the

city and, you know, how popular they were in the city, you know, I really don't think they were as popular in the city as they were in the Delta because, like you said, they worked in the cotton fields. They didn't have a restaurant to run down to real quick to grab lunch and come back. So I think that tamales were a little more scarce in the city.

00:05:09

AES: Okay. And so Tamale Joe, do you have an idea of how long, about, he had been peddling tamales before your great-grandfather took up on the idea?

00:05:18

GL: I don't. I know that they were both down here at the same time. Mexican Joe pretty much handled, I think, the white area of town. He—he pushed—he had a pushcart and he was able to walk up and down Capital Street and all. As I say, he had a pushcart. When my grandfather—my great-grandfather started doing it, all he had was just a tin drum and built a fire right there on the sidewalk and sold it right there on the corner. *[Laughs]*

00:05:41

AES: And so that would have been here on Farish Street or in this area?

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GL: That was right here on Farish, yes.

00:05:44

AES: Okay. So can you talk a little bit about that and talk about where we are and a little bit of the history of Farish Street?

00:05:50

GL: Well Farish Street was, as far as I know in oral history, Farish Street was the only street that African Americans could go during that time without—without having to worry about the—you know, the—the white people. Everything down here was built by freed slaves; no architectural degrees, no, you know—no college degrees. They just built a building. And they had their own little—their own little city. They had their own restaurants, their own grocery stores, their own clothing stores, and this is where commerce for African Americans was—and in the city.

00:06:26

And that—I guess that started around the late [nineteen] '20s, you know. And I guess that's how my family came—came into being, you know, with—with Farish Street in 1939 when they opened the restaurant. It was probably, as far as ownership, I would say about 80-percent African American owned. Now, we did have a lot of—little owned stores. The other twenty percent, they usually weren't white but they were Lebanese. I think they had a big migration of Lebanese folks here, just people from the Mediterranean area. But that was—that was Farish Street then.

00:07:00

AES: Do you know of any Sicilians in the area at that time?

00:07:02

GL: *[Laughs]* Funny you should ask. The—it was a Sicilian that owned the business that we got—that we got the business from. And, in fact, I think the business before we got it was a guy by the name of Magiano, and he owned the building. And it was a little grocery store when my great-grandfather and grandfather came in. And the place was called Magiano's. So when we first opened up we didn't call it the Big Apple Inn. It was called Magiano's; we just took the name, and then later they changed the name to the Big Apple Inn.

00:07:32

AES: Okay. And the reason I asked is because there's—part of the tamale history that I've documented, primarily in the Arkansas Delta, is that there's a Sicilian connection to tamales and that, you know, with the Spanish and Italian [languages] there was an easy kind of—ease to communication for the Mexican immigrants to convey their culinary traditions to the Sicilian population in the Delta. And then—and I'm speaking specifically of Pasquale's Hot Tamales in West Helena [Arkansas] that their relative, in the late nineteenth century, actually got a recipe for tamales from a Mexican. And it was kind of like a supply and demand thing, like he could make them, but he needed the recipe. And so—and that was, you know, a century ago. So that's interesting that the—the grocery store was owned by Sicilians.

00:08:16

So back to your great-grandfather, Juan Mora, making and selling hot tamales, can you tell me more about the kettle that he would cook them in and how he cooked them and what the recipe was like originally?

00:08:30

GL: Well it was kind of a homemade kettle. It was a tin drum. And what he did is he just cut it in half and he—I guess he made the tamales at home and would stack them inside of this tin drum and build a fire out there on the street and would stay out there until he sold out. And the number of tamales that he sold in a day was enough to keep his family going.

00:08:52

AES: And so I'm curious about his method because, you know, in the Delta, tamales are—are simmered in water. They're not steamed like traditional Latin American-style tamales are. So I'm wondering if your great-grandfather—and tell me if I'm misremembering—but do you wrap yours in tin foil and then simmer them in water, or tell me how you cook them now.

00:09:11

GL: Okay. Well, my grandfather, now we—we—now we wrap them in foil and—and put them in water. My grandfather—my great-grandfather, though, he used to just stack them—stand them straight up and then put them in water and cover them in water and bring them to a boil and then let the water drain off of them about halfway down. But yeah, he always put—immersed his in water. Some people steam them, but he's always immersed his in water. And the only reason why we put them in tin foil now is it's easier to keep up with him, and we sell a whole lot more than he did back then. So we just wrap them by—in half-dozen packs in foil and then boil the whole—boil the whole pack of tamales in the water.

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AES: Okay. So do you have any idea why he decided to put them in water?

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GL: I don't know. You know, in fact, I didn't—I thought that was the only way they came until I started reading about tamales and then trying other people's tamales. I really think that he liked the juiciness of them, you know. He liked the juiciness of the tamales when they were submersed in water. You know, sometimes when they're steamed they can have a tendency to get a little dry sometimes, but when they sit in the water the whole time, you know, and you just take them out of the water and let them drain a little bit, they're going to stay juicy.

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AES: And so is that still true when—when—even when you wrap them in foil that the water can seep in there a little bit and keep the tamales moist?

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GL: Even more so. Even more so. Now we—what we do is we boil them in water and then after they boil for like fifteen, twenty minutes we take them out of the water and let them steam, but the water still stays inside of the foil. So they stay juicy as ever—even when the customer gets home with the tamales, they—if they decide not to eat them in the restaurant and take them home, they stay just as juicy.

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AES: Do you have any idea how much your great-grandfather was selling tamales for in the '30s?

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GL: I don't. I don't. Now later came some other items on the menu in the restaurant, and I know that sandwiches then sold for a nickel, so I would probably assume that probably half a dozen probably sold for ten cents. *[Laughs]*

00:11:06

AES: And so where on Farish Street was the original grocery store?

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GL: Where we are right now. We're kind of on North Farish Street. The—the grocery store originally was directly across the street. And that's when we opened in 1939. We moved to this location in '52.

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AES: And what was the reason for that?

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GL: Just opportunity for a new location. It was a brand new building that was built, and it was apartments upstairs and retail downstairs. I think something must have happened. Maybe the owner of the building was doing something because we wouldn't have moved just because. So maybe somebody else bought it and had other plans for the building.

00:11:49

AES: And so your grandfather—great-grandfather, excuse me. About how long would you say that he was peddling tamales before he got the grocery store?

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GL: My timeline, I really don't know exact dates, but I'm figuring about four years because I heard that he started doing it like in the mid-'30s, and since he opened this place in 1939, I'm thinking probably about four years.

00:12:10

AES: Okay. Okay, and so then tell me, too, going back to the fact that Tamale Joe sold primarily to the white community of Jackson, and your great-grandfather established himself on here—here on Farish Street in the African American community, do you think that was—he saw a need and wanted to fill it for this community with tamales or—because he knew Tamale Joe was selling to the white community or was there a reason that he wanted to establish a business here in this part of town?

00:12:34

GL: I don't think it was an intentional thing. I think that he and—and Mexican Joe probably just worked out a little deal: "Hey listen, you take that side of town, and I'll take this side of town." And another thing, too, he didn't have a cart. He had—he had no way of being mobile, so at first—when he first started, I think it was probably just an experiment: "I'm just going to see if I can do this instead of getting out there and working for the railroad." It was more of an experimental thing, and I guess they just—they just respected each other's territories.

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AES: And working at the railroad, what kind of injury did he sustain when he worked, do you know?

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GL: Right around the corner from here there's a viaduct. I don't know if you're familiar with the King Edward Hotel, but where the King Edward Hotel is there's a bridge right there by the train station and it's—they call it the viaduct. Well, he fell off that bridge while he was—while they were constructing it, and his injuries were pretty bad and he just knew that he couldn't go back to lifting anything and working like that anymore, so he had to figure out something else to do.

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AES: Okay. And so tell me about him starting a family here in Jackson.

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GL: Well he met a woman. I don't know what year that was. I don't even know if he was—if that was before—when he was doing the tamales. I guess it was. But he met a woman here. I—I never met her. Her name—they called her Mae-Mama. That's all I know. She was a black woman from—from the area, and he met her. I don't think they ever got married, but they started having children.

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Well they had a child—that's all I know was one child. You know, it's a shame that I haven't followed my family tree, but all I know is my grandfather and then great-grandfather, and that's where my family tree stops. *[Laughs]*

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AES: And your grandfather's name is Harold, is that right?

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GL: Harold Lee, yes.

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AES: So tell me about the Lee surname, if you will, and how that's tied in.

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GL: I'm not 100-percent sure but I'm thinking—my grandfather wouldn't talk about it. He's dead now. Now he died three years ago, but he never talked about his past. We had to—just to get the little family history we do have, we had to dig it out of him. But I'm thinking that Mae-Mama's last name was Lee, and he and Big John were never married, so I guess that when they had Harold, they just kept her name—you know, gave him her name.

00:14:44

AES: Okay. Okay. All right. And so—so was he generally—and, you know, the fact that, I guess, he married into the African American community, he was generally accepted here on Farish Street and in Jackson, your great-grandfather?

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GL: Oh yeah, they loved him. They loved him. And in fact, it's so funny listening to some of the old people who still come through here, people who are in their 80s, how Big John would curse them out in Spanish if they were people coming in with no money—curse them out in Spanish but then always give them something to eat free. You know, they—he was—he was a legend here. They loved—they loved Big John.

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AES: Can you tell me a little bit more about his personality and some stories you've heard from your family?

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GL: Well, of course, there's all kinds of stories I hear about. You know, other—other customers that come in, they said that he would stand behind the counter with his arms crossed and just wait for you to place an order and then, you know, he'd cook it on demand, which is how we got started now. We only cook our orders on demand. You come in and give you orders to the girls, and they cook it right there when you give it to them.

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I can remember just as a child sitting in his lap and him feeding me watermelon and teaching me how to curse in Spanish. **[Laughs]** I can remember that. That was probably in the—in the late '60s and early '70s, you know, when—he was just a jovial man, very religious, very, very religious, staunch Catholic—went to church every day, every day.

00:16:07

Just—just a great figure in the community. Never wanted any notoriety or anything. All he was trying to do was make a living for his family. He gave away more than he actually made,

and as long as he was able to care for his family, anything left over went to everybody else. In fact, all the kids in the neighborhood knew that they could, you know, get school supplies or get meals or—from—from Big John.

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There was one lady who used to live next door, and her family was very, very poor. And he—he asked the mother, he said, “Listen, can she come live with us?” They educated her and sent her to private school, sent her to college, and—and from what I understand, he’s done that with a few folks, you know.

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AES: A real pillar of the community. That’s—.

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GL: He really was.

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AES: Wow. And so what year did he pass, if you had some time that you were able to spend with him.

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GL: He died in 1973. In fact, I was living overseas at the time, and that was my first experience with death. And when he—when he passed I can remember, boy, that was—that was my first time I ever remember my father crying. And in fact that’s—wow, my father is seventy now, and

that's the only time I've seen him cry, when—when Big John died. He was always there, you know, for—for him when he was younger and older.

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AES: What's your father's name?

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GL: My father's name is Gene. I'm Gene Junior, and they call me Geno.

00:17:29

AES: Okay. And so do you remember the funeral? Was there a big outpouring of—of condolences from the community since he was such a prominent figure here?

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GL: There was, from what I understand. My father only told me about it because, as I said, we were living overseas at the time, and we couldn't afford everybody to come back home, so dad just flew home for the funeral, and he said it was very big. I think they had a procession right here on Farish Street. And the same thing when my grandfather passed three years ago. It was a real big thing in the city.

00:17:58

AES: So tell me about, I guess first I'd like to know when smokes and ears came on the scene, so that we can talk about them a little bit and how that became a part of your staple menu at the Big Apple Inn.

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GL: Well, when they opened the place in 1939, they knew that they couldn't just have a restaurant strictly selling tamales. Now, as I said, they brought—they opened a place that was originally Magiano's, and he sold fruits and—and different items, little snacks and things like that. So they came in with the tamales, and they came up with some different sandwiches. Now smokes came first and what—what a smoke is—is just ground Red Rose [brand] smoked sausage. We take the skin off of Red Rose smoked sausage and grind it up and put it on a griddle and cook it like hamburger meat and put it on a Krystal-sized bun with mustard sauce, slaw, and hot sauce. And they sold that and bologna sandwiches and tamales for a long time. I think that was there three staples on the menu.

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And later, I'd say probably about a year or two later in the early '40s, that's when the ears came on the scene.

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AES: Tell me how that happened.

00:19:04

GL: Well there was a little local processing plant here called Jackson Processing Plant, and that's where my grandfather—great-grandfather and grandfather would go pick up the smoked sausages every morning. I guess they didn't have enough volume to have delivery trucks deliver. In fact, I don't know if they would have delivered to the black community anyway.

00:19:20

So they'd go to Jackson Packing Company and pick up the smoked sausage every morning. Well, one day the owner of Jackson Packing came to my great-grandfather and said, "John, man, I got all these—this stuff here that I throw away. I throw away the pig ears, the pig tails, things like that—that I haven't used. Would you like to have them?" And he said, "Yeah, I'm not about to throw away anything." So they started giving—giving the pig ears to my great-grandfather for free. And he tried to figure out different ways to cook them and finally figured out a way to cook them and make a profit off of them.

00:19:48

And I guess—I don't know how long it lasted. When he found out that my great-grandfather was making a profit off of it, he started charging him for the ears.

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AES: And, as I said before, you can learn a lot more about the smokes and ears through our documentary film of the same name. But so, you know, that kind of begs the question for me, you know, bologna sandwiches and the smokes and then pig ear sandwiches, those are all things that are—I mean outside of cooking the—the ears for two days, which I understand is how long it took [*Laughs*] before you got the pressure cooker—but those things are, you know, pretty immediate and pretty easy to make. Tamales are really labor-intensive. So I wonder when those other things can on the scene and were on the menu, if like the tamale production kind of went down a little bit or have—and how that has kind of seen peaks and valleys over the years, and then up to what kind of ratio your tamale business is today.

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GL: Our tamales, we probably keep tamales on our menu down here on Farish Street just for nostalgia sake because it's really not a—a large money-maker for us. Smokes and ears is what—what people usually come down here for. We might only sell, oh goodness, twenty dozen tamales a week. And that's it.

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Now I do go to another restaurant in town [Soulshine Pizza Factory] and—and roll tamales for them. They'll sell almost 100 dozen a week. You know, a big difference. I think a lot of it has to do with—what Mexican Joe knew. The white community buys a whole lot more tamales [*Laughs*] than the black community.

00:21:26

AES: Interesting, okay. Well and so how much do you sell a dozen and a half-dozen tamales today for?

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GL: We just had a price increase last month. Right now we sell a half dozen for \$5.50 and a dozen for \$9.00.

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AES: What are the prices of the smokes and ears?

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GL: Smokes and ears, all sandwiches are \$1.10. So you can have—you have a great meal in here with a drink and all for under \$5.00.

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AES: Yeah. So the smokes and ears, you know, not only being easier to make but they're far less expensive to purchase, so I mean do you imagine that's precisely why they've been more popular over the years?

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GL: Probably, yeah. You know three sandwiches and a drink will run you four bucks, you know, and you're full. So yeah, I—I would think so. And you know, I'll tell you, a lot of people when they come down, we still have a lot of questions. People ask a lot, "What is a tamale?" You know, a lot of people down there really don't know what tamales are. In the Delta everybody knows what a tamale—what a tamale is but in—in the city the—the black community is being educated about tamales still.

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AES: That's interesting, too. So tell me, so Soulshine Pizza is the business—that's where you go and roll the tamales for them at their location?

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GL: Yes, I go to their location and roll them. And I mean, they sell a ton of tamales. They—they have it on their menu as an appetizer, and I think you can get it from them for \$9.00 a half dozen and \$14.00 or \$15.00 for a dozen.

00:22:54

AES: So do you—do you have any idea why they wanted to put them on their menu?

00:22:57

GL: I just went by, and when he first opened up his establishment seven, eight years ago, I just went to welcome them to the community. And I met him and he was a really neat guy, Chris Sartin is his name, great guy and just—we hit it off right away. And I said, “Man, what you need are some tamales in here.” And he said, “Okay.” And he—we’ve been doing the tamales ever since. [*Laughs*]

00:23:19

AES: Huh. Okay. And so did you—did you—tell me why you suggested that he needed to serve tamales. Because it was good business for you or it was something that you’re perpetuating like your family heritage or a combination?

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GL: Well, we had never done anything like that before. Just after talking with him and he was just getting to the restaurant business, and I had been in the restaurant business for years. We just struck up a conversation talking about different things we each had on our menu, and he said, man, he loves tamales. He said, “I might need to put them on my menu.” I said, “Well, you want us to do them for you?” He said, “Why not?” And it’s gone ever since. And he’s opening up—he’s opened up two locations already and has one under construction and another one in the planning for next year in Nashville.

00:24:06

AES: And so is he a native of Jackson?

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GL: He is a native of Brandon, yeah.

00:24:11

AES: So had he ever been to the Big Apple Inn before?

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GL: No, not before. Not before we started doing tamales for him, no.

00:24:17

AES: Was he familiar with Delta-style tamales when he met with you?

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GL: I'm sure he is. Everybody is. [*Laughs*]. Everybody is familiar with some kind of—some type of tamale in the Delta, you know.

00:24:27

AES: Okay, so tell me about your tamales and the process of making into them without giving away too many family secrets.

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GL: Well our tamales, there's—there's a couple different types of tamales you can get around here. The tamales that you usually find in Mississippi is a cornmeal-based *masa* [*masa harina or*

corn flour]. Now the *masa* is—I don't know what it means, but what *masa* is—it's a corn flour mixture that's—that goes around the meat in a tamale. And you'll find that most of the Delta tamales have a cornmeal mixture. Now my great-grandfather's recipe originally had a—a cornmeal mixture, I guess because he couldn't find prepackaged *masa* already. And it seemed like in the—in the Delta that—that was—that's the big thing to have but in the city people usually like a more flour(y) texture to their—to their *masa*.

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So we did change the *masa* fifteen years ago to the—to the corn flour *masa*, and it has increased tamale sales, you know, tremendously. So we use a—a—when we first started with the cornmeal mixture it didn't have I don't know—something was missing even to me, even though people would get it, but ever since we switched over to the cornmeal—I mean the—to the flour based *masa* we—we took off in sales.

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Now we use turkey in our tamales. We find that it holds the flavor a whole lot better. So we use ground turkey in our tamales. We just season the meat and—and go from there. Now during deer season, we also do deer tamales—venison tamales for a lot of the hunters around town and for a few processing plants here. And during deer season we'll roll anywhere from 2,500 dozen to 5,000 dozen tamales.

00:26:15

AES: Holy cow. That's a lot of tamales. [*Laughs*]

00:26:16

GL: That's a lot of tamales. In fact, when we first started with deer season—doing deer season tamales a few years back, we—it was overwhelming, so we bought a little tamale machine. And it was a little hand-cranked machine, and we were rolling up tamales but they didn't come out the same. We have a tendency of putting—we're a little heavy-handed on the meat, and the little machine didn't—didn't put as much meat as our customers liked. And in fact, we rolled by hand, my wife and I rolled by hand faster than the machine did, so we continue to do it by hand.

00:26:45

AES: Wow. And so the—the turkey, was that something that was a decision by you or your father or your grandfather or had—have they always been turkey tamales?

00:26:57

GL: No, they—they originally were beef. That's something that I changed, too. The turkey—the ground beef, when people get home sometimes, I don't know if the fat inside of ground beef would—would gel and get hard sometimes and would make the *masa* kind of hard and kind of—wouldn't hold the juices in for some reason as—as good. So we switched over to turkey and just experimented with different things and found that turkey worked a whole lot better. And most people think they're still beef because you really can't tell after you spice up ground turkey. They still think it's beef.

00:27:24

AES: So what was that light bulb moment when you took over the family place and—and said, “I'm going to change this up. This is a family recipe but I'm going to improve on it.”

00:27:33

GL: Tamale sales were very slim. I said, “There’s got to be a reason.” So we—my wife and I went everywhere just trying different tamales, different tamales, and we liked some here; we didn’t like some there. We liked some here. And so we just kind of got a mixture of all of them, still keeping with the same general recipe, the same spices are used in it because I really think that when it—when it comes down to the heart of the matter, it’s the spices that are used in the tamales and how you spice the meat and how you spice the *masa* that makes—that makes a good tamale. So we still use—all that still the same, the exact ingredients go into the tamale except the—the major change is just our *masa* now.

00:28:13

AES: And so you said that you spice both the meal and the *masa*. Do you spice the water that they’re cooked in at all?

00:28:18

GL: No, we—when we roll our tamales, most tamale recipes call for a lot of lard, and we don’t use lard in ours. We just cook our—our—our meat in a whole lot of vegetable oil. And then after the meat is done, we drain the oil and pour that into the *masa*. So that—that spicy oil spices up the *masa* too. And it’s so oily at the time, so when we do boil it all the oil will cook out and it’ll spice—it’ll season the water.

00:28:48

AES: Okay. And so how often do you cook tamales? Is it once a week or more regularly?

00:28:53

GL: Every day.

00:28:55

AES: You cook tamales every day?

00:28:55

GL: We cook tamales every day. If not for the restaurant, I'm at Soulshine doing tamales. Yeah, every day.

00:29:02

AES: Okay. So who was doing them before you came on the scene?

00:29:04

GL: My grandmother and grandfather. My grandfather, Harold, learned how to do it from his father, Big John. And they were doing the tamales all those years until eight years ago. And my uncle took over the business at the time. This is about almost thirty years ago, and he said the tamales were too labor-intensive to even—even worry with. And my father felt the same way. So my grandmother and grandfather, when they reached eighty years old, they said they were ready to quit. **[Laughs]** Well, they said if—if they were going to quit, tamales were going stop being sold. So my wife and I said, well, we wanted to learn how to make them, so we came—we started working with them. And they don't write anything down; they said it's a family secret. If we write it down and if we tell you, we got to kill you. **[Laughs]** So they told it to us, and they

worked with us until we got it right, until we got it in our head. It took about a week and a half, and then they completely retired from the business at eighty years old.

00:29:58

AES: What year was that about?

00:30:00

GL: Oh man I'd say—what year is now, 2011. I'd say about 2001, 2000, right around that time.

00:30:07

AES: And so what do you remember about them teaching you how to make tamales?

00:30:12

GL: Are we biting off more than we can chew? [*Laughs*] That's the first thing, like—because I mean it was—it was so labor-intensive just to—just preparing it to get ready to—getting ready to—before you even roll it takes about two hours preparation time. And then rolling takes another few hours, so I mean it was just—just to get—at the time, we were only doing them for the restaurant, and we were rolling maybe twenty dozen for the week, and that would take, you know, five hours just to do that. Like wow, that's a lot of work just for twenty dozen tamales to make whatever we were making, and it wasn't worth it.

00:30:43

And which is why my father and uncle said at the time, if they had to learn how to make it, forget it. We just won't sell it. [*Laughs*]

00:30:52

AES: So do you feel a great sense of pride that you and your wife are carrying on that tradition?

00:30:56

GL: Oh, I do even more than the smokes and ears. Even though tamales are not our—our signature item on the menu, that's still the thing that we take the most pride in. We really take tamales—take a lot of pride in our tamales. In fact, if I were to open up another place right now I would love to open up just a tamale shack and just sell tamales, different types of tamales.

00:31:15

AES: Different types, like what kind? What do you have swirling around in that head of yours?

00:31:17

GL: Amy, we—*[Laughs]* we have rolled so many types of tamales. Now, if somebody comes down here and asks us—asks us if we'll do a tamale for them, for a different type tamale we'll do it. We've done pork, pulled pork. We've done alligator. Deer. We have one person that we do vegetarian tamales for. Now we do a—for some of our customers, we do a spicy black bean, a sweet corn tamale, which is a vegetarian tamale. But this guy here wants some type of meat, so we just use that vegetarian like soy meat. Oh, wow, we've done fruit tamales. We've done every—we'll try everything in a tamale and—and they work out great. They work out really good.

00:31:52

One of my favorite things is just get a regular tamale and eat it for breakfast. I get three tamales and get an egg over easy and crack the yolk on top of it and eat it for breakfast. I mean

there's just—there's all kinds of ways—you can actually run a little tamale place just—just doing tamales. In fact, they do it in the Delta all the time, just strictly selling tamales.

00:32:10

AES: Wow. Well I—part of me hopes that you follow through with the tamale shack idea with all those different variations. That would be something really unique for Mississippi.

00:32:17

GL: I think so. And I wouldn't—I wouldn't want a full restaurant. I would want something like the Seattle Drip [Coffee Company], you know where you drive through and grab your coffee and keep going. I just want just a tamale shack. People drive up to the window, pick up their tamales, and keep going. You know, “What kind of tamale you want—chicken, shredded chicken, pork, beef, alligator—whatever?” [*Laughs*]

00:32:36

AES: So tell me about the—your other location here that's on State Street.

00:32:40

GL: We opened another location about six years ago, and it was kind of by default that we opened it. Farish Street, at the time, is—was going through a major change. They're trying to turn Farish Street into an entertainment district, so it'll be similar to like what Beale Street is [in Memphis]. And in the meantime, Farish Street right now and has been for the last forty years, a one-way street. Well, they were working on the south end of the street, and while they were

working down there they blocked the street off. So, you're blocking off a one-way street; you can imagine what our business looked like at the time.

00:33:08

So either we faced closing the doors or tried to open up temporarily somewhere else. So I opened up a place in North Jackson thinking it was going to be temporary; it ended up being a better spot than—than down here on Farish Street.

00:33:20

AES: So what's your clientele like up there?

00:33:22

GL: It's more of the suburbanites. Back when we first opened up here in the '30s, everything was downtown. Now nothing is downtown. You know, people—I mean we don't even have shopping stores downtown. Downtown is strictly offices. That's it. There are no grocery stores, no retail stores; it's just strictly offices.

00:33:41

So when five o'clock hits, downtown shuts down. You know, and we are a little bit off the beaten path of the original downtown commerce, and so we really don't get that big of a crowd on Farish Street anymore. So we're hoping for the entertainment district to come back. But the move out north was a—a brilliant move. It—we didn't know it at the time. Traffic is better. To—to come to my Farish Street store you have to be coming here. You're not just passing by. You have to be coming to this place, especially now that Farish Street is pretty vacant. There's only two restaurants now open on Farish Street, and the rest of the buildings are—are vacant and—and falling apart. So yeah, State Street was a very good move.

00:34:19

AES: And so do you have kind of like the same demographic and the same sales structure there? Like are the pig ear sandwiches a big seller in the north [Jackson] location?

00:34:28

GL: Yeah, the pig ears are a big—big seller just as much as down here. The thing is, we have the same clientele. It's the same customers it's just they moved to the suburbs now. So now they're just saying, "Oh, great. I'm glad you're over here because I don't have to drive all the way downtown." So instead of driving downtown once every other week, they'll come to that place every week, you know, because it's closer to them.

00:34:47

AES: And what does the physical space of that store look like? I haven't been by there.

00:34:50

GL: It's smaller than this space. We only have 1,000 square feet in that space, and half of it is kitchen space, so we have found that—the Big Apple Inn has mainly been ninety-five percent takeout. You know, right now I think we seat twenty-four people in here, but you'll never come in here and see twenty-four people sitting in here.

00:35:10

Farish Street will sit—will seat twelve people, but you're lucky if you ever see two or three people in there just eating it. The people just grab it to go.

00:35:16

AES: And tell me now about just kind of like the context of this location and being that it's so steeped in Jackson history and civil rights history and blues history and now culinary history that, you know, we're having this conversation about your great-grandfather and what that—those stories—how they affect an eating experience in this place. Like people still—even though they can go to the north State Street location, do they—do some people choose to come here because of I guess the authenticity of it or it's the original location or it has a nostalgic connection or any of those kinds of things? Do you get any of those ideas?

00:35:56

GL: Every day. Every day. We have some people who refuse—we have some people who live across the street from the north—north State Street location but will refuse to go over there because this is the place that they were raised with. And in fact, we have some people who say that it just doesn't taste the same, even though it's the same ingredients, the same—they say the grill—the griddle is not seasoned. I don't tell them that the griddle down here on Farish is newer than the one out on State Street, but you know I just say, you know, "You're probably right. As long as you come, that's all that matters to me."

00:36:22

You know we have people that come down there every day saying that, uh-hmm.

00:36:24

AES: And so can we talk a little bit about, again, this—this—a lot of this in smokes and ears but the civil rights and blues history relevant to the Farish Street location and this business?

00:36:35

GL: It's so neat that you bring it up right now because right now is the fiftieth anniversary for the Freedom Riders, and it's a big hoopty-do-doo going on right now in the city. There's—in fact, this weekend they're opening up an exhibit about the Freedom Riders on—at the Mississippi Museum of Art and it's just like—my mother was a Freedom Rider, and she was one of the people they arrested. And my mother is Oriental, and she was going to Tougaloo [College in Jackson] at the time, and they came down to her and said, “Listen, you want to help us, you know, to ride these buses to—you know, bring awareness to the white community down here?” Not knowing any better she said, “Yeah, why not?” Jumped on the bus and they arrested her and sent her to Parchman [State Penitentiary]. And they kept them up there in Parchman like forty days on death row.

00:37:16

But Farish Street was a major spot because, like I said before, it was a—it was the—it was the gathering spot for the black community then. This was the only place that black folks could go. And upstairs from our restaurant was Medgar Evers' office. So when he would have meetings or he would have discussions his place was—his office was a little too small to have his meetings or to have Freedom Rider meetings or to—or just to, I guess, have guests, so they would always meet in our restaurant downstairs. It was just—this place was just a—just a center of activity during—during those times in the '60s. Farish Street just in general was—was—as a matter of fact, I think Martin Luther King [Jr.] marched on Farish Street. It was just a—a bustling area at the time.

00:38:06

AES: And what's your mother's name?

00:38:08

GL: Her name—well, at the time it was Mary Harrison—Mary Harrison. In fact I can't wait till the—the grand opening is this coming Monday of the—of the—of the exhibit and I can't wait to go see her mug shot because that's what they have—all the—there's going to be 300 mug shots of all the Freedom Riders, and my mother is one of them. *[Laughs]*

00:38:25

AES: So tell me a little bit about her history. I mean you—your family is the, you know—

00:38:28

GL: The melting pot.

00:38:29

AES: —the melting pot, exactly, with the Mexican and—and African America and Asian heritage. So tell me a little bit about her background and how she got connected with the family.

00:38:38

GL: Well, my mother is Filipino. She was born in Manila, Philippines. Her mother and father were very poor. And, in fact, I don't even know if she knew—even knew her father. But her mother was very poor. And when she was born, she was put up for adoption. And a black family was living in the Philippines at the time, a Major in the Army. He was a Chaplain—adopted my mother and when they moved back to the States they brought—of course brought her with them and they resided in San Antonio, Texas. And they came to Mississippi. They had family in

Mississippi to visit when she was in her—in her college-aged years and she visited her cousin at Tougaloo College, fell in love with the campus, and started in Tougaloo. And that's where she met my father, and it was in 1961 that she was with the Freedom Riders and when she was arrested.

00:39:26

AES: Do you know how many Asian students were at Tougaloo in those years?

00:39:30

GL: *[Laughs]* Probably one being my mother. Yeah, probably one. And that—yeah, they met right there at—at Tougaloo and got married in '62. They graduated in '61 and got married in 1962, and then I came along in 1965 and, you know, the—the South was still going through all those turbulent times. And my father said, at the time, that he was not going to raise a child in Mississippi. So when I was born, he applied for a job in Missouri and we moved to Missouri, you know, right after I was born. And they went up to Missouri and found a cute little house and met with the realtor and the realtor told them, “Oh yeah, this is a great neighborhood, but you can't move into it. It's not integrated yet.” He said, “Oh my goodness. I came all the way up here from Mississippi, escaping this.” And so we stayed in Missouri for a little while. But in the meantime, he was still looking for somewhere else go to and applied for a job overseas. And *[Laughs]* we moved overseas and stayed there till I was a junior in high school.

00:40:27

AES: Where overseas?

00:40:29

GL: In Germany. We were civilians over there. Dad was the principal of an American school and mom was a teacher.

00:40:34

AES: And are you an only child?

00:40:36

GL: No, I have a brother who was born in Missouri and a sister who was born in Germany.

00:40:41

AES: So then I—I get the idea then that maybe your father, since he left the family business here was—was he not as—as involved in the business before he left and—and how did—what did he do to find different work when he moved away?

00:40:55

GL: My father was never interested in the business. That was always my grandfather's thing—his dad. And I—he was always an educator, all of his life, and when we came back to the States in, you know, it was like 1981, he was a principal of a—of a school here and Mom was a teacher. And then my grandfather had retired, and had passed the business onto my uncle. Well, at the time, my uncle got sick. He had a stroke, and somebody had to take over the family business. So Dad quit his job and jumped in, you know, head first, and I quit my job. I was working at a company called Equitable Insurance and Investments at the time. I quit my job, and Dad took the

day shift, and I took the night shift. We had no idea what we were doing. My grandfather came out of retirement to kind of show us the ropes, and we took it from there.

00:41:47

AES: Wow. So that's—that was a big move for your family, your father in particular. So can you describe maybe what that responsibility was like for him and how he really made the decision to jump into this business?

00:42:03

GL: Well, when he asked my dad about it, he said it was a no-brainer. It was just something that he knew he had to do. He had to continue the—the family legacy. He—he knew a little bit about the—about the business because when he was a kid he was down here all the time. Now as far as cooking and how to prepare the stuff, that had to be taught to him. He had to learn that from my—from my grandfather, which, you know, is just one of those things. You know, when you have to do it, you just do it.

00:42:27

We were able to—the business at the time, Farish Street was on a decline then. We were able to pick it up back again and—and then get it back going strong again. Me, however, oh man, it was a culture shock. I was raised in Germany, a completely white surrounding. My friends were white; everybody was white. And we came here, and I went to private school—white surroundings. Then when I came to Farish Street, like, whoa, what's going on? **[Laughs]** I mean we're in the hood. You know, I had to learn the jargon. I had to learn the—the—I had to get used to being picked on, you know. You know, I—I consider myself black, but when you look at me,

you can tell that I'm not 100-percent black. So I had to go through being told that I'm not black, even though I knew I was. It was a complete culture shock for me. That was a hard move.

00:43:17

AES: And what did it take for you to, you know, persist with this life change and this, you know, commitment to the family business? I mean you're the fourth generation. And that—you know, so many people I talk to, they—you know, of your father's generation, let's say, say, "Oh, you know, my kids aren't interested. When we die, this restaurant will go away." And I—I hear that 80-percent of the time. So, you know, for someone like you, specifically, you know, particularly with the fact that you had to jump in late in the game and go through that culture shock and being a new place and—and you know, just start from scratch, basically, for you to have that commitment to this is astonishing to me. It's really amazing and impressive and you deserve so much credit for that.

00:43:56

So I know the people of Jackson thank you but what—what has it been like to now, you know, you're established and—and, you know, a smooth-running machine kind of thing, and you've, you know, had some innovation and changed recipes and opened different locations and thinking about what your great-grandfather might think now that you are the fourth generation and this is still going on, can you reflect on that?

00:44:17

GL: When I first got down here, Amy, I think I took—it was—it was a job. It—I didn't plan on being down here that long. I really didn't. And it scared the life out of me when Dad came to me one day and said, "Geno, I think I'm about ready to retire." This was ten years ago. I was like,

“Well, what do you mean you’re ready to retire? **[Laughs]** Who is going to get it?” You know, “Who is going to take over?”

00:44:40

I think that somewhere during that time and it was probably about eleven, twelve years ago that I realized what my grandfather had always said: “You’ll never get rich doing this business but you’ll always,” you know, “you’ll always see people satisfied.”

00:44:52

When I was in high school, when I graduated I went to seminary. I was studying to be a priest. I had a strong desire to—to be in the ministry. And I think that’s—my mind did have a change about Farish Street. And down here on Farish Street became my ministry, after being down here a while, seeing the kids come down here hungry, seeing the kids live in these shotgun houses, and that became my ministry. So when I was down here, I worked, but I started a great little tutorial program for the kids, all kinds of neat little things for the kids, mainly around the children, working with the homeless down here, and it became my ministry. And that’s when I—that’s when I started loving the area down here about—about twelve years ago.

00:45:36

AES: So you’ve stepped into your great-grandfather’s shoes, then, in that respect?

00:45:39

GL: Exactly. And I didn't realize why he loved it. And a person has got to be either crazy or—to go into the restaurant business. It’s just—it’s a hard business. It’s a hard business, one of those kinds of businesses, either it’s doing great or it’s doing terrible. There is no middle ground. You know, it’s just—but now that I view it as my—my ministry and my opportunity to talk to people

or to—or just to meet new people, it brings a whole new perspective into my being down here every day.

00:46:07

AES: That's wonderful. So tell me about some of the employees here and people who have been affiliated with the Big Apple Inn over the years.

00:46:15

GL: Well, luckily we have a very, very low turnover rate down here. The last person I hired, I hired her six years ago. A person usually doesn't quit from down here. If—they'll stay here for forever. We've had employees stay thirty-five years, and we had two that were here for twenty-eight years just recently. We just try to—we have a great little profit-sharing plan going on down here. The—the—when the business does great, the employees do great. You know, they get a base salary, but if they reach a certain number every day, they will get a—a bonus for every day. So they're—they're—they push themselves.

00:46:55

We—we've been very lucky and plus, all of our employees, every one of them have been raised on this too. They've been eating down here since they were kids. In fact, a couple of my employees [*Laughs*]**[Laughs]**—I have one here. I can remember her sitting on my lap when she was two years old and now she's—she's the baby of the bunch that we have here. And now she's in here and she'd—she'd always say—you know, I remember when she was turning five. She, “Mr. Geno, yesterday I was this many,” and she holds up four fingers. She says, “But now I'm a whole hand.” [*Laughs*]**[Laughs]** And then she's in—and she's always—since then, I mean since that age, “I'm going to work down here one day. I'm going to work down here one day.” And when she

got old enough, she came and said, “Mr. Geno, I’m ready for my job.” And I hired her on the spot and she’s been here—and that’s my newest employee and my latest, and she’s been here six years now.

00:47:41

AES: So what do you think the draw is for somebody to really want to work here?

00:47:45

GL: I really don’t know because I can—I can tell you, Amy, it is not the pay. You know, *[Laughs]* I don’t over-pay and they don’t over-work, you know what I mean? It’s just that it’s a fun place; it’s a historic place. We just—we just all do what we do because it’s a—it’s just a great place. It’s laid back. I’m not cracking a whip over anybody. You know, they—they know what they’re supposed to do, and they do it. I don’t have to stand over them all day long. It’s just—it’s just a neat place to work.

00:48:10

AES: Was the profit-sharing plan is that something you implemented, as well?

00:48:14

GL: Yeah, that’s something that—we’ve always had two people working down here, two family members. When my grandfather was here, he ran the day shift; my grandmother ran the night shift or my grandfather ran the day shift and my great-grandfather ran the night shift. Then when my grandmother stopped working, my uncle ran the night shift. And then when Dad and I came in one of us ran the day shift, and one of us ran the night shift.

00:48:35

When my dad retired ten years ago, I knew I couldn't run the day and the night shift because I did want to be—I did want to be home with my family too. So I had to figure out something. So, for the first time, we put managers in place. We've never had managers in place. And I told them, "Listen, you will get one chance to be a manager, and you will prove to me that you can be a manager. If you can't, either I will fire you, or I will move you down and move somebody else up as manager." And it's—it's worked out.

00:49:03

AES: And now you've—you've started a family here, and you have beautiful children. I wonder if you are going to have them come up in the Big Apple Inn?

00:49:11

GL: *[Laughs]* Maybe one day. My oldest daughter is twelve. She is kind of like I was. She's—she's a product of a private school. She's in private school right now, and she's actually afraid to come to the Big Apple Inn. *[Laughs]* Yeah, it's—it's strange. You know, hopefully that will change. Now my baby, she's five. She wants to come down every day. She loves it down here, and she always tells her older sister, "Sissy, the Big Apple Inn is going to be mine. You're not going to have anything to do with it." So that's going to be my little protégé.

00:49:41

AES: Do they already help out with tamale making or anything like that?

00:49:43

GL: Playing, you know. My—my five year old when we—we roll the tamales, she will put them in the foil for us. Well we'll put them in the foil, and she'll just tap the ends to get the foil nice and tight. She always loves to—especially during deer season. During deer, she knows we're strung out. We put her little apron on. She has her own little apron. She has a little apron and a little chef's hat, and she puts her little rubber gloves on that go up to about her elbow [Laughs] and she—she helps us out during deer season.

00:50:11

AES: That's great. So talking about ingredients again, I wonder where your great-grandfather one, got his ingredients, specifically, I guess, the—the corn husks because they're still—your tamales are still wrapped in corn husks and where he would have sourced those in the '30s?

00:50:27

GL: I don't, you know, I really don't know. I know there were times when he couldn't get them, and they'd use some kind of parchment paper. They would go back and forth and whenever he was ever to get cornhusks, he'd wrap them in cornhusks. If he couldn't find them, he'd wrap them in parchment paper. But they're still not easy to find locally in—in bulk because we buy them in fifty-pound boxes. So we still get our—our shucks shipped from—from Mexico.

00:50:51

AES: And tell me about the garlic in your tamales because yours, I think, are about maybe the most garlicky I can remember. It's a good thing.

00:50:59

GL: Yeah, I don't know. In fact, we're told that all the time. In fact, most people don't really put a lot of garlic in their tamales. It's just that that's something that my grandfather did. And, in fact, we use fresh garlic in the meat and then we use granulated garlic in the—in the *masa*. So they're very garlic infused.

00:51:19

AES: Yeah. I mean you can see the pieces of garlic in the meat. I remember that distinctly. And so tell me does your—is your mother still living?

00:51:27

GL: Oh, yes. Yes, she's living.

00:51:28

AES: And does she like tamales and smokes and ears?

00:51:30

GL: She loves smokes, and we have a hotdog on the menu. What is it—it's a smoke sausage, and we cut it up like an accordion and put it on the same size bun. She loves those two items. In fact, she came down yesterday to pick up some. Yeah, but [*Laughs*] Amy, I don't think there's anybody in my family who eats ears. [*Laughs*] Now I cook them every day, and I'll taste them to make sure they're cooked correctly, but I still don't eat them.

00:51:55

Now tamales, tamales—I eat tamales if not every day, every other day. I love the tamales.

00:52:04

AES: Can you describe your tamale in appearance and taste just kind of quickly?

00:52:09

GL: Our tamale is—they're not dry at all. Some tamales, you go to some places and they're very dry. Our tamales are—they're firm but not—but not real dry. They're—oh, it's hard—it's hard to explain. When you go to a Mexican restaurant, the tamales, you can actually pick it up. You can take it out of the corn shuck and actually pick up the tamale and hold it. You can't do our tamale like that; it's a little bit softer.

00:52:34

It—wow, that's kind of—that's kind of hard to describe. It's, like I say, it's just—it's juicy. It's juicy and the reason why it is that is when we started wrapping them in foil like that because everybody would—when they would come down to the Big Apple, they'd say they'd want tamales but they put extra juice on it, so it'll be juicy. So I have to figure out some way to keep the juice in it so when the customer went home, they still would be able to have the juice. Otherwise, you know, by the time they did get home or if they ate it later on that night, it would be very dry. So we—that's why we came up with the foil.

00:53:07

AES: Have you ever shipped tamales anywhere? To somebody who has left Jackson and has a taste for what they left behind?

00:53:10

GL: All the time. We have a very big shipping business. In fact, I have a company who makes—who makes coolers for us so we can pack the tamales and the sandwiches in coolers and we put them on dry ice and overnight it.

00:53:25

AES: So people around the country are getting smokes and ears and hot tamales from the Big Apple Inn?

00:53:30

GL: That's right. And, you know, the—the funny thing about that, Amy, is I can't see that because we have one customer who gets them like every two months in Seattle. And she'll get sixty dollars-worth of food, but her shipping will be like \$150, but she gets it every two months.

00:53:44

AES: What does she get? What does she order?

00:53:46

GL: Smokes, ears, and tamales, and she's never even been here. It's her husband who is from here and loves it, and she surprised him one year. He would always talk about it, "Oh, honey. You got to try the Big Apple Inn. You got to try—." So she found our number and called and asked us if we shipped, and we said, "Yeah." And one Christmas she surprised him. This was a few years back—surprised him for Christmas and she's been getting them ever since. **[Laughs]**

00:54:10

AES: Wow, so how long ago was it that you started shipping them and what was the first kind of thought about shipping?

00:54:16

GL: I thought about the idea around eight years ago, but it's been through trial and error that we were able to get it perfect. What we would do is we'd freeze it and—and use UPS [United Parcel Service], and they would ship it overnight, and the product would always be good. When they got the product by shipping it overnight it would still—it would still be almost still frozen. It's getting a little bit better and a little bit better. We had to figure out a way to make shipping a little bit cheaper, so we started using the United States Postal Service. It didn't go as fast as FedEx, so that's why we started—I mean as fast as UPS, so that's why we started putting it in coolers and on dry ice. And even though with the extra weight, it still was cheaper than the UPS.

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But it was just a trial and error thing. You know, we went on the Internet and we saw that other companies in other states were doing it, and so I would order from them, you, and they'd come to—it would come to us vacuum-sealed. And we could tell it wasn't a fresh product. It was like something that had been sitting on a shelf, and the product was real dry. So what we do is, especially with the tamales, as soon as we finish boiling it—excuse me, as soon as we finish boiling it, we put it straight in the freezer. So as you know, things that are hot freeze faster for some reason—I don't understand why but so the—so the water inside the tamale would actually freeze to. So when they heated it up, it would still be just as juicy as when they bought it right here from the Big Apple.

00:55:34

AES: Wow. So tell me about some of your local tamale customers then—the people that do actually buy tamales from the Big Apple Inn and if there are some long-term people who that's the only thing they get or some kinds of stories along those lines.

00:55:48

GL: Our tamale sales are—the majority of the people who come and get tamales only are—is our white clientele, you know, who really aren't into the smokes and ears but love our tamales. Our black clientele, the ones that do eat tamales, it's always an accompaniment to their smokes and ears. And it's never usually more than half dozen to a dozen. Now our white clientele, they'll come and get three and four dozen at a time.

00:56:14

Like I said, tamale sales are just not our—our biggest staple down here, which I know that if we did open up in a white community, you know, I know we could just sell tamales alone. But then I got to deal with high rent then. **[Laughs]**

00:56:29

AES: So I'm curious, you know, your father grew up, you know, coming here and was exposed to tamales and smokes and ears, and you grew up in Missouri and Germany and your—your mother is Filipino, so I'm curious to know what you ate at home.

00:56:47

GL: Everything. My mother is—well, you might as well consider her as American as everybody else. When she—when she came to the States, she was two years old. She still doesn't speak a lick of Tagalog. That was the language they speak in the Philippines. You know, so she's as

American as—as everybody else. Now she—she can cook soul food, and she loved to cook it for—for Dad. She doesn't like to eat it, you know greens and candied yams and things like that. But we were raised on just—just normal food that everybody else eats, all Americans eat, you know, pot roast, hamburgers, hotdogs—just the same old things.

00:57:20

Now she does—she does know how to cook Filipino food because her mother, she got acquainted with her mother when she was in high school here in the States. Her mother came to the United States and moved to California and she got reacquainted with her mother. So her mother—she was able to spend summers with her—her real mother, her biological mother, and she taught her a lot of the Filipino customs, the—the foods, and things like that. So my mother can cook it to this day but doesn't very much.

00:57:48

AES: And your wife, is she a native of Jackson?

00:57:50

GL: She's a native of Clinton, which is a suburb of Jackson, yes, she is.

00:57:55

AES: And had she ever been here or her family before y'all met?

00:57:57

GL: No, she had never been here. She had heard of it but never been here. And the only thing that Angie—that's my wife's name—the only thing that Angie wanted to do was when she

graduated from college was get out of Jackson. Who would have thought that she would have married somebody who was knitted inside of Jackson? *[Laughs]*

00:58:12

AES: Indeed. Indeed. How does she enjoy making tamales with you? Is that something you enjoy as a couple?

00:58:20

GL: We, you know, we have always been very close—always. Now she's—she's a stay at home mom and it's just—we've always loved spending our time together, so just tamale time is just our—our talking time. We—we love it. We love it.

00:58:36

AES: That's great. Well, let's talk a little bit about the future of the Big Apple Inn because I remember when I saw you here in Jackson a couple months ago, you were talking about the new development here on Farish Street and that y'all might be moving from this location. Is that still true?

00:58:47

GL: That's still true, if they can still work out the—the fine details. Right now we haven't signed the lease down there. Nobody has. There's—there's a lot of things up in the air. You know, there's a lot of issues to be worked out. But if they can be, yeah, we'll move down the street. And the only reason why we'll—we would move is the building that we're in is falling apart. And the landlord doesn't want to sell it. I would love to stay in this building. You know,

this is where our history is. If he'd sell the building to me, you know, I'd—I'd stay here, but if he doesn't, then we have no choice but to move to a—to a newer location. And which would be exciting because if the entertainment district does go similar to what Beale Street is, it'll be great for business.

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The space we're looking at is the same sized-space. It's still just 1,200 square feet. We're just going to run—at first I thought about opening up a big place, big restaurant with live entertainment and dancing and blues and a full bar. I said, "No, I know how to run a small restaurant, and so that's what I'm going to stick with." And now I may have a little spot in the back where somebody who might be picking a guitar or, you know, playing some blues, we might sell some beer, but that's—that's about it. We're going to still stick to our smokes, ears, and tamales.

00:59:55

AES: Well I wonder, you know, you said the landlord won't sell this building. Has the—and there's always been a landlord here. Has that—has the building stayed kind of in the same family's hand as the business has on your end of things, or has it changed hands a lot over the years?

01:00:07

GL: No, it's the same family. In the '30s there was a doctor in the Farish Street area by the name of Dr. Redmond. And he was the first—that's what I was told, the first black millionaire down here and he—his family still owns a lot of property all over the Farish Street area. And until—it's his heir's property. The guy that we actually pay rent to would probably sell it, but

there's so many heirs that, you know, I think they're waiting on somebody to come and offer them \$1,000,000 for the area, you know, thinking that it's going to be a Beale Street one day. But in the meantime, the building is in such disrepair, you know, either somebody is going to take it by eminent domain or it's going to be condemned. **[Laughs]**

01:00:44

AES: Yeah. And you know, after having this conversation about just the historic significance of this space and to see that change is just—it's heartbreaking.

01:00:52

GL: It is and I've had a couple of meetings with the mayor. The mayor is trying to acquire the building, the City is. And they have intentions on turning it into a museum upstairs—being a museum because that's where Medgar Evers' office was. And if he does, they've already told me that I could still stay down here, but I wouldn't want the whole downstairs. I would expand the restaurant a little bit, and then on one side of the restaurant maybe put in a souvenir shop and they can tour the museum upstairs and exit through the little museum and they can get their “Medgar Evers ate here” t-shirts. **[Laughs]**

01:01:20

AES: Wow. I hope that happens because, you know, on the lamppost out front you have that plaque that says you're stop eleven on the Jackson Civil Rights Tour. I mean, to think that—that could disappear. You know, this place could be disappeared, but then the idea of souvenirs—that—on the one hand genius and the other hand kind of a little bit hilarious. **[Laughs]** Well I mean, you know, you're a businessman and you do what you do, but I mean—and that would be

you know—if Farish Street really did take off, I mean that would be exactly the kind of thing that—that visitors here would look for. And so but, you know, just the—the fact that you can, I guess, capitalize on civil rights history, blues history, culinary history, ethnic history of Jackson, I mean you have got it all right here under this roof. It’s amazing.

01:02:02

GL: We really do, really do because it—when you watch the video, you’ll see that this—this building has housed some incredible folks, not only Medgar Evers but Sonny Boy Williamson, the legendary blues singer. I mean he was a genius on the harmonica. He used to live upstairs.

01:02:17

AES: What did he like to eat?

01:02:17

GL: I don’t know. I don’t know. My grandfather would have to tell you that and, in fact, I don’t know if he really ate that much down here. He—he was performing in the juke joints all night long, and my father said he pretty much slept all day. [*Laughs*]

01:02:31

AES: So speaking of days and nights, you’re open here at seven o’clock in the morning. Tell me about that demand for smokes and ears and tamales at seven in the morning.

01:02:42

GL: Well, we've tried different things on the menu. We've tried breakfast. We used to have bacon and eggs, but nobody wanted bacon and eggs. You know, I guess when you come to the Big Apple Inn, you're coming for a smoke and an ear or tamales and that's it. If you want bacon and eggs, you're going to a place that has bacon and eggs: Waffle House, IHOP, somewhere like that. You know, so we just took everything—all these little cute little additions off the menu, you know. For a while my grandfather even tried fish, thinking that let's expand; let's expand. But we—we're good at what we do. We're good at our little six items we have on the menu, so that's what we stick with.

01:03:14

AES: So is there a busiest—busiest hour of the day for smokes and ears?

01:03:18

GL: Lunchtime is our—is our busiest. And—and Friday and Saturday evenings we're—we're usually very busy but, as I said, right now it's kind of hard because, once again, construction is going on because they're trying to get the entertainment district going up, so they have the one-way street blocked off. In fact, right now it's lunchtime, and we're empty.

01:03:38

AES: Yeah. And so tell me, too, you know, you have this TV and you stream the film *Smokes and Ears* in here all the time? Sometimes?

01:03:47

GL: All the time. I say all the time. Our DVD player was broken for about three weeks, so we didn't have it on for three weeks, but yeah. We just keep it on all the time just letting the folks know about the history of the place.

01:03:58

AES: And how has your clientele responded to that? What kind of feedback have you gotten?

01:04:01

GL: Stories—everybody has a story then. And that's what I love. When they see the video, then they go, "I can remember when they used to be this. I've been eating down here since—" You know, every—everybody has a Big Apple Inn story. And when little kids come in here I always tell them, "I'm going to see you twenty years from now. You're going to say that I came to the Big Apple Inn when I was five years old or whatever." You know, it's just everybody has a story.

01:04:24

AES: Well that might be a great note to end on, unless you have something to add that we haven't talked about or final thought about tamales and your great-grandfather?

01:04:32

GL: I really don't. It's been—it's been a journey. It's been fun. I can remember times that I used to—I mean stay awake, Amy, just worrying about the business and worrying how it's going to do and whether it's going to do well. But I just stopped worrying about it and started—started just thinking that, listen, it's just—it's just a blessing to be down here. It's just a blessing to be

with these people and I just—I really—I really enjoy it. I look forward every day to coming down here. You know, and my—my co-workers are just, they're fantastic. I usually—I come down here first thing in the morning, and I run to both locations and make sure everybody has what they need. And then I'm gone. I usually leave around twelve or one o'clock every day, and I don't come back to the restaurant. I'm trying to work on other things, which is really why my employees are invaluable because I've always been of the belief that if you always have to work in your business, you can't work on the business. So I'm going out and talking to folks about the Big Apple, passing out flyers, trying to see if we can get more tamale sales somewhere else or if we can open up another Big Apple in somewhere else, trying to work with Soulshine about other items and menus. I mean so it's a full day, but I love it.

01:05:36

AES: Do you have an idea if there have been a lot of people who have seen the SFA documentary *Smokes sand Ears* and have come here just because of that and you hear about it?

01:05:47

GL: There have. There have. We—a lot of people come—we have a lot of tourists in Jackson, people who are on a Blues Trail. And—and a lot of them have run across the—the video, not only the video but the—John T. Edge has written so many books and written articles in magazines and written about pig ears, so we have a lot of folks who've come in just—just because of his books and magazines or cookbooks. And so SFA—SFA has been a very big promoter of—of us and we're really happy about that.

01:06:21

AES: Yeah. And I remember, too, you have this plaque of the cover of the issue of *Garden and Gun* with the foods—*Southern Foods You Must Eat before You Die* and y'all are in there for that.

01:06:30

GL: In fact, what's funny, I mean, is while we were in here—while we were in here doing the filming of the—of the *Smokes and Ears* video, a guy just happened to walk in and looked lost, a white guy—looked lost. In fact, he's in the video eating a pig ear. But he walked in here looking lost and he said that he heard about the place because of the *Garden and Gun* magazine and that's how he—that's how he heard about the place.

01:06:57

AES: That's great. Well, it's a great story, and I'm glad that we can help tell it, and I'm really excited to get you on the Tamale Trail, and I'm really excited to hopefully eat a tamale.

01:07:06

GL: All right. Thank you, Amy.

01:07:07

AES: Thank you, Geno, so much. I appreciate it.

01:07:08

GL: Okay. Thank you.

01:07:10

[End Geno Lee-Big Apple Inn Interview]