GREG HANER
Fifth-Generation Owner – Mazzoni's Café – Louisville, KY

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Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 1 minute
Project: Louisville Barroom Culture

[Begin Greg Haner Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, January 17, 2008, for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Louisville, Kentucky, and I am at the new and soon-to-open Mazzoni's here, and I'm with owner Greg Haner. Greg, would you say your name and your birth date for the record, please?

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Greg Haner: My name is Greg Haner, and my birth date is November 21, 1963.

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AE: All right. And could you start at the beginning with the history of Mazzoni's and kind of give the background and your more than 100-year-old establishment here and your family involvement?

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GH: Yes, I am the fifth-generation owner. I am the fifth-generation owner of Mazzoni's Oyster Café Restaurant. It was started in 1884 by five Mazzoni brothers, who migrated here from Genoa, Italy. And they all came and started in the tavern cuisine at various locations. I can get that information to you at—at a—and I have it documented. But the one brother, Philip, had his establishment on Third and Market in downtown Louisville and the—that's what really carried on the Mazzoni name over the years because all the other ones pretty much retired from the business, and Philip's restaurant carried on and has been running for 125 years.

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Pretty much, it started out as—as a tavern and they pretty much worked around the clock with the three shifts—the around-the-clock shifts: the morning shift, the afternoon shift, and the night shift. It was pretty much a liquor establishment. They would offer you a frankfurter wiener, a—a boiled egg, or a rolled oyster with each drink to enhance business. And when Prohibition became along in 1919, Mazzoni's became a restaurant and never really adapted back to the—to the bar scene. We've been serving some homemade specialties, the original rolled oyster, which is a—a three to four oysters encased in a cracker meal breading that is lightly rolled and deep—deep fried and as the outside—so it gets golden brown. The inside seals and the oysters burst, making the whole—and the liquor from the oysters makes the whole morsel on the inside taste like an oyster. Some people might call it a scalloped oyster fritter. It's what's made Mazzoni's famous, along with other soups and sandwiches that warrant their own fame.

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We've been doing it a long time, and we take special care in the product in order to make it the best it can be. And it is what has kept us in business for such a long time.

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AE: What else can you say about the origination of the rolled oyster? Is it something that—that originated with the family or being here in Louisville or the—the neighborhood?

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GH: I would say there's mixed views on whether it actually came from Italy in the—in the—at the water and estuaries. Realize oysters reproduce in a mix of fresh and saltwater; some varieties of the oysters is more—less salinity in the water and more up the—farther up the estuaries of the river—farther up into the river and other oysters are a little bit more in the saltwater. Some

varieties grow more in the saltwater. And—and you find them, which means they tend to spawn at different times of the year. And we used to just only have oysters at certain times of the year because it was regulated by the states. And the states say the—the oyster beds are open, and the oyster beds are closed. In recent years—over the past twenty—you never really—it was a season because you couldn't ship oysters inland—twelve-hours inland—without a railcar running—running dry on ice. So the refrigerated truck allowed you get—to get oysters twelve-hours inland without having to be re-iced. And then in later years, the states had public beds, and they would open and close all the beds, and they found out they could lease private waters to individuals—state waters to private individuals and make—make the revenue from that, which pretty much got rid of the season we have of oysters. We don't have oysters to we have oysters. And then when the state beds would close, the private beds would all open up and—because that's when the supply and demand for oysters was most necessary.

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The—the—as far as the—as far as the oysters are concerned, we—getting back to the—the actual restaurant, we—I'm drawing a blank here.

00:05:46

AE: The origin point of the rolled oyster.

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GH: Oh, there you go. As far as the origin point of the rolled oyster is concerned, it could have been that it was actually—came from—from Italy or it was just that as these brothers knew of oysters and knew that nobody had them inland, they were on the coast, and that's where he got them. Nobody was shipping things across—across the country. Well, but at that point in time

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they had the river. They had the ways you could get oysters either, you know, by coming up the river or you could—you could truck them over, so pretty much they were taking something that hadn't—hadn't been exposed in this area. And, at that point in time, you know, Louisville was a river town. And because of the falls in the Ohio, everybody stopped in Louisville. So to be able to get product from the East Coast and bring it here it was—and then all the roll—oyster rollers were—were brought from Italy. People that wanted to have the experience of the—a new life would come here and, actually, the original location on 222 South Third Street had—the oyster rollers lived on the third floor, and they would run low on oysters because they didn't really freeze anything at that point in time. They would have to wake them up, and they would come down and roll oysters because the kitchen was on the second floor, and they would send it down to the barroom by dumbwaiter. And when they—one of their—when I was trying to determine, you know, why—why the previous generations had such great success, they said there was the Sherman Minton Bridge going across Kentucky to Indiana, and they had 1,000 people a day working around the clock building that bridge. And he said **[*Laughs*]** Mazzoni's was about three blocks from the—from the river and everybody—everybody was walking right across the front door to—to work their shift on the bridge for that three years and—and they just happened to be in the right location.

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Not to mention that Mazzoni's was one of four—pretty much four restaurants in the city, so you had twenty-five-percent of the market, which was, you know, substantial.

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AE: So you mentioned the East Coast. Would they have come—when they immigrated, would they have come through New York, or would they have come through the Port of New Orleans?

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GH: New York and were documented—the Mazzoni brothers all came through Ellis Island.

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AE: And so where—where were they getting their oysters from that they were serving? You were talking about leasing beds and all that but—but where were they getting them?

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GH: Well, originally, although oysters were from the Chesapeake Bay, which up—was up around Baltimore, Maryland, and into Virginia; but in recent years, you know, there were three or four oyster suppliers all—all in that region. But in recent years, due to the run off from New York and coming down the—coming down the Coast, oysters don't really have a volatile habitat to grow. In Baltimore the—the oyster production in the past ten years, you know—ten to twelve years ago, they were pulling 80,000 bushels out of Baltimore, and now they're pulling like 25,000 bushels, just because they're not growing there anymore, and nobody is taking care of the waters in order to make sure it can happen. So most of the oyster production is not from—I used to advertise "Chesapeake Bay Oysters," but most of the oysters now I call Eastern Shore, which is from the southern part of Virginia on down to the panhandle and into the Gulf [of Mexico] are all called Eastern Shore, instead of Chesapeake Bay oysters and Gulf oysters of ago. But they also have mentioned that a lot of the—the supply of oysters, the cold-water oysters are getting a lot of the disease that—that's sort of, you know making, them—you know, you crack seven to ten and there's nothing in the shells. Whereas the Southern oysters pretty much they found that because it's a warmer water oyster, instead of a cold-water oyster, that the sun kills a lot of the

bacteria because it's keeping the water warm which—which helps—helps the oysters, as far as catching disease. In the same respect, it's—it's sort of the same analogy of a—a coldwater fish versus a warm water fish on how—how firm and tight the product is.

00:10:32

AE: So would the—the recipe for the rolled oyster and other things that were being served at—at the restaurant in the early days, would those have come directly from Philip Mazzoni or his—his wife or countrymen or where did they come from?

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GH: I would say—I would say, as you come over to the—as you would come to the states, you would probably bring some of the heirlooms. I—I question because Mazzoni's had such a wide variety menu. We saw the—the rolled oyster and individually breaded pan-fried oysters and—and oyster stew but on the traditional—the original menu we had a homemade hot tamale with chili. Now I know it was on the menu board from 1921, but I don't really know how Philip Mazzoni come—and—and I know that the reason they **[*Laughs*]** had a hot tamale on the menu is because as you finish making the—the chili, you pull the grease off, and you use the grease to make the orange tamales; and then you have to determine a way to use the beef from the vegetable soup and the—and the jowl bacon from the bean soup had to have a way to be using that, so you were—you were being cost effective. Needless to say, that makes a filling of a hot tamale. And when you skim your grease off the homemade chili, which is a pasilla chile pepper, very unique, very chocolate in color and in zest. You—basically you're trying to be able to find ways to—to help your costs and so that's really how a tamale came along is because you were

using all your—all the—the—the—reusing all your products in order to be cost effective. And that—that's what any chef does in any kitchen.

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AE: So are the recipes that started Mazzoni's, do you still use the same ones for the rolled oysters and the tamales, as far as you know?

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GH: Yes. And I always find that in life, people that are involved with it, everybody wants to add their little flare. They want to make their little change, and the biggest thing you fight with is everybody wants to give it—give it that little twist when all you're saying is, "No, I want to make it the same way I made it for the last few years." I had to laugh when I actually joined the—the company after working corporate for seven years. I came back to the restaurant, and the first thing I did, you know—we had consistent products because we had the same girl making the chili for twenty years. But when I sat down and I said, "Okay, so tell me how much—how much or—how much water," and she shows me and some puree and she shows me; and it got to the chili powder, and she takes this big old jug and she shakes it about three—three jiggers, as I call them **[*Laughs*]** and—and she says, "Well, that's how much I put in." So I said, "Okay, Flo. Thank you but next time we're going to weigh that." **[*Laughs*]** Because, ultimately, there wasn't a recipe; it was just this loyal employee that had been consistent and made it the same way every time, and now we've got that into breaking it down into a recipe and exactly what it is. But the first few times, it was more just repetitive motion of how somebody had taught you and—and then in 1991 they weren't even written down. But it's the difference of being consistent, and we've done a real good job of that over the last 125 years.

00:14:05

AE: So tell me, then, a little bit more about the family tree of how the restaurant has changed—changed hands over the years and how you got back into it.

GH: Pretty much, I—I have a Management Degree from Indiana University, and I worked in the restaurant all through high school, and I wasn't going to be in the restaurant business the rest of my life. And my brother, who went to the Purdue University Hospitality School, you know, he seemed like he might go into the business. And as it was he got out and went into marketing and has now worked to—worked in a couple fields and how he's working with Yum! Brands as a Vice President of Franchise—Franchise Sales, I believe, and knowing good and well that his—his coming from the restaurant business roots of 100 years had to help him in that journey, not to mention he's a very talented individual. But he pretty much got out and got back in the restaurant business, and I wasn't going to be in the restaurant business and I ended—and now I've been here, after working at the corporate restaurant level for seven or eight years. I came back in 1991 and bought the company in 1996 and—and have been home ever since.

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AE: Is that where your—since you worked in high school and all that, were your parents deeply involved in the restaurant or—?

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GH: Pretty much. My grandfather had two—two aunts—my grandfather had three sisters. That's one of his sisters right there. Hold on. [***Calls out to woman in room***] Judy. [***To***

interviewer] My—my grandfather had three daughters of which one was my mother. When my mother was—got married, she married her husband, my dad; Ken Haner, was in the tavern business and, after they got married, he worked part time for Mazzoni for about six years and—and then ended up buying the business because there wasn't a Mazzoni heir. And we pretty much, from that point in time, the only thing that my grandfather asked of my—my father is—was that he—if he bought the business, he wouldn't have my mother working the business because my grandmother ran the kitchen for life and didn't get to raise her children. So he lived up to that obligation, and my mother never worked at the restaurant. And now here we are, next generation and, you know, it was just a changing—changing of the guard and that's the only way he could—he could buy the business is if that didn't happen. And that's the way it is. And now my—my wife, who is a nurse, she's not working in the business. But as I say, she—she—she you know—she was supportive, but she didn't actually work—run the kitchen per se.

[***Recording is paused for approximately five minutes, as Greg Haner speaks with Judy.]***

00:17:11

AE: All right. So we were talking about—we can pause again. Well let's—tell me about this bar here that you brought of storage to put in the new place.

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GH: Well Mazzoni's was at its original location on 222 South Third Street for—since 1884 to 1976—could have been—yeah, I think it was '75, possibly. I'm getting all mixed up. And pretty much, it was there; it was built by Bittners out of Louisville in 190-a mahogany bar, you know, pulled out all the stops. When we transplanted that to our next location in downtown Louisville at Seventh and Jefferson, they pulled the back bar away from the wall and, to show a sign of the

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times, they used to have hand bills that—besides the morning and afternoon newspaper, people would advertise by sticking a hand bill in the front window of businesses. And when they pulled this back bar away from the wall, one of the good things that happened with the move is that about 100 artifacts of old Louisville fell out, and there was—about twenty-five-percent of them were dated by the year between 1917 and 1934, and some of the other ones weren't dated and—and still had value but it just tells you that you need to make sure you date everything because you don't know who is going to find it. But it talked about—and—and a lot of these signs are posted in the restaurant and will be, you know, "Burlesque at the Gaiety" or "Wrestling" or "Boxing" or how much a cab ride is, you know, a two-way cab ride for twenty-five cents, stuff like that. But it covered pretty much the entertainment scene and—and, you know, midnight cruises and different—different—different athletic clubs and—and political groups type thing. So it's—it shows a little bit of the richness and the—the—the heritage of Mazzoni's and—and Louisville.

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AE: So was the bar in storage for some thirty-five years?

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GH: Actually Mazzoni's had two locations. We were Third—Third and Market and when we left Third and Market the—we moved to Seventh and Jefferson in downtown Louisville. And then, just a couple months thereafter, we opened a suburban location at 2804 Taylorsville Road, which we were there for thirty-one years, from 1976 to just—just December 22, 2007, of which it was time that—it was time to move a little bit farther east—eastward. And then we decided to—because the Seventh Street location, we—we had Seventh Street and Taylorsville Road for

fifteen years, and then we decided that we were going to close the—the downtown location and move to the—move to suburbia and then a lot of the artifacts, such as the original bar that we're locating in Middletown, we pretty much brought it out of storage after sixteen years and—and put it back together and—and it's just a beautiful piece.

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AE: So was part of your incentive for moving from the Thomasville Road—is that the correct?

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GH: Taylorsville.

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AE: Taylorsville. I'm sorry, Taylorsville. Was that part of the inspiration to be in a new space that could hold this bar, so you could bring it out of storage?

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GH: If you look at the two bars we've had, the other one was a copper-top bar and very nice, but it was created out of some door panels that had—a door that had four panels in it and there were four doors turned sideways, and they put a very ornate copper rail in front of it to sort of draw attention to the—to the rail, instead of maybe the bar. And then they had a—the second location had a soda fountain back bar, which is very ornate and—and an antique. But now that we opened this new location, and it's pretty much the old location was—was a sixty-year-old building. It had worn out and the neighborhood was pretty much built out, whereas moving out to Middletown was a little bit farther east and, instead of being a half a mile outside the Inner-Belt Expressway, we are about a mile and a half inside the Outer-Belt Expressway, but it's where

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the sprawl is really sort of taking place out by the Outer-Belt and you have larger homes—4,000 square foot homes in this area. And the business district is pretty much booming, whereas we had a thriving business on—in the Taylorsville Road location, we were located next to an airport, which was adjacent to a golf course and a park, and then we had the Inner-Belt Exchange four blocks behind it, so the Inner Belt Expressway, six blocks behind us, so you really weren't—you really weren't in a dense populated area. And with the build out of the neighborhood and the—the change of the neighborhood it was just the right time and—and cost-effectiveness of price per square foot to move a little bit farther out. And it's also a larger location. I did have seventy-five seats, and now I have 100 seats inside and thirty-five outside.

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AE: And do you think you're going to keep a lot of your customer base from the old location?

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GH: They always say, generation after generation agree, Mazzoni's Café is sure to please. A lot of generation business. A lot. You know, we have a lot of people that come in—grandparent, parent, and child just because everybody remembers their trip to Mazzoni's as a kid because it's a little different, you know. The—to push a bowl of oyster crackers to the—to the young kid at the bar is just—it's a one of a kind experience that really sticks with you. I'm—I feel strongly that I'm a destination location because of the original rolled oyster that's unique and synonymous with Mazzoni's that—that I'll have the people come. And I would say that I had a lot of loyal regular customers in my old location, and I feel for those, but for the overall benefit of the customers and—and friends of Mazzoni's, people are going to see a—a—going to see a—you know, a much more vibrant location and that's exactly what we need.

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AE: So what would you say, then—well, I want to ask this question first about the bar business, and I wonder if, given the, you know, old standing traditions of bar food coming from Mazzoni's, were there any specialty drinks or anything coming from Mazzoni's in the early days?

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GH: Tap beer, pretty much up until today. We were pretty much just straight beer and sodas, and then we got into a little bit of a beer and wine. But at the new location, because of tight economic times, you pretty much have to look at possibly selling somebody a mixed drink, and that's what we're doing in this location. Local laws say you have to have at least 100 seats inside to serve alcohol to get a special beer license and you're—they're fighting the law that says you have to be at least 750-foot away from another establishment of which the Taylorsville Road location was right next to a long-standing Air Devil's Inn Bar, which was sort of like the pilots' bar from the municipal airport across the street with its own rich heritage and tradition.

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AE: Well, then, if we could segue into talking about Flabby's in—in Germantown and—and your ownership of that place and also how the rolled oyster infiltrated Germantown.

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GH: Flabby Devine's was a—Flabby was a bricklayer, who liked to drink beer, and in the neighborhood of Germantown, which was in 1949 was swampland, and when the Germanic and Irish influence came to Louisville, Kentucky, you know, back in the day, there was the Black

Monday where the—where the—it was the—there was Black Monday where the—where the Protestants pretty much ran the newspaper and there was a—a you know—they—some people went over the edge and it was a sad day for the—the Catholic population because there was some fighting and—and—and I don't know what you would call it—just you know—there were some deaths for whatever reason. And the—it was sort of a changing of the times but the—the Germantown area, which was a swampland when the—a lot of these immigrants came to Louisville, they said, "Well, you want a place to live? Well, you can live over there in Germantown." So pretty much the Germantown area, which is about five by four square blocks, you know, the—the German attitude was to make it a little village. So they had their own foundries and their own bakeries and their own dairies, and they pretty much created a little town called Schnitzelburg in Germantown, and they didn't need anybody. They didn't need the city; they didn't need anybody. They did it all themselves. And you—you would notice that by the shotgun houses and the camelback houses and how they were neatly kept with whitewashed and—and crisp white painted on the—the tree bases in the neighborhood and so the—the neighborhood holds—holds true of that character. And one of the other things it brought was that it was common to have a—a pub or a tavern on street corners in those neighborhoods and to this day, one of the reasons I got into Flabby's in Germantown is because there was about ten or twelve bars all within four to five square blocks in residential neighborhoods, and they all had their specialty. It might be—mine happened to be fried chicken and then we got into—we got into some German food later on just because you were in Schnitzelburg. But the other one might be pizza and he sells—one sells liquor drinks and one sells beer, and they all started little restaurants. So as far as going to any bigger city, everybody has these little pockets of neighborhoods that—that had the heritage and so that's where it sort of started, as far as the—the

style of the houses and all and, you know, all the houses had twelve-foot ceilings, which is unheard of and were built with, you know, hardwood that—hard poplar wood that, you know, you could hardly get a nail through. And they pretty much would help each other out in building houses all in the neighborhood. And then we fast-forward a few years—that the neighborhood has—has come to now and there's been, you know—Flabby's has been there since 1952. There's another entity, Check's Café, down the street that's been there since 1946, and they all sort of have their—their—their niche in the neighborhood. And it—it definitely gives flavor, and you feel like you've been to the hometown place. But if we fast-forward now, you know, the—the Germanic influence has sort of faded away. It has the name, but now it's a mixed melting pot of medium priced houses and, you know, in the neighborhood you have the—the Bardstown Road corridor, which is just in the past, you know, fifteen years has been the hot place to live. And it's almost like Germantown—Schnitzelburg is, you know; it's sort of taking over a little bit of that feel, and it's going through the transition of younger people moving in, so you really feel the—the turning of the neighborhood and the—as far as the turning of the neighborhood it's—it's really creating its own—it's where anybody that's starting out—it's where you could still possibly get a house and fix it up but—for $80,000 to $115,000. And that's, you know, most other parts of town you really can't find anything in that price range. So it's really making a thrust of being a—turning into a new generation and it's just going to take a couple more years before the neighborhood is really kicking.

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AE: So what year did you buy Flabby's, and what made you decide to take it over?

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GH: It was available. I was in the restaurant business. I didn't really own the property. I owned the business and didn't own the property and so in 2000 I just—I felt that it was—I wanted to own—own the property, so we picked up Jim Flabby Divine's. Pretty much, Jimmy Flabby Divine ran it for a few years, and then his son, Jim Junior, ran Flabby's for another twenty—twenty-something years and then it went to a couple different owners, and then a daughter ran it for about a year and a half, trying to keep that family vision alive and opted out, and then it had about three or four owners, and I picked it up in 2000. And I want to say, in 2002 was their 50th anniversary, so we celebrated a 50th anniversary. After the 50th anniversary, we had been there selling the—the famous crust fried chicken that we've had for years. They say that when I bought the place that the recipe for the chicken came with the lease. I laughed because it—it—pretty much the guy taught me and ten minutes he's out the back door **[*Laughs*]** but—but—but we—we—it's a double-dipped buttermilk—double-dipped buttermilk self-rising crust, so it's nice and flaky. And, you know, we cook it to order so it's—it's special in that regard. We pretty much hand—hand-toss it instead of putting—you know, have it pre-done in any regards.

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And so I've had it since 2000 and it's—we've shown—shown a steady growth over that time. And it's definitely a hometown place where they know your name and it's—it's a—you know, it has a good name, and I've gotten lots of good press. The rolled oyster pretty much I—as I opened the other place and was trying to market the rolled oyster in more than one venue and have done that in two or three different venues in recent years—find that it had some selling power. But I did find that when I brought it on, I thought it was really going to just—going to take—take the place by storm and it's done okay, but Flabby's had its own style and its own menu, so it wasn't like it was this loss leader by any means. It's a good item, but it wasn't like it ran on its own and—and—and so we still sell a good amount but it's not—not like it, you know,

just ran its own—the chicken and the livers and the other items were—the Schnitzel sandwich, the hand-cut pork tenderloin—. When I was starting that German menu in—in Germantown, somebody said, "Well, you should you know—Southern Indiana all the bars have a pork tenderloin sandwich." "Oh, really?" And then I find, doing research, that a pork tenderloin is a Schnitzel **[*Laughs*]**; it's not a veal Schnitzel, but it's a pork Schnitzel and Schnitzel means *to cut*. And it's a cut of meat, and so a Schnitzel sandwich is a cut—a cut and breaded sandwich and I'm in Schnitzelburg so, huh, doesn't that make sense.

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But so the—you know, whether it would be the—the German potato salad or, you know, braised red cabbage that goes along with some of the German dinners, or you come back and just the straight bratwurst that the restaurant has been serving for years and years, it all sort of gives you a little bit of that German—German flare with the, you know, homemade hot mustard with eleven spices and then a big frosted glass of cold beer, you know, gets everybody thinking in the right mindset.

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AE: So then you actively, if I'm understanding what you're saying, you actively expanded the existing menu that was kind of basic German like brats and whatnot and really developed it into a more heavier offering of—of German food?

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GH: Yeah, they pretty much had, you know, a basic brat and that was about it. Being in Schnitzelburg, I—I sort of brought in traditional—a traditional German dinner, even though it's not thorough German, I serve a Limburger cheese sandwich that sells really well, and they act

like that that's not—that's more of a—it's—it's of the Germanic influence, but it's not really German, so everybody thinks that Limburger is German—ha, ha, ha. But we do sort of a—taste of it—for the people that are living—for German, because Louisville only really had one German restaurant and there was a—a great opportunity to offer a medium priced, you know, $11.95 meal that gives you a little taste of—of German. And since then, I believe there's another place but, you know, a cold mug of beer or, if you're being authentic, it should be a hot mug of beer. We found a niche that, you know, you're—if—if you're looking for that ethnic food, it's not like that market was really tapped in the area.

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AE: Well and back to the rolled oyster again, it's my understanding that in Germantown that a lot of those taverns have—have had rolled oysters on the menu for quite a long time.

00:37:11

GH: I would refer back to Mazzoni's. Over the years, during the 120 years, there was another location—a competitor named Al Kolb—K-o-l-b—and Al Kolb's had oysters, and he was a competitor, and he was a competitor up until about, oh, [nineteen] '63 to '65. And then, for whatever reason, that longevity—he—they were not in the fifth generation like Mazzoni's, so it sort of fell away and there wasn't any—any competition there. But the raw—I would say Mazzoni's made the raw oyster famous, and other people have tried. They do serve them in the grocery store but it's—it's definitely a little heavier than—than the light airy oyster you would get if you came to the restaurant. So other people have rolled oysters probably because we—Mazzoni's had them for years and years and years. When I bought the operation in Germantown at Flabby's, I brought the rolled oyster down, which sort of carried it on and, you know, we sort

of kept away from like, you know, supplying them around the city because your shelf life is so short. You get about two days, and you got to move them in two days and—and I haven't really found a good way to freeze them and make them exceptional. So we—anything we do—we roll them and we cook. And that's what keeps—kept us to be the premier oyster—rolled oyster company. But the others have them, or they talk about having them. I don't think they have them as much anymore just because they, you know, you've got to have somebody that's producing those for you and it's—there's an art to the rolling technique. If you talk a little bit about that rolling technique realize you lightly dust an oyster in a cracker meal breading, and you set them off to the side so they can set up, and then after you set them up you create a—a dip of—of oyster liquor and some spices and—and flour and as you pick up three to four oysters, you dip it in this pastinga as it was called; some people call it a dip, and you drag it into your cracker meal and then you encase it in cracker meal but you pick it up in your hand and you sort of turn it three-quarters of a turn not touching it too much because you don't want it to be heavy so it's really a rolling process that you need to sort of flip it around in your hand without touching it too many times and then give it a final press which encrusts those oysters inside without not having any—any oyster on the—on the exterior of the breading because when you would take and deep fry that if you have an oyster out it just blows out the side and you can't serve it. So the technique is to be able to roll it and encase the oyster in—in a cracker meal so that it can be—so it can be sealed in order to be fried.

00:40:37

AE: So what else do you have on the menu at Mazzoni's, and are you going to be adding anything new when you open this new location?

00:40:45

GH: Mazzoni's originally started as a fry kitchen, and when I joined the company in 1995, you know, I did a menu mix of my—you know, what I'm selling and so—and I sold seventy-percent oysters and thirty-percent everything else, and we worked really hard to balance that out because, at that point in time, oysters were very volatile and you couldn't get them and then you had to tell people you were out; and then so we balanced the menu out to where we're like thirty-three-percent oysters and thirty-three-percent fish—codfish—and thirty-three-percent [other] food. And we sort of balanced all that out and it, you know, has made it a little bit more manageable. Other things we have on our menu—is that the question?

00:41:40

Our base menu started out as about fifteen items and, in my reign, I sort of have enhanced that to about fifty items because I was a fry kitchen from the start. We have—we've worked at it that. You know, now we serve fifteen fresh vegetables a day, so we have the light choice. And you can come in and order a vegetable plate, and you pick the vegetables, you know. We have—order an eggplant for, you know, $1.95, whereas most people want to sell you a side dish for $7.00. But [we have] a whole lot of homemade fresh vegetables that you wouldn't find anywhere else for a light choice. We've—besides the fried oysters and codfish that people, you know—has made us famous and been our, you know—with consumers' trends changing you—you try to make sure you offer the other people something so, you know, we have, you know, six or seven pasta dishes and we make our own—make our own sauce and we—we have the—the vegetables; we have some vegetarian sandwiches, artichoke and provolone, or a Moosewood veggie sandwich, which is taking a medley of some different vegetables and searing it on a grill and adding garlic and blue cheese, which gives you a nice—nice taste inspired by the—the Vegetarian Moosewood Cookbook, which—which has, you know, has a lot—a nice following.

We do a Philly cheesesteak sandwich because we—one of our employees long ago was—did it as a sixteen-year-old job, and he's like, "I can tell you how to make the best one," and he was right. It's the best one. **[*Laughs*]** Other than that, we bread our own chicken tenders, so they're light and airy, you know. It's all—any more, a lot of the products of everybody sort of getting into—you're not getting whole—whole products anymore; everybody wants to—to juice them or pump them with something and sometimes that's acceptable because you're trying to keep it moist, but when it's just the sheer fact because they can add twenty percent and charge you the same, it's a big game because nobody tells you they're doing it. You got to figure it out on your own. But, you know, you start getting to where that kind of stuff happens, and you feel like you're—you know, I always laugh because I feel like you're licking on a salt lick like a horse, but enough for the humor.

00:44:29

AE: So are tamales a big sell here still today? Are you going to keep them on the menu?

00:44:34

GH: We hand-roll our own tamales, and they are very unique. And I think they're excellent, but not everybody is a big tamale [fan] just because it's cornmeal and it's—it's not supposed to be anything real flashy; it's—it is exactly what it is, and I think we make—if you're a tamale fan, we make the best. But it—we do hand-roll them, and I don't want to lose the art of the hand-rolling because I guarantee most people don't hand-roll them. They figure out how to get them from somebody. But it's a very unique product; it's not a—a ground beef. It's a shredded beef product and the pasilla chile pepper that Mazzoni's is known for, which is a very rich chocolaty color of chile. They act like chipotle was—was the next new thing and they told me pasilla was

coming right after it, so I've been—ever since I saw the chipotle is on the way out and pasilla is on the way in, I've been advertising it to the hilt, trying to be the first one.

00:45:36

AE: So where did you get your—your interest in cooking and—and being the back of the house person, as well?

00:45:47

GH: It was thrust upon me; nobody else showed up. **[*Laughs*]** No, I did a stint working with—with, you know, one of my corporate jobs was at Ruby Tuesday's, and I was a kitchen manager, so I learned a little bit about the pasta business and how to do that effectively and—and came in and—and they had the base menu, which was pretty much your fried kitchen, you know, oysters and fish and shrimp. And I also worked with Ruby Tuesday's, which was more of a grilled steak place with a salad bar. So all those influences, along with some family recipes on how to cook the kale—cook the fried cabbage—and some loyal employees, who used to cook kale all the time but we never served it in the restaurant, you know—a lot of those things people don't want to do at home and they want to do it, you know; they want somebody else to do the cooking, and it just happens to be that I've surrounded myself with some loyal employees that are damn good cooks, as well as myself.

As far as culinary experience, I—a lot of it was already developed. As far as, you know, bringing some of the family favorites, the salmon croquettes to the table or the—the spaghetti sauce—the family recipe for some spaghetti sauce, you know, we—we bring all those and make it look real good. I can't stress enough that—how many times, when you're trying to make a quality sauce, they—they—it's not like they offer you the quality ingredients, you know.

Everybody offers you something that's—that's sub-par from what quality is, and if you want quality ingredients, you've got to have the quality stuff and—and I always look at that as far as—as far as ketchup is concerned. You know, if ketchup isn't bright red, you're getting something that's not ketchup; you're getting some variation of ketchup. And if ketchup is bright red, you're getting quality stuff and, of course, it needs to be cut, but it's amazing to me how so many times when you're trying to make a quality product and they're giving you the sub-par—sub-par and, if you don't know the difference, they don't tell you. They just expect you to know. So we strive for the most quality you can find.

00:48:17

AE: So since you brought this old bar out of storage and are featuring it here in this new restaurant—it's absolutely gorgeous—are you bringing anything out of storage either literally or—or figuratively like a hard-boiled egg with a cold beer? **[*Laughs*]**

00:48:31

GH: I would say a couple, you know, we have a lot of artifacts that will go on the wall, once the place gets cleaned up. I anticipate an opening date of the third week of January [2008]. We are looking to come out—we don't really dabble much in desserts but we're looking—seeing—I'm having a liquor bar. I'm hoping to hit on a few of the senses sort of like, you know, stop by for a night cap and sell maybe the—the drink and a dessert for $9.95 and sort of play with that a little bit or—I laugh because in having a bar, I—I—when I went on a vacation out to San Francisco, and I sat at the trolley turn, and I was sitting at the Buena Vista and—the Buena Vista is a little café below a little hotel that brought the Irish coffee to San Francisco in like 1950 or '51. And you can tell these guys have been standing behind that bar making 200 and 300 Irish coffees a

day for, like, life. And it's just a neat little system, and I'm thinking to myself, "Hmm, next thing you know we'll be selling Irish coffee." Sell it as a nightcap and on you go, you know, and make it a fun place to go or—so the possibilities are endless. Something else that, you know, it's all a new idea. But I have a great northern white bean soup that we make from scratch, and it's excellent. And we have a lot of followers just for the bean soup here, as well as the chili, and that's what I find interesting. You know, a lot of these corporate stores, they come out and they sell a sub or a chili or they sell—well I've been doing it, and we do it all. We make them all and do them all, and we're not really keying in on one or the other. It's like you make them all, and it's almost to the point where like, you know, everybody else can open a spot and they need like one oven and this, one oven and this piece of equipment to serve what they serve. And I need like **[*Laughs*]** all these different pieces of equipment because it's a full kitchen. But, you know, the idea is, a lot of your purveyors want to take the work out of it for you and bring it—bring it to you—have it to you already prepared. The problem is, if they're bringing it to you already prepared, that means the guy down the street—his is already prepared too, and where does that get you but, you know, unemployed so—. But as far as that—as far as the bar is concerned, you know we're coming out here and we're having a little bit of a—we're located next to the Fitness Center so we're—we're keying up a little up on our light menu, even though we all know that when people go out to eat and spend money, they ain't looking for anything light; they're looking for all the good stuff. But along with bringing on a full bar and—and toying with some Old Fashioneds and drinks of that nature, I think we're going to be ready to develop. You know, they said, "What you really need to do, if you want to use advertising and you're on fire is watch the Rachel Ray show and produce whatever she made the night before in the restaurant the next night." They said, "You'll sell a ton of it because everybody wants to try it anyway." So I found

that to be sort of humorous. But it's just fresh new and changing and a lot of the trouble is—is you never know what to try, so it might do it for you in some regards.

00:52:05

But you know we—we can talk about all the things that could make you money but really, because I've been around a long time, I don't have to—you always have to look at brand new to—to reach that few percentage of people but a lot of what I make, I've been making for a long time, and if I keep the quality and the consistency the same, the people that already want it—and it's going to take care of itself in some regards. And with a new location with an extra twenty-five seats and a patio, we have the—a great opportunity to really rock on and so we're looking forward to it.

00:52:46

AE: Well, do you foresee another 100 years?

00:52:50

GH: **[*Sighs*]** I know I got twenty years where I'm at, and that puts me at about sixty-two and deciding what I want to do, and I don't know. I think the—the style of Mazzoni's with the—the history, I see us definitely clipping off another twenty. I could probably see us having that 150-year anniversary as we roll on. Sometimes I—I get leery of whether the production of oysters would—will fall away because at one time—perfect example: when the Katrina or the hurricane before—after Katrina—.

00:53:37

AE: Rita?

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GH: I say Katrina, but it was within a couple weeks of Katrina, it came and basically blew all the oyster shucking houses in the Gulf—anything within a mile inland was flattened. Within a week, the—the cost of oysters went up double because there were no oysters to be had in the Gulf. And, to be honest with you, an oyster was like $2.75, and I was doing okay and a week later, I was charging $4.50 because the price doubled because there—because basically people said, "I need oysters. I can't get them. How much are they?" And—and that—that stayed that way for over a year. And then it eased up a little bit, but it never really got back to where it was and those oyster houses—those Gulf shucking houses finally got re-set up and on you go. But you know, they didn't know whether the oysters were displaced or just the shucking houses because everything was so tore up and thrown away. And then, you know, you—also you play a little bit with quarantined beds because somebody is not watching the ecosystem and what's being dumped into the estuaries that causes oysters a little bit of a problem, too. So a couple of years ago there was a real scare, and I'm thinking to myself, "Well, luckily I balanced out my menu because I might not have oysters." As it was, it worked out and the people that really love oysters don't care what the price is, but it used to be they were sort of like—if we were talking food, like a White Castle [hamburgers]—buy them by the sack because they were seventy-five cents a piece. Well now they're $3.90, and people say to me, "Golly, they really went up." And I say, "Well you used to pay a nickel for a loaf of bread. How much are you paying for bread—$3.00?" And they're—you know they—.

00:55:31

Or, you know, the—the old story back in the '40s and '50s the—somebody would come and eat lunch and spend a quarter for lunch and you only made like $2.50 a day. So somebody pays—somebody—whatever they make now, are they really spending like fifteen percent of

their salary for that day for lunch? But you know that's—you can ponder it, but it's not going to change anything.

00:56:01

AE: Right, right. Well I was just thinking back to your talking about being in San Francisco where the Irish coffee, you know, got popular and all. Have you ever been anywhere or heard of anyplace that has a rolled—rolled oyster outside of Louisville?

00:56:16

GH: No. The—I mean people have lightly dusted pan fried individual [oysters], but where you take three or four and put them in—encase them in a cracker meal breading and fry them up, no. I know that my grandfather or—or his—realize my grandfather Ed Mazzoni was a—a partner with his sister, Elsie Mazzoni Long, and it just happened to be that Elsie Mazzoni Long's husband was a professional baseball player that struck out Babe Ruth thirteen of the fifteen times he was at bat. **[*Laughs*]** But and he also had a no-hit game or whatever the case may be, but they were partners and she—you know, he would be in the restaurant and, of course, people would love to come talk to the—the pro-baseball player so that was a draw. And he—and—and during their reign, it might have been before Ed and Tommy Long were the—but John, I believe, he taught someone in Nashville how to roll an oyster, and I've heard stories about how they have rolled oysters in Nashville but nothing I can, you know, go down and check out or put my finger on. So, you know, that being said, they say, "Oh, it's down there, but I haven't seen it, I haven't heard it." There hasn't been much, you know, conversation about it, but it was mentioned.

00:57:55

And also here in—in Louisville there were some other brother—there were some other cousins because, you know, there were five brothers in the Mazzoni family. Philip carried on the—the business for ninety years. The other brothers all lived here and at the family reunion, I believe, we had one in 2000, you know. We filled a church auditorium with 450 people, and I only knew, like, you know, four of them, so it's a huge, huge family in the neighborhood and the—the sprawl here has been, you know, a lot of people even though all the Mazzoni's really aren't in the—in the restaurant business. It's just one—one family line—one brother.

00:58:41

AE: And where in Italy was the—did the Mazzoni—Mazzoni brothers come from?

00:58:49

GH: It was Genoa, Italy, near Petrona [Pietranera], if I'm not mistaken. I might not have that pronunciation right. But it used to be that John, you know, he—he basically came over to—or Philip, who started the company in 1884, would bring nephews over for the summer. And John came over at nineteen, and Philip went back and he got caught over there with World War I, and John started running the business in 1919 and ran it for thirty-five years, from the time he was nineteen until he retired. And he—he probably is the one that did the most for the business, as far as developing it, and there's pictures of him putting it in the Kuntz's Deli, which was a restaurant—was a deli/restaurant—a delicatessen that turned into a restaurant and you know was started in 1892 but closed its doors within the last few years. But, you know, you see the picture of the oyster rollers standing in the front window of the deli rolling fresh oysters for people to take home with them.

01:00:08

AE: Okay, well is there anything that I haven't asked you or hasn't come to mind earlier in the—in the course of our conversation that you want to make sure to add before we finish up here?

01:00:22

GH: If I—if I think of that, I would say it's—the big thing that keeps you—keeps you moving—moving forward is that you don't change quickly. And that's served us well, even though some people think you need to, you know, keep adapting and keep moving. We've sort of stayed the course and—and not really changed what we do too much or get too flashy in one direction or another, and that's served us pretty well. And that we try not to—try to give a—you know good, Southern hospitality and—and treat people you'd like to treat—you would be treated yourself and that's served us real well. Thank you.

01:01:16

AE: Thank you, Greg, for sitting with me. I've enjoyed it a lot. Thank you.

01:01:20

[End Greg Haner Interview]

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