Horst Pfeifer
Middendorf's Restaurant—Manchac, LA
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Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, March 24, 2014. I am in Manchac—or Acres—Louisiana. And I'm sitting here in Middendorf's Restaurant with Chef Horst Pfeifer. And if I could get you to introduce yourself, just say your name and state what you do for a profession, that would be great.

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Horst Pfeifer: My name is Horst Pfeifer. I'm Middendorf's Restaurant. My background is European Master Chef, now at Middendorf's. I am the Executive Gopher. **[*Laughs*]** No, I do whatever it takes, and this is just a very busy place, and help everybody out and make it run smooth.

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SR: Could you share with us your birth date?

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HP: I'm born August 7, 1962.

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SR: Where were you—where were you born, and where did you grow up?

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HP: I was born in Germany, in the southern part of Germany, close to Munich in the state of Bavaria. I lived there all my life; came in 1988—came to the United States. And that was back when at fifteen years, when I graduated from school, I started what you do in Europe: a European apprenticeship where when you're fifteen years old, you work in a hotel or restaurant and learn about cooking but also still go to school. So I did this for three years, and then I traveled around in Germany and worked for different chefs. And came for a very short time in '85 to Austin, Texas, and went back to Germany, worked for more chefs, and then got my master's degree. And then was looking to go somewhere, and I got an offer to come back to the United States in '88.

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SR: I was going to—so, when you say Master Chef, that means that you have a master's degree in culinary arts?

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HP: Yes, yes, I have a master's degree in culinary arts. Since when you—over in Europe and Germany, you need the master's degree since you're kind of an educator to get the young kids coming to work for you. So you need the master's degree to be a teacher, mentor, to be able to hire these young people to work for you.

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SR: It's interesting to me that you--you did all that and then used it in the United States.

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HP: Well there's a lot of European chefs. In the old days. I probably was the last generation who came here. But in the '60s and '70s it was all European chefs, either Austrian, Swiss, German, or French people coming to the United States. And back then the culinary programs were not as great, back then, until what they're now. Now, I feel like this country in the last twenty years exploded enormous—what's happened here in this country, culinary-wise, schooling-wise, and everything.

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SR: Can you tell me a little bit about the setting that you grew up in? What was the town like, and what was your family like?

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HP: Well I grew up in a very, very small town with 150 people. Back then, the house I grew up [in] the first eight years was built in 1568. We had a farm—was mixed farming. We had like four cattle and then the calves and pigs. And I remember as a little kid when I was five, six, seven years old, until 1969 when we renovated the house, it was hard living. But also we didn't have any equipment.

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I remember when we used to make hay, and we actually—we didn't have horses or donkeys. We had our milk cows in front of the wagon to bring the hay home and everything. So when I tell people this is my background, where I come from you know, they're laughing like it's in the Stone Age. People can't believe it, but—. So I grew up on a small farm and everything

we ate and cooked and baked was from our own, what we grew. We didn't go to the store back then. The whole town was this way, 150 people. We still had a small bakery. We had a mill there that milled our corn and there was a lot of bartering going on. You brought so much wheat to the mill and he milled your flour, and then in exchange he kept some of the flour and you got flour back—some of the flour. You brought it to the bakery and they gave you little coupons. You could pick up so many pounds of--of bread. But also you baked some bread at home, too. So everything was bartering.

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So I grew up on a small farm until 1970, and then my dad started working on—growing on thirty acres was not big enough anymore in the '70s to live--live from. We had twenty-five little farms in our town. And now there's one left and he barely can make a living. You know, so it--it was a wonderful living. It was wonderful, but growing up it was in a small town like this, you did have a little bit of disadvantage when you had been in the big city and go to school and everything. You never—you know, you always had to help on the farm and work, and the city kids made fun of you.

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So growing up on a farm and helping there. And when my parents worked in the field I had to watch my little brother at home, from heating up food—what mother cooked the day before—warming it up, and when they came home for lunch or dinner. I started cooking. So when it was time to make a decision in my life: What do you want to do? At fifteen you don't know what you want to do. So my mother said, "You know, you like cooking. Why not become a chef?" So I did it. And it was hard at fifteen. You know, you want to play with your friends. But at 16, 17—I remember the day: it was a Sunday, and I told myself, "You better make it

happen," and set myself some goals what I want to accomplish at a certain stage in my life. And I reached them. I never thought I would be where I'm now. That's a different story, but you know I always wanted to have my own restaurant. I had my own restaurant when I was twenty-nine. I thought actually I would have it later in life, and I set my goals. I was ahead there, but then in 2005 when I had my restaurant Bella Luna and The Foundry catering, Katrina came. And you know I lost Bella Luna through Katrina. And so I had to make a decision. I was looking for a year and a half for a restaurant in New Orleans. And just didn't find anything.

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And I also was a little bit frustrated. All the frustration we had to fight with insurance, with the politics of New Orleans, with the move-forward thing, so I lost a lot there and I lost a lot of strength maybe, or fight. But in a way it was a good thing, since I tell you one thing: if I would still be the same—to take on Middendorf's—what I have now, and this came in a way: I was looking for a year and a half for something, and Karen, my wife, she said, "Horst, if you go back in the restaurant business, I want a restaurant that has no tablecloths and has laminated menus."

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Well, that's not what Bella Luna was. Bella Luna was white tablecloths. You know, every day we printed the menu. And she said, "I would like something a little bit more simple." Well, I looked at all different places. One day I got the call from the previous owners of Middendorf's, and so they said, "Would you be interested in looking at us?" I said, "Well, at this moment, a year and a half later, I'll look at anything."

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So I came out here on a Tuesday when they were closed and I looked at it and I went back home and I told Karen, "Well, they have no tablecloths and they have laminated menus." She said, "I want to look at it." So on Sunday we came out and we ate here for lunch and she couldn't eat. She laughed through the whole meal, since it was so funny in a way, since when she went to college she worked in a seafood restaurant. It's made this full cycle and circle. And so this was on a Sunday, and Monday we made an offer and two weeks later we owned Middendorf's.

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SR: Wow. I didn't realize it happened that quickly.

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HP: Yeah **[*Laughs*]**, it was real, real quick. It was neat. Now, when we bought it, it was a big challenge. You know, you're very proud when you buy something like this, and you tell people. Well, if I would do it over again, I would never tell anybody. I just would keep on, since when you're the new guy—you're always the new guy until the next guy comes in. **[*Laughs*]** You know, you waking up in the morning and breathing, it's always the wrong thing for the regulars who come here for seventy years, even if you didn't change anything. They are looking for whatever.

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So for the first year we were the new people who they were watching us like hawks if we would change anything or do anything. And we promised everybody we would not change anything, but in their mind a lot of things changed.

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We did change something after like seven, eight months, since we had to bring computers in for the kitchen to be able to run smoother. I was in the kitchen and the waitresses used to walk in there and they would call—. The expediter—there was a legal pad, and the waiters came in and wrote down by hand what to order, and then they called it and we fixed it. And I was in the kitchen. I owned the place and I didn't know what was going on. So **[*Laughs*]** it was pretty funny.

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Plus I still was a little bit in the—losing Bella Luna and the whole thing, I was still in the funk. And then a year later we flooded. It was Hurricane Ike, and it was devastating. We actually lived on the property, and you know at 1:00 in the morning I had to wake up Karen and there was water—our dining table at our house, in the bed and everything. We barely made it out here.

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Well, it was very, very depressing but a week later a whole bunch of my friends came and helped. And the way they helped—you know, you--you're over your head and you don't even know where to start. And they just came and helped clean up and threw stuff away. You didn't know—so at this moment, it's when I really brought everything back to me and I realized, "Listen, you're on your own and you better start hustling and move forward." And since then we moved forward. It took us then a year to renovate all the original building, where we're in right now, and for one year we were over at what I call the "new building," what we don't use anymore since we added more to it here.

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When we bought it in 2007 we had maybe 300 seats. Now in 2014, when we opened with the deck, we have like 500 seating. So we don't need this other building anymore. Also what we have right now is always the vision I had where we have one kitchen supplying everything. This way you have full-time employees. Before when they had two kitchens, two buildings, you had a whole bunch of part-time employees. Now we have all full-time employees and it runs much smoother. We don't need as many people. Like before, you had ten people in one building in the kitchen and ten people here. Now we run thirteen people in the kitchen, so the numbers—. But they're all full-time, so that's a nice exciting thing to be able to pull off.

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SR: So the—there's so many questions about what you just said, but that was a great summary. And I'll just say, so the "new building" was actually built in like the '70s or something, right?

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HP: Yes, it was in the '70s. It was—you know, it had to be so scary back then when they built I-55 and the exit numbers passed us. I know the people were looking and saying, man, you know we can—maybe people never stop. And when they opened the interstate, more people came. They didn't own the property right next to it, where the parking lot is, or where we are sitting right now in this. They could be able to buy the building two doors down. And so they built an annex, and they only opened it on Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday night. But the regulars never wanted to sit there. They rather stood in line in front of the old.

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So you know this was a long big fight. Not a fight, you know—. And then this, what we did now, makes the most sense.

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SR: Right. So you're saying that what was scary? When I-55 was built, or before it was built?

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HP: No, when it was built the people who owned it back then, Mr. Dick Smith or Joey and Suzie who were running it—it had to kind of be a scary thing. You know, people wouldn't stop here anymore. They'd keep on driving. But right there you used to drive on [Highway] 51 on your front door, so they'll stop, but now this big interstate going by, you think they wouldn't stop. But it's overnight, even more people came. So then they needed more seating, so that's when they built this overflow restaurant.

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SR: And the second kitchen was in the overflow restaurant?

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HP: Yes, so there was two kitchens. But yeah, they only needed people there on Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday. So there was a lot of these part-timers, so it was hard to find good people.

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SR: I see. Yeah, and so now what do you use the--the new building for?

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HP: Storage and staging, since you know it's lower than this building, so water will come again. It wouldn't make any sense to put anything in there. We store our floodwall, we—a place like this as you see it today, we have a maintenance shop over there and we park our cars in there, and we just need it for—keep junk. **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: Although it's not junky, I'll say. I've been in there. It's very tidy.

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HP: Yeah. Yeah, Christmas decorations, you know, and stuff we need here to do promotions. We have ***[Unintelligible]*** and stuff like this, so we have a lot of stuff there.

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SR: I want to ask you about Bella Luna, but before I dig into that, can you tell me: So you mentioned Austin, but what brought you to New Orleans? And what year did you come to New Orleans?

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HP: In '91. In '88 I got an offer to go to Austin, Texas, and I worked for this—I signed a three-year contract to work for these people and run an executive retreat. And after the three-year

contract was up, you know, I was ready to move on since I wanted to be in the restaurant industry. It was like a private resort. It was a little bit slower pace for me. I needed it a little bit faster.

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But these people were connected. They came from New Orleans and were connected in their own part of the restaurant, and the restaurant they owned was called Moran's Riverside. And Mr. Moran was ready to retire. They wanted to get out. So they liked what I did and they made me an offer where I was able to come over here and work and eventually was able to own the restaurant and purchase it.

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SR: When you started working there was it called Moran's or was it called Bella Luna?

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HP: Well, it was called Moran's when I came to New Orleans in '91, and then when Mr. Moran—when we did a renovation and we wanted—. Originally we wanted to open it under the name Moran's, but then as we all sat down we said, "You know what? It would be better if we would change the name," just to get new hype and everything and so on. That's why Mr. Moran and we all decided, we said one night, we sat down and we all wrote names down and we had like 100 names. And then we looked in the Yellow Pages and stuff, names that had been used already so we know we couldn't use it, and we came down to like five, six names. And each of us took them home and the next day we came back and Bella Luna was stuck. The nice thing is

you sit there and you see the moon rise in the evening and everything, so that's why it's a Bella Luna.

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SR: It was. I'll just say for the record, it was one of the only places in New Orleans where you could see the—sit down and see the river and have a meal.

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HP: Yes, yes. It was right behind Café du Monde in the second floor, and yes, it was right over the floodwall so you saw the river, the boats go by. It was a beautiful place. It was a perfect place to show off the city. And we always felt like we had a very incredible, unique package from valet parking, comfortable seating. It--it was real, real neat. Real special. We were known for our thin fettuccini. We used to toss it on table-side. It was known for romance. We got so many proposals there, you know. It was real, real neat.

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SR: Tell me about that fettuccini, because I've heard so many references to it. What was that specialty?

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HP: Well, the fettuccini, it's homemade but it's not made in the extruder. We're rolling it out, and I still make it. We roll it out paper, paper thin to a half a millimeter. When you work pasta and semolina so long, it won't expand anymore when you cook it. So when you eat it, it's like

feather, real light. It cooks in like twenty—fifteen 15 seconds, and then we just toss it a little bit with Reggiano [cheese] and with fresh cracked pepper, and sometimes a little bit of truffle oil. And it's just so delicious. It's unbelievable.

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SR: You still make it at home, or you just make it for Middendorf's customers?

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HP: No, not at Middendorf's. That's—we couldn't do this here, but I make it at home and also in our other place, at The Foundry, we're using it. And I make it sometimes just for the employees here, since I wanted to—. So it's neat. And that's what we were known for in—you know, Bella Luna was a very elegant restaurant. It was neat. That's why a lot of people thought when—sort of life after Bella Luna then, when I bought Middendorf's, I would say ninety percent of my friends thought I went crazy, going from fine dining to owning a catfish house. **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: How would you categorize the cuisine at Bella Luna? Was it German?

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HP: No, it was not German. It's an Italian name, Bella Luna. We had some few little—maybe with the fettuccini and osso buco we had a little bit of Italian influence, but more traditional dishes, not fancy Italian. But then also, you know when people come to New Orleans they want

some local food. We had crab cakes. We had all the selection of seafood, and we used some of our fettuccini just—it used to be an appetizer, an egg pasta, and then I also made it with calamari, and we had like a steamed lobster with it and everything. So you need to bring a little bit—you know, at the end of the day the customers would come in and you'd want to make sure they're pleased and get what they want.

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So with having our local seafood, crabmeat, crawfish and everything, but also you want to give them a little bit of comfort zone, for some people. And then we—since we did a lot of business entertainment there, you needed some primal meat cuts. You know, from filet, from New York Strip, with the bone on and everything. So you had certain things. We had like a nice selection, but we didn't have—we didn't have anything like étouffée or stuff like this. We did not.

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SR: And you did a little bit of farming in the French Quarter, right?

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HP: Well, I wouldn't call it farming. I had an herb garden. I lived right next door. The older Ursulines Convent, where the nuns came there in 1700, one of the first nuns there had a medicinal herb garden. And in the old days a lot of the herbs were used for medicinal purpose. So being the neighbor and growing up in a farm, like I said earlier, I was real intrigued and I became friends with the priest who lived there and we wanted to restore—he wanted to restore everything. So I said, "Well." I took on the project of restoring the garden.

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And so we did a little bit of research, but all the herbs they used we still use. They're just used in different—they didn't use them for culinary purposes. They used them mainly for medicinal purpose. And so I had an herb garden there and grew them, and I gave some tours and educated people like this, and it was real, real neat. It was the favorite moment in the day. Every evening I walked over there 5 o'clock and got all my new cuttings from the herbs to be able to put on garnish and everything. It was real, real special for me to be there.

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And I missed it. You know my restaurant was a block away from my herb garden. The house was across. A bad day commuting for me was five minutes walking.

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SR: Does that herb garden still exist?

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HP: Yes, it's still there. It still is. I think some other people take care of it.

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SR: And you mentioned losing Bella Luna after Katrina. Was it water-damaged?

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HP: Well it was—we were on the second floor. So no, there was no water from floodwater, but since we were one of the taller buildings in the Quarter, the wind ripped all the windows out and

doors and took the roof off. And it just took too long to rebuild it since the--the landlord was the City of New Orleans, and as we all know how things like this can drag on or take forever. And eventually I had to make a decision, but also the tough loss was after they didn't do anything for over a year, my insurance wouldn't step in either, and since then more damage was done. So it was, you know, a legal thing. And at the end of the day there was—I was not happy. You know, I lost you know most of it to--to neglect of my landlord. But I'm happy here now.

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SR: Did you—if you need to me to pause it, that's fine. Okay, sure. **[*Off Mic Conversation*]**

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Now, when you decided to buy Middendorf's—well, let me ask you: I want to ask if you felt like you were crazy, but were you surprised when Karen said, "I want a restaurant with no tablecloths and laminated menus?"

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HP: Well, I don't know. I mean Katrina made so many changes in everybody's life. And one thing it's taught us: I'm now ready for anything any time. Who knows what's tomorrow? You know, hopefully we never have to go through something like this, but it's taught me a lot and hopefully a lot of other people a lot. And the one thing I learned: I did not only go through Katrina—and then twice out here—you know, we have to teach people to get up and--and push hard on their own. Especially small businesses. So much depends on it.

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Yes. Was I surprised? Maybe a little bit I was surprised when she said this, and then when we came out and she was like, "I would do anything—." That was really—yes, it was a little bit of surprise when she said this. And then when she said, "Oh yeah, I want this," I'm like, "Okay." **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: How did you all meet?

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HP: We meet in--in Austin, in Austin, Texas. She worked for the same restaurant as I worked over there, so—.

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SR: So all of her experience was probably in fine dining as well. I mean y'all, I guess, were pretty young.

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HP: We were young, but before I met her she worked actually in a seafood restaurant like this but a little bit different. And I remember when she quit there, you know she couldn't wait to get rid of her clothes because they all smelled like grease. But it was back then. Here it's different. We have different fryers and much cleaner than in the old days.

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But she couldn't wait to get rid of it, and then that's why she actually laughed when we came here and it's a seafood restaurant like she worked and it's like she couldn't believe it. But she loves it, and it's very, very special place. And you know, it maybe was a calling for us at the time where we were able to deal with it. Like I said earlier, if I would have done this ten years earlier when I was young, I would bring the Middendorf's like I wanted to do. I had to learn Middendorf's. I didn't have to teach Middendorf's something or change the recipes. Just go back to basic, to what Middendorf's already was with the thin-fried catfish and keep on producing a good quality product and make it better.

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We added a lot. We don't do changes here. We don't use the word "changes" here. We add a lot, like we made homemade ice-cream, bread pudding. We're going back to a lot more home-style. We're adding some—a little bit of vegetables or a little bit of salad. So we added a few little things here and there. And so nobody said, "Oh, you changed something." We're adding to it, and the people like our adding. Like the outside, the new deck area. This new dining room. You know, in the beginning when I--I did the construction on this dining room and everybody was nervous about how we're going to do it or whatever. And everybody said, "It has to look like the old one." Well, it's not going to look like the old one. It's not the same room. And now you know the nicest compliment is when the regular people who come here for sixty, seventy years, and it's their right to sit in this new dining room by the window. And the first four or five months when we opened it, nobody wanted—they kind of wanted to be in the old part. You come in the same entrance. And now they don't want to go to the old part anymore. They want to be in this part. That's their right. And that's so wonderful; that's the nicest compliment. And this means they're trusting Karen and I, what we did over the last three years to protect

Middendorf's and--and preserve it and keep on moving forward. And I think we're walking a very delicate line to keep the history going since like Middendorf's is a time capsule and we want to keep it this way, but at the same time you--you have to move forward to make it easier for the people to get there, the employees to work, you know. There's so many things we added to it where there's less mistakes made, like the computers. The kitchen is air-conditioned, safer equipment, and even for the customer, you know, you need more handicapped accessibility and ramp and everything. And the old ways, it was not feasible. It was not in the old Middendorf's.

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And so able to do all this, it's very, very special to make it for the next generations to come.

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SR: Can you kind of give me the outline of—or the timeline of—when you bought it? So first of all, this did not flood in Katrina, correct?

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HP: No, we didn't own it. The people owned it, Joe and Suzie. No, it did not flood in Katrina, but then two weeks later when Rita hit, that's when it flooded. What's happened is when a storm stays east of us we pretty much are in good shape. It's when the storm goes west of us and then it goes north, and we get this westerly wind pushing this lake over here. That's when we have to sweat it. Any time a storm goes west, that's when we get—that's when we would have problems.

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SR: That's Lake Maurepas, right?

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HP: Yes. But first the wind pushes in the water from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Pontchartrain into Maurepas, and then in like no time at all it switches to a westerly wind and it pushes this whole water over here. So first it fills the lake and then it dumps it on us.

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SR: So it did—it did, then, flood in Rita. And then—

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HP: I bought it.

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SR: —yeah, you bought it. And then tell me about the two floods.

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HP: Okay, we bought it in '07, in April. Then in September of '08 it flooded. It was Ike who destroyed Galveston, yeah. Ike flooded us; it was real bad. And it took us six weeks to reopen. That was a tough one. It was real tough. Then in 2011 we had Lee, a small tropical storm, and we were fighting it. We flooded again, but we built a dam like a foot high, 500-feet long, and it just kept the water out. So we made—and then we built these flowerbeds around it who would protect us.

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But in 2012 Isaac came, and it was the biggest water they ever saw, and it got us hard. But we only shut down for two weeks in Isaac. Even the water was higher, but we had—two months before we got a generator, so we had power. We also have a water well here, what we don't use for the customers, but we had a well here and we just happened to have hooked it up, and so—. As we were flooded, and then you have the air-conditioner and everything running so you don't get any mildew or nothing goes bad. Now we lost food in the water, who got into the freezer. We dumped it all. But as you pump down, you're in control. You know you have refrigeration, you have light, you can maneuver here. And then as the water goes down, and we had like a half-inch in our dining room. We got everybody inside with hoses, and as you go out you hose everything out with clean water and the mud never settles—you're in good shape. And so for 2012 Isaac we had a plan: Plan A was nothing was going to happen. Plan B: if it's happening, how do we proceed? And the one thing, I have a lot of good contractors, and it worked real well.

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As we still had water here, the next day I called all the contractors. I called the guy with a crane and a barge to fix the deck. I called—lined everybody up. And as the water receded and they were able to drive in here, we took out the flooring in our old building downstairs. We still had two inches of water as we took the flooring out. Put it in the kiln and dried it and had it back two weeks later.

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SR: What kiln?

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HP: To dry it like—

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SR: Where is that?

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HP: In--in Opelousas. So you put it in there to dry the wood out and everything since it's all buckled up. We had—as we hosed out, we're painting already. I did not want to show the customers what happened here. And I—and one thing is I didn't tell everybody we flooded. Everybody knew we flooded, but I didn't go out there anymore. It's not—. Listen, there's enough people screaming and crying. Get on your own and keep on moving forward and push and--and get jobs back and make it happen.

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SR: Wow, I can't believe you were doing—. I was wondering how you were cleaning because I knew the water was in the parking lot for a while.

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HP: It was as high—yeah, we had the water for six days before we finally headed down. But like I said, we had a plan. We--we were here. Every day we cooked us a meal and we sat here, since up here there was no water.

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SR: Okay, so that's one thing I wanted to clarify. When did you build this new dining room?

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HP: The new dining room. Okay, 2008 it was Ike; 2009 we moved back over here and we had the kitchen built in the back in the old restaurant. And we moved—we didn't—2011 we opened this dining room.

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SR: And this dining room, for the record, is significantly higher than the old dining room?

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HP: Yes. We have probably three more feet left before we would flood up here from the last one. Will it come? Who knows. You know, I mean there's no guarantees anymore wherever you are in this world.

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SR: How did you decide on the height?

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HP: It was the distance from the downstairs restaurant—in the kitchen. The height was decided on the kitchen, bringing the food into the old dining room. **[*Laughs*]**

00:30:53

SR: That's a good way to decide it.

00:30:54

HP: Well it—you can't walk a mile with the food, so it's like we had this much space, so we worked it out. And should it be higher? Probably. But you know, for right now it's what made the decision.

00:31:09

SR: Well, I will take some pictures, but I'm wondering: Can you—. It's a really beautiful room. I know why people want to sit in it. Can you sort of describe it and--and tell us about how you designed it?

00:31:21

HP: Well, how to describe it? Well it's--it was—. First when you design a dining room like this you know you have a footprint, and then you need certain areas. You need a bar. You need bathrooms. And we needed the ramp for people to come up here. So certain things already kind of are laid out. And then you build around it. So then we just had the area where we put tables, and I really did not know how it's going to look eventually. You know there are certain things I was really strict—first, we're out here in the swamp. You know, we have 100 pilings underneath this dining room and they're going 30--27-feet in the ground to keep us up. But then you're out in the swamp and everything is moving and the train comes by. So everything we built here is

screwed. We don't use nails here since the **[*Laughs*]**—everything is screwed. So that started there.

00:32:12

Then I went to a friend of mine. He reclaims old wood, and I really did not know how this dining room was going to look. And then one day when it came to make a decision about it and I walked over his—it looked like a scrap yard, and he has all this wood. He had these old barrels that came out of Dixie Brewery. We have old single cypress here. And he has all this old wood, and immediately when I walked in there I knew where certain pieces go. Even the old rusted galvanized roof top over there. You know, but then one thing always bothered me in restaurants, is the dropped ceiling. And we have a dropped ceiling. And so I said, "I don't want people to look at my dropped ceiling when they come in." So that's where he came up with this oak tree. And we created—built an oak tree. So to come—when people come in, they'll see this oak tree, and we have the windows. It just kind of fell in place.

00:33:07

SR: Somebody—if somebody told me, "You're going to go into a dining room that has a fake oak tree," um, I wouldn't think—I would not assume that it would be beautiful. Who designed that tree?

00:33:18

HP: Well the—I did a little bit of research to find who makes—. You know, everybody said, "You should do a cypress tree." Well, cypress don't have many leaves and branches **[*Laughs*]**. It--it wouldn't look right. So we said, "Let's do an oak tree." And I talked to the guy on the

phone. It's in Carlsbad, California. They're called Nature Maker and they really make—I mean, it's beautiful. And I never looked the guy in the face. I just—he said, "I need a deposit," and you give them the measurements of what you want and they'll do a little blueprint of how to—. I said, "Okay, in this area the branches can dip down by the host stand and they can come down a little bit." And we gave him the height dimension and he draws it up. And they built the tree on-site at their shop and then they cut it—they're cutting it in pieces, numbered, and they put it in a container. And so you always talk. And he sends a picture of the tree and I said, "Yeah, I want to see if this tree shows up right."

00:34:12

Never saw the guy. So he said, "Listen, we set the tree up and all the dust is gone. So you tell me which day it is." So I said, "Okay on this and this Tuesday we can set it up. That's when I want it." He said, "Okay." I said—he told me, "At 8:30 a truck will roll up with a container and drops it off, and at 9 o'clock my guy will show up and he needs one of you guys helping and that can talk on the phone can help you put it together."

00:34:38

Eight o'clock the truck showed up and dropped the container. Nine o'clock his person walked in, and two days later we had an oak tree.

00:34:45

SR: Did his person come from California or—?

00:34:47

HP: Flew out here to put it together.

00:34:49

SR: Wow, that's an amazing story.

00:34:52

HP: It's beautiful and people like it. And people—it's special. It's neat.

00:34:58

SR: And then what about the murals? Talk about those.

00:35:01

HP: The murals—you see, and they're facing east—is actually looking at Lake Pontchartrain, and it's the lighthouse. It used to be right in the entrance, between Lake Pontchartrain going into Lake Maurepas. And people—it was a fifteen-acre island, and it's not there anymore. Eroded. The top of the lighthouse is in Madisonville. But I just took a--a picture and wanted to resemble what used to be out there and bring it back together.

00:35:27

And then you see also this old dugout [canoe] up there. That's probably older than this country. It's out of Abita Creek and was sunken in in there, and it's an old Indian dugout where they go in the little creeks and go back and forth. So it's very special to me.

00:35:43

SR: Where did you get that?

00:35:45

HP: Every piece of wood is from my friend, Will Branch, and like the flooring, it's from the old schoolhouse in Opelousas. And the--the bar, it's the old vats where they used to make beer in it. They're from Dixie Brewery, and they're unique. Some of them are out of redwood. Some of them are white oak. And then we took some of the same wood and made this redwood table. Even redwood has nothing to do with here, but having this big tank at Dixie Brewery and having this wood we were able to make it, so this kind of blends together.

00:36:20

SR: Right.

00:36:20

HP: And so everything is from recycled, reclaimed wood.

00:36:24

SR: Do you know what the name of that island was that the lighthouse was on?

00:36:28

HP: No, it just was part of a little island out there. I don't know. I couldn't tell you. It was not a major island. It was just a lighthouse.

00:36:37

SR: I'll have to do some research and find out what year it completely went away, the lighthouse.

00:36:42

HP: Yeah. I can find it out later on and I'll give you a number.

00:36:45

SR: Okay. And then also, just so listeners and readers know, this dining room is very bright with natural light. You can actually see water. It's not--it's not so possible to actually see water when you're in the original dining room, correct?

00:37:04

HP: No, you don't, since you actually are below the water behind the seawall, so you don't see it, and up here you see it. It's absolutely beautiful. And it's kind of a little bit what we had at Bella Luna. You were able to see the river. So you know, we went from thin fettuccini to thin-fried catfish. We went from looking at the river and looking at the lake.

00:37:22

SR: Did you—I mean, you know, this was born of necessity for the most part. But did you always have a vision that you wanted a dining room that would look out on the water?

00:37:31

HP: Oh absolutely. You know, first when we came out here we knew the area about the flooding and everything, but I didn't know I would be the lucky winner to get flooded two times--three times in four years. So we knew eventually we wanted to build high.

00:37:46

This, what you see right now, it was our vision eventually to be high like this. But after the first flooding we almost lost a year in rethinking everything and we should have done that right away. So no, it's always had—for people to see it and enjoy it.

00:38:02

SR: And you said, in describing how you designed this room, that you knew you needed a bar. But that was—there wasn't a bar here before, right?

00:38:13

HP: There's a bar downstairs, but people don't see it. It's more like a service bar. And it's not about being in the bar business, but it just is when people wait and everything, and we get some single diners, when they travel they'd rather like to sit there and just grab a bite. They'll feel—sometimes feel uncomfortable sitting at a table when they're alone there. No, it's not a big bar. It's only like eight people can sit in there, but you'll need a bar for all the—I serve drinks, too, so—.

00:38:36

SR: Now, what about the downstairs dining room? Is that—are the walls cypress?

00:38:42

HP: All the walls downstairs is the original cypress from Middendorf's from way back when, yeah. It's all cypress.

00:38:49

SR: And that holds up pretty well in the—in flooding?

00:38:51

HP: Yes, but it's not the ideal. Eventually we want to lift—it's the wood behind it. We need to—you know, every time you take the panels off you take the insulation out and redo everything in the back, but we need to lift the building up a little too. It just has to. You don't want to go through it.

00:39:08

SR: Oh, you mean raise it?

00:39:09

HP: Raise it, yeah, yeah. The flooding is not a wonderful feeling.

00:39:14

SR: I wonder what the long—old-time customers will say about that.

00:39:18

HP: I think now they will trust us. I think that we—I don't think we will hear anything. You know, they'll trust, they'll feel more comfortable with what I did here, and I feel that we wouldn't hear anything about it. I think they would--they would feel very comfortable since you still have the same look eventually.

00:39:35

SR: In that moment, when you were deciding to purchase Middendorf's and ninety percent of your friends thought you were crazy—well, two questions: Did *you* think you were crazy? And, did you process how sort of touchy it might be to navigate this relationship that people have had for generations with this restaurant?

00:40:00

HP: No, I did not navigate through this. There was a lot of—I think we were excited about purchasing something like this and be able—be the ones who are able to hold the torch and do something like this. But did we think it fully through with all the things that came down my road? Absolutely not. You cannot foresee everything. And no, you know, there's so many little things I probably forgot by now. No. There is—you know, it's like when people tell me, "Oh, it must be so much easier for you now at Middendorf's compared to Bella Luna." I said, "No, not at—." I said, "Are you crazy?" I said, "Bella Luna, whatever I cooked—I was Bella Luna, so whatever I put in front of the customer it was Bella Luna, it was me."

00:40:55

Middendorf's is Middendorf's. Horst Pfeifer had to learn Middendorf's. I had to learn to thin-fry it and how to cut it thin. And it's like, when Middendorf's—when we open the door on a

Sunday morning, it's like I tell everybody, it's like jumping on a freight train going 150 miles an hour. You better hold onto it, since it's—you can't—you're just like steering a big tanker, you know. The people—you know, everybody comes here every Sunday. They all have their little rituals and everything and so you just are there and you run around; whatever needs to be done, I'm there. The girls in the kitchen need something. We're just floating around. We have two people, me and somebody else, just going around and helping and checking constantly since so many people walk through here—to make sure that they get the Middendorf's experience.

00:41:44

SR: Yeah, I think that—well, first of all, I was here on a weekday—either a Tuesday or a Thursday—and I could not believe that there were people waiting in line for lunch at 10:30. You open for lunch at 10:30, correct?

00:41:56

HP: Yes.

00:41:58

SR: And then your wife told me—I can't remember what the number was, how many hosts/hostesses you have on, like, let's say a normal Sunday.

00:42:08

HP: On a Sunday we have four or five hostesses.

00:42:11

SR: At one time?

00:42:11

HP: Yeah.

00:42:13

SR: And then two of you walking around?

00:42:15

HP: Yeah, and then we have bussers. It's just—it's the way it has to be. I mean, it has to go fast. The people want it, and you constantly have to look and communicate with the tables since people come in and they'll say, "We have twenty-five," and you have to find a table somehow. And then they have to make it work. And you know, everybody is always on the radio. We're talking to each other. "Who has this table? Who has this table coming up?" We on the floor, we look into the future, an hour, where the next table of, you know—the hostess, they're just bringing, and we tell them, "This table is ready." You need five, you need six, you need seven. And tell them where to sit to make everything run smooth.

00:42:54

SR: How many covers will you do on a typical busy Sunday?

00:42:58

HP: Shew, a lot. We do a—well, a typical, or what's the most? On a typical Sunday we're doing around 2,500 people.

00:43:16

SR: Who are these people? Are they—do they live on the Northshore here, primarily, or—?

00:43:21

HP: No, our customers come—. Like people from Mississippi—Oxford, Jackson—if they go to New Orleans, they'll stop on the way in and they'll stop on the way out. On the way out they'll eat here and take five, six to go. We have older people from Jackson, Mississippi after church. They go on their Sunday drive and end up eating a late lunch or early supper here. Baton Rouge. People from Houston going to Gulf Shores, Alabama or whatever. People who grew up in this area, they're kind of—it's kind of a destination point for people driving through. They'll make a plan when they go from--from Spot A to B. Middendorf's is in the middle somewhere and they'll make a detour or they'll stop by there.

00:44:08

Families that live in Baton Rouge and New Orleans: "Where are we going to meet? Middendorf's." So our local customer base is from Mobile, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi, Baton Rouge, Houma; like people on the Southshore, Lafourche Parish, Houma, Thibodaux—they like to go camping on the Northshore here. On their way out there they'll stop and eat their thin-fried catfish.

00:44:35

SR: You must hear so many stories.

00:44:37

HP: We do hear a lot of stories and it's very unique and very special. And you also not only hear stories; you hear people—you know, it's funny. At Bella Luna we were this fine dining restaurant with people coming in in suits and ties and tuxedos. Well, we see the same customers here, only not in suits and ties. We see them in their flip-flops and coming in with a boat or—. So yes, we see them all.

00:45:01

SR: One of my big questions in thinking about this was, you know, your job was so creative at Bella Luna. The--the cooking part. Like, you were using your hands and creating—you could create something new one day if you felt like it. That's not really an option here. I mean, I--I don't want to put words in your mouth. I see a lot of creativity in this place and what you've done with it, but what would your answer be? Like, what is your outlet now for creativity?

00:45:36

HP: Well, there's still, you know, everybody in their—as we get older, there's a new interest. You're looking at it; yeah, and we're changing also our lifestyles and everything. And you have to be very creative here, and what makes me excited—first, if I want to cook I cook at home or cook for friends. I love to do this. But here, just being creative to work with the people, the customers, be creative to work with our employees. We have a lot of single mothers. You know, being creative with them, educating and teaching them. We have so many women working here

who are single parents, and we're helping them with sending them to schooling or get a ServSafe [certification]—or helping teach them. It takes a lot of creativity to be able to create this. Not only the atmosphere for the customers, but also to make it all. Creating it to make it run smooth together.

00:46:41

Now, Middendorf's—since we talk about the people working here, you know, Middendorf's is not for everybody. It's a very fast pace. And it's--it's hard. It's not for everybody to work here. Since I—when we talk with food people and friends here in the chef business and everything, I said, "A lot of the guys who I had at Bella Luna or you have working in your kitchen, they couldn't cut it here." I have a lady here, Miss Elaine. She's been here for thirty-five years and she's frying the fish. And you know, on a Friday or Saturday she works what we call a double. She's here from 10:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night. And I take my hat off to her, for somebody like this for thirty-five years and is still so focused and dedicated and making sure that every piece of fish is probably the same good quality—maybe even better now than what she did back then. And that's being creative, to keep everybody motivated and doing this. Being creative of keeping everybody going and making it easier for them to work. So that's the outlet of being creative, and it's a wonderful feeling when you see this and you can put it together.

00:47:59

SR: You said that not everybody could cut it here. Did you know that you could?

00:48:06

HP: Well, I never thought of it, since you know sometimes you have to teach yourself. You better learn to love something since you know fighting it doesn't work. You can teach yourself to learn to love something. I love it now. But I had to push myself in the beginning to--to learn to love it, to learn to—. You know, when I—as a kid, my mom and we used to go and eat ice cream, and you didn't have a choice. She just ordered mixed ice cream and you would get a little scoop. The ice cafés where you get the little scoop of European gelatos, they always put some ice-cream in there. You know, and it didn't sell much, so they gave it to you. Well, I got it and I never liked pistachio. So I taught myself: I--I ate the ones I didn't like first, so as a reward I get this—lemon ice was my favorite ice, so I had a scoop of lemon ice at the end. **[*Laughs*]**

00:48:59

But no, what I did, it was a lot of hard push to make sure it all goes right, and you have to be very positive always and tell yourself. Now, it's hard after Friday, Saturday, and Sunday when you really—when we bought it, it was really physically exhausting the first couple months, since we didn't have the comfort with air-conditioning in the kitchen and the environment. So you were exhausted. And then deal with the customer base. We had so many people—. It was hard, so you had to teach yourself. But now with having everything up to the newest equipment and standard—we have an induction cooker here, we have grills and all the stuff here, so it's much easier working, and now it's easy. But in sharing it with the employees and making them part of it—so proud. I mean, as we walk through here and you can see how spotless and how it gets taken care of and everything, it's--it's enjoyable for them to come here. But when I'm not cutting it, it's even hard for waitresses to be here. You know, since you have four tables and it's like—you've seen it on Thursday. And Saturdays; like on Mother's Day and Father's Day, we

open the door at ten o'clock in the morning, and when we open the door at ten o'clock we have a line of 100 people sometimes there.

00:50:15

And by 10:30 the restaurant is full seated with 400 or 500 people here, and we have a line and the line is still at eight o'clock at night. And you walk out there and say—you open your eyes it's like, "Okay."

00:50:31

SR: And I'll say, you know from a customer's perspective, you get your food really quickly. I don't think I've ever had to notice that I've waited at all for my food.

00:50:40

HP: Well, it depends what you order. If you order broiled flounder or something it takes a little bit, or fried whole fish. But like, since eighty-five percent, ninety percent, it's thin-fried catfish, and we have two people just frying catfish.

00:50:54

When you have so many seats, they do not wait until somebody calls, "Oh, I need an order for thin-fried catfish." **[*Laughs*]**

00:51:02

SR: They just keep it going?

00:51:02

HP: They keep it going. **[*Laughs*]**

00:51:05

SR: That makes sense. Yeah, so I did want to ask: First of all, what has your retention been of employees? Particularly, I'm thinking about the kitchen? Like, is the kitchen staffed similarly now to what it was when you got here?

00:51:19

HP: Yeah, there are still a lot of the same people here. The base crew is the same. But you always lose some people, and you win some. You know, we have sometimes students working here and when they graduate from Southeastern they move somewhere else and you lose them. In the summer, we definitely bring some more people in, some young kids/students who come home. The kitchen—you know, the day we bought it, the two previous owners walked out and we walked in and everything stayed the same for the first year until we put computers in. And then we lost two waitresses and somebody in the kitchen. Since we added something to—some people don't like adding, but it's just life. But as you'll notice, there's still some of the same people here, and we have—it's so funny. We have some of them there's like two generations, mother and daughter, mother, daughter, and granddaughter working here. So it's—there's a few family-based cliques in the kitchen or in the front of the house. There's always like two, three people there together. It makes sense. We're ten miles away from anybody, so they'll carpool and drive out here and everything, so it's the way it works.

00:52:30

SR: How many kitchen employees will you have working on a typical busy Sunday?

00:52:37

HP: Well right now, let's say if it's one o'clock, we have five people frying and two people doing the broiling and dessert, and then four people plating up, and two people just make sure all the tickets are in the right order and just make sure they go to the right spot and everything. And then five--six people back of it to make sure everything is stocked. Constantly restocking, yeah.

00:53:02

SR: That many people just restocking?

00:53:05

HP: Yeah.

00:53:05

SR: Like prep cooks and—?

00:53:06

HP: Well, they bring in the clean dishes to the waitress, to the kitchen people, just make sure everything is on path for—

00:53:17

SR: There must be just a huge sigh of relief when you finish the last plate at the end of the day.

00:53:22

HP: Yeah, **[*Laughs*]** but you know what? On Sundays we kind of wind—it winds down here since—at a certain time people don't drive up, so it's kind of you have the hype until like—on Saturdays until like 8:00--8:30, and then it kind of trickles off. And then we have multiple small dining rooms and we shut down one dining room and one dining room. So we also, with the staff, we have out of four people who plate up, we go down to three, two, and then only one. And so they can clean up. They maybe came in early. Same in the morning: we don't start with everybody at once. We bring so many people in, and then two hours later a few more, so it kind of overlaps to be in the crunch time. And then we bring two more people in at two o'clock so employees can take their luncheon and everything. So it's kind of like a lot of planning.

00:54:05

SR: Yeah. So, the food. Middendorf's is known for its catfish, specifically its thin-fried catfish, but you don't only serve that. The menu is actually really big. Can you talk about the menu a little bit?

00:54:23

HP: Well, the menu is big. Well, it started—it basically started with fried seafood. You know, we have fried shrimp, oysters, the thin catfish, and also we have smaller fillets or whole catfish—and it's fried. But then, also, we have broiled items. And then there's combination platters with shrimp, fish, and oysters. We make a crab stuffing. We have beautiful stuffed crabs, and they're in the crab shell with fresh vegetables and herbs and bread and beautiful crabmeat—

claw meat, but it has a nice flavor. We also add some boiled seafood. Now right now it's been so cold, we still don't have a lot of boiled seafood. We have a little shrimp, but crawfish and crabs are still not here. But when they're in season we have crab and crawfish. And then we added a couple salads to it, and being out here, what it used to be a roadhouse diner, you know, you have a few meat items, and we have fried chicken. It's not like we sell a lot, but we have one lady, she comes out and only eats our fried chicken.

00:55:25

Now, I tasted the one and it was actually—I was incredibly surprised, since we get all the natural chicken and we just simply batter it like they used to do it, and so it's not processed. So it has a different flavor to it than when you get it somewhere else. You know, it doesn't have the spiciness. And these roadhouse diners, people always want to add their seasoning to it. That's why we have it on the table. The older people, that's what they like to do.

00:55:51

So it's sometimes hard when people from the city come and say, "Oh, you should have more seasoning on it." Well, we can't. But many people—we do—you have once or twice, you get somebody saying, "Oh, there should be more salt or—." Well, you know, you always can add it, but not take it away. But it's where it comes from, where these people had this neutral seasoned food, fried seafood, and then the people added to it. We also have a beautiful steak. When I bought the place, they had a steak. They had it before, but I said if I sell a steak I don't want any complaints. So we got a beautiful, the nicest steak. I get a Delmonico, ribeye steak. And you know, we don't make money on it, but I don't want [them] to complain either, about the steak and coming out here. We're not a steakhouse, but we sell one, two cases a week and call it a day. We're a catfish house, and that's what we have.

00:56:43

We have also our homemade desserts, which was added to it, and we added quite a bit to it and vegetables and everything. So everybody can find something. But it's hard when somebody comes out and they're allergic to seafood and want us to change. I say, "Listen, seafood is everywhere here."

00:57:05

SR: Well I had a friend in town this past weekend who developed a shellfish allergy when she turned thirty, and I had a really hard time taking her to eat in New Orleans because places—even if you didn't order a shellfish dish, they spent time in the same fryer as the shellfish. But you were telling me about your fryer situation. How many fryers do you have?

00:57:27

HP: Thirteen. I never thought I would own thirteen fryers in my life. **[*Laughs*]**

00:57:33

SR: And you fry things separately, correct?

00:57:35

HP: Yes, every fryer is different. You know, this is for hushpuppies, this is for soft-shell crab, this is for the fried chicken, this is for French fries. And then the catfish and the shrimp and oysters. We don't mix them. But if somebody has an allergy, I mean something could fall in. You can't--you can't take a guarantee on it, but we don't mix it.

00:57:54

When I had Bella Luna and you had this fancy chef and, yes, we have one fryer. I learned so much here even when I realized—you know, frying, it's an art. And then—and you do notice the difference if you put everything in the same fryer. I didn't notice when I was this fancy chef with Bella Luna. You know, we had our soft-shell crab in there and then dumped something else in there—that's fine. You taste the difference of how clean our food tastes from not being in the same fryer. It's incredible.

00:58:24

So I--I learned this and see it now why—. And a lot of us in the city may go to restaurants like this and maybe don't notice it, but the people out here who wouldn't come—a certain percentage of this restaurant, people who came here never came to Bella Luna probably. But if they would have come there and they would have had some fried seafood, they would notice we had everything in the same fryer since they know how it's supposed to be. And it's so unique because people who come here all their life, they know exactly how it's supposed to be and how it is.

00:59:00

SR: Were there thirteen fryers here when you bought the place?

00:59:04

HP: Well they were in each restaurant. Since there were two restaurants, it was not as full. They actually had more but they were smaller. They had nine here and nine in the other one, so they had smaller ones.

00:59:19

SR: Do you use the same kind of oil for every--every fryer?

00:59:22

HP: Yeah, it's the same oil. It's canola oil, vegetable oil. We definitely don't use peanut oil. First, it's expensive, and the flavor, and there's more allergies with peanut. As long as the vegetable oil—it works. It's more about *handling* the seafood, you know, and not mixing it. And our batter is so light, or the dust we put on it is so light, there's no—it's not serving oil on everything. So that's more the secret than the oil itself.

00:59:51

SR: What can you tell me about the batter?

00:59:53

HP: Well, all we do is—probably you know a lot of places—. Our place was built in 1934 during the real tough times, the Depression, where people didn't have money, so it's more like a poor man's breading. It just is soaked—everything is soaked in a light salt brine and then lightly dusted. Now, on the soft-shell we put a little bit of egg wash on it, but nothing has an egg—nothing is double-battered. Not flour, egg wash, bread crumbs. But fancy chefs like I used to do, it's how we were taught and made. But you don't—this way there's not a big heavy flouring and breading on our fish, and that's why it's so light.

01:00:32

The one thing that's different, the people out here or who come to diners like this or catfish houses, they like all their seafood a little bit more fried, more crispier than when I was at Bella Luna. I wanted my soft-shell real nice and moist inside. You know, crisp but moist. They like even—they don't want too much of the moistness, and they want it real crunchy sometimes.

01:00:58

SR: Is your batter flour? I mean, can you tell me about the recipe or not?

01:01:03

HP: It's just a corn product. Cornmeal/corn flour mixture we make.

01:01:07

SR: Okay. And where do you source your seafood?

01:01:11

HP: Well, right now in the winter we get a little bit—we have two people catching crabs, and--and in the winter since there's no crabs they're catching catfish. So I get a little bit of wild catfish in the winter here. But there's not enough [wild] catfish out there to supply Middendorf's. And the fishermen, there's not enough of them to catch them. They don't want to deal with it. I get some farm-raised catfish out of Mississippi. There's no secret. You need farming, and as you work and work with the farmers, you know we all can create a better product and help everybody and protect the wildlife, since when we get a big storm sometimes it kills all the fish. It's just life: farms.

01:01:53

SR: If you have a bunch of wild catfish, do your customers know?

01:01:58

HP: Well, you have to be more—actually more careful with it, since some people, they don't—. The wild catfish, it's--it's every fish is different. You know, the way it ate, what it ate, the consistency of the flesh, how it died. When I'm cutting them and I have 100 fillets, you could make piles of so many and each would be different.

01:02:29

No, you couldn't taste it. When you cut it so thin and bread it, they couldn't tell. But I have to pick out the right ones for which ones I'll use when I'm cutting them—use them for the thick catfish, the way we make them thicker, or the thin one, since you wouldn't notice. Sometimes the wild catfish, it's too lean, it's too tough, and so I have to use them for something else. So when you have a farm-raised product, at least you get a consistency, and the customer is demanding it these days. You know, it—as much as we would love the wild—but if we kill everything in the wild, there wouldn't be any wildlife out there anymore.

01:03:01

SR: No. I was just—yeah, I was just wondering if it's requested or if people notice, like, "Oh, right, this is—I got a wild batch." I know I couldn't tell.

01:03:10

HP: No, you couldn't tell. You couldn't tell. After it's seasoned, and especially fried and thin-cut, you couldn't tell.

01:03:16

SR: And so did the previous owners get their fish from the same farm?

01:03:21

HP: No. There was a different farm. They got it out of the Delta. I'm getting it now more out of the limestone bed. North, more northeast of the Delta, where they have different ponds a little bit. It's a cleaner fish.

01:03:38

SR: So that must also be like a real learning experience.

01:03:44

HP: Oh—

01:03:45

SR: In aquaculture.

01:03:46

HP: Well, absolutely. For me to learn everything about catfish. And I thought, you know, catfish is catfish. And that's what everybody thinks when they're talking to me, and I say, "No."

I mean it's changed, and as the season changes and the animals eat more or less, it changes how we process. Even if it looks for the customer the same, it changes the cutting. You know, how much fat is in the fish, how much—it just, that definitely changes how we process the fish and which temperature we process them. And sometimes there's a lot of fat in there. We don't want it ice-cold; we want it a little bit warmer to—the knife goes through better. And it's hard sometimes.

01:04:25

SR: So when you get the fish from the farm, does it come in whole or do they—?

01:04:30

HP: No, fillets.

01:04:31

SR: They fillet it?

01:04:31

HP: Yeah, and it's the way—the right thing to do, since if we would get them whole, the crew of cleaning, skinning, the mess. Now, if they're—if I get fillets and they're processed there, they're--they're rendering and they're recycling all the byproducts. At least when we harvest now something on the farm, we use everything. If you turn in the leftovers, they'll boil them out and harvest the oil for making bio-diesel. Everything is usable. That's the nice thing when we farm-raise something: at least we use everything. The wild—you know, what are we going to do

with the heads and everything we have here? We put them in crab traps, but you only can put so many crab traps—.

01:05:13

SR: How many pounds of fish do you get a week?

01:05:17

HP: We get roughly 2,000 pounds of filets.

01:05:25

SR: Does that farm sell to anybody else?

01:05:28

HP: Oh yeah. In Mississippi there's a lot of—. I think this country is producing like 350 million pounds or tons a year. I forgot. You have to look it up. You have to ask the Catfish Institute. But it used to be double the amount. And then you know, a lot of farms closed and they brought the imports in there. It used to be double the amount of catfish being harvested and grown in this country.

01:05:56

SR: And that much is gotten from overseas or—?

01:05:59

HP: Yes, overseas, and some people got out of farming. You know, as soon as we turned food into fuel, like when the corn turned into ethanol and it made the feed prices go up. People—and you need a lot of feed. Now even for raising fish, it's the most economic animal to turn feed into a protein. For every pound—for every pound of feed, you get a half a pound of flesh. Compared to if you do chicken, you get—for every pound, you need like three pounds of corn, or almost four pounds of corn, to get one pound of chicken. With catfish, you need two pounds to get one pound. And cattle, you need eighteen to twenty pounds of corn to get one pound of feed or whatever. So in—and as people—you know, you can't have everything on a pasture. It's the people—it's not going to work all the way. We need to give them grain a little bit. People like the flavor.

01:07:02

SR: What about your shrimp and your oysters? Where do you get them?

01:07:05

HP: This comes all local. The oysters we shuck up here in Hammond, but they're coming—where we can harvest them. East, west. It depends which area is open ,where can oyster, but they're shucking them for me. And the shrimp is local also and depends on the season. Sometimes I have to buy a whole bunch and then store it, since if the season is hard. And that sometimes is the hardest part: to be fair to the customers and--and the farmers, or—. The customers don't realize it, you know.

01:07:42

I can't raise prices every week since the market changed on shrimp and everything. You know right, now we know our price has been the same and the shrimp almost doubled with all the things when last season was bad. Plus they brought imported in, so everybody had to buy local. So hopefully in April we'll get a good season. And then when April and May—I'll probably buy enough of the smaller cocktail shrimp and everything to last me until October. So you have to do it, be able to--to produce something for the customer for a price point. The shrimp season is not all the time, you know. There's a season. People think it's every day; it's not there. But it's a way of processing it and--and keeping it, you know, in this time and age.

01:08:32

SR: Is that true of oysters as well?

01:08:34

HP: Well, oysters, you do see a little bit of different—no, you can get them pretty much all year round. But you see a change in the quality and size. Then you just need one little incident like BP, or another thing will be probably what I have to look for: we have all this snow in the North right now. If all this snow is melting and dumps all this water with all the nutrients and fertilizer into the Gulf of Mexico, it sometimes has an impact. They [the oyster beds] may be closed in certain areas. So we--we don't know how it can impact it. But I can see all this happening. You know with BP, there was no oysters available for a little while. [Interviewer's note: by "BP," he means the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010.]

01:09:23

SR: What about, I'm a—I've been a big fan of the gumbo here for a long time. The crab gumbo is the one I get. You have two gumbos on the menu, is that right?

01:09:31

HP: Well, we have a shrimp and a crab gumbo, and also we have a turtle soup. That's one thing we added. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah, we added the turtle soup and people are real excited about it.

01:09:40

SR: So that--that's funny. That snuck by me because it's such a traditional dish that—. So you're, like, innovating by going old-school?

01:09:49

HP: Yes. And it's what out here—I mean the people, that's where—. Actually, my neighbor, for Father's Day last year his kids, they caught him two big snapping turtles. And he was the happiest daddy in the world to get two snappers so he can make all these turtle recipes and everything.

01:10:05

SR: Do you make your turtle soup with turtle meat?

01:10:07

HP: Yes, we get turtle meat. And the same there: you know, there's a lot of people down here harvesting turtle, and then in the spring/summer months they're traveling north to collect the--the

turtles, and in the fall they're coming back here. And then you buy the turtle meat and and then make turtle soup.

01:10:26

SR: How did you make the decision to add that item in particular?

01:10:30

HP: Well, we were looking for another soup besides the gumbo and everything, and you know we tried different things—shrimp bisque—and the turtle soup felt like more of the area where we were. And it's nice for the people, then, to get a bottle of sherry and get sherry [poured over the soup]. There's something a little bit special for them.

01:10:46

SR: The gumbo makes me think: you know, gumbo is so—gumbo is something that customers will really notice if it's different, right? Is the gumbo the same as it was when you bought the place?

01:11:00

HP: Well, no. And like--like gumbos, you can go to New Orleans and drive down the same street and eat the gumbo in every restaurant and every gumbo tastes a little bit different. Eventually you find one where people like it. When we did it—and is it for everybody? Well, everybody thinks their mother's is the best gumbo. Well, you know the gumbos, jambalaya, all these things in this area, everybody has their own little secret recipe.

01:11:29

SR: I guess—I mean, I was wondering—I was trying to get at: Did you get recipes when you opened this restaurant, or did you—was it mostly that you got employees with technique in their hands? Or, how did that work?

01:11:43

HP: Well, we did get some recipes, and then we adapted them to the new procedures and to things we did—from our barbeque sauce, tartar sauce, and stuff like this. We have these recipes—and the stuffing—and we just tweaked them a little bit to make them more uniform, to make them easier for the employees and everything, and maybe changed a few little ingredients to add a little bit, too, with my background. To add more—.

01:12:11

Also maybe add to them a little bit a new update to it. A little bit more—little bit more parsley, and make it fresher and a little bit more of that. So something like this.

01:12:23

SR: What did I—oh, I wrote down the "whole fried catfish," which I've never had here. What kind of person orders that?

01:12:30

HP: The people who really want like in the old days would want the catfish flavor. When I was—I forget sometimes how good our catfish is, since it doesn't taste like catfish, you know.

When you—people, when I go to a food show, and they say, "Oh, try my catfish." And you go there and they have this big piece of fillet and you break a piece up and you say, "Okay, yeah. Now I know why people like our catfish." It's not like you ate a spoon of mud.

01:12:56

The catfish industry also is changing. They're doing flavor testing and everything before they harvest a pond now, and that's when you get a whole catfish you get this rich flavor. It's like when you cook a steak on the bone, or anything you cook with bone. You know, the chicken thigh meat tastes different when you cook it on the bone than when you have it deboned and everything. Or the breast. Cooking a chicken breast on the bone and having it totally deboned tastes different. So that's how catfish would taste: you get a richer flavor. Is it for everybody? Not for everybody, since we don't sell this many. But people love it since it's a big fish, and they love it. And it peels off, and that's what they like—and the moisture in there. But people, why they come here: since they eat catfish and it doesn't taste like catfish.

01:13:47

SR: Can you tell me anything about the technique of cutting it so thinly?

01:13:53

HP: Well it—I would say, first, it probably comes historically, in the old days they probably—the reason why they maybe started it is nobody likes the big catfish, since they taste real strong. So I think that's when they started cutting it thin, and cut all the blood line and the fat off, and that's how it always was. And when I came here we had two ladies out there taking all the fat, the blood line off, and cutting it. And Karen learned it too, my wife, how to do all this.

01:14:24

SR: Really?

01:14:24

HP: Yeah. I mean, it's the backbone. That's what Middendorf's is. I mean there was a couple times when we were closed on Mondays and Tuesdays and Karen and I came down here just to make sure we get better at it and learn it.

01:14:36

SR: And do you cut it that thinly just with a knife? And when the fish is fresh or—?

01:14:41

HP: Like I told you earlier, it has to be the right temperature, and it changes with the season. You know, like I told you earlier, sometimes—the toughest time is if it's in the fall when they get—when they're real fatty or meaty, and it's a little bit more—. They're almost like—it gets real hard and it cakes your knife up and everything.

01:15:00

No, this—it just is a lot of work, and that's what people don't realize.

01:15:08

SR: And now Karen was telling me about how you have a product now that you're selling to supermarkets.

01:15:16

HP: Well, with my background, when I bought Middendorf's I invented the piece of equipment where I can produce it to sell it to market, yes.

01:15:27

SR: And how does that work? Is it a frozen product?

01:15:31

HP: Yes, it would be. It's frozen. It comes in little slices and in boxes and they can put their own flavors on it and bread it how they want it. But everybody comes back to Middendorf's, since when you have such a thin piece of fish and people put some fry meal on it and it has a lot of salt and everything, it really ruins it. Our sweet corn breading we have on it, it just fits perfect for this thin sliver of fish.

01:15:5

SR: Yeah. I have to say that you said that there isn't much seasoning in it, but I've never noticed that it was lacking.

01:16:04

HP: Well, it depends where you come from. And when people come from New Orleans and they go somewhere and people have their Louisiana fish fry on it where it has a lot of flavor, and they'll come out here and expect the same. It's not. We just—we don't. We just have saltwater

and then the meal on it. And then you can add it to it. But it's the combination when you bite into it and you have this nice little sliver of white fish in there and the golden crust on the outside, and then you can dip it in your tartar or cocktail sauce or put the hot sauce on. That's what it was.

01:16:37

Like I said, once in a while somebody said, "Oh, you should have more flavor." Well, that's Middendorf's. You know, it's not about it's right or wrong. It's not bad. It just is how we are now. I cannot add for you more flavor to it since you're the only one. The other people like how it is.

01:16:55

SR: So the product—so I didn't know it wasn't breaded, the product. I haven't seen the product in the grocery store.

01:16:59

HP: It's—

01:17:01

SR: So it's not breaded. It's something—it's the fish, and it's cut how you cut your fish, and that's what makes it Middendorf's?

01:17:06

HP: Yes, it's called Middendorf's Cut. M-Cut, we're calling it. It's raw right now, but also I'm working on the process of breading it and par-frying it, so you would be able to get it and put it on a cookie tray and put it in your oven at 375 [degrees] for fifteen minutes and you would have the same Middendorf's at home. And this whole idea comes from all the people from Mississippi, since like I said, when they go to New Orleans and they leave New Orleans and drive back home to Oxford or Jackson, they'll stop here. They order one here, and then they'll always order three, four, five of them—and they call them "soft-fried." It means not crispy. They'll just drop them in for sixty seconds so it's still really—it's cooked but flimsy. And then they'll take it home and they'll put it on their cookie tray and then fifteen minutes later they have crispy Middendorf's catfish. And that's where the idea came from, and said, "Man—." Earlier you asked me about being creative. Able to do something that is creative. If I can pull this off, the Middendorf's thin-cut and then bread it and sell it, it's being creative to help the farmers, to help the catfish industry to make a more attractive catfish. Since it's kind of—on the protein side, it kind of looked not so pretty at you know. And so it's time for the catfish industry to—with checking flavors and make sure they have flavor. Meaning it doesn't taste dirty or whatever and has a clean flavor. So the farmers themselves, before they harvest the pond they're catching fish already and then they're cutting it and cooking it. And in all the processes they have a room where somebody is in there and they're cooking a piece, smelling it, tasting it, and then they're rating a scoring sheet, and then they'll see if they're going to harvest this pond or not.

01:19:00

They're taking three samples out, every week a sample, before they would harvest, and if it's not on flavor, then they're not going to harvest this pond. Then they add more oxygen or whatever just to work with the pond to get it—to make it taste right. And the farmers do a lot

already. I was visiting two weeks ago a plant and looking at it, and right now in the winter the—you know, it's pretty clean, but there's still one out of the three ponds is not on flavor and so they're not harvesting it. So they'll go back into the recycling and they'll maybe go back to them in three months. And then they'll taste them again.

01:19:40

So starting there, and then with their fish sometimes—. Everybody wants the small little fillets, and sometimes there's big fish, so that's where the Middendorf's would come in. And it would help the farmers to sell some of the big fish, to make a quality product and make it attractive for other people.

01:19:57

SR: I suppose, like, it's not necessarily limited to supermarkets. Could restaurants buy that fish?

01:20:03

HP: Oh, absolutely. We have some restaurants getting it already. But like I said, we're not making it a big thing out of it yet. It's very good, but we're still in the development stage, since I realized, as you see when we're frying, it's a lot of work. Taking these little slivers and bread them and fry them. And we have two people doing it all day long, but it's all what we sell. And I realize not every restaurant can do it, and so I realized I have to produce the breaded product also to please some restaurants, or people who wouldn't be able to handle it and they want it. Since the last thing is you want to put something out there, and then the people don't succeed with it real well, so I want to give them the option. As soon as I have the breaded—what we call par-fried—ready, then I would make a big deal out of it and let everybody know it. But I have to—I

realized when I—. You know, I thought, "I have the raw product and I have it made and it's fine." And I realized, well, you have to make it easier for the end consumer, for the restaurants, too. Some people, they are small, maybe a small mom-and-pop restaurant. They can't have just one person frying there, since it's not all they use, but they would love to have it.

01:21:16

And so I want to be able to have both options before we really let everybody know we have it out there. But it's available, and some of the supermarkets, they have it on their Friday deli special. They have the Middendorf's in certain areas, regional, yeah.

01:21:32

SR: I'm going to be on the lookout for that. If a restaurant used it, would they call it Middendorf's catfish on their menu?

01:21:37

HP: It would be up to them. They can call it the Middendorf's Cut or Middendorf's thin-fried, yes, since when you put your name on it, I would say—. But some people want to make it their own probably. And they will maybe want to put their own breading on and everything, but everybody sometimes goes back to our breading since it's so neutral. Then you can make all these fancy sauces. And I think even for nicer restaurants who want to make a daily luncheon special—you know, just a plain crisp beautiful pile of thin-fried catfish. And then all the other little sauces would be something unique and special.

01:22:17

SR: I can see what you mean: how you still are leading a creative life.

01:22:20

HP: Yeah, yeah, it is creative. **[*Laughs*]** And you have to be creative to keep you going, you know. You have to have goals, and then so it's neat and challenges.

01:22:29

SR: It--it strikes me—I hadn't thought of this before, but had you eaten here before you were approached about buying this place?

01:22:37

HP: No. **[*Laughs*]** I ate the day before we put an offer in, the day we came out and looked at it. Because we had never been here. We just heard of it. **[*Laughs*]**

01:22:48

SR: I can add—hopefully the previous owners will speak to me as well, but I'm wondering how did they even—. Had they heard you were looking for a restaurant, or how did this meeting even happen?

01:22:59

HP: Through a friend. Somehow a friend made connections and they knew I was out there. They knew I was looking and everything, yes, but I never ate here. I heard about the place and--and it's—the rest is history.

01:23:14

SR: And now you live over here, right?

01:23:15

HP: Yes. Well, when you're here—like I told you earlier, you know, you have to learn to love something. But also, wherever you make a living and you want to be successful, you have to be there. You have to get involved and doing—and that's what Karen—we are. We're involved with the community, we're involved with the employees, we are involved with where we are. And that's what makes you successful. Just buying somewhere or opening a business and not being involved, that—sometimes people would look at you weird and you get a better feel for it, when you're part of it.

01:23:45

But also, you know, I lived in the Quarter. And when you don't make a living in the Quarter anymore—like, since I don't have Bella Luna anymore—and then being out here and you commute into the Quarter and you commute out, it's harder for you to deal with the challenges every day. When I made a living there, I may give every crazy person in the street in the Quarter an excuse for it, and I was fine with it. But when you're not there and making a living, and be there every day just driving in and sleeping, it's—it doesn't work. Now I love the Quarter, but it just doesn't work for my life right now.

01:24:25

SR: I can see that. And so Karen has kind of like come full circle, coming back to the seafood restaurant, but you've also come back to a small town existence.

01:24:33

HP: Right, and farming, and want to do stuff like this. And so, yeah, it's a—it's a wild ride, I tell everybody, and I don't know how to describe it. I tried to come up with the word what it is, going full circle like this.

01:24:49

SR: Do you do any growing?

01:24:50

HP: Yes, I have a big garden at home, and I grow more than I can eat at home. And I said, "But I like to grow," and I just—I plant stuff we use here, so I have like fifty tomato plants, you know, and then—. But it's—. Last year—. I like to grow vegetables, or tomatoes. I like the Green Zebras, the Crimson Tide, all these heirloom tomatoes. And one year you have a good year and the next year you don't have a good year, for the seeds.

01:25:22

And but it's a funny: we make a salad here, and I bring all these exotic tomatoes in and we--we cut them up and put them in a salad here and the say, "Hey, there's a green tomato." And **[*Laughs*]** it's funny, so I let the employees eat them. So, no. I grow, like in the fall I put my broccoli and cauliflower in, and eggplant and--and cabbage and everything. And we use it here. It's not much, but at least it's my garden. And since I can't eat all the tomatoes and broccoli and

cauliflower at home, you know. I love it, but I can't eat as much. But at least I use my garden, and I love to do this.

01:25:54

SR: That's really nice. And you have—so, you have—can you tell us about your chicken coop? Because it's exquisite.

01:26:00

HP: You like it?

01:26:01

SR: Yeah, I do.

01:26:02

HP: I think everybody should have a chicken coop like this. It looks wicked.

01:26:06

SR: Can you describe it?

01:26:07

HP: Well, I wanted something that somebody else didn't have, you know, so I took a piece of cardboard and I built this Harry-Potter-wicked-witch-looking house. It was real crooked. Every—there's nothing at a right angle. And then I could—so I made it out of cardboard, and I

got the carpenters out here and said, "Listen. I want to build this." And so they started measuring and I said, "Listen. You can't measure this. There's nothing in ninety degree angles. Just build it. It will be fine."

01:26:35

Well, we built the first one at home to see if they can build it before we built it here.

01:26:40

SR: An actual one or a cardboard one?

01:26:42

HP: The same one, same one. So we built one at home and it came out good. And this one was just the second one, and it looks awesome. It just looks—the kids love it. They think it's a playhouse and it's not. It's for the chickens. You know, if the chickens are happy your eggs taste better and everything. So we have chickens and guineas and geese and ducks, and so they live in there and it's neat. Every morning I come down here and feed all my critters I have here, with a little animal kingdom here. And so, yes, it's full cycles. Growing up on a farm—and we don't have cattle and pigs here. We don't need this, but—not yet. **[*Laughs*]**

01:27:20

SR: Do you use the eggs? Is there something on the menu that uses eggs?

01:27:25

HP: We--we use the eggs. Yeah, we use them for the egg wash, and we make bread pudding. We make ice cream and stuff, but here is the unique thing: when the recipe had written—it said how many eggs to put in there. And I have all different varieties of chicken, so being creative I have to teach then my girls in the kitchen who do the prep. I said, "You know, baking is chemistry, and you have to weigh everything," since one time she made the bread pudding and it didn't cook right, didn't chill. It was liquid since my chicken eggs—well, one is a little bit smaller than the one we always get uniform from the store.

01:28:02

So I said, "Listen, okay, that's what happened probably." It took me a little while to figure out. I said, "You used my chicken eggs, the yard eggs?" "Yeah, yeah, yeah." I said, "Okay." I said, "Why don't you weigh them?" So I showed her. So things like this, creative and teaching, is also wonderful things. So she realized if we buy the big large ones we normally we use, we use twenty-two eggs in this recipe for the bread pudding. And if she uses my Araucana eggs and everything else, she needs thirty-three eggs. And it makes a big difference, since the recipe didn't work out.

01:28:38

SR: Was your mom a creative cook?

01:28:42

HP: Well, my mom was a cook. Creative? she was a very good cook, but I think when you grow up, you know, you have farming and gardening and everything we did, it's more about getting a meal on the table every day. She was very creative—I mean, she learned cooking and everything.

We slaughtered our own pigs. We had our own chickens, our rabbits. You had your typical German dishes, you know. We had our schnitzel, we had our, sauerbraten, and sometimes we had this sweet and sour sauce—sauerbraten, the red wine and the vinegar. We put it in our rabbit. We—sausages, you know. Every—the lunch was the big meal, the warm meal, and for dinner you always had cold cuts. Just bread and cold cuts and fresh tomatoes, and sometimes you just boiled potatoes and sour milk. It was good, especially in the summer.

01:29:39

You can't do this anymore. We had cattle. So what you did was like fermenting. You know, like wine, sour wine—it's grape juice. People don't think of it this way. Sauerkraut is fermented cabbage. When we had, sometimes in the summer when you worked a lot, we just had some baked potatoes and we had some of the milk from the day before and we put it in the certain spot to get the right thing, and it was so refreshing. We made our own butter and cottage cheese and everything. And so we had a lot of stuff.

01:30:12

SR: It's probably been a while since you had potatoes and sour milk.

01:30:16

HP: Yes. When I was a kid it was not my favorite. Now I would love it. **[*Laughs*]**

01:30:21

SR: Did your mom—I mean, I'm just trying to get at like what excited you about cooking, if you were just sort of wired that way or if she—. Did she enjoy cooking?

01:30:28

HP: Well like I said, when I was ten years old my younger brother was born, so I was the one who had to babysit him at home. And from heating up the meals and everything, I was kind of pushed in this--this little situation. And so I felt comfortable cooking and doing stuff, so I always loved to do it. And at first it—for a ten-year-old, your parents need to help you? This was wonderful. You know, at ten years you still listen to your parents. Don't ask me when they're fourteen, fifteen. So but then I had to make a decision and say, "Why don't you study this and become a chef?" So that's what I did.

01:31:01

SR: What did your brother do?

01:31:03

HP: My younger brother is a butcher. So growing up on the farm, that's what we did. He stayed at home and he has the family land and farm, and--and he's a big—became a butcher in a small butchery there that feeds the whole little town. They'll slaughter ten pigs a week and make sausage and everything out of it.

01:31:25

SR: That's--that's fascinating to me. Do you go back?

01:31:27

HP: I go every year. I mean my parents—everybody is there, and we go every, every year in June/July, we go over there.

01:31:33

SR: Your parents are alive?

01:31:34

HP: My ma is still alive. My dad sadly passed away the day I flooded in Isaac. It was a sad moment. I couldn't even go there.

01:31:43

SR: I'm sorry to hear that.

01:31:44

HP: But I was able to say good-bye since he—I was there in June, and we knew he—we found out that he was real ill, and he didn't want to—. He had a wonderful life, and you know it's nice when you can make your own decisions, and he made his decision, and he didn't go to the hospital. And it's sad but it's wonderful since he said, "Horst, at eighty-five, if I go in the hospital it's not going to work." So if you're able to say good-bye and everybody can prepare, it's okay.

01:32:16

SR: What did he do after he stopped farming?

01:32:22

HP: Well, he worked in the factory and made furniture. I mean, he—we had the farm. So he lived all his life off the farm, but then at forty-five, fifty years, he can—there was a factory in our area and he worked. We still—he still farmed until he was seventy years old, just part-time. Not as much anymore, just able to mow the fields and make the hay and had a few animals at home and everything. But we didn't—you couldn't make a living anymore. He had to start working.

01:32:53

SR: Karen did tell me that you're sort of the animal rescuer around here.

01:32:58

HP: **[*Laughs*]** Oh yeah. Well, where we are, you know we get a lot of animals, sometimes dropped off. But also I took on the challenge, since we bought Middendorf's. There's so many cats out here. You know the sad part: people don't take care of their animals. The first thing when you adopt an animal is get one—get it fixed. There's so many out there. And adopt animals; don't buy one.

01:33:19

So when I came here—I have been here now for six years, almost seven, and I probably caught sixty, seventy cats and got them all fixed. I'm so proud to say we never reproduced any kittens at Middendorf's since I've been here. **[*Laughs*]**

01:33:35

SR: Really?

01:33:35

HP: But we still have twenty cats. **[*Laughs*]** And—

01:33:39

SR: And you're keeping some vet in business, I think.

01:33:41

HP: Yeah. Actually, I'm very lucky to meet the vet who helps me out, helping fixing them, since the first cat I brought to a vet I didn't—it was a very expensive lesson, you know, for stray animals to have to totally take care of them. So he does it at home in his garage fixing them, and it's not as an expensive lesson.

01:34:03

But I rescued an animal this morning I want to show you. I don't even know what it is. It's a strange little bird. It's—hold on. Look. What's this?

01:34:23

SR: Oh, wow.

01:34:25

HP: He was—I think he migrates through here, and it's when he stands up.

01:34:31

SR: Oh wow.

01:34:31

HP: He's just—

01:34:32

SR: So his neck is always in that position?

01:34:35

HP: No, it's—he normally stands up like this.

01:34:37

SR: I see, okay.

01:34:38

HP: Just right now he's staring me down. He's scared. I don't know what it is.

01:34:42

SR: I've never seen that.

01:34:41

HP: Look at his eyes, how he looks—but it's a long beak, and he comes after—. When I came this morning I fed the cats—

01:34:49

SR: Was it here at the restaurant?

01:34:50

HP: Yeah, this morning. And then I--I think a cat got him and dragged him here. But he's not hurt. He got with the beak after the cat, and so they must have let him go. And so when I came, he came after me and I caught him and brought him out here where it's fenced in, and I put him out there and gave him a little protein, a little piece, since he looks like an animal who eats bugs or worms. And he was stressed out. But he must have flew off. He rested. I can't find him anymore. And then the last one we—

01:35:20

SR: Oh, he has a big beak and a long neck and bugged out eyes.

01:35:25

HP: He is a crazy little critter. I don't know. And hold on. You see our other ones.

01:35:31

SR: Did you catch him with your hands?

01:35:32

HP: Yeah. Hold on. I have to show you Lucky. He was my last rescue. That's Lucky the duck.

01:35:40

SR: He's so cute. Is he out there?

01:35:41

HP: Yeah, he's out there.

01:35:44

SR: And I've heard that you also caught alligators?

01:35:46

HP: Yeah, we had a couple alligators, but you don't want to catch them if they're longer than five feet.

01:35:53

SR: You didn't have those in Germany?

01:35:55

HP: No, I didn't know it until I came here. I didn't know. And so they were—sometimes out here you end up with stuff, catch them and bring them across and let them go.

01:36:04

SR: It sort of feels like you're predestined to be out here in the wild.

01:36:10

HP: I don't know. It looks like it. **[*Laughs*]**

01:36:13

SR: I'm not going to keep you very much longer, but it does strike me that I haven't talked to you about the outdoor area. So that—as a customer, that was a big change for me because it happened in time for me to have a kid, and it's way more pleasant to dine with a child who can, like, go play in a sandbox. But did you always know you wanted to have the outdoor area, and how did that come about?

01:36:36

HP: Well, when we bought Middendorf's there was nothing outdoor on this side, but there was the waterfront, and we always felt like it should be utilized. So we always thought of the area of having a deck for the adults to be there. But then we realized how many families and kids come here, and that's when it kind of like fell together. And it's so wonderful where the people or the parents can sit out there, eat on the deck or on the porch, and watch their kids play in the sand. And so you know, sitting inside you have to tell them to be quiet—don't do this, don't do this—and so it's really—. We're going to open that when the temperature is the right temperature, and it's so wonderful then to be able to be out there and play and enjoy it. And parents have a nice evening.

01:37:22

We have actually people coming on Saturday afternoon—or Sunday afternoon—and making like a late lunch or early supper, and they'll bring a—they'll bring their pajamas and a towel and they'll let the kids play. And then we have an outside area where they can hose them off, and they'll dry them off and put their pajamas on them and put them in the car and drive home and put them to bed.

01:37:41

So it's a wonderful thing for the parents: the kids get worn out. They'll sleep until they're home and they don't have to fight them. They can put them in bed and it's done.

01:37:49

SR: That's brilliant. I need to do that.

01:37:51

HP: Yeah. And on Wednesday and Thursday, we sometimes get people here, since we have the same sand area and the water fountain out there and fishing—"Wishing Well," we call it—where the kids can play. And so they'll come down and hang out here and have their lunch and let the kids play a couple hours in the summer. So it's neat.

01:38:10

SR: And it's—there's a lot of art. There's a lot of art on this property. Murals and--and your coop. And somebody was painting a mural out on the—in there. I mean, that I guess comes from you, too.

01:38:28

HP: Well, it comes from us to make it—make it look attractive. And there's certain ways you can make it attractive and use local artists or creative people to make it all work together. I will be the person in the way who knows the fuctuality and how it has to all work together and safety and everything else. You know, like when you look at the mural over there we painted, and there's a ramp. So I told the artist, "We need the sign on here, 'do not run on the ramp,' for the kids running in circles. So everything, we always kind of blend together being creative, functional, and--and to blend in to work it. And that's--and that's the creative idea, for me to move forward how it all works.

01:39:12

SR: And the train set, too.

01:39:14

HP: Yes. That's something that was Karen's Christmas. She wanted a little train for Christmas on this little roof. And you know, it's a guy thing. You go to the train store and then started a little train and you end up with the railroad. **[*Laughs*]**

01:39:29

SR: Right, there is a railroad in the dining room.

01:39:31

HP: In the dining room through the tree through the house and back out. **[*Laughs*]** But it was a challenge, but challenge is like you know that's what we need to keep--you know we all want challenges. You don't want to say oh, I don't want to do it; that's wrong. You always want to do something that makes you better. And you know it makes me so happy when I see it in the customers and the kids seeing it. They're fascinated. When the bartender turns down every half an hour or whatever or when they ask for it and the horn goes off and like they're amazed, everybody.

01:40:03

SR: I haven't seen it working yet, but I look forward to it. Do you have—you know, Karen told me a lot of stories—not recorded; just in conversation—about some of her favorite, most touching, customer moments. Stories of customers—you know, customers would tell stories about what this restaurant means to them, or thanking you for revitalizing the place and rebuilding after floods. Do you have a favorite customer moment?

01:40:31

HP: Well, Karen is more involved in the front with the customers. There's nothing coming in my head right now. I, just when I hear the compliments we get— "Thank you for not changing anything"—and you look around and say, "You know, we actually did a lot." But that sticks in my head, them respecting us for what we did and the honesty and everything. That--that's my favorite moment, you know. That's not individual stories, but it's when a lot of people tell you this, that makes me feel I do the right thing.

01:41:07

SR: It would be rewarding. Was there ever a moment—I mean, I know you said that in the beginning you had to learn to love the place. But after the two floods, were there any moments where you sat down and thought you might not rebuild?

01:41:23

HP: Not at the moment there. You always question yourself: "What happens if it's coming again?" Now, in Isaac, 2012, when I was in here and we see the dam breaking and the water gushing in here, and in like five minutes we had water down there, and you're standing there and you can't even pick up the t-shirt and you said—you know, tears come in your eyes and you're like—. You can't describe it. It's like the pain, the—how it—what you feel at this moment, the emptiness and everything, it's hard. Do you think about rebuilding this moment? You don't know what to think at this moment, when--when you stand there and immediately you have water up to your knees.

01:42:14

Afterwards, at least I got right away and the thing—I planned to do it. And after we were finished and opened it up, yes, then you think about it and say, "What the hell were you doing? Why do you want to do this?" Yes, you think this way. And it's why you do all these improvements and constantly do all this—build it higher. I mean the coolers we built higher, so you don't have to do it anymore. But what happens if it comes this high? Would you do it? Well, if it comes this high to here, then it's somewhere else, and eventually you say, "Do I need it?" I don't know. You don't know until you're there. You don't know. You can't make this call and make a plan yet. You know, if it happens again, will we be there? Well, probably yes. Put on the

boots and go through it. I mean it's—we only have the old dining room still lower. And if it's something that would happen there's only three pieces of equipment there. It's not—we don't lose the kitchen and we don't lose the coolers. That's all high and dry hopefully. So could I live with it? I have to. You know, the responsibility of how I was raised and what my mother and dad taught me and the responsibility to the people coming here—the compliments, the responsibility towards the people who work here—. You know, just rolling over and playing dead doesn't work.

01:43:42

And if you would, what are you going to do? You need something to do. Huh?

01:43:49

SR: You need a lot of things to do. **[*Laughs*]**

01:43:51

HP: **[*Laughs*]** I have a list. You know it's getting longer every day. I thought one day I would catch up.

01:43:59

SR: I have a feeling that list keeps getting added to, which is great. It sounds like you stayed for the hurricanes.

01:44:05

HP: Yes, absolutely. I always stayed here. Yes, I was here. I left after we had all the water and it's time to leave. It's nothing we can do.

01:44:17

SR: Would you do that again? Stay?

01:44:19

HP: You have to be here. There's certain things you can address if something happened right away. If something happened—look, I put this new wall around. If something happened like Isaac again, I feel very, very safe keeping the water out. Now where we are, we would get a lot of seepage from underground, pushing water in. Now, you have to maintain your pumps and everything and make sure everything runs. That just has to be a little thing. You would hate yourself coming in the next day and everything is flooded and accidentally a piece of wood clogged up the pump or whatever. You know, so you have to like maintenance.

01:44:59

I would be here with somebody—with two people. Yes, we would stay here, yeah. I would stay here. You have to. Back to the responsibility. I mean, I feel safe. I built this building. I feel safe here. I know it's not going to go anywhere. So I do feel safe being here.

01:45:21

SR: Do you have a boat?

01:45:22

HP: No. I like friends with boats and I like to look at them. I don't have the time for a boat.

01:45:27

SR: Well, you probably have a lot of friends with boats around here. I'm going to wrap this up. You know, I have pages of questions and I didn't look at a single—. I didn't look at them because this was such a great conversation.

01:45:39

HP: Well, you can call me back. I mean, you can call me back. I'm sure when you listen to it again and write it out and then you see this, you can call me. You have my cell phone number, so just call me.

01:45:48

SR: Well, but also, this is how these are ideally: is sort of organic conversations, which is wonderful. There is one last question I want to ask, you which is kind of anticlimactic, but I didn't get a chance to ask it earlier. And that is about the sheriff that you have that you inherited. There's a sheriff who works here, which I've never heard of that with a restaurant before. Can you tell me about that?

01:46:12

HP: You don't?

01:46:14

SR: No.

01:46:14

HP: I thought every restaurant should have one. ***[Laughs]***

01:46:16

SR: Well, you know—

01:46:17

HP: Like a chicken coop. Chicken coop and a sheriff's car, and the sheriff comes to them. No, I think it came from the old days where—well, it's nice. We--we're paying for the person, and it's our car, and we're paying for it, and tt's approved by the sheriff, and he goes to training by the sheriff's department. And it's a retired one, so it's this little—working three days a week, helping us on the weekends. But I think it came from way back when, when there was no cell phones and everything, and we're out here in the woods and where hold-ups maybe happen. You know, it's for safety. I think it started from way back when, and it always has kept on going, so we inherited it. And I mean, like I said, it's--it's great advertising for the local sheriff. It's his decoy. It's his employee, and he goes to the training with him, so it's like one of these auxiliary deputy sheriffs who would help out on big functions anywhere—somewhere else.

01:47:19

So you know, the local sheriff has an exposure here, and he has a radio, and you call in if there's a problem and they would send a car down here. But it gives people safety. And on the weekends, having the water here and the boat launch there, so he's keeping—he looks out for

everybody. If somebody breaks down they feel more comfortable seeing somebody in a uniform. And on the weekends, I wouldn't have time to deal with somebody out there. You know, until somebody—a local sheriff comes down there. So it works out well.

01:47:48

SR: Well, I mean yeah, it is interesting. Because you say in the old days you were in the woods out here. It's not exactly like you're in a metropolis now. I mean, it is—

01:47:55

HP: Yeah, but with cell phones—. I bet you in the old days, when like in the '60s when there was a—if somebody would come out here and do a hold-up—you know, go to a bar/restaurant and they cut the wire along the railroad and nobody had a phone down here. It could be. I don't know where it came from.

01:48:11

SR: Yeah.

01:48:12

HP: And there was, in the old days, there was a lot of renegades probably coming out here. Crazy people.

01:48:18

SR: How did—how was his schedule set? Do you do that, or does the sheriff's office do that, or how does that work?

01:48:22

HP: We all work together on it—you know, what's going on—and let everybody know what's going on, so—.

01:48:27

SR: He does a little hosting, I noticed. **[*Laughs*]**

01:48:31

HP: Yeah. He's not the fastest hostess. I mean, it's so wonderful. It's an older guy and it's entertaining and people like to see him and everything, so it's a nice little—nice little Middendorf's story.

01:48:44

SR: I agree. Okay, well, thank you so much for your time. And I'll follow up if we have more questions as I interview people around here. But this is a great start to the project.

01:48:55

HP: Okay.

01:48:55

SR: So, thank you.

01:48:55

HP: You're welcome.

01:48:58

[End Horst Pfeifer Interview]