JOE RANDALL
Savannah, GA

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Interviewer: Orlando Montoya
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[Begin Joe Randall Interview]

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Orlando Montoya: All right. This is the Oral History Project Interview recording with Chef Joe Randall in Savannah, Georgia at his cooking school on Waters Avenue. And the date is March 9, 2005. And first question I'll ask you Chef Randall is your date and place of birth.

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Joe Randall: I was born July 23, 1946 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

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OM: And where did you go to school?

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JR: I went to school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. **[*Phone Rings*]**

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OM: Where did you go to school?

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JR: I went to high school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, William Penn High School. I left high school and went into the Air Force. And so I began to cook while in the Air Force.

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OM: How many years were you in the Air Force?

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JR: It was a short period of time. My father died when I was young and so I got out of the Air Force with a hardship discharge. I went back to Pennsylvania to make sure that my mother was secure and help her. So I was there just about—almost two years. But I was stationed in Georgia at Turner Field in Albany, Georgia. And so I got an early taste of Southern cooking in 1963 when I was stationed down in Albany. The young ladies that I dated prepared wonderful meals and it was very apparent to me at that time that the food tasted a little different in the South than it did in Pennsylvania.

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My mother is originally from Virginia over in Staunton and Waynesboro, so I grew up in a house with Southern cooking. But my father was a doctor so we ate a variety of things. We ate lamb chops and veal chops and leg of lamb and a variety of different dishes but my mother also liked chitlins' and she liked pork sausage and pudding and a variety of different country dishes, as we used to talk.

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OM: What were your first memories of—of food? Do you remember you know perhaps making food with your mother or grandmother or anything around the table that you can remember vividly?

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JR: Well I did spend some time in the kitchen. My father didn't cook at all. I grew up in a house where my mother cooked for my father and everybody that ate—ate what my father liked. But I had a unique experience because I traveled back and forth from Harrisburg to McKeesport or Pittsburgh and during those summer years, I would spend time with my uncle.

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I had an uncle named Richard Ross, who was a restaurateur and caterer. He had his own catering business and a very viable restaurant and so I worked with him on some catering parties and I ate at his house often. So I got a taste of the restaurant business at an early age working with Uncle Dick as a teenager.

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OM: What did you do in the restaurant?

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JR: Well we bused tables; we did prep work with Uncle Dick, you know cut vegetables, you know cut butter paddies, whatever it was that he instructed us to do and then we also waited tables.

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OM: Do you remember—do you remember what the name of the restaurant was?

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JR: It was called Ross'. It was in Large, Pennsylvania, which was about sixteen miles outside of Pittsburgh.

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OM: What were some of the typical meals that you ate growing up? You said you had a variety of things and it was primarily what your dad liked. Well what did your dad like?

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JR: Well my father was a graduate of Howard University Medical School, so he lived in the Washington, DC area in the late twenties and early thirties. He graduated from Howard in 1931. So seafood was a lover of his. He was a lover of seafood. He liked oysters and oyster stew was one of the dishes that I learned to love at an early age. Oysters poached in cream and butter, slightly seasoned with a little cayenne, and a little salt and pepper always turned out to be a wonderful flavorful dish for me.

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But my mother cooked things to please my father and he was just interested in food that was full of flavor.

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OM: It sounds like maybe the food that you had growing up was a little bit different than what you experienced when you came to Albany, Georgia and came down here. How would you describe that difference?

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OM: Well the difference was regional; a lot of the things that we ate in Harrisburg where I was raised had a reflection of the abundance of seafood and things that was in the Baltimore area

'cause Baltimore was only a forty-five minute drive from Harrisburg. So crabs and shrimp and all those wonderful things were readily available in the fresh fish but I liked catfish. We had channel cats that we used to catch and down near the Conowingo Dam.

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The difference I think was some seasoning. When I got south there were things that were cooked for me like whole cakes and fried chicken in lard and beans and I remember an experience with Polk salad. A young lady asked me would I like some salad and being a meat and potatoes kind of guy I was ready to skip the salad and go straight to the meat. And I said, "No thank you." And she came out of the kitchen with a big plate of Polk salad greens with some fatback and some cornbread. And when I knew anything I was telling her I changed my mind; I'd like to have a plate of salad but I was ignorant to the fact that she was talking about a cooked salad—of salad greens. **[*Phone Rings*]**

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OM: So after the Military what kind of occupation did you have?

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JR: Well I got into the kitchen. I first went to work for a Greek gentleman who had a restaurant called The Chalet. It was in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania. It was a very large restaurant that sat on an interstate, Route Fifteen, that went from—through Pennsylvania down into Maryland. So he got a lot of bus tours. And they had a nice local crowd. And Mr. Veronikis was very—had a large menu, as those Greek restaurants used to do similar to diners. So we served pork in three or four different ways. We had steaks. We had chops, lots of seafood; but during those days everything was made fresh. All of our salad dressings; we made our own mayonnaise. We made our own

French dressing, our own Italian dressing; we did—we breaded all our seafood. Nothing was brought frozen.

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So it was a lot of those early years of learning the production as well as the cooking.

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OM: And that was the 1960s?

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JR: Yes; this was around sixty-four – sixty-five.

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OM: And how many—I hesitate to ask this question but how many other restaurant jobs did you—have you had since then?

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JR: Oh, I don't—I've lost track. Probably in the neighborhood of twenty or thirty but it's been forty-two years. I've worked in variety of different hospitality experiences. I've worked in country clubs. I've worked in restaurants, hotels; I've taught at three universities and three culinary schools. I opened the Kellogg Ranch at the Cal Poly Pomona University, which was a training restaurant where the students had to earn their Bachelor of Science degree. In order to meet that requirement they had to spend thirty weeks in the kitchen operation, ten weeks in the lab learning kitchen techniques which I taught, ten weeks in restaurant development, running

dining room and kitchen organization and then ten weeks literally operating a restaurant opened to the public which was—drew a crowd from Los Angeles.

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OM: And Mr. Randall there must have been a point, sometime between when cooking was just a job for you when it was a way to make money and support yourself and your family to be a living or being what you did. What—where and when do you think that transformation took place?

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JR: Well it was early on. After I came out of the Service I just had a job. And so I worked at Veronikis—Jerry Veronikis' Chalet; I worked in Richmond, Virginia at—for a guy named Tom Ross, who owned Tom Ross' Charcoal Horse. At that time in the early sixties Holiday Inns were just hotels; the owner who built them didn't want anything to do with the restaurants. So he used to lease out the restaurants. And in Richmond, Tom Ross had the kitchens in maybe four or five Holiday Inns.

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So then I returned to Pennsylvania and got the opportunity to go to work for my mentor. His name was Robert W. Lee. Chef Lee was originally from Atlanta. He worked at Henry Grady and the Biltmore in the teens, 1917, 1918. He left around 1937 and went down into St. Simon's Island and opened the Kings and Prince Beach Club. And then he left there and he went into Charleston for a short period of time and eventually ended up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania at the Harrisburg Hotel.

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So from 1939 to 1967 Chef Lee was the Executive Chef at one hotel. And a lot of the cooks that worked for him in Atlanta also migrated to Pennsylvania to work for him. So this is where I tell people that I got my true understanding of Southern cooking. I learned to cook Southern up north at the Harrisburg Hotel working with Chef Lee and all those wonderful black cooks who had migrated to Pennsylvania to continue to work for him, who were from Atlanta.

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OM: And what was Mister—what did you learn most importantly from Mr. Lee?

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JR: Well the things that you learn in an apprenticeship situation and I did a two-year apprenticeship under Chef Lee; one he taught me to respect for the equipment because without the equipment in a kitchen when you need it you need to be able to rely on it to do the job that you need done, so you have to learn to take care of it and protect it and not to be—not to misuse it.

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He also learned—taught me to respect for the people and the relationships that you build in kitchens. Kitchens sometimes are closed quarters; it's hot, it's sweaty so you got to learn to get along with people. You might be bumping into people and rubbing up against people and you can't be super-sensitive in those types of settings.

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And he taught me to have a sense of humor as you work because some things just become more fun when you're relaxed and enjoy what you're doing.

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OM: Have you seen Southern food and the definition of that change in these many years?

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JR: Well it hasn't changed in my mind. Southern food as I see it is still the foundation of what I call the Black Hand in the pot. It is that contribution that the African Americans have made to food in America and it is exposed throughout the country. If you go to Seattle you'll see blacks who have migrated from Louisiana making gumbo, from their homeland. If you go to Boston you'll see blacks who migrated from North Carolina or South Carolina who have ended up there and you'll see them cooking rice and peas. And so it's clearly—Southern food has evolved but it hasn't taken such a leap. I think it has changed a little bit as you move out of the South and items that you're used to dealing with when you're in the South become less available, so you begin to substitute some things that you don't necessarily have readily at hand to try and make a similar dish of what you used to have when you were in the South.

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And that sometimes when people from—who are not used to the South, come to the South and try and do Southern cooking it doesn't work because the authenticity isn't there.

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OM: You—you said that Southern cooking hasn't changed much but in people's minds—how has it changed in people's minds?

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JR: Well there's several things. When I started cooking crab cakes for instance, in the sixties, ninety-five percent of the crab cakes that we cooked were deep-fried. So we have lightened food a little bit. I now sauté crab cakes. I cook crab cakes every week but I don't deep-fry anymore. I lightly dust them in flour and sauté them in a small amount of fat and finish them in the oven. They're still wonderful; they don't have the crunch and it's not the same but it is a very desirable dish, but it has less fat.

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There are some people who would have you believe that Southern food is just too full of salt, too full of fat, too full of everything that's wrong for you. My philosophy is moderation in all things. You don't eat a pound of bacon in every meal but three slices every few days won't hurt.

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OM: So Southern cooking has changed a little bit because of our desire of late to be thin and—and good looking and—but has it changed also with regard to maybe—maybe the time that people have to cook? A lot of people don't like to spend all day in the kitchen anymore.

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JR: Well there are people who like to cook and then there are people who don't like to cook. Some dishes just can't be cooked a-la-minute meaning in fifteen minutes. If you talk about cooking oxtails, they take several hours to cook to get tender. Braised short ribs, they're some smothered pork chops; some of these dishes just don't—can't be cooking in fifteen minutes. And so when you're knowledgeable and I think that's part of the problem, there are a lot of people who talk about what we call new Southern cooking. And I classify that as people who don't

necessarily know anything about the old so they talk about the new. But when you talk about true authentic Southern cooking it takes time to do it right and you can't rush it.

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OM: A lot of things when you talk about the South including its food might be romanticized or mystified; is—do you think that—that is true about Southern food?

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JR: Well I'm sure that there's some level of romance that's attributed to Southern cooking. There's wonderful stories about fried chicken on Sundays for the preacher. There's no question in my mind that preachers love fried chicken and those who are preaching in the South look forward to going to somebody's house on Sunday just for some chicken. But the reality is that the romance with Southern food has to do with taste and flavor, hospitality, and how you're brought up.

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My mother raised us that nobody entered your home without you offering them something. My mother raised us that it's not right to refuse when somebody offers you because it's better to give than to receive and by giving of something from your home that enriches your house. And so there are people who don't understand this. And so consequently they think that it's—it's you know just simple to—to say no thank you; I don't care for any. But my mother would not let you get away with that. She'd offer you a cup of tea. If you didn't want a cup of tea, she'd offer you a cup of coffee. She'd get around to a piece of cake or cookie, a glass of water; she was going to find something that you'd accept.

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OM: So when people do talk about Southern food as being a continuity and tradition, part of our—part of history—that is true?

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JR: There's no question. It's part of good Southern hospitality as is a tradition.

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OM: Can you describe a meal that would be typically Southern?

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JR: Well a meal that I would cook that would be typically Southern would probably be a soup or a salad that had either fried green tomatoes or a soup with some crab and some corn in it, so you'd might say a wonderful crab and corn chowder and then maybe a salad with either sliced tomatoes fresh out of the garden or little sliced onions, maybe a little sliced cucumbers and just a little vinegar and sugar sprinkled over top as a vinaigrette maybe with a little oil.

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And then from there it depends on the region of the South that you're in because unfortunately people take this term *Southern food* and want to homogenize it and throw it all together. And there are regions within the South where people eat differently in the South. And so here in the Low Country it might be some fried whiting and some red rice and maybe some Southern fried corn. Or, it may be a roast rack of pork with some mashed potatoes and some green beans with a little bacon chopped on them, so all those would be wonderful Southern dishes.

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For desserts, a peach cobbler or blackberry cobbler, or just a slice of pound cake with some homemade peach ice cream.

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OM: Let me ask you sort of a question that I just thought about. When back in the sixties and seventies was there—because it's clear that when you talked about the black hand in the pot, that this is what Southern food is about, is there—was there a changing recognition of this back in those days or—because I'm trying to think you know back before the—the Civil Rights struggle and maybe most—a lot of people just didn't mention that as part of the cooking? Is there—did that change at all?

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JR: Well there—there are two factors. One, this thing about this food service industry has been glorified now. We have wonderful celebrity chefs who are making hundreds of thousands of dollars, but that wasn't always the case. African Americans didn't wake up one morning and decide they wanted to be in food service. This was work that was relegated to immigrants and African slaves. The—the opportunity to be in the kitchen was something that was designated for them to do. And they mastered it and did it well.

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Now during the Civil Rights struggle as you mentioned there were two things that happened. One, African Americans were pursuing other careers because new doors were opening up and so there were many grandmothers and fathers who were saying to their children, "Go to college and be somebody." They weren't necessarily telling them to go out and become chefs and

waiters and work in restaurants. I can still hear the sound of Civil Rights advocates talking about, we don't have to work in your restaurants anymore, back in the sixties because new doors were opening up.

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There were some people who still equate working in restaurants with servitude as opposed to the service part of it where you take the talent God has given you and your ability to prepare something with your hands, to serve someone else, and see the pleasure that they get from enjoying it. There is a great deal of difference in giving a service and servitude meaning you are required to be of service because you have no choice or no options.

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OM: Had you experienced any racism in your climate for the pinnacle of where you have—where you are right now?

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JR: Well when I say have I experienced racism there have been jobs that I was the only black in the kitchen and I worked right along with whoever was willing to work. There were wonderful European chefs who shared knowledge with me because they were there interested in doing a good job. But there were times when you know you can clearly see that the promotions were going to the good ole boy group. And so there's this thing where value comes in. When we talk about the contributions that African Americans have made to food it has gone almost un-talked about because there wasn't any money in it, or there was money for somebody else to make by claiming the contribution. So my position is very clear that the contribution that African Americans have made to food in America is one that one doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to

figure out. We were the ones in the kitchen doing the cooking, so we have to be the ones to get the credit for it.

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OM: Well congratulations. **[*Laughs*]** You've got this—this wonderful school and it seems that—. Do you—I mean I'm—I'm interviewing you and I'm seeing the pictures behind you flash up on your screen of you with all types of other celebrities. Do you ever think about this—this success that you've had and do you ever put that I perspective philosophically or religiously?

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JR: Well I count—I count it as a blessing. I think all of us have a place that we're supposed to be and if we follow the Lord's lead he'll lead us to where he wants us to be. That's how I ended up in Savannah. I never dreamed I would be in Savannah but I ended up here and some of the things I wanted to do specifically in opening up a school I thought about twenty-five years ago. But I wasn't in the right place; it wasn't the right time, but I—when I ended up in Savannah things started to happen and they came together and thus I have the school.

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OM: How did that happen?

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JR: Well the greatest thing here about the school was filling the void. I didn't know at the time that I went and applied for the business license for this cooking school in Savannah that there had never been a private cooking school in the history of Savannah before. There had been

electric companies that had done cooking classes on a sporadic schedule. There had been classes at private clubs taught by chefs, but there had never been a school established as a recreational cooking school where people could go and sign up on an ongoing basis just for cooking classes until I opened the school here in Savannah.

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And it was done, primarily I was the Executive Director of Food Service for SCAD and we had looked for a site to do some cooking classes. SCAD wasn't set up with Continuing Ed and so they couldn't necessarily pull it together. And I found an appliance store, Livingood's that has some facilities and I approached the owner, Mrs. Livingood, and I discussed the possibility of me cooking some—doing some cooking classes at her facility. She agreed. We advertised and offered cooking classes, sold them out for the first two months within two weeks and recognized that there was an interest and then for six—seven months we did cooking classes there.

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And then I looked for a small house that I could literally gut and turn into a kitchen whereby I would be in a position to do the demonstrations as we do them here at Chef Joe Randall's Cooking School.

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OM: And how did you end up in Savannah at SCAD period? I mean you—

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JR: Well my oldest son graduated from high school and well applied and was accepted at the University of South Carolina. And so we brought him down to go to school. My wife had two aunts that lived in Columbia; one was the first African American female to get tenure at the

University of South Carolina. She headed up the African American Studies Department there for some seventeen years before she passed.

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But what I saw was me traveling from Baltimore to South Carolina for my wife to visit her son and her aunts on a regular basis. And I told the wife why not let's move south, so she could be closer to her son? Well I sent my wife and my other two children to Columbia and then I finished a project in Philadelphia and then when I came I looked around. Columbia is a wonderful college town but I didn't see it as a place where I was going to settle down. So I began to pursue trying to find out what was available as far as food service for me, and as I talked to the people, most of them began to tell me—I said, "Where do you eat?" They said, "We eat in Charleston." Well I knew then that if—if everybody in Columbia is driving an hour—hour and a half to Charleston to eat there was no need of me staying in Columbia.

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I had a friend who worked for me in Baltimore who was the Assistant to the President of SCAD. And I told him if I ever got to Savannah I would come see him because the President of SCAD had brought him to California on numerous occasions to visit me. So I came—called Arty and told him I was coming to Savannah to see him. He in turn told the President of SCAD. They asked me could they put me up at their guest home. I graciously accepted it. And then they asked me to cook dinner for them. And it's hard to refuse your host.

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So I prepared a meal for them and before they finished the soup I was the Director of Food Service for SCAD.

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OM: What was that soup and what was that meal? I want to know.

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JR: Well it was the first course was sweet potato Louisiana sausage bisque soup. It's a wonderful sweet potato soup made with a—the holy trinity, celery, onions, and green peppers, simmered in a little chicken stock and then you add a little pureed sweet potatoes and a little Louisiana spicy hot sausage with a little fresh thyme. And then we did some grilled chicken and rosemary over red rice, a little southern fried corn, and then I think we did a—a nice tart, a brown butter peach and pecan tart with a bourbon custard sauce for dessert.

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OM: And briefly since you mentioned your children in the last answer, what are your children and their names and their ages?

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JR: Well I have three children. My oldest son is J. Christopher Randall. He eventually graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from Georgia Southern University in Sports Management. And so he works in marketing with Trans Sports America, which is a company that takes sports teams around the world to play soccer, lacrosse, basketball; they take teams to different countries to—to compete.

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My middle child is Kenneth A. Randall. He is a—has attended Georgia Southern, Georgia State pardon me—University. He came home and went—got his—went to school to get his real estate license. He passed the Georgia State Real Estate Test, so he has his real estate

license and he's interested in real estate. And he works for Verizon but now he realizes he wants to go back to Georgia State and finish his degree in real estate.

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And then I have a baby daughter. Her name is Kara Randall. She's a sophomore at Georgia State studying Journalism.

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OM: And your spouse's name?

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JR: My lovely wife is named Barbara. Barbara is the Secretary to a Vice President at Armstrong Atlantic University but she's also my assistant here at the cooking school. I cook and she cleans.

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OM: This is the halfway point and I'm going to stop and take a short break.

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And now this is the second half of the interview when which we're going to switch gears and talk about the Southern Foodways Alliance and its history. Again we're talking with Chef Joe Randall and my name is Orlando Montoya. We're here at Chef Joe Randall's Cooking School. How did you come to be involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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JR: Well when they met in Birmingham, I think it was in 1999, I was present at that initial meeting. I had been interested in Southern food as a professional beyond my ability just to cook

it because as an educator teaching at Cal Poly Pomona I have taught about Antoine Careme and Escoffier and many other classic chefs from Europe. But one day I had a young student who asked me to tell him about some of the people that looked like him. He happened to be an African American student. And so he said, "You taught me about Antoine Careme and Escoffier but when are you going to teach me about somebody that looks like me?"

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So I did some research for him and I wanted him to understand the contribution that African Americans have made to food so we began to explain to him about Hannibal who was George Washington's cook and chef, for who George Washington had traveled with him, cook. I explained to him about the African cooks who cooked on the chuck wagons out West. We also talked to him about James Heming who was Thomas Jefferson's slave and also his chef, who Thomas took to France for five years. The time that he was in Paris with him James Heming was there the entire time cooking for him.

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So when you're able to establish some of these early pioneers then you help some young blacks who are interested in food but don't understand the relevance of why they're in it.

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That was some of the reasons that I was interested in the Southern Foodways. It wasn't necessarily the Southern Foodways Alliance in the beginning because in 1990 I visited a conference in Charleston with Edna Lewis and the original group, the Preservation for—of Southern Food. They had a conference at Middletown Place and I was present there for those four days. And so I continued to keep my interest up until—until eventually we met in Birmingham to form the Southern Food Alliance.

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OM: How did you get that invitation or who invited you or do you remember any of that?

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JR: John Egerton I believe called me; John and I had met in Charleston and he and I had talked over the years. Edna Lewis and I are very close and she spoke very highly of him always and I was familiar with his work on Southern food. And so my co-author Toni Tipton Martin, she was involved and eventually became President.

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OM: So you were involved with the Society for the Preservation of Revitalization of Southern Food and what about the American Southern Food Institute? Did you have any—?

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JR: No, I didn't have anything to do with that at all.

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OM: What was your involvement in the Preservation of Southern Food?

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JR: Well I just attended that—that conference that they had. I wasn't on the Board or wasn't involved in the organization there but I was in touch with Ms. Edna Lewis who was spearheading it at that time, so I was constantly getting fed information that was keeping my interest up about why we should preserve authentic Southern cooking.

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OM: What do you remember about the Birmingham 1999 meeting?

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JR: Well the meeting was a broad meeting of people from different walks of life who had come together with one sincere goal to form an organization, to preserve good Southern cooking, to do justice with it, establish some oral history, and to try and establish some fellowship among those people who had kind interest in Southern food.

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OM: Were you placed on a committee or was there—was there any—what did—what did you do?

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JR: Well originally we were there as a group and we discussed the organization, the coming together. I was at a second meeting at Morris Brown University where the first nominations were made for people to become President. I think at that time Leah Chase was nominated as the first President and then Toni Tipton Martin as Vice President and then she eventually moved into the President ranks.

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But we began to put the bylaws together and began to organize the organization.

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OM: What was your vision for the Southern Foodways Alliance when it began?

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JR: Well surely the vision was that there would be some level of continuity among spirit. There had been some fragmented dissensions among different people for different reasons and I was hoping that we could get beyond that. What I've learned over the years is if you work hard towards something you'll accomplish it and I just didn't think that the energy that was being put into the—the battles and the squabbles were worth it. And I didn't see anything being accomplished.

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So I believe that the Southern Food Alliance has come a long way in establishing not only the symposium that they have every year but the other events that they put on throughout the nation to keep people's eye on the wonderful Southern food that is prepared on a daily basis. And my hope is that the—the contributions that African Americans made will be clearly established and recognized and they have been to some degree exposed. I think that there are those who are still trying to gain recognition who eventually will but I learned a long time ago it's—it's the greasy wheel or the noisy wheel that gets the grease. And so those people who have this interest of benefiting need to—to be busy about doing something about Southern food.

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OM: I just thought of a question and this may seem a little bit off to you where you're talking about this organization that's putting the spotlight on Southern food. It seems to me that—it might seem to a lot of people that you know Southern food is—is just the way we live; it's the

way we are. Why do we—why do we need to have an organization that's dedicated to Southern food? I mean you—it's just natural; it's part of our lives.

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JR: Well that's something you can take for granted because you're in the South, but you must realize that there are clearly dissenters who would have destroyed all of the wonderful gains that we've made with the stroke of a pen by condemning Southern food for being no good for you. And so my opinion, Southern food is just as healthy as any other cuisine, but surely you must deal with it based on moderation. But I know it tastes better than most other cuisines.

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OM: Well I can tell you; you can get some pretty—pretty lard-laid Mexican food too. **[*Laughs*]**

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JR: Oh there's no doubt. I mean whenever people ask me about lard I tell them to go to a Mexican restaurant and eat some refried beans. I guarantee they'll get some. But and—and it's—you know it's flavor; it's not about you know I have people who come here and I cook with a lot of butter. And there are those who don't have butter in their house and wouldn't have it because they've been programmed to think that butter is bad for you. But the reality is we have a whole industry that has been developed based on condemning one other food item in order to legitimize the next. So we have—you can walk down the supermarket shelves and see you know whatever the new crave is—it's carb stuff or low-fat this or something else that—and thirty years ago none of that existed in the supermarket.

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OM: A little bit back to the Southern Foodways Alliance and these organizational meetings is there any funny moment, any—any sort of sad moment, any—any particular moment you recall in particular from these early meetings?

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JR: Well I wasn't at the first symposium but I did attend I think the 1999 symposium and Vertamae did a beautiful—Vertamae Grosvenor did a beautiful play that she had written called Nyam which I've just found it to be heartfelt. And in relationship we were all in Oxford, Mississippi somewhere that I had never dreamed I'd ever be in the courthouse and I don't know if it was funny but it was surely those eerie moments when I thought about what black man had been in that courthouse and what might his sentence have been for some miniscule crime that somebody had decided he was going to do some time for.

00:44:48

OM: Did you have a role in developing the Southern Foodways Alliance's mission, vision, or programming?

00:44:56

JR: Well no, I never was truly involved in initial programming. They had committees and I contributed to some degree via email or via telephone conversations to some of the initial programming meetings and I was on a couple committees. But at that same time as they were beginning to move forward I opened this cooking school. I resigned from the Board and devoted what I needed to do was put 100-percent of my time and attention into establishing and giving

credibility to this school. And so now that the school has a name and reputation I can be a little bit more active.

00:45:47

OM: And so you—are you on the Board right now?

00:45:52

JR: No, I'm not on the Board and there may become an opportunity again in the future sometime that I might be.

00:46:00

OM: The Southern Foodways Alliance's focus is on food as culture. What does that mean to you?

00:46:08

JR: Well food is culture. It's a part of any nationality of people's culture. And when we talk about the South you talk about hospitality, food becomes an intricate part of the presentation of the hospitality because you share the food of the heartland. And so the food that we serve here in the South is just an intricate part of the culture of the South.

00:46:41

OM: Is it an integral part of—of your own culture and by that what I mean is you personally? When you—when you think of—of—well for me, I have—I love music and sometimes when I think of a particular song it reminds me of a particular place or a particular time. Do you have

any foods that you would cook that would recall a particular time or—? Is that—do you have that kind of a connection with food?

00:47:06

JR: Well I have food memories. You know I have a pound cake that was my mother's. I have the green bowl she used to hand-beat it in. The bowl is over seventy-five years old. So every time I lick a spoon when I make that pound cake it carries me back to my childhood to those food memories of those wonderful things.

00:47:29

There are many dishes that I cook that help me to relate to those wonderful memories. But in this situation that I'm in now, people often ask me, what's my favorite meal to cook? And I'm beyond having a favorite meal to cook because I cook a different meal every day and the reality is the meal that I enjoy cooking the most is the one that the customers—that just sat and enjoyed—enjoyed. And so if today I cook a rack of pork and some red rice and the class loves it, then I'm—that was the meal for me that day. Tomorrow if it's oxtails and you know Cuban black beans and yellow rice and—and that's the one that the class enjoys then so be it.

00:48:27

OM: Uh-hmm, do you have any ideas for the future of the Southern Foodways Alliance?

00:48:30

JR: Well I think they need to continue to work towards bringing together people who have an interest in the food and making it clear that those people who have this interest are welcome and

they—you know have an interest in—in exposing the food to the public and the public to the food.

00:49:03

OM: Is there any time that you have thought that the Southern Foodways Alliance has gotten off its base or done anything that wasn't particular to its mission?

00:49:13

JR: Well, I don't necessarily think that it was off its base, but I think, like any young organization, they've had some growing pains. But I think that they're growing through them as you do when you go through life. They're still continuing to hold their own. Leadership is still solid. There are people who play roles at certain times and step aside and new people come onboard with fresh ideas and fresh vitality to continue on. So I think they're moving along.

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OM: Well how—what were some of the growing pains?

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JR: Well surely in the beginning any time you bring two or three different organizations together you have people who think that they have the ideas, and sometimes their ideas are positive and work and sometimes they don't. And so you have to go through that process of trying different ideas, weeding out those ones that work and we're going with those things that do work.

00:50:21

OM: So, there's organizational sort of political conflicts?

00:50:27

JR: Well yeah, I mean and—and in every organization there's going to be some level of political conflict but the mission of the organization should overcome all that because as long as you keep your eye on your mission—.

00:50:41

OM: And has it?

00:50:41

JR: I believe it has overall. I think there is some people who are very conscientious about seeing that it succeeds, and I believe it will succeed because of their efforts and those people who are coming onboard who are now getting their opportunity to make the contribution.

00:51:04

OM: You mentioned the contribution of African Americans to Southern food. Are African Americans well represented in the Southern Foodways Alliance? Were they at the beginning; are they now?

00:51:16

JR: Well I think that they were there and I think that there were some who may have not necessarily agreed with everything that they saw and they either stepped aside or left. I think

some stayed on to continue to help the organization move forward. I think the organization has to keep an open mind to be clear about what its mission is. And they clearly—it's, you know, in my experience and there's always been an attempt to give recognition to those African Americans, but in some cases it seems as if they're trying to deal with two goals at once, recognize the African Americans but at the same time give credit to the other side to balance it so people's feelings don't get hurt.

00:52:24

OM: Can you really do that? I mean—

00:52:24

JR: I don't think so because, you know, again I'm back to the black hand in the pot. We were the ones in the kitchen doing the cooking. I don't know how anybody can think they can take credit for that.

00:52:37

OM: Do you—do you think that there's a—I don't know how to say it any other way—to ask this question, but a white face on Southern cooking? I mean when you—when you see them on—when you see people on TV or you see them in books or you know when they're talking about Southern cooking—?

00:52:55

JR: Well I'll tell it to you like this. There are young people who come up to me and ask me what African American cuisine is. I'm from the South is what they tell me. My mother cooks

Southern. And I've been eating it all my life. And I only have one question for them. Who taught their mother? See, for some reason people say well, we were poor; we didn't have any money. We couldn't afford to have black hired help. Well, people forget it didn't take a lot to have a black hand in the kitchen cooking. You know it might have been for just a roof over their head or it might have been just so they could take home the leftovers to feed their family. So it's—it just sometimes we—we try and equate it with today's reality that you know I couldn't afford $50,000 a year to have a private chef. So back in those days we didn't have one, but that wasn't the reality.

00:53:52

The reality was that the—a black person working for you didn't cost a lot and it wasn't of a lot of value but they produced a lot.

00:54:04

OM: But like Paula Dean, Emeril Lagasse all of your big stars—

00:54:08

JR: Well Emeril is a—clearly a—a Massachusetts, Falls River, Massachusetts, Portuguese who has nothing but wonderful success and I applaud him. He's marketed his self well and all his products. He's made a big contribution to Louisiana but that's a whole other story when you're talking about the South.

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You know when you talk about the Southern cooking you have to begin to try and separate some of it out because there are regions within regions. Louisiana is another—another animal in a sense all of its own. If you just include it there's some people who think every time

you say Southern cooking you mean Cajun because they don't know any better. And there are people who don't know the difference between Cajun and Creole just because they don't know any better.

00:55:08

But clearly Emeril has been a very positive force—there must be a squirrel somewhere—very positive force in causing people to have an interest in food and so I applaud him for that.

00:55:27

Paula Dean I know personally; she lives here in Savannah. She took her fist and then turned it into a multi-million dollar operation with a lot of gift and gab and a lot of hard work, so I applaud her. I'm not saying to you that there isn't a place for white folks in the Southern food and in that industry but the images that you see sometimes tend to make you think that black folks didn't have anything to do with it. What I tell people is you go to any restaurant in the South you want and you may see a dining room full of white waitresses but look at the hand—that's handing the food through the window.

00:56:13

OM: Anything that I've left out that you would like to add that I've—?

00:56:19

JR: No, I just think that Southern food is clearly or any good part of American culture—can't be denied nor can you deny the Black Hand in the pot.

00:56:32

OM: And about the Southern Foodways Alliance anything that I left out?

00:56:35

JR: No; I think that they're going to continue to grow and continue to do things that are going to be positive for the food service industry as well as for the continuing to help expose good Southern cooking to America.

00:56:53

OM: Okay; thank you very much.

00:56:56

[End Joe Randall Interview]