

JOSEPHINE PHILLIPS COMIER
Josephine's Creole Restaurant – St. Martinville, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Josephine Phillips Cormier Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Wednesday, August 20, 2008. I'm in St. Martinville, Louisiana, at Josephine's Restaurant. And I'm going to let the owner pronounce her own name and tell us her birth date.

00:00:16

Josephine Phillips Cormier: Yes, my name is Josephine Phillips Cormier. My birthday is May 28, 1953.

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SR: And could you say in—your own words what—what you do for a living?

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JPC: Well for the last 15 years I've been cooking Cajun-Creole-style in this area—okra gumbos, red beans and rice, deep-fried chicken, fried fish, shrimps; doing working man's meal basically for 10:30 to 2:00 Monday through Friday.

00:01:03

SR: Okay. When you say Cajun-Creole: Are you Cajun-Creole or where do you fit in that? What—what is your heritage? Do you know where your ancestors—?

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JPC: My heritage is Creole, but in this area there's a combination between Cajun-Creole and it's very hard to differentiate it. You really, it's the cooking is basically the same in this area, so most of—we—we just label it as Cajun-Creole cooking because it has—basically both heritages, you know, style of cooking.

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SR: Well there's a lot—that's a huge topic, but like when—did you grow up in this area?

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JPC: Yes, I did. I grew up in a small town named Parks, six miles from St. Martinville, and been here for the last 38 years. And we've been cooking—. My father was a cook; his family were cooks, and I think that's where we picked up the cooking style that we learned from my mother and my father and cooking. And when my father passed I made a commitment that I would carry his tradition on.

00:02:35

SR: Was—did your father—was your father a professional cook?

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JPC: In the early days I don't know if you'd call it professional. **[Laughs]** You know anybody that had a funeral or a wedding, his family would get together and cook their whole meal, like the—the rice dressing and the pork stews. And the sisters, his sisters, would do the cakes. They'd

make the homemade cakes with the icing and everything, so they did the entire meal. And we were several in my family—my father's family that carried over the tradition. In fact some of us are still doing that as our professions.

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SR: When you say some of us, you mean siblings or cousins?

00:03:24

JPC: Siblings and cousins. I have a sister that—that owned a restaurant—well it was Laura's Café—for 21 years, and her daughter opened it after she retired. And her daughter has a restaurant in Lafayette that's Laura's Café II. And I have another sister that has BJ Catering, and my brother occasionally does boudin and crackling. And I have a cousin that makes wedding and professional—she's a professional baker.

00:03:55

SR: Where does your brother do boudin and crackling?

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JPC: He doesn't do it very often but he—we would do it our old-fashioned way with when families got together and we'd get buy a—a pig and distribute it. We—he doesn't do it to sell out; we do it when the winter comes so that we can get our stock of boudin and put it in our freezers and stuff, so we usually do it at my mom's house or at his house, which they are

neighbors. And we just do a big family day of doing the boudin and crackling and make pork stews and frying sweet potatoes. So we do a family day out of that.

00:04:36

SR: Wow.

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JPC: And once or twice out of the winter season.

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SR: We also have a Southern Boudin Trail; that's why I'm asking that. That's very intriguing to me.

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JPC: Oh okay; oh okay—okay.

00:04:46

SR: Does he keep his own pigs?

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JPC: No; no, no, no [*Laughs*]. We, in fact we usually corner him and say, *It's time for us to restock our freezer*. So he'll—my dad did it—and he, I think out of all of us he's picked up doing the boudin basically the way my dad did it. So whenever we get low on our stock we all get

together and we'll buy a pig and buy all the ingredients and he'll just—if he can't mix it he shows us and then always—it's always his hand that just lets us know exactly what's the right taste to it.

00:05:24

SR: He's got the touch?

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JPC: Right, he does. He does. [*Laughs*]

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SR: When you were growing up, though, would you have like a boucherie? I mean would you—your dad would slaughter the pigs?

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JPC: And when I was growing up my dad grew his own pigs and—and they would butcher the pig from the beginning to the end of slaughtering the pigs, cleaning the pigs, doing the boudin, doing the crackling, making the pork stew, deep-frying potatoes, doing the cracklings and all of the stuff. And I think they would do that at least once or twice out of the winter season. But in the area that we're from, they would always butcher—he and his brother or his nephews, they would butcher pigs for outsiders; you know whoever needed the butchering done, they would do it and make the boudin. I think they even made the hogshead cheese or something like that.

Yeah, we don't do that anymore. But once upon a time they—they did those. Maybe they still do; we don't do it very often.

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SR: They would make house calls?

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JPC: Yes, yes. They would make house calls. In fact I think they did, between St. Martinville and Parks they did basically—as far as I could remember, whenever there was a big boucherie they would—they would do it.

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SR: That's interesting. Do you serve anything here at the restaurant that's reminiscent of the boucherie days—things that y'all would fix on that day besides the boudin and the crackling?

00:07:00

JPC: On Mondays. The only thing that I do is pork stew. I do the pork stew on Mondays, but I don't do it with—. It's like I said, I'm not too good in the boudin business but I—I've learned how to do the pork stew from my dad's family, and I—I usually do the pork stew with cabbage—smothered cabbage—and black-eyes with smothered potatoes. That's usually a very, very big seller for me on Mondays.

00:07:33

SR: Delicious. Do you buy boudin to serve here at all?

00:07:39

JPC: No, I don't. Now to eat, yes. When—when our stocks go down, yes, but to sell, no. I've never gotten into—to the boudin. I've tried. I've even bought the old-fashioned boudin stuffer and thinking that I would carry my daddy's boudin and tried it a couple of times and just didn't hit it just right. So I just faded away from it and whenever I need some, like I said, I'll go to my brother and say, *Let's make some; it's time to make some.*

00:08:11

SR: Let me ask you...So I've been doing a lot of boudin oral history interviews and I've been—I've had a hard time finding female boudin makers, but lately I've found a couple. I still haven't found owner/operator black or African American boudin makers. But do you think that—but I hear that it's part of the Creole tradition in this area.

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JPC: It is. I really don't know of anyone. Like I said, basically after my dad died, which was 22—23 years ago, that kind of faded away in our family as far as having the big boucheries and stuff. We don't do it anymore so I don't—I don't know of anyone that really does it. Most of the time if you're out of your stock after you sweet-talk your brother to do it, you'll get it from the grocery store or one of the slaughterhouses.

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SR: Okay, well thanks. That was an unexpected little aside.

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JPC: Oh okay. [*Laughs*]

00:09:19

SR: Boudin—thank you. Do you know your heritage, where like your ancestors—how long they've been here and where they came from?

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JPC: I've got—I'm assuming my father has been here all his life. In fact my father was—he worked in the fields. They worked off of a plantation, St. John Plantation. So I'm assuming that he was born and reared in this area. My maiden name is Phillips. There are not that many Phillips in this area and we are a large family but we're the only Phillips in the area that I know of, so I—we never really got very much information as far as where they came from, and I'm just assuming that they were brought here as slaves and just worked as—as sharecroppers and in the fields, 'cause I do remember when I was little that he did work on a plantation and we lived on a plantation until further years. I think it was first grade before we moved and they bought a home and we lived there. And that's—that's the most I know about where my father's family has come from.

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SR: And your mother's—was she from the Parks/St. Martinville area as well?

JPC: My—my mother's maiden name is Ebow and she's from an African tribe.

00:11:03

SR: From a what?

00:11:04

JPC: African tribe, the Ebow Tribe.

00:11:08

SR: Could you spell that?

00:11:08

JPC: Well we spell it E-b-o-w—Ebow. And I'm assuming that she's from this area too. I guess I really don't know. We have been trying to do a family tree but we've had very—in fact we've had very, very large family reunions, but to say exactly where our ancestors came from we really don't really know. I do know that we've done the research on my mother's side, the Ebow, and they've—they've come from the Ebow Tribe.

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SR: What in—what did you do before you opened this restaurant? Were you in the food business before 15 years ago?

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JPC: No, I worked at Wal-Mart for 13 years. I worked as a customer service manager and I did subbing at the Catholic school cafeteria for about two or three years after I retired from Wal-Mart. Before that I was a homemaker. I raised three kids of my own and five foster kids. So I was a homemaker before I went to work at Wal-Mart and I've been here, like I said, almost 30—38 years. So the first part of my married life I—I was a homemaker. *[Laughs]*

00:12:43

SR: Which was harder, having eight kids or coming in here every morning?

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JPC: Well the kids weren't all at the same time.

00:12:45

SR: Okay.

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JPC: When—when I got married I was 19 years-old and my sister-in-law died and my husband had the kids, so we reared the kids. So I had my foster kids before I had my own kids, and they are old; they're—they're older. In fact my oldest son—I don't call them foster kids; I call them kids—he's 44 years-old. So he was only nine years younger than I was. And you know their mother died unexpected, we took the kids, and I think about two years later I ended up having my first son, my first child. But it—it was—I think it's harder today with kids. It was difficult

but it wasn't—it wasn't a task that couldn't be done, and they have grown up to be fine kids. So I'm assuming I did a fairly good job. *[Laughs]*

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SR: I'm sure.

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JPC: Yeah.

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SR: And so what inspired you to make this plunge, you know sort of later in life? I mean, not to say that you're old. You're not, but this is—

00:14:00

JPC: Oh no.

00:14:02

SR: —this is a lot of work.

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JPC: Because of my daddy's tradition and his family. In fact I think I—he had a brother that did more cooking than he did and—and when he would do the—he'd make us a homemade barbeque sauce or when they'd do the boucheries and he'd ask us, you know. After we'd do all

of the cleaning up and the cooking and the eating and he would—he would make the comment of, you know, *I wish someone would just take over my trait; you know somebody needs to carry it on*. And I think the day before my dad died he did his last boucherie. Someone had asked him to butcher the hog and everything and he told us that that was his last, and he died with a massive heart attack. And I made a promise to him even if I didn't do it verbally while he was living; at his funeral I said, *You know one day I'm going to get a place in your name*. His name was Joseph, and I think I'm named after him because my mom had four girls and no boys and the boy came the year after I did. So she decided to name me Josephine. And I always said that if I would ever, ever get on my feet to open a place in his name and his honor, that's what I would do—in his family's honor. And really and truly I've opened this because of him. I don't think that it was my trait. When I got married I didn't know how to cook anything. I lived with my grandmother until, oh I was an adult—well ready to get out of high school. I was in eleventh grade and we didn't do any cooking at my grandmother's because you know in the olden days, 6 o'clock they had their foods on—on the burners. And by the time you got off of school food was ready, and if you—if it was a Sunday you ate at 12 o'clock. So the elderlies always did the cooking so I didn't learn how to cook. And that's why I'm assuming the trait was there that I didn't use. And after—after I made that promise of trying to research some of the things that he used to cook—experiment, should I say—some of the things that he and my mom showed us how to cook, I started experimenting with it like the okra and the red beans and the stews. I got interested in doing it and that was only, what? Sixteen years ago. We would always cook because you had that many kids, but never in large quantities like weddings. We—I had never done that before.

00:16:52

SR: That was pretty brave of you to—to do this.

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JPC: I—I think it was in me. I just didn't—you know how when you're growing up and your—your parents say, *I want you to do this and I want you to do that* and you say, *Well I want to do my own thing?* I went through that stage until his death.

00:17:13

SR: And it seems like you like doing this.

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JPC: Oh I love it. I'm getting older and I am passing on the trait. My kids do know how to cook; they've done a lot of the jobs—the caterings at Mardi Gras. I don't ever do any of the work; they do all the work. As long as I can have everything for them, any—we did a party. My daughter recently bought a house and we did a party two weeks ago and when I got up at 6 o'clock my boys had the meal almost completed. And really everything that you wanted: the jambalayas, the—the shrimp molds and the shrimp cocktails and stuff. They had did everything. The pork roast, the turkey roast. They know how to do the—debone the turkeys and do it, so they basically know—. And we've discussed that if and when—and I'm hoping it's a while from now that I do decide to retire—they have the trait already. My daughter is—she knows how to cook. She's very good at serving and—and you know dealing with the customers. She doesn't get on the stove that much, but if they push her to help them, all of the know-how—how to just carry on the business if—if they have to. They know how to do it.

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SR: And do any of them work here regularly?

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JPC: No. In fact [*Laughs*] only one lives here, but at Mardi Gras they all come because that's a big, big, very big day for us, and they all come in and they know exactly what they have to do.

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SR: Haven't experienced Mardi Gras here. Do you have a big party at the house or do you—are there parades?

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JPC: No, there's a parade that goes down this Main Street and we usually do the crawfish étouffées, the fried fish, and you know like a lot of the Cajun-Creole meals because there's so many out of town(ers) that are in. And usually I do about 150-pounds of crawfish and sell out for 6 o'clock. And it's basically a meal like this: it's the crawfish étouffée with a slab of—of fish, potato salad and peas. And that's the meal. But I do have a—a big helper now, which is my husband. He does most of the cooking, you know. We've been working together for a very, very long time and he's recently retired, so it's just he and I that do it on a daily—Monday through Friday. We—we've run(ned) our own business for quite some time.

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SR: And what's your husband's name?

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JPC: His name is Wilray—Wilray Cormier. And he's a pretty good cook. He doesn't like to admit it but—he swears he's the dishwasher but he does most of the chopping of the onions and peeling the shrimps and seasoning the fish and so—the chicken stew. There's some things even if you call yourself a professional you don't know how to cook. Like there's some things that I don't like, and what I don't like I don't cook well, but I have it on the menu so I have to use him or someone else that, you know, in the past that knew how—. I don't like cabbage. I don't like smothered cabbage, and we're—we sell a lot of cabbage every Monday. So you'd look at it and say, *Hmm, his product is better than mine*. I've tried it and I just can't fix it right. I don't know what it is. There's certain things—the chicken, the smothered chicken. I can't cook it the way he does. So he has to cook the meals that the customers prefer because if I cook it they may not like it and you sell what the people like. So we—we've been working together and it's been a good product for us; it's a seller. **[Laughs]**

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SR: What was his job before he retired?

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JPC: He worked 34 years offshore for Kerr-McGee.

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SR: Wow.

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JPC: Thirty-four years offshore, yes.

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SR: Well congratulations in getting him back on dry land.

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JPC: Yeah. Yes, in fact when I married him he was offshore. *[Laughs]* I should have said when we married he was working offshore.

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SR: For Mardi Gras, do y'all make gumbo?

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JPC: No, I don't. In the winter months I usually do. Mardi Gras Sunday—not for Tuesday; we close early Tuesday. Mardi Gras Sunday is a big newcomer's parade in town, and like I said our basic meal—now you can try hotdogs and stuff. I usually leave those for the food stands that are out there. I usually do plate lunches, and they sell real, real good for me. Gumbos, I do gumbos in the winter months. Very seldom will I do a gumbo when it's warm unless it's requested, you know. Besides on Wednesday doing the okra gumbo, I usually—like the sausage and shrimp gumbo, that's the ones you're referring to or the okra gumbo? Any type of gumbo?

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SR: Any gumbo, yeah.

00:22:31

JPC: Okay, any type of gumbo. Those are usually when the fall comes in or the first cold weather. The phones start ringing at 7:30 when we walk in here: *You're having gumbo today—you're having gumbo?* Sometimes you're making gumbo twice a day, yes. If it—it depends on what type of gumbo you're making on that day.

00:22:57

SR: So right now if I understand it correctly... We're in the summer. It's August. And so you make the okra gumbo every Wednesday, but in the winter do you have gumbo every day?

00:23:09

JPC: I usually do different gumbos. Like on Mondays—I don't know that it's a tradition around here that people used to go out and, you know, or people go out, or if they don't cook on weekends, or that first cold Monday morning they want—either want soups or gumbo. So on Mondays we'll do gumbos and soup. And sometimes it's all week but basically it's like Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

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SR: And can you tell me your—the different gumbos that you make here at the restaurant?

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JPC: Oh okay. We do okra gumbo, we do the sausage and chicken, we do the shrimp and crab gumbo.

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SR: And were any of those inspired by your dad?

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JPC: No. Maybe I guess because you learned how to cook—like I say, I did a lot of the watching and no cooking 'til I got married. *[Laughs]*

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SR: Right.

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JPC: So it must have just been a trait that was already there that wasn't used.

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SR: Yeah. I want to get deeper into the gumbos but I didn't ask earlier: Did you ever get a sense of who taught your dad to cook—like who his inspiration might have been?

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JPC: Hmm, no. All I remember was when we were—when we would get together and on Sundays, I remember every Sunday when I was growing up families would get together. We'd go to church in the morning. The adults would go out and—and start cooking. The kids would go out and play and they would—you know each person would cook, or they would cook together you know. One would do the gumbo and one would do the rice and one would do the meats; the other ones would do like the melons and one would do the cakes, the desserts—and maybe it was from the family before my dad. I don't—I really don't know. All I can remember is every Sunday you had family day. So obviously they got that from their family because on Sundays no matter what—it was winter, summer, it was always family dinner.

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I don't know if you remember the story. I can't remember the name, but it—this show and they would sit on Sundays and families—some families still do it, but when we were growing up in my generation, Sunday dinner was always given to the family's house, the main house, whatever you call it. The family's house, whether it was grandfather's house or grandma's house, and all the siblings and all their children and all the cousins would get together and have a family dinner—family gathering with food and songs and games. The kids would play out(doors) with games and stuff. So I'm assuming that they picked up that generation from their—from their generation and before.

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SR: It sounds so fun.

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JPC: Yeah, those days are not here anymore. We —we still try to get together but I don't see it as much anymore you know. My kids, including my foster kids, they're all gone; they're not here. So when they do come on holidays and stuff, yes, we still try to do the boudin, and let's fry the cracklings, and you know let's—let's get Paul [Josephine's brother] and we'll try to make boudin you know. And you have to have the okra; you have to have the crabs; you have to have—you have to have the whole hog, you know—everything. And that's done probably once a year or when you can basically call it a family reunion when you can get them all together.

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SR: All right. Well, tell me about this gumbo here that I took pictures of and that I'm going to eat for dinner.

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JPC: Oh okay.

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SR: Yeah, tell me about that.

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JPC: How I started it?

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SR: Yeah.

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JPC: Okay what—I use fresh gumbo; fresh okra—let me not say gumbo—fresh okra. And when I start it off I use a little bit of cooking oil. I got a cup of—half a cup of cooking oil. And that's usually—the amount that I cook in here is...you can call it a bundle or a sack of okra, on Wednesdays I'll cook. The okra—I take fresh okra and then we cut it; we slit it and we cut the okra and smother it down, and onions—.

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SR: Let me stop you for a minute. Can you define what that means: *smother it down*?

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JPC: Okay. The—the okra comes from the field—fresh okra, that's how we call it—fresh okra, and it's not cooked. It's just a raw vegetable. Take it and we—I use Magnalite pots. I use a Magnalite pot with onions, green peppers, garlic, celery, parsley, and onion tops. And I add that in, cover it for about an hour and a half, and then that's the smothering part. Once you cover it with the oil and all the ingredients, it simmers. It simmers, smothering. And after that I'll take some tasso, fresh sausage—smoked sausage, not fresh sausage—smoked sausage—and this okra. And I have shrimps—dried shrimps, and I add that to it after the—. The okra has a tendency to have a slime in it, so we cook until there's no more slime and then add the meats to it to enhance the flavor. And I'll add the seasoning—the salt, pepper. I use—I don't use black pepper here, besides you know on the tables if anybody would want it. But that's a habit that I've never—I don't cook with black pepper. I'll use white pepper, the red pepper, the garlic, the onion powder,

and towards the end I'll add fresh chopped parsley and onion tops to enhance the taste. But not—the okra gumbo usually takes me two and a half to three hours to cook. And you add the water. I'm sorry, I didn't tell you about the water to make the gumbo. After all the slime and it's cooked down and right before I add all my meats, I'll add the meats and the water so that it will steam and the smoked taste from the tasso and the dried shrimps and stuff in this particular okra—so it could enhance the taste.

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SR: Yum. So are you saying that this—with this gumbo you don't use a roux? It's just the okra?

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JPC: No, I don't use the roux. I'm not—not on this. Now the—like when I'm doing the crab and the seafood gumbo I will add roux because the seafood doesn't take as long to cook down, but on—on today with the sausage and the meats that I put in I don't add the roux to it. No.

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SR: That's interesting—and also that you use tasso, which I love. Was that part...like would—would your dad make that?

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JPC: They made—they made their own tasso; a lot of times they did their smoked sausage. They did their own smoked sausage and the dried shrimps. I think it's just—it's a habit that we've picked up in watching our parents do. My kids, when my mom—now she can't, but when

my mom cooks okra they will leave my okra gumbo and go to her house because she cooks it better than I do I guess. And no matter how many times I've tried to cook it the way she does, I just—some things that I just can't cook as well as she does.

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SR: Do you have any idea what she does differently?

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JPC: I've watched her 1,000 times and I do the same thing and it just—I don't know what it is; it's just different. I use the same ingredients, the same measurements, the same okra, the same amount of water. I know she doesn't put roux in her—in her chicken gumbo. Now she does do that—I don't do very often, is the chicken and okra gumbo, the chicken and the okra. I don't do it because they don't really like it here and I've never really done it for my family because they liked the smoked sausage or the seafood gumbo.

00:32:55

SR: Everybody has their own technique, huh?

00:32:59

JPC: Yes. Yes.

00:33:00

SR: I have so many questions. Let me pick one. The dried shrimp. So me, personally I'm just—I like dried shrimp in gumbo. But I'm just starting to experiment with cooking with it. Do you find, is there a range of quality of dried shrimp? I just don't even really know how to shop for it. Do you look for a certain size?

00:33:25

JPC: No; I look for a certain amount of quantity for money-wise. You know the more I can get for—for the money that I get, the more I can use it in different—. I use dried shrimps in smothered potatoes sometimes; I'll use it in...oh, I use dried shrimps in so many—in the mustard greens today because my customers like the taste of it. It enhances. The fresh shrimp does the same thing but the dried shrimp just gives it an extra pang to it, to the food.

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SR: And do you get your dried shrimp from a specific place or just from your supplier?

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JPC: From my supplier. From my supplier, yes. And there's also—it's called a shrimp powder and I'll use that in the gumbos, but you know in here you have to basically be very, very careful because I'm in a small town and a lot of people are allergic so that's why I get the dried shrimp and the shrimp powder and sometimes I won't cook it in the gumbos or the okra because some people are allergic to it. So you can add it and—and how I add it is you just boil it and put it aside and just add it to the—the okra gumbo or the [*inaudible*] gumbo if anybody wants it.

00:34:53

SR: What about, it didn't sound like you use any tomato.

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JPC: Sometimes, not all the time. I don't like that much tomatoes and like I said, there are different ways. Sometimes I do—.

00:35:12

SR: I'm just looking at the color to see what other questions...

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JPC: Oh okay, today there is a little tomato as you can see. I use fresh tomatoes. Sometimes I like to use—and it's not often—especially in the summer months you have so many gardens that have these good juicy tomatoes and stuff. I'll add it. It's not—I don't always add it, but I do add tomatoes like today I did. I had fresh tomatoes so I added it.

00:35:52

SR: So when I was looking—just looking at the color of the gumbo, because I was thinking when we were taking pictures earlier I had assumed there was roux in there because it's very dark. Does the okra brown a lot while it's smothering?

00:36:04

JPC: If it's put on the right temperature and it's covered tight, it usually gets to the color that you want. And I've heard this recently and I—I don't know where it comes from: there's different types of okra, and I think there's one that's called the ridge okra. That's the one that has I guess the ridges and that's the one that I've—I've gotten this year. And there's just the canning okra which is the straight okra, and there's a round okra. I just buy okra from my supplier and—and it's usually—I get most of my products like the mustards, the yams, from a local guy that sells it. I don't like canned stuff. If I have to I'll use—not any of my okra. I—this year I put up 25 bundles of okra. I have three freezers filled with just okra to—to make it for the whole year.

00:37:09

SR: And by *bundle* do you mean like those potato sacks?

00:37:11

JPC: Potato sacks, yes, six a week. We do it Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—two on Mondays, two on Wednesdays, two on Fridays. Because the canned okra that you buy from your suppliers, they just don't—frozen okra, I don't—I don't like those. And when I get the okra I usually—we usually cut them and steam them from—and then I pack them in the freezer and every time I need them...Like today my okra was already steamed so I didn't have the long process of three and a half hours. I had more like maybe two hours because I steamed them for another hour and I added the onions when I started, but I added the meats—I got here at 7:30; about 8:30 I started adding my meats. By 10:30 it was ready to be served with no slime with a good taste. But I—I'm assuming—I'm learning [*Laughs*]*—I'm assuming there are different okras that cooks differently but I don't add any roux unless it's like—. As you can see, this is*

more of a thicker (gumbo); if it has to be more on the watery side then maybe I would add roux. But here, this is how they like it here, more on the thicker side, and I don't add roux to it. I just add more okra. And that's—the products is I run out of it. I guess they like it.

00:38:58

SR: You ran out today, right?

00:38:59

JPC: I ran out. I ran out very, very early—very early.

00:39:03

SR: While the okra is smothering do you ever stir it or do you just leave it?

00:39:12

JPC: Oh yeah, you have to constantly and it's sort of like every 15 minutes. If it's put on the right temp, the right fire, you're not—you never rush it because you will probably mess it up. I don't know. All I know is from what I've learned from my parents, is you put it on, you walk away from it, and every 15 minutes come stir it; give it the two and a half to three and a half hours to cook, and you do okay.

00:39:42

SR: Well you know, have you ever had—like you can get sort of stabbed by okra? It will sort of be a prickle?

00:39:49

JPC: Yes, when—when you're cutting.

00:39:51

SR: Yeah.

00:39:53

JPC: When you're washing it. And—and that's the hardest part with the okra, for me, is to wash it and clip it, get the—get the top and the bottom—the nerves or whatever you call them—get those out to put up. That's the part that I don't like doing, but I do them because when a product sells you do whatever you have to to put it out.

00:40:16

SR: Now when you say *wash*, do you scrub them or do you just rinse them?

00:40:20

JPC: No, no, no. The guy that—that supplies me for them, he cleans them before. And in the commercial industrial sinks you put them [to] soak, and then you put them in a strainer—well, that's what I do. I rinse them three to five times to make sure—.

00:40:41

SR: Really?

00:40:43

JPC: —because they're homegrown here and I—I buy it fresh. I don't buy them out of a store. I get them from a supplier. And you know with all of the sprays and stuff you want to make sure it's clean, no bugs, so you—I wash them. And in one sink I wash them and I have the rinse sink and then I redo them over, and then we strain them before because when I'm cutting I don't like the slime there from the washing and stuff, so I let them drain in a strainer before I cut them.

00:41:15

SR: This is very educational for me. [*Laughs*]

00:41:19

JPC: [*Laughs*]

00:41:21

SR: And so when you put them in—when you wash them, that's just water, right? There's no—you don't—?

00:41:27

JPC: Just water. No added anything to it.

00:41:30

SR: Well that helps but I think after 25 bundles my hands would be bloodied.

00:41:36

JPC: No, you usually [*Laughs*] tape your finger. I usually tape my—my finger because I use a short knife. And—and a good knife, you can sit in front of the TV and cut a bundle in an hour.

00:41:51

SR: That's what you were saying. You take your homework—you take it home with you like homework, huh?

00:41:55

JPC: Yeah, I take it home. I sit in front of the TV after it's all cleaned and clipped and drained and I'll sit and—I'll sit and cut it and watch a good movie or something; watch the news, let it steam for—sometimes it depends on the temperature and what I have to do. If I have housework I'll lower the temperature and give it—allow it more time to steam. If—and I use steamers. Being in a restaurant with all the cooking that we have to do, we use steamers. So I'll—I'll put them in the steamer, and then a lot of times if you don't want to do that you can put them in the oven. It—put it in the oven. When I have the steamers—when I have more than two bundles and we decide to sit down and cut all that we've gotten for that day—'cause we have a certain amount to cut up—what we do is put a couple of pans in the oven. And if it's in the oven you just put it—go about your business, wash your clothes, clean your house and in about two and a half—three hours it's ready to pack and put in the freezer.

00:43:06

SR: So when you put it in the oven, do you just spread it on a sheet pan or do you—?

00:43:09

JPC: No, I usually use one of the cooking pans, like my large cooking pans, and that holds about a half a sack. And add a little oil at the bottom; no water. I don't do it with water. I'm only telling you the way I know how to fix those. And cover it with aluminum foil, and stick it in the oven for—well the temp is usually 350. And put it on and go on and do something else.

00:43:43

SR: Wow. Okay, thanks. I'm going to try that.

00:43:47

JPC: And when the seeds are pink, that's when you know you don't have anymore slime in it. Some people like the slime; we don't in this area 'cause a lot of my customers, the first thing they say is, *Does your okra have slime?* After a couple of times they know that that's not the way I cook it. If I can't cook something that I can eat then I'm not going to cook it. It's some things that I cook—that we cook that I don't like—but if I cook the things that I'm going—that I would enjoy, you know my cooking is based on if I'm not going to eat it I'm not going to serve it. And—and in this area we don't like slimy okra, so that's the way we put it up.

00:44:32

SR: I've—oh, go ahead.

00:44:35

JPC: And that's—that's how it's preserved. It can last through the whole season if it's packed the right way in a good sealed bag. It lasts the whole year for us throughout the next season.

00:44:46

SR: Do you put okra in any of—in any of your other gumbos?

00:44:52

JPC: No, no; here they basically just like the way we fix it. That's—and I've had quite a few customers that said, *I don't eat anybody's okra but I will eat your okra because it's a lot like mine(s)*, you know. Whether it's good or not, I take that as a compliment.

00:45:12

SR: Uh-hm. And do you serve okra in other dishes, just like smothered okra as a side dish or—?

00:45:19

JPC: Yes, I do smothered okra. In fact my family, my husband, my kids love okra gumbo. My husband loves to smother it; no water, just smother it down with shrimps or sausage—smoked sausage—and that's how we eat(s) it. It's thick. It's not runny. It's—you know, it's not watery. That's—that's the type that he eats. Now he'll nibble if—in here on it, but he prefers the smothered instead of okra gumbo.

00:45:48

SR: And so when you put shrimp in the smothered okra, do you use the dried shrimp?

00:45:52

JPC: We use the dried and the fresh both.

00:45:55

SR: In the same one?

00:45:56

JPC: Uh-hm, yeah.

00:46:00

SR: Now can you just describe for me what you served with the gumbo today?

00:46:04

JPC: Okay, today we had deep fried chicken. That's chicken with no floured batter; it's just we—we just seasoned the chicken real spicy and dipped it in a deep fryer for 19 to 20 minutes, cut some fresh onions and parsley and sprinkled it over and put it on the serving line. And I did potato salad with rice and gravy, a dinner roll and okra.

00:46:40

SR: Well that chicken looks good. There's no batter on there.

00:46:44

JPC: No batter; it's only deep fried in the oil and that's it, and that's how—that's how they like it here, you know. They started saying, *Well when are you going to serve...?*—they like the fried chicken with the batter, but they also like the deep-fried—*When are you going to sell the chicken with*—or, *When are you going to sell the okra gumbo with chicken on the side?* So we started, *Okay we'll do the deep-fried*, you know. Usually in here I'll cook whatever my customers ask if I can, you know. If it's something that I know how to cook or I can experiment or give it a go at it, I'll do it and it's a sell-out. So we—on Wednesdays we do the deep-fried chicken with okra gumbo and the potato salad.

00:47:29

SR: So did they come up with that idea themselves, or you did it once and then they liked it?

00:47:34

JPC: No, they asked for it. They asked for it. Obviously, and—and now that they have asked I remember my mom, whenever she made just the okra gumbo—because of the large family, I guess, to stretch it a little bit—she added the potato salad and the meat with it so that you don't have a big old bowl but you had a nice sized bowl, but you had enough to fill you up for that meal. And that's probably—and we're familiar with that here. You know, it's not just the bowl of gumbo with rice. It's the meat and the salad, which almost all my gumbos—whether it's okra gumbo or sausage and chicken, I usually have potato salad with it.

00:48:20

SR: And do you personally eat the potato salad on the side or do you put it in the gumbo?

00:48:25

JPC: On the side—I personally—. I've seen it; I've had people say, *Just slap it on top*, but [Laughs] personally I like it on the side. [Laughs] I don't—I don't like all of my food mixed, no.

00:48:44

SR: Right. When you make your gumbo, how long are the shrimp in there before it's done, about?

00:48:50

JPC: The fresh shrimps doesn't take but no longer than about 10 minutes. The dry shrimps, I let that cook 30 minutes because it enhances the taste. The longer it cooks the more flavor it adds to your—to your gumbo.

00:49:05

SR: And the other gumbos, can you refresh my memory what your other two gumbos are that you make in the winter?

00:49:11

JPC: Okay, it's the chicken and sausage gumbo, the crab and shrimp gumbo.

00:49:17

SR: Crab and shrimp. And are those roux gumbos?

00:49:17

JPC: Yeah, those are roux gumbos, yeah those are.

00:49:22

SR: And do they get the same shade of roux?

00:49:26

JPC: We make our roux. I usually like to make a light roux, and you can always as you—before you add all your water when you're—when you're—like for the chicken and sausage, I usually add the roux with all the onions and everything, and if it's not the right color for it, for like a gumbo I'll just let it cook a little longer before I start adding the water and everything to it. But when I make my roux I make a lighter roux 'cause I don't like a dark-tasting or a burnt taste to any of my rouxs. So we'll just make our own roux.

00:50:06

SR: And by a *lighter roux*, can you compare that shade to something?

00:50:13

JPC: Hmm.

00:50:13

SR: Is it like peanut butter or lighter than that?

00:50:15

JPC: Peanut butter, peanut butter color. That's right on the money—peanut butter. I don't like the dark, dark roux because I just don't like the burnt and maybe—the longer—I don't know. I just make my roux so I can't really tell you the difference between the dark and the light. We were always—you know, those things that I do in here, that's from family showing us how to do it, and once I got into business some members of the family showed me how to cook some of the Creole cooking. You know, the things that I didn't know I asked older aunts, cousins that was older, and—and they helped me out with it.

00:51:03

SR: Like with the roux-making?

00:51:04

JPC: The roux-making, yeah; the roux making. Like the red beans and the sausage, the red beans and sausage; the greens—the greens, and cornbread dressing and stuff like that. That's stuff that I didn't really—you know I did them but I didn't really know how to do them because I did them only Christmas dinners or Thanksgiving dinners, so there was some things that I had to go to family. And my sister that had a café before I did, she taught me a lot of—of what she knew how to do and basically our menus were basically the same. She's in Lafayette; I'm in St. Martinville. So we served basically the same menus but—but a different taste because everybody cooks differently.

00:51:57

SR: Now when you make your roux for your other gumbos, what kind of fat do you use?

00:52:01

JPC: I use regular—regular cooking oil, and sometimes it depends on the mood because you can make a dry roux. You can make it in a microwave oven or the oven. And the only thing is, you stir it a little bit longer, a little bit longer. But I've made—when I was in you know—when I've completely run out, I've made a dry roux with no oil in the microwave oven, and it usually comes out well.

00:52:29

SR: Can you tell a difference in the end product?

00:52:32

JPC: I don't think so. I really don't think so. It comes out the peanut butter color, and it tastes as roux—yeah.

00:52:45

SR: What about: Do you use filé ever—filé powder in any of your gumbos?

00:52:50

JPC: I have it here for customers but I never add it—add the filé.

00:52:55

SR: And is it on the table or they ask for it?

00:52:58

JPC: They ask for it. They ask for it.

00:53:00

SR: And how often does that happen?

00:53:02

JPC: Oh basically every—whatever day that you have especially chicken and sausage gumbo. I've never had anybody ask me for the okra gumbo, but the chicken and sausage gumbo or the seafood gumbo they will ask for filé.

00:53:20

SR: How much gumbo did you make today?

00:53:23

JPC: I made, like I said half a sack, and that's—you're asking like quart size?

00:53:34

SR: Yeah, or gallon?

00:53:36

JPC: Gallon size. I'm a cook that never measures. I never measure anything. All I can say is that I made a half of sack of okra and added it to the gumbo, so a large Magnalite pot that is like—that holds at least five gallons [of] water—yeah five gallons of water, so that would be the amount of gumbo I made today. **[Laughs]** That, yeah. 'Cause I don't—I don't measure anything. Everything is done by, *I need a pinch of this and I need a pinch of that. Let me, today I know I need a half a sack of okra because I'm going to sell out.* You know, I need X-amount to come up with X-amount of plates for today, so basically that's how we—very little measurement, and give a prayer to God and say, *Please let it come out right.* **[Laughs]**

00:54:31

SR: I like that okra is your measurement. That seems good. What—do you use stock in your other gumbos or do you just use water?

00:54:43

JPC: Just water, just water. What I do with my chicken gumbo, I—I don't like to just do the water and just dump the raw chicken, so it does make a stock. I usually take it and cut it up and season it and put it in the oven and let it brown; add a little water as it's—it's cooking, and it makes a stock—and add that to the gumbo. The shrimp and crab, no; I just use—there is a stock that the local seafood station has that sometimes I'll buy and it's a shrimp—I don't know what Kevin calls it but he says it's when he's boiling—he boils some type of stock and he sells the shrimp juice, and I'll add that to it and it enhances the taste. Sometimes I'll add it to the okra

when I want to—like especially on Fridays when I want to get the seafood taste to go with the fish 'cause I do sell—on Fridays I sell the fish with the okra.

00:55:54

SR: Oh, with the smothered okra?

00:55:56

JPC: With—with the smothered okra.

00:55:59

SR: Yum. And you also make a shrimp stew, I think Marcelle [Bienvenu] told me.

00:56:04

JPC: Shrimp stew with eggs. *[Laughs]* Shrimp stew with boiled eggs, yes. It's made—it's made with roux.

00:56:13

SR: It is?

00:56:13

JPC: We make that with roux. I use—I don't use oil with my shrimp stews. I use margarine or butter and sauté my onions in that first. Sauté the shrimps for about four minutes; take them out and leave some of the stock, and add the roux and let the roux cook down for about an hour—45

minutes to an hour—and then add the mixture—the stew to the shrimps. Because you don't want to overcook your shrimp because you're—you can't overcook shrimps, and as long as you cook—I cook shrimp three to six minutes. Especially once you add it to the hot mixture of the sautéed butter and seasoning—the onions, bell pepper, celery. I use a lot of seasoning. It just gives it a little better taste, and I take the eggs and boil them. Well on Fridays we boil them, about four dozen, cut them in half and drop them in the shrimp stew. **[Laughs]** And drop them in the shrimp stew and that's what we serve on Friday.

00:57:23

SR: So you basically you're making like a really blonde roux, then?

00:57:28

JPC: Yes, yes.

00:57:30

SR: Okay. And do you add, like, your flour and your seasonings at the same time?

00:57:36

JPC: For the stew?

00:57:38

SR: Yeah, sorry, I didn't—well you said that you add—I think you add—.

00:57:43

JPC: I add the roux, not flour.

00:57:45

SR: Oh I see.

00:57:45

JPC: I sauté the—

00:57:46

SR: You will have already made the roux.

00:57:48

JPC: Right, the roux will be made.

00:57:49

SR: I see, okay.

00:57:50

JPC: The roux will be made. The peanut butter roux will be made, and before I add the roux I sauté and—hmm, about a pound of—okay, for—I need about three pounds of margarine and two cups of mixed onions, bell peppers, celery, onion tops, and my onion tops and parsley I always add towards the end. But I sauté all this other stuff first and add the shrimps just for it to give the

broth—to make the broth; take the shrimps out, [*Phone Rings*] and add the roux and let that cook 45 to an hour—45 minutes to an hour.

00:58:42

SR: I see.

00:58:44

JPC: Then mix it with my stew. That must be a telemarketer [*Laughs*]. Mix it with my stew. Add the eggs and simmer. That's it. It's very simple to make. Anybody can make shrimp stew, anybody. And I also add the dry shrimps in there. Excuse me.

00:59:06

SR: So we'll wrap this up here pretty soon. I just would like to ask you a couple more things. Well if you—if you had to describe gumbo to someone who had never eaten gumbo before, or define it, what would you say?

00:59:19

JPC: Delicious. [*Laughs*] Delicious, and if they'd ask what's in it, like the okra gumbo, I would tell them exactly what's in it. A lot of people that are not from this area are not familiar with okra. And I've had some customers say, *No matter what you've done or whatever, everybody in here says it's good but I just don't like okra*. So you know, you try to persuade them, *Well just take a taste tester and if you don't like it I understand*. It's not that you're insulting my cooking but it's delicious.

00:59:58

SR: Did you grow up eating a lot of okra?

01:00:00

JPC: Yes. [*Laughs*]

01:00:02

SR: It sounds like it.

01:00:03

JPC: Anything that you can grow from the fields we grew up with it, especially okra—okra. That's why I put up so many—so many [*Laughs*] bundles and so many sacks of okra because that's a product of this area that—you know, it's your big market. It's what you—that's your heritage whether it's Cajun or whether it's Creole in this area. Okra is our heritage.

01:00:35

SR: What is it—can you tell me what's the biggest challenge about your job and what you like most about your job?

01:00:44

JPC: What I like most is that I'm carrying out a family tradition. Challenging: getting up every morning at 7 o'clock when you know that you're an age where, *Oh if I could just sleep 'til 8:30*

[Laughs] basically. But once you get in, it just gets to be—when you open those doors at 10:30 and customers start coming in and buying your product it’s a very good feeling. It’s a good feeling.

01:01:15

SR: Okay, well thank you so much for giving me your time.

01:01:18

JPC: You’re quite welcome, and I hope you enjoy the meal.

01:01:21

SR: I have no doubt.

01:01:21

JPC: Let me get you a go-plate.

01:01:24

SR: Okay, thank you. **[Laughs]**

01:01:24

[End Josephine Phillips Cormier Interview]