LOLIS ERIC ELIE
New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: April Grayson
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[Begin Lolis Eric Elie Interview]

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April Grayson: Yes, this is April Grayson on October 8, 2004, interviewing Lolis Elie in Oxford, Mississippi, at the occasion of the Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium. Okay, and if you could start by telling me your full name and your place and date of birth?

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Lolis Eric Elie: My name is Lolis Eric Elie, and I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, April 10, 1963.

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AG: I was wondering if you could just start by telling us how you became involved with the SFA.

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LEE: I met John Egerton at the Tennessee Williams Festival—I don't know, about 10 years ago. We ended up having a drink after that—me, him, and the late Tom Dent. And I guess a couple of years after that I got a call from him asking me to join the founding board of SFA because I had written a book on the culture of barbecue, *Smokestack Lightening, Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country.*

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I couldn't make the first gathering. We were in the middle of filming a documentary based on that book, but I was one of the founding members. I signed up as on the founding members. The next year, they called Rudy Lombard who had been the author of *Creole Feast: 15 Master Chefs Reveal their Secrets*. It was one of the first books and perhaps the first book by American professional chefs, opposed to food writers and so forth, that focused on black chefs in New Orleans. The theme of that year's conference was Creoleization, and they asked him to speak and he said, "Look, I haven't done anything in food since then, but you should call Lolis Elie." And Rudy Lombard and my father had been best friends since the Civil Rights Movement.

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So I prepared a talk at that year's SFA Conference. I actually got to find my copy of that; it was called—what is it—*As to Escoffier Silence and the Matter of Gumbo*. And I gave my talk that year. And I've come every year since and participated in various ways.

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AG: Do you have any specific recollections about that first event that you attended?

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LEE: Yeah, the keynote speaker, the opening speaker was Jessica Harris who I had been trying to meet, and I had been hearing things about her. And she was doing the talk that looked at the whole range of Creole culture and cuisine throughout the African world. And she set a very high bar, so in some ways I've been running my models for trying to achieve that level of scholarship and everything simultaneously.

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AG: So, can I assume that you did not—you did not go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham that—?

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LEE: I didn't. Correct.

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AG: And when you got involved with SFA did you have a personal vision before that organization?

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LEE: **[*Laughs*]** I got involved because John Egerton asked me. I came the next year because he asked me to give a talk. And it was at that point that I really enjoyed it. I also met some people that I—I liked a lot. I had always had a vision—or not always, but certainly since doing the barbecue book I had a vision of food as being something more than your nourishment or more than mere physical nourishment.

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SFA embodied much of that. But in a—in a significant sense, I didn't consider myself from the South. I mean, New Orleans is different in a lot of ways. So, the idea of being a part of a southern organization, I didn't bother to think about being opposed to it. I didn't bother to think about it at all. But the kind of fellowship at that first year, and I met a lot of folks—when you give a talk everybody comes up—"Oh, I liked your talk" or whatever. And my vision of the organization sort of evolved from there, largely from what John Egerton said, and in the introduction of *Cornbread Nation*, I talk about his kind of vision of this is the new platform of racial reconciliation.

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And I share that hope. Obviously, racial reconciliation is a—actually, we should call it conciliation rather than reconciliation, but that's a very distant and difficult thing. But regardless of our ability to impact these larger social issues, what is clear is that there's a kind of fellowship that they express on these weekends that is very enriching for me.

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AG: Great. Since you've been involved how has your—your vision for the organization evolved? Does it seem like it's the same as it was when you originally got involved or—?

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LEE: The vision, in terms of what the organization is about or should be about, hasn't really changed, but a lot of what we've talked about is the kind of thing we're doing now, doing oral histories, trying to recognize some of the chefs and cooks who have been doing this, toiling in the vineyards for all these years with little recognition, and trying to expand the city in various ways. And so you know I—I've been a member of the programming committee for several years, and this year—John T. [Edge] likes to sneak down to New Orleans from time to time, so he and I talk often.

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And also there's a great leap in terms of our vision that took place in—in *Cornbread Nation 2*. When John Egerton edited, what he did was collect from the best writers he could find on the subject at that time. What we decided after that was that each volume of *Cornbread Nation* would focus on themes from a recent Symposium. And so putting together barbecue, and initially I just tried to find us the best barbecue stuff I could find.

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Then I began to look at it in terms of trying to make it the most comprehensive statement on the culture of barbecue available. So I went and sort of combed my source material from doing my book and the bibliography from this woman, Ripley Golovin, who had done a very well-researched senior thesis at Vassar College about 20 years ago, and tried to—to set a vision of what the range of barbecue information should be and be certain that we covered it.

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So, I knew we needed something on barbacoa, the Mexican American tradition; so I got Rod Davis to recommend this woman, Bárbara Renaud González, who wrote one of my favorite pieces in the book. We often talk about the kind of Caribbean connection in barbecue, and it's saluted to it in several pieces, but I can mention Jessica Harris wrote specifically on that topic.

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I found a—a piece at a Georgia barbecue from the 1890s which gives a real sense of how people viewed barbecue and race and cooking in that context at that time, which I thought was crucial in terms of understanding of where we've evolved from. In addition to that, the sort of best-of pieces that are not tied to barbecue per se, but the hope is that if you want to understand Southern food ways you have to have a complete set of these books because next year Ronni Lundy will be doing the Appalachian book, and I'm certain there's going to be no more comprehensive approach to that subject than hers. And then Toni Tipton-Martin is going to be doing race and food, based on this year's Symposium; and once again, you can find the little essays on those topics, but finding one volume is difficult.

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AG: So, is it safe to say that you share SFA's idea of food as being intrinsic to the culture? And if so, do you see that, sounds like, from a like an intellectual point of view as well as a personal point of view?

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LEE: [*Laughs*] Yeah, I think people took food for granted for so long that they didn't think of it as a cultural marker. And I see that as having evolved a great deal in the last 20 years or so. The people doing it before, AJ Liebling and M.F.K Fisher, obviously were heading in that direction before, but the range and the depth of the food investigation certainly has peaked in recent years. Oh, and my personal connection to that?

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I grew up in New Orleans and I went to college at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. At that time I thought—I was in the South and therefore I wanted to get out of the South for college. And perhaps then or perhaps even before then, my pride in being from New Orleans and what that means sort of evolved, and our food is emblematic of us, and certainly in the United States nobody eats quite like we do. So, you know, I'd be making red beans and rice and stuff at school. And so my sense of the food as a part of identity was sharpened then.

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Part of it also is that I like to cook. And so, you know, it—it—part of it is just fun, and part of it is it's sort of a nationalistic statement, a declaration of independence from the rest of the United States, you know.

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AG: So you wrote an article about your coming to think of yourself as a southerner through the SFA experience?

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LEE: Yeah, it's the introduction to *Cornbread Nation*. And, you know, given the South's history and given the whole racial thing here, it's very convenient to not consider yourself a southerner. And there's substantive reasons why New Orleans is apart and separate because obviously you can't draw definitive lines. Many things you could say about southern culture, you probably found some northern or western outpost of it.

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But another aspect of it is that it has to be personal. It has to be the sense of personal connection that's not dictated to you by geography or some intellectual construct. And you know I—I guess one of the pivotal things is meeting Ronni Lundy; so you know Ronni is from Kentucky, and she describes herself as a hillbilly passing for white. And it talks about that whole sense of—of an other that people look down on in the context of the broader society, which of course parallels the whole racial thing in the—the broader nation. And also, it reminds us that whatever we might think about our personal histories and our own legacy and profession and so forth, other people got that as well. And the experience of SFA has been one of the things that has made me try not to look at—at oppression in a comparative sense—this notion of trying to prove that my people have suffered more than yours. What's more important is to talk about the fact that human suffering is—is widespread and needs to be eradicated as much as possible. The question of whether or not I suffered more than you is—is not particularly relevant.

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AG: Do you have ideas or visions for the future of SFA and any kind of specific projects that you would like to see or pursue?

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LEE: **[*Laughs*]** One of the things—well, let me tell you about an experience and form that question in the sense of—there's a group called the Black Men of Labor in New Orleans, and they formed after Danny Barker died. And Danny Barker was a great raconteur and banjo and guitar player, historian of music. And he said he didn't want a jazz funeral when he died because the funerals had changed so much. Young people were—were misbehaving at the funerals and so forth. And they said, "We can't let this happen. So we're going to do—we're going to put on an old-fashioned funeral and make him proud but still keep the tradition going."

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From that evolved this night where they gave awards to all these old jazz musicians. And these were not just the most famous or the most popular. These were about 50 to 60 musicians, most of whom had probably never gotten any recognition for playing traditional jazz before. I'm certain that even if they had gotten recognition, they never gotten it from black folks. Black people recognizing black musicians for playing black music, it's a rare thing in terms of quality music and not just pop foolishness.

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There were people literally crying when they got these awards. And mind you, and—and in a cynical sense, this is a cattle call. There was 60 folks getting a goddamn plaque or—or, you know, a piece of paper—not a big deal. But you begin to realize what it means to folks to be doing something creative, doing something individualistic and no doubt evolving into a consciousness of themselves as an artist. But nobody else really cares.

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Well I see that a lot in terms of foodways. One of my particular favorites is a woman named Willie Mae Seton, New Orleans who makes the best fried chicken I've ever had. And, you know, she's talking about this little restaurant and folks know her as something sort of different; she's still doing everything from scratch unlike a lot of other places. But I think about people like that, and I hope that we can recognize those folks.

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The oral histories are also very important to me because as a writer and researcher and historian, to some degree myself, I know what it's like to find a little piece of evidence that might have seemed unimportant, and you can imagine, like this interview, and somebody checking it out and what they get from it has nothing to do with food, but it informed them of something else they're trying to do. And oral histories of folks involved in southern food are not easy to come by. And so I applaud this aspect of what we're trying to do.

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The other thing that's sort of happening without us but perhaps we can move it on even faster is insuring that Southern Foodways is a part of the vocabulary of all American chefs and of all chefs interested in international food because the country is looked more to itself for food information and not so much to Europe or even to Asia, but realizing among our most original foods are those in the Southern United States. And so my hope is to encourage that even further, so that our food is taken seriously as any other food.

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AG: Can you share some stories about food from your childhood, like who were the preparers of that food? What was a typical meal, and was there, you know, some ceremony around it?

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LEE: My mother and my grandmother and my aunts did the cooking. My parents were divorced when I was I don't know—eight or ten or something. And so my father developed some specialty with his menu, so he used to do these potato, cheese, and onion omelets. I remember one time my mother was in the hospital and my father made eggs and rice for us, but he really wasn't the cook.

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And what to say about my mother's cooking? It was wonderful in all sorts of ways. A lot of it was the traditional stuff, the red beans and rice, gumbo, jambalaya, shrimp creole, and we were far from poor, but we also—you know, it wasn't like there was a whole pile of money out there. And I remember my mother had what we referred to as the "expensive shrimp dish". She did use jumbo shrimp, and there wasn't much gravy—bell pepper and onion sautéed and stuff and so it wasn't like you could stretch it with rice and gravy. This was nothing like that. I still remember now even though I probably have not had this in, like, 20 years or more.

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What else?

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AG: Did you sit together as a family? How did you—how was the eating carried out?

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LEE: Always on Sundays we sat together as a family. During the week we often ate before my parents got home. My grandmother would be there, so me and my sister and my grandmother might eat about 5 o'clock or so. And my mother probably didn't get home around—and my father you know 'til about 7:00. But in some ways that kind of deterioration of—of sitting at the table undistracted by television was showing itself even when I was growing up because, like, never on a Sunday dinner would we have the television on, but I can remember some weekdays when that might be going on.

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Sunday dinners you know pot-roast, potato salad was almost all the time. We're from New Orleans, so rice was all the time. Stewed hen on Sunday as opposed to smothered chicken during the week because the hen takes a lot longer to prepare and so forth, so all major holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter you had to have gumbo. And gumbo for us was always a variety of meats—crab, shrimp, sausage and chicken. Not like when you go to restaurants now it will be chicken and sausage or seafood or something; it was always okra.

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AG: Right. How did you cultivate an interest in food on a professional level or—or even just—just a general interest in food and was there a particular catalyst for that?

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LEE: I—I was determined to develop the world's best recipe, for instant grits. I worked on this for several years, and the key, of course, was putting the right amount of margarine. And I worked and worked and worked on it, and finally I got it perfected. And that was the catalyst for me trying to do other things. I used to make box cakes and be very proud of those.

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And also it had to do with me getting up on Saturday morning to watch cartoons, far earlier than my mother wanted to get up to fix me breakfast. So there was those kinds of things that you start to do. But I was always curious about cooking, so I got my grandmother to teach me how to make red beans and rice. And, you know, my father started doing this sort of omelet thing, and I got an omelet pan, the one that you sort of fold over, so you get these sort of impossibly perfect omelet envelopes.

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And I remember paying attention to food and being aware of what was good and not good even then. The—and also I grew up in the desegregation era, and my parents made a point of taking us to good restaurants in part because black folks could now do it, and in part because it was kind of more of the lifestyle they wanted us to—to understand and appreciate. And I can remember times being disappointed in particular meals at these restaurants. My father remembers that I was always an adventurous orderer so I'd see something on the menu that would be very fancy and very expensive, and I'd order it and of course, I wouldn't like it. So he would order something that he knew I would like, and we'd switch plates halfway through the meal. So, I got—I got to thank him for—for indulging me in my curiosity.

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And I guess in 1978, '79 Rudy Lombard did two food festivals based on the book, and I was a gopher at these festivals. But you had all of these chefs making, you know, fancy stuff and even people doing more down home things. One of the people I remember most—this woman was making *calas*, these rice donuts. I can still remember the flavor of them all these years later, you know, fantastic. And—and so that sparked another kind of interest. So I had that cookbook, and I used to make Shrimp 21 out of that cookbook and crepes de Galtier, and, you know, various recipes. So, there was always this interest in trying to do some of my own cooking and doing what I saw at various points as being fancy stuff, you know. There's a luxe box cake recipe as opposed to the regular one, you know.

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When I went to college, one thing I do remember is that it didn't bother me a lot to go to restaurants and get a bad meal, meaning I viewed that as part of the educational thing. You know you go there; “Well, I ain't going there no more” or you know—. I had a gig playing guitar in an Indian restaurant, and part of the—the payment was dinner every night. The first night I thought it was awful. The second night I thought it was less awful. A month later I thought it was fantastic. And so that was another one of my catalysts, just trying to deal with international stuff. A whole lot of my friends in college were West Indians, and so I also got into West Indian food.

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AG: How did you get your first job in sort of writing and doing food things?

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LEE: I remember doing an essay—essay is too bland of a word—writing two or three pages on the catfish at Barrow’s Restaurant. You know something; no, that was just like a few sentences in some other essay, and I even forget the context. So, even though—this was like when I was in college—I didn’t have a particular sense of myself as a food writer, but I was—I realized that food was evocative of place.

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I got a job as a road manager for Wynton Marsalis’ band, and he was working on a book with Frank Stewart, a photographer at the time. So, Frank and I were hanging out, and Frank was helping me a whole lot, trying to adjust to this new life. So, he and I started talking about doing a book. And we knew we wanted to do a book that involved some travel, so we talked about all kinds of stuff, and he suggested I do a book on barbecue. He had grown up in Memphis and Chicago so he had some sense of the differences between those two places, and I think the pivotal event might have been going to North Carolina. I think it was in Wilson, playing a gig down there, gave us barbecue as our backstage meal. Barbecue from I believe a place called Bill's—B-i-l-l—apostrophe—s.

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I really didn't like it at the time. It was very different from what I was used to—whole hog barbecue, which means the ribs, had been ripped out of a pig that was already cooked as opposed to being done separately as I was used to. But we were struck by how different it was more than anything else, so Frank said, "Why don't we do a book on barbecue?" And that was the initial catalyst for us, but our book proposal was silly in retrospect. You know, this is something generic—we're going to go to different places, and tell you about the regional stuff. We went to Memphis to do a sample chapter, and we were playing the blues tunes on the cassette in our 1981 Volvo. So, we'd be listening to these tunes, hanging out at night at some of the blues joints in Memphis, and I got a conception on the parallel between blues and barbecue in terms of going from rural to urban, from less to more technical sophistication, and ultimately to a kind of adulteration that you get in—in the commercial version of either of those genres.

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And that became the basis of my understanding of looking at food in the broader context of culture.

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AG: Have—have you seen any evolution of southern food, specifically New Orleans, food during your lifetime or do you think it's—?

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LEE: [*Laughs*] There's definitely been an evolution. You go to a fancy restaurant and you will see the influence of Southern food on what fancy chefs are doing. All of the sudden now I'm trying to think of—of some examples. Well the Upperline in New Orleans. The owner JoAnn Clevenger is from North Louisiana and spent most of her life in New Orleans. She has, like, fried greens tomatoes on the menu. And they come with shrimp remoulade, which is New Orleans, or fried green tomatoes I certainly don't recall from when I was a kid. Shrimp and grits has gotten to be a fairly popular menu item even outside of South Carolina. Barbecue, you know, you look at fancy restaurateurs like Danny Meyer and David Swinghamer in New York doing the upscale barbecue place as an example. And also other times you see grits on the menu rather than polenta. Polenta is acceptable because it's Italian and continental and grits, so you know it ain't no big deal. So, you see more and more of that. I'm just trying to think of other examples, and they escape me now.

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AG: All the talk about Southern food is with the continuity and tradition, and I was wondering if you think that is an accurate thing to say or if it's more romanticized.

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LEE: [*Laughs*] You know, when you hear of food a whole lot of talking about is what you grew up on. And that's always a romantic vision. If you want—you know unless you had a real bad childhood, who wants to remember those bad times? You remember the best of them. And there's also with that this disinclination to accept changes. The things that I'm kind of curious about—I don't like converted rice, and I'm always trying to figure out what it's been converted from. I—you know I like stuff to be made from scratch. If you want to serve me a cake, then I would make it from scratch or get it from a good bakery. But this box foolishness—why bother? Or, you know you buy a piecrust, you buy some filling, and you put it together and you say you've made a pie. It doesn't make any sense.

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But in some ways I kind of—I'm straddling a couple of perspectives on that. In New Orleans now I—I don't like much of the gumbo at the restaurants because it's different from what I think about as gumbo, and also you've got a lot of these chefs who aren't from New Orleans who come in not knowing the differences between Cajun and Creole foods and talk about making authentic gumbo and authentic Creole gumbo and andouille. I didn't hear of andouille till I was in the ***[inaudible]*** from the Cajun country which is neither bad nor good; it's just different.

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And so part of the concern is people attempting to make these things without knowing what the authentic ingredients or authentic recipes are. By the same token, I'm equally at home in a—you know a small, traditional, greasy spoon-type place. I want a place where the chef is doing that architectural food where it has several layers and stuff. I like that. I know people talk about it being overdone and talk about people mixing stuff that don't belong together. But I have no categorical disagreement with it. If you can pull it off—great. I love it.

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And I've traveled a lot so the sense of international cuisine and the idea of mixing ingredients I like.

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The ultimate question though as a matter of discipline and restraint and—and skill; how well you can pull it off. Having said all of that though, we've got to figure out ways to at least preserve the original, so we know what we're evolving from. Books help in that regard a great deal, but also helping the chef have a respect for the tradition even if they're not slavishly following it.

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AG: One last question: I wonder if you could describe sort of your quintessential Southern meal.

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LEE: **[*Laughs*]** I'm from New Orleans. I don't have a quintessential Southern meal.

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AG: Okay; well your quintessential New Orleans meal. What would somebody come over to your house, and say I want—what you'd consider—the epitome of a New Orleans meal, you know what would you serve?

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LEE: Well, I'll tell you, we actually sort of did that with Jo Nathan. She's a cookbook writer in DC whom I met here, who is—I'm trying to think what her book is about, but anyway, she—coming to New Orleans and doing a sort of tour of the restaurants of the people and—. So, we thought about various places to go and things to do and ultimately decided that I'd invite her to dinner at my mother's house, and me, my mother, and my aunts would cook.

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One of the ironies about gumbo is it's the traditional appetizer for the fancy meal. Remind you it's a dish that is totally filling; it's a soup with the rice and all this meat in it, so gumbo is plenty enough to fill you up, but it always starts off as an appetizer for us.

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My aunt made her eggplant casserole, which is eggplant with shrimp and, you, know, onions and garlic and all that stuff chopped up in it. My mother stewed a hen. And we had some mustard greens, and of course, unlike much of the South, we in New Orleans tend to prefer mustard greens over collards—mustards and turnips over collards. But as everyone knows they're tougher and not easily edible.

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And I think I finished that meal with a crepe ***[inaudible]*** from Rudy Lombard's book—strawberry crepes with a cream cheese and pecan filling and a liqueur sauce on top. The one thing that's not there is a recipe from my maternal grandmother. She would take cushaw pumpkins, these crookneck green and white striped pumpkins and she would make a kind of pone out of it. And that's become sort of family tradition for us on—on big holiday meals. So, when that stuff is available around Halloween we buy a bunch of it and—and freeze it so we can make that for the rest of the year.

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AG: Okay, so now if you could do your "You're listening to *Cornbread Nation*"?

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LEE: Okay.

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AG: We can—you can do it as many times as you want.

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LEE: Okay. Well let's—you know I'm trying to see how many ***[inaudible]*** from the other end—exactly what you said and let me try and do that. Well, I'm Lolis Eric Elie, and I love gumbo, and I love listening to *Cornbread Nation* radio and—and you're listening to—. What am I supposed to say at the end?

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AG: That's fine. You can say, "You're listening" or "I love listening to *Cornbread Nation*" or another variation.

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LEE: Got you. I'm trying to think of how—. I'm Lolis Eric Elie, and my favorite—no, that's corny as shit. I'm Lolis Eric Elie. I like eating gumbo and listening to *Cornbread Nation* radio. I'm Lolis Eric Elie, and I like eating gumbo and listening to *Cornbread Nation* radio. And if you have good taste you will too.

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AG: Yeah. That's great. Thank you.

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[End Lolis Eric Elie Interview]