

**MATT DWYER**  
**Charlie's Steak House—New Orleans, LA**

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Location: Charlie's Steak House—New Orleans, LA  
Interviewer: Sara Roahen  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 55 minutes  
Project: New Orleans Eats—Louisiana

**[Begin Matt Dwyer Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Wednesday, September 24, 2008. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana at Charlie's Steak House with Charlie's new owner. Could I get you to say your name and your birth date, and tell me what you do for your living?

**00:00:19**

**Matthew Dwyer:** Matthew Dwyer, January 1971. I'm now a restaurateur/bartender/cook/yard maintenance—a little bit of everything right now.

**00:00:29**

**SR:** And tell me where you're from.

**00:00:31**

**MD:** I'm from New Orleans; lived in Lakeview and then moved uptown in '93 and have lived right near the restaurant since then.

**00:00:40**

**SR:** Did you grow up coming to Charlie's at all? Or, what was your first Charlie's Steak House experience that you remember?

**00:00:45**

**MD:** First time I was at Charlie's was in '93. We didn't even hear about that often. We were by The Steak Knife, so that's where we went. And we came to town and we discovered Charlie's, and it was a little different. It wasn't the cleanest place I had ever been into, but the food was great, and the service was a little different also. We enjoyed it and just kept coming back.

**00:01:07**

**SR:** Who is "we"?

**00:01:08**

**MD:** Oh, my brother and my father and my other roommate, who doesn't—he's in Alaska now. It was when we were in college and we all lived together, except dad. He was just visiting.

**00:01:19**

**SR:** And did Charlie's become part of your regular routine? On what sort of occasion would you maybe come to eat?

**00:01:28**

**MD:** Well, I worked at night and I was going to school during the day, so I was probably here—we ate here at least once a month. But more often than not I'm come over and get au gratins for lunch and just live on the potatoes au gratin.

**00:01:37**

**SR:** No steak? Just au gratin?

**00:01:39**

**MD:** Yes, yeah. Steak was too much for lunch. [*Laughs*]

**00:01:43**

**SR:** I didn't even really realize they were open for lunch.

**00:01:45**

**MD:** Yeah, Tuesday thru Friday they're open for lunch.

**00:01:48**

**SR:** Okay. And right now are you open for lunch?

**00:01:51**

**MD:** No, not yet. Eventually.

**00:01:53**

**SR:** Tell me what you went to college for and whether you were in the food industry at all before you bought this place.

**00:02:01**

**MD:** Political science was my degree and with the intention of going to law school, which never panned out. I worked at Madigan's for ten-and-a-half years, and we also have a restaurant there call GB's, so I was managing the restaurant and bartending.

**00:02:16**

**SR:** Okay.

**00:02:17**

**MD:** I did that for, like I said, ten-and-a-half years. In high school I worked in a little diner, and then after Madigan's I worked at two other steakhouses, the Hilton, and a couple other places. And my favorite place was the Ugly Dog Saloon. And I got to cook there a little bit and bartended.

**00:02:36**

**SR:** Can you tell me, for the record, what Madigan's is?

**00:02:39**

**MD:** Oh, that's a bar at the corner of South Carrollton and Maple. It's been there since 1984, but the building itself has been a bar since I think the '30s.

**00:02:48**

**SR:** And do they serve food there, or is that just—?

**00:02:50**

**MD:** The restaurant behind it is GB's. It's the same owner and they serve food.

**00:02:53**

**SR:** Oh, I see.

**00:02:54**

**MD:** Right.

**00:02:56**

**SR:** All right, and tell me a little bit about how you got here at Charlie's. I'll say for the record that Charlie's original owners didn't open it after Katrina. How did you come to open it?

**00:03:12**

**MD:** Well, at some point in time—I can't remember what year it was, but I was at Madigan's and still in college—or maybe it was after college—but I'd see the owner every morning. I'd get off work at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning and he'd be coming in to cut the steaks. So I would talk to him every day, and we always—he knew I was taking care of the grass or doing things to help him. And I started bartending for him. And at first I would do it I guess every other Saturday, whenever I could, and he couldn't believe how much money could be made at the bar.

**00:03:37**

So he bought me new barstools and he was all excited, and then I had to quit because my other job needed me. Then my brother took it over. So we still did it off and on, but they ended

up having a bartender periodically, which was something they never did—or hadn't done in the past. So—.

**00:03:52**

**SR:** Just to clarify, you're talking here [at Charlie's] you bartended?

**00:03:54**

**MD:** Here, yeah. So I did that, and I was half a block away and I was always late [*Laughs*]. I had to be here at 5:00, and I could never get here on time, and it killed me to be here that close. But after Katrina I kept trying to talk to the owner and it was impossible to get a hold of her. And other people had told me, "Oh, we're trying to buy Charlie's," and trying to buy it. And then I kind of heard a rumor that someone else was going to buy it and they were going to turn it into condos and take up the whole parking lot. And then that didn't pan out, so after two years of the job I had been at I quit—or just left that job. And I found her; I went out to her house. After I found her address, I kept calling and it wasn't working, so I finally just drove out to her house and she recognized me right away. And I talked to her and she said there was an offer on the table but she was going to give me first chance. And I just—it was within 48 hours of leaving the job I was at for two years, since before Katrina, to this happening.

**00:04:48**

And I think I actually went out and left her a note one day and she wasn't there, and I came back the next day. I think that's Tuesday I went out, and Wednesday I went back, and then she said I had until Friday to buy it. Which didn't quite—it ended up, you know, taking a little longer.

**00:05:02**

**SR:** And so could you clarify, for the record, who the owner is?

**00:05:05**

**MD:** Her name is Ellen Petrossi, and she is Sonny's widow. And Sonny would be Charles Petrossi, Jr., and Charlie's son.

**00:05:13**

**SR:** Okay. And Miss Dottye—what's her relationship?

**00:05:16**

**MD:** Miss Dottye is Charlie's daughter and Sonny's sister.

**00:05:21**

**SR:** So, the sister-in-law of the owner?

**00:05:26**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:05:27**

**SR:** Okay. I just had to clarify all that. That must have been sort of a shock, that you were maybe going to buy a restaurant in the span of 48 hours. Did you have any second thoughts?



**00:05:41**

**MD:** I didn't have any thoughts. I was just kind of freaking out and trying to make it happen because I really had just until Friday to do it. And I kept thinking—I was like, "I have to bring Charlie's back." If there is anything else besides bringing Charlie's back and be my own boss, and it was just all I wanted to do at that point, and I just kept going and going. And then she was a little reluctant because I didn't make the Friday deadline, but in the meantime, in those three days, I called her every day and I went out to her house and I brought her cookies.

**00:06:07**

One day she was telling me how her lawn mower broke and she didn't want to—she had a big yard, so I went and cut her grass. And she caught me as I was putting the mower away. So I put the mower away and she was like, "You don't do that. You know I have a mower. It's just not working." And I said, "Well, let's fix the mower." So I went out there on Sunday and I changed the drive belt on a Cub Cadet riding lawn mower. I had never done that before. So she just—she knew then I was bound and determined to make her happy and buy Charlie's. So she ended up giving me 30 days to do it.

**00:06:32**

**SR:** And where does she live?

**00:06:35**

**MD:** In Bucktown.

**00:06:38**

**SR:** Oh, okay.

**00:06:39**

**MD:** If I can remember.

**00:06:40**

**SR:** That's a pretty impressive story. There's a lot in there that I didn't know. I didn't realize that you had worked here before. Why did this place mean so much to you, and why did it mean so much to reopen it?

**00:06:51**

**MD:** Oh it's the tradition here and all the stories I had ever heard, and Miss Dottye so wonderful. I just love her, and she's been such a big help. And people were just driving by all the time and talking about Charlie's. And once I closed on the property there were still some questions and doubts about sprinkler systems and how much money we were going to invest. And I think there was one day I was just kind of, "I don't know if we can do this."

**00:07:15**

But I transferred the numbers. I immediately brought the telephone numbers back, the numbers they had for 50 years. So I transferred them to my cell phone, and everyone that called here I talked to. I talked to close to 700 people just every day. Every time the phone rang I answered it and I talked to them. And so I had to change my phone plan. **[Laughs]**

**00:07:37**

**SR:** So you knew that you were going to have business once you opened.

**00:07:41**

**MD:** Yeah. This place—you know, it's very special, and it's just so different. It's the most unusual place I've ever been in. There is no menu and nobody complains. [*Laughs*]

**00:07:51**

**SR:** Right.

**00:07:53**

**MD:** I think that's it.

**00:07:54**

**SR:** Can you tell us a little bit—well, me, and by extension our audience—a little bit about the ways that it's different? And also a little bit about Miss Dottye?

**00:08:07**

**MD:** Well the ways it's different, to start with, we have no menu. We're the waiter—or myself, that's your menu. We tell you what you're going to have. I mean, not as much as they used to. The old Charlie's, you came in and Miss Dottye said you were—you know, she didn't even ask you if you were having onion rings. They were put on your table. When she came back, if she knew you she'd look around and you got a salad. And you could ask what dressing you wanted

was about it, and then everything else kind of came out family-style—your au gratin, your mushrooms, your fries just were put on the table.

**00:08:34**

But if you were a male you got—depending on your size, if she looked at you—like I would obviously get the small T-bone, but my brother would get the large. But if you tried to order a filet, no. They'd scream at you. You know, the filet is for women and not for men. And we've tried to recreate that to a point, but it's not happening. *[Laughs]* I think it was in the article I did with Chris Rose, it says, "Proud to announce that men can now have filets and women can now have potatoes."

**00:09:04**

Some of the old waiters wouldn't—if you came in and you had a steak and a salad, and if you asked for potatoes he'd say, "No, too much food for a woman," and you'd never get it. And sometimes you couldn't even get another drink. So they used to—when the last cooler broke, they just bought a refrigerator and they stuck it right here in the corner and people would—I'd see people just walk up and open the fridge, crack open the beer, and look at the waiter—"Got a beer"—and walk away. People used to make their own drinks. It was different.

**00:09:33**

**SR:** Yeah.

**00:09:36**

**MD:** Now Miss Dottie, she had been here for 55 years. She's 82 now, so she originally worked with her mother, Naomi. There was—where you pulled up today, in that corner, that was a

corner store and mom and Dottye ran the corner store and Charlie and Sonny ran Charlie's. So there was some—I don't know what the problem was with the corner store, but eventually they closed the corner store and Dottye came here to work. And then she stayed and ran it forever and ever.

**00:10:05**

**SR:** Is Dottye around here anymore?

**00:10:07**

**MD:** Yes, she is still here. She lives in the neighborhood. She's been in a few times. She loves it and she's been—she's so happy; she sent me flowers. Actually, she sent me that one and the little card on the wall. She was just thrilled. She brought the whole family in and I think we had eight Petrossies walk through and give the thumbs up.

**00:10:26**

**SR:** And I see that Dottye still has a TV set to her channel?

**00:10:31**

**MD:** Yes, Dottye always had a TV and she said that her TV had been stolen a few times, so I mounted this one a little better in case—I don't want anything happening to it. Yeah, her table was right there and she always had her TV, and it always had WWL on or Wheel of Fortune. You know, she had her shows and people loved it. And she always knew the sports scores and everything else. Tulane Tigers—she had it every time. But that's why—that's the tribute to

Dotty, and it says, "Don't change the channel." When she comes in she sits there and that's her TV and **[Laughs]** she gets the best service.

**00:11:03**

**SR:** It's a nice TV, too. It's like a little flat screen.

**00:11:06**

**MD:** Yeah, we couldn't quite find—I even looked on eBay for something with rabbit ears, and it just didn't fit on the—we had to build a shelf for it, so it was easier to hang on the wall. But she understood. A little upgrade, and she likes it a lot.

**00:11:19**

**SR:** That is great. I have a million questions, but while this is in my head: so I ate here a few times before you bought it, before the renovation. I always was seated upstairs. And I always wondered if it was because I wasn't a regular. Was there a hierarchy of people? There is an upstairs dining room and downstairs dining room.

**00:11:41**

**MD:** I don't know. Some people have told me they never ate downstairs or they never ate upstairs, because there was no host and there rarely was a bartender. If you knew Miss Dotty, for years Miss Dotty ran the upstairs. That was her rooms, so all the little touches upstairs, all the autographs, everything is made out to Dotty, and everything in there was hers. But after she

had a surgery her doctor said no more climbing the steps, so she had to come downstairs. So if you knew Dottye and had always gone to Dottye, you went in here.

**00:12:09**

Now the upstairs was only opened on Saturdays most of the time—occasionally Fridays. It was just the overflow. So people would come in and see the sign right above it that says “Dining Upstairs” and just walk up the steps. And if downstairs was too busy, or if the waiters didn’t want to wait on you—especially, like you said, if you weren’t a regular and they didn’t know you—they didn’t say anything. Because it was two brothers. It was Rudy and Raphael. Raphael had the upstairs and Rudy was downstairs with Andy and Dottye and Frank. So there was always a little bit of competition too because Miss Dottye had her regulars, and you know you didn’t—if you were her regular, you came to her. You didn’t go upstairs. You didn’t want to anyway. *[Laughs]*

**00:12:47**

**SR:** I know. I always felt kind of—I mean, I always had a great time, but I felt kind of cheated having to walk up those stairs.

**00:12:53**

**MD:** I wonder if I do that to people now. I say, “Do you mind sitting upstairs?” Because we have—there’s not quite the ambiance because it’s not as loud and we put a stereo up there to kind of give it a little bit of noise, but you feel like you’re by yourself. The first time we did it I think we took two people up there, and these two huge rooms, and there’s these two people and they’re kind of looking around, like they were punished. *[Laughs]* Go sit in the corner.

**00:13:15**

**SR:** Yeah, well I noticed when I did walk up there the other day—or the other night when I was in here eating—there was Otis Redding playing. Is that a jukebox, or that's your stereo?

**00:13:23**

**MD:** Oh, it's WWOZ [a local music station].

**00:13:27**

**SR:** Oh, okay.

**00:13:26**

**MD:** Yeah, you have to have OZ on upstairs. [*Laughs*] We have it on downstairs too except sometimes, you know—. There was something we just couldn't take the other night, Argentina dance. It was good but it just wasn't steakhouse music. [*Laughs*]

**00:13:41**

**SR:** Did they have music before?

**00:13:42**

**MD:** No, no. TV. And nothing upstairs that I know of. Just the sound of the waiter and he would never—he always had a runner. He would never come downstairs. Once he got upstairs he was up there. So all he would do was go to the top of the steps and yell down the order, and I never



understood what in the hell he was saying. So I heard, “Bourbon and Coke!” and I’m like, “Oh crap.” And then Michael would run down and pick it up and go back up with it. That’s how you just—doors were open and he yelled the order down and that’s how it was done. **[Laughs]**

**00:14:09**

**SR:** But now the waiters come downstairs, I noticed.

**00:14:12**

**MD:** Yes. Yeah, they—yeah, the waiters do come downstairs. They’ve got a little updated cash register version, so it kind of sends the drinks and does the things for them. They don’t have to yell at the steps anymore. But I did give them walkie-talkies last week. Besides our hostess, we have one girl, and it’s a real boys’ club—poor thing. I’m surprised she just hasn’t killed anybody yet.

**00:14:35**

She asked me if she could have a walkie-talkie, and I said, “Why?” She goes, “Well, I’m upstairs and I miss talking to the other kids downstairs.” So I went next door and I got her walkie-talkies. **[Laughs]**

**00:14:45**

**SR:** Yeah, I did notice that there was one very pretty girl seating people, and then it was all boys.

**00:14:56**

**MD:** Oh yes. That's depending—she kind of is just helping us out. You were here last night?

**00:15:01**

**SR:** No, um—

**00:15:03**

**MD:** Was it Tuesday or Wednesday?

**00:15:05**

**SR:** It was a Tuesday or Wednesday.

**00:15:06**

**MD:** Yeah, that's Lauren. Yeah, she just came to help us out.

**00:15:08**

**SR:** Oh, okay.

**00:15:09**

**MD:** Yeah, she—when they see blonde girls, they think they're mine. I'm like, "No, they're not all mine." [*Laughs*]

**00:15:16**

**SR:** Tell me what state the building was in when you took it over.

**00:15:21**

**MD:** The floor was all right, but other than that it was a lot worse than I expected because of the roof had leaked for years before, and they just—nothing had been done. The back wall, the chain wall had broken in the bathroom, and there was just no maintenance schedule after Sonny had died. So the grease would look like asphalt in the kitchen, it was so thick, and we didn't know that because we didn't have any power. And the City wouldn't turn the power on because our electrical was so outdated.

**00:15:49**

But I do understand—when I told you they had the refrigerator for the beer, they had one upstairs also, and they took the drawers out of it and used those to catch water in the hallway. And then behind Miss Dottye's—there used to be a register right there on a display cooler where the old air-conditioner was. And they had water just running down the wall, and they were catching it with that. So for three years they did that. There was a little bit of mold. And this used to be all paneled, just like the upstairs with the wood paneling. And we couldn't find the paneling just the same, so we just went with this wainscoting. But behind all the mold it looked like it was going to be about 18 inches at the most, the mold, and then we popped it off and it was almost six feet. So we gutted everything.

**00:16:29**

**SR:** Six feet, like, in what direction?

**00:16:32**

**MD:** Up the ceiling, towards the ceiling, and the ceiling tiles had mold all on them and all the tables and chairs were covered. I tried to save them and clean them—downstairs. Upstairs wasn't bad at all.

**00:16:42**

**SR:** So there were mold issues even before the flood?

**00:16:47**

**MD:** I'm sure there were. [*Laughs*] There were all sorts of issues. [*Laughs*]

**00:16:51**

**SR:** But these tiles—are these the original tiles?

**00:16:53**

**MD:** Yes, original tiles, original front door, and there's a few other things—not many.

**00:17:01**

**SR:** You know, because I wasn't in this room ever I don't—did they have the wainscoting before or was it—?

**00:17:09**

**MD:** It was all paneled. It was all dark paneled. That picture was at the back of the wall back there.

**00:17:15**

**SR:** The picture of a mountain?

**00:17:16**

**MD:** Yes, and we have no idea why or where, but I have several of these in storage. But they're not in good shape because they all got wet. And I think they're all the same artist, and on the back of them some say "to Charlie" or "to Sonny." So I think they were gifts. That is why I didn't throw anything away, but they're not savable as far as being in the building.

**00:17:33**

**SR:** Are they all landscape?

**00:17:35**

**MD:** Yeah, they're all pretty much the same. [*Laughs*]

**00:17:38**

**SR:** Um—

**00:17:40**

**MD:** The only thing we don't have—we didn't put up, and my brother, he's finished cleaning them but hasn't put them back up yet—is there used to be hat racks. Little—about this big and about a foot high, and there were three of them.

**00:17:51**

**SR:** Oh, where were they?

**00:17:52**

**MD:** By the other exit in the corner.

**00:17:55**

**SR:** Okay. Somebody was saying that there used to be hooks along the walls.

**00:17:59**

**MD:** That's what those were. Those are—they've got—it goes up and then hooks at the bottom. I've got pictures.

**00:18:05**

**SR:** Okay. Well that's good, those are coming back, huh?

**00:18:06**

**MD:** Yeah, yeah. I didn't want to do it right away because I had just cleaned the floors and I knew my brother had to drill into the wall, and I'm like, "You're not doing that while the floor is clean." I was like, "Wait a couple weeks and then I won't care anymore." *[Laughs]*

**00:18:16**

**SR:** And what about the kitchen? Did you get to design a new kitchen or is it relatively the same?

**00:18:21**

**MD:** It's relatively the same but it's all new. The hood had to be replaced. The Fire Marshall saw that right away and said, "No." So once we tore that out, we tore everything out. Same floor though. And then the walk-in had to be replaced. It was really needing it. It had a wood siding on it and it was all handmade, but it was a little funky. And then there was a leak—the air-conditioner upstairs, the condensation line leaked for so long that it actually rotted through part of the floor upstairs and then rotted into what turned out to be the walk-in cooler. My contractor's dad put his foot through it. *[Laughs]*

**00:18:55**

**SR:** Good thing he didn't fall.

**00:18:56**

**MD:** He's all right. He's good. *[Laughs]*

**00:19:00**

**SR:** So I mean, you did a major overhaul. How long did this take?

**00:19:05**

**MD:** From—let's see. I closed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, and we opened on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August—eleven months. But then there's a whole two months of trying to get the thing going the week before—or, all of July basically, and August. So the renovation itself was just a little over ten months. Phipps Enterprises was amazing. They put up with me even when we ran out of money and started—he never let me stop the project. He's like, "I know Charlie's is—I know Charlie's. It'll come back and you'll be fine. I know you're going to get money." And he just kept on working. The bank couldn't believe it.

**00:19:42**

**SR:** And what was the name of that company?

**00:19:43**

**MD:** Oh, Phipps Enterprises. It's Fred Phipps.

**00:19:46**

**SR:** How do you spell that?

**00:19:47**

**MD:** P-h-i-p-p-s. And his father is Fred, Sr. It's Fred and Freddy.

**00:19:53**

**SR:** And so they just took it on faith that the money would come through?



**00:19:57**

**MD:** Yes. We're both Loyola grads, so I think he—he liked that. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:02**

**SR:** You told me that you used the oral history project as it exists now [interviews with three enthusiastic customers] as part of your business plan. Was it difficult to talk people into giving you loans to reopen this place?

**00:20:16**

**MD:** Oh, it was impossible. I mean I had some friends that were willing to put up money, and a little bit here and a little bit there. It was like \$5,000 all the way up to \$50,000. But we needed so much money after seeing what we needed to do. I knocked on every door in town and nobody wanted to lend anything because it's just restaurants. And finally Gulf Coast—his name is Thomas Ogg, and he's the only one that said yes. And so I love Thomas. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:39**

**SR:** I'm sorry; I don't really know this business. He's a lender or—?

**00:20:45**

**MD:** He's the vice president of the Harrison branch. I'm not sure what his exact title is—in Lakeview.

**00:20:51**

**SR:** Oh, okay.

**00:20:52**

**MD:** But he was the only one that had faith in it. But even he said that was it for money. And then he saw the progress and he was like, “All right,” and he got us more money. And then he got us with one other state organization that helped us out.

**00:21:07**

**SR:** Well that's good. It sounds like—*[Ruffling papers]*

**00:21:16**

**MD:** Duct tape them to the table for you?

**00:21:23**

**SR:** Ten months doesn't actually sound like that bad for this kind of project.

**00:21:27**

**MD:** Well considering we wanted to be open by Christmas, *[Laughs]* it was a lot longer. And then I kept picking holidays, and I really wanted to be open in time for the BCS and the Sugar Bowl. And then after that I just kept going down the list, and the next was St. Paddy's Day, and then I wanted to be open for Jazz Fest. And since I didn't quite make that, I decided to go to Jazz Fest. *[Laughs]*

**00:21:48**

**SR:** Instead you opened for hurricane season.

**00:21:50**

**MD:** I opened for hurricane season, exactly, and was open for two weeks and then we had a hurricane. And it was like reopening again because some of the staff didn't come back and it was jus—it was like we started over.

**00:22:00**

**SR:** Tell me: I thought that the stairs seemed to have been widened.

**00:22:06**

**MD:** No. They're still the same, and they still lean to the left, and that's because the waiters carry the trays on the left-hand side.

**00:22:14**

**SR:** That's not true, though, is it?

**00:22:15**

**MD:** Probably not. Sounds good though.

**00:22:17**

**SR:** So it must be brighter in that hallway or something because I wasn't as scared to walk up the stairs as I used to be.

**00:22:21**

**MD:** That hallway was paneled also, and there was only one light, and now I've got two lights in there. Well, there was an old small light and there was a chandelier that only had one bulb that worked—usually one or two. But now there's, yeah, much more light and there is a new door for the new fire escape there, too. So if that's open you have more light from the outside. And it's definitely brighter.

**00:22:41**

**SR:** What about the ceilings in here? Are they higher?

**00:22:44**

**MD:** No. No, I'm pretty sure they're still the same. If anything, it would just be an inch because—but they're just cleaner. And we used to have big florescent fixtures, so now we don't have that anymore. We just have the can lighting. And then the wall, which makes a huge difference.

**00:23:04**

**SR:** And by "here," I'll just say for the record, we're in the main dining room downstairs.

**00:23:07**

**MD:** And there's speakers in the ceiling.

**00:23:08**

**SR:** Oh, there are speakers in the ceiling. I did notice that the lighting in here doesn't make people look green anymore.

**00:23:15**

**MD:** [*Laughs*] I guess that had something to do with the florescent. I can work on that though.

**00:23:21**

**SR:** It sounds like the Petrossi family was enthusiastic about the place reopening and the look of things. What about other regular customers? What sort of—are you getting—I mean I'm asking because I imagine there are sticklers who are upset that things are clean—?

**00:23:38**

**MD:** Yeah. It's hard to explain it to them because some things just aren't quite the same, but for the amount of hugs I've gotten and crying and tears, and people are just clapping and it's just amazing. When Dottye comes in—when she comes in to eat, the whole room quiets down and they start pointing: “Oh, there's Dottye, there's Dottye.” And they want to go talk to her but they don't want to bother her, so they kind of wait until she's done eating and they'll come say hi as they're walking by.

**00:24:03**

But, yeah, the menu is the same. I had the same—I had a lady, Miss Rhoda Patterson, she's been here since October of 1970, and she's the one that gave me all the recipes and helped me do everything. So that's how I have all the tastes the same. Now the steaks are a better cut

and a better quality, but they're not as thick because after three years of Charlie's not being open, the one place that did have the cut of meat, they just don't. The animals are just bred different now. So I hate to talk about how many cows are lost now. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:39**

**SR:** Yeah.

**00:24:40**

**MD:** So it's still—but it's a much better quality, but the biggest complaint so far has been that the service is too good and the steaks are too tender and the floor is too clean. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:51**

**SR:** Well I'll have you know that my waiter pretty much forced us to get onion rings and salads.

**00:24:57**

**MD:** Oh yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**00:24:59**

**SR:** So that's good.

**00:24:59**

**MD:** Yeah, that's part of the old deal, the old tradition of it. You don't have to eat it all but we recommend you do.

**00:25:05**

**SR:** We did. And so Rhoda—does she still work here?

**00:25:09**

**MD:** Oh, it's Patterson.

**00:25:10**

**SR:** Oh, Patterson.

**00:25:12**

**MD:** Yeah, Miss Rhoda is still with me like once or twice a week. She's not in the—she is diabetic and she didn't realize it until after Katrina. So she has to make sure she stays healthy, so she comes in. But she lives in the West Bank, too, so it's not an easy drive for her, so—. But she likes to come over and be here, and I love having her.

**00:25:28**

**SR:** And the recipes, were they ever written down before you took the place over?

**00:25:33**

**MD:** No, not that I know of, because even Dottye didn't have all of them. That's why Dottye got me in touch with Rhoda.

**00:25:39**

**SR:** Are they written down now?

**00:25:41**

**MD:** Maybe. [*Laughs*]

**00:25:44**

**SR:** I'm not going to ask to see them; I'm just wondering.

**00:25:46**

**MD:** I wrote them down as I was on the phone with her, and I've looked back at it because I was so excited and I couldn't even read part of the handwriting. I had to ask her when we were doing it. When she was showing me the recipes I had my book and I was watching her and I'm going down my list to see how she's doing it is the same way we talked on the phone to make sure I wrote it down right. And I got them all, and it's just her and I that own the recipes at the moment.

**00:26:09**

Now the guys in the kitchen know basically what—they can always make the au gratins, and they know how to make the onion rings. The only thing that I haven't put on paper—because I'm here during the day—is I make the dressings early in the day because they're better if they're made and they sit and you go back to the cooler. And nobody else ever does the dressing, and that's the only reason that the recipes haven't been shared yet. I'm sure they will.



**00:26:31**

**SR:** And so you do a lot of the cooking?

**00:26:33**

**MD:** Yeah, I do the dressings, and my general manager, Glenn [Bove]—well, besides everything else he does, he also does the prep on the au gratins and does the fries. He was doing something else today. He does everything.

**00:26:48**

**SR:** Would that be the person who I saw wearing a chef's coat?

**00:26:51**

**MD:** No, that would have been the chef.

**00:26:53**

**SR:** Oh, okay. Who is the chef?

**00:26:54**

**MD:** When you came in, that would have been Michael Brewer, and Michael just left Commander's Palace. He was the wine director there, and he left there to open his own place and it hasn't quite opened yet, but he's the original chef in my business plan. I would have brought him in if we had gotten opened when we wanted to be open. He was the executive chef at Jackson, which closed. It was either Sugar Magnolia, 1910 Magazine. Yeah, he ran that and then

they closed that, and he—well, hoping Charlie's was going to open, he took the job at Commander's. But now he's over here with us, and I have two other chefs right now—actually three: Jeremy Russell, Spencer Harden, and Blaze Bezold. All these guys all have culinary school experience and all of them have done a lot of things. And they're wonderful.

**00:27:42**

**SR:** Do you have any staff members that are from the old Charlie's?

**00:27:48**

**MD:** Just Rhoda. Uh-hm, she's the only one. And I do have one other guy—well, I have two other people in the kitchen that don't have quite the experience. Drew Phippen has been—his experience before this was Quizno's, and he has learned a lot, and these guys are—these guys are really teaching him and he's been great. And then Reggie and my two dishwashers, Alton and Raymond. And everybody in here has been just wonderful.

**00:28:16**

**SR:** Were the servers pre-Katrina—were they all part of the family?

**00:28:23**

**MD:** No, not anymore. Just Dottye. She was the only one. Like I said, the other two were brothers and they were Cuban.

**00:28:31**

**SR:** Oh, I see. They were brothers but not from the family.

**00:28:33**

**MD:** Right, yeah, and not even—nowhere near the right continent. So I don't know how they were involved in it, but I think the last—the only last family member would have been Sonny and Dottye.

**00:28:45**

**SR:** Have you heard from them at all?

**00:28:48**

**MD:** Well, Sonny passed away in '02, and as I say, I see Dottye. And I haven't heard from Ellen in a few weeks. But I did hear from one of the two brothers. He called—yeah, I'm sorry, I have [heard from] only one of the two. Rudy called me to see if I had any openings yet. [*Laughs*]

**00:29:03**

**SR:** So he still lives here?

**00:29:05**

**MD:** Yeah. I guess he—yeah, I'm not sure where he lives. But he's here, yeah. I think it's the West Bank from the phone number.

**00:29:10**

**SR:** Any chance he'll be coming on the staff?

**00:29:12**

**MD:** Not at the moment. We're full because everybody that has been here has been here from day one.

**00:29:17**

**SR:** So I could tell that the steaks were more tender. What's the difference? They're a different grade?

**00:29:24**

**MD:** Well, it's a better cut of meat. Yeah, we buy the whole loin just like they used to. I don't cut it where they cut it before, and that's where part of the difference comes in. I have it cut from end to end, and it's cut to our specs. It's Thompson [Packers] in Slidell, and they've been wonderful to us—also trying to work with us because I'm a little bit anal retentive, so I'm always kind of picking at things. And they have been pretty understanding about it. And also they tenderize the steak for us, and they age it for us too, and then it's cryogenically sealed, and then by the time we get it—so it is much better.

**00:29:58**

**SR:** How long is it aged, do you know?

**00:29:59**

**MD:** Twenty-one days.

**00:30:01**

**SR:** And can you tell us anything about how it's cooked?

**00:30:08**

**MD:** No. *[Laughs]*

**00:30:10**

**SR:** Say that again.

**00:30:11**

**MD:** No.

**00:30:14**

**SR:** Not even what device it goes in?

**00:30:15**

**MD:** It's in a steak broiler and it's a South End broiler and it's got two double drawers, and one of the drawers we utilize more than anything to heat the plates in. and then we do the steaks on the upper drawer.

**00:30:28**

**SR:** And the plates, they can't be new, can they? The metal things that the steaks come out on?

**00:30:36**

**MD:** No, those are the original plates. We were able to save them. My manager, Glenn, one day he just took it upon himself, along with everything else he's done, he went outside and he stacked them all up—he had ninety plates. And he took a wire wheel and a wire brush to all of them. I think he said he started at like noon, and I came about at 6:30 to help him, and we finally finished about 10:30. And then we took them all and seasoned them, salt and oil, and threw them back in the broiler and burned the hell out of them again. *[Laughs]*

**00:31:03**

**SR:** What are those made of?

**00:31:05**

**MD:** I'm not sure. I think they're aluminum, but somebody else said they might be pewter. There is no stamp on them, but we've melted a couple. So, yeah, they got a little hot and you can't stack them more than four high in the broiler. *[Laughs]*

**00:31:17**

**SR:** That must be a hot broiler.

**00:31:19**

**MD:** It's about 1400 degrees, yeah.

**00:31:20**

**SR:** Fourteen hundred?

**00:31:21**

**MD:** Uh-hm.

**00:31:22**

**SR:** Well, I appreciated how they still had the same wobble.

**00:31:24**

**MD:** Yeah, they look like a beat-up hubcap. [*Laughs*]

**00:31:27**

**SR:** Yeah. When you were a bartender at the old Charlie's—which is great because I had questions about the bar. The actual physical bar—it's totally new, right?

**00:31:43**

**MD:** Yes. The bar itself is a rescue. It was going to be thrown away and we saved it, the copper top. And then the back bar is completely brand new. I designed that and it came out pretty well.

**00:31:55**

**SR:** It's beautiful.

**00:31:56**

**MD:** Well, thank you.

**00:31:57**

**SR:** I had a hard time getting anything other than purple wine when I used to eat here.

**00:32:04**

**MD:** They had Merlot, a Chablis, and a White Zin in a box and they had a—they had a few bottles that were in a display cooler, and we still have some of those next door. We keep them in storage, yeah.

**00:32:14**

**SR:** But now it's actually—I mean, you take your cocktails fairly seriously, it seems like.

**00:32:21**

**MD:** Oh, yes. Our bar business is—we want to make everybody happy. We really increased the wines. We didn't think we were going to sell that much wine, and we sell a lot of wine. People are enjoying it. It's a nice wine selection, it's brand-recognizable, so it's you know what you're going to get. I don't have any crazy wines yet, but I'm working on it.

**00:32:39**

But my friend did ask for a White Zin in a box the other night for his birthday. So I got him a bottle of White Zin and I threw it in a box and I gave it to him. [*Laughs*]



**00:32:47**

**SR:** Do you have a bartender? I mean, is there one person that's the head bartender?

**00:32:51**

**MD:** Yes, yes, Larry is the head bartender and Glenn, the general manager, is also a bartender.

And then right now Chef Mike is also a bartender. [*Laughs*]

**00:33:01**

**SR:** Great.

**00:33:01**

**MD:** And myself.

**00:33:04**

**SR:** Can people eat at the bar?

**00:33:05**

**MD:** We only let people eat at the bar if there is no wait. If there is too many people waiting for the dining room, then you can't let them eat at the bar because other people get hungry and try to pick at their plate and steal things from them.

**00:33:14**

**SR:** Right. Can you just go down what the entire menu?

**00:33:21**

**MD:** Small, medium, and large T-bone—it's sixteen-ounce, twenty-ounce, and a twenty-four-ounce. Ten-ounce filet. And the old filet was eight [ounces], and that's the only thing we did: we went to a ten-ounce. The onion rings. Wedge salad with either homemade blue cheese, Italian, thousand island, or oil and vinegar. You have the steak fries, potatoes au gratin, and the mushrooms in a bordelaise sauce. And the mushrooms used to be in a can, and they're now fresh. The old ones were bad. My friends wouldn't even eat them. They were free and they wouldn't eat them. *[Laughs]*

**00:33:51**

**SR:** I'm glad to hear that. And then for dessert?

**00:33:54**

**MD:** Angelo Brocato's ice cream. We have spumoni, cassata, and Italian seed cookies. It's the same thing they had before.

**00:34:01**

**SR:** Okay, so that brings me to the fact that the original owners were of Italian heritage.

**00:34:08**

**MD:** Yes. From Ustica, Italy.

**00:34:11**

**SR:** And you have a great history that you found on the Internet. Maybe you can tell me a little bit about that.

**00:34:15**

**MD:** Well, Charlie came over in 1921. I guess he was fifteen years old when he came over. And the reason he had come over is because his uncle, Salvador, who everybody called Sam—Sam owned—it was called Petrossi's Restaurant, and it's now Café Atchafalaya on Louisiana [Avenue]. And I guess Sam had his wife and two daughters, and they were running the business and he was really busy.

**00:34:38**

So he sent a letter over to Italy expecting his brother to come. Well, when he got down to the dock to pick up his brother, there was Charlie at 14—or 15. So Charlie went to help him. Charlie went over there and I guess worked there for a few years and then went to Commander's Palace. And he was a waiter and he worked in the kitchen at Commander's, and that's where he met his wife, Naomi. And then somewhere—I guess it would be in '31—they came over here. By April of 1932 they opened Charlie's.

**00:35:07**

And the original location is where you parked in the parking lot. But that was only for a few months. Then they moved into this building. So this building wasn't really designed as a restaurant, which I always wondered, and they just managed to turn it into one.

**00:35:20**

**SR:** Do you know what it was before that?

**00:35:21**

**MD:** No, I sure don't. I'm guessing a sno-ball stand since it's New Orleans. [*Laughs*]

**00:35:26**

**SR:** Yeah. And then how long did Charlie live?

**00:35:30**

**MD:** Charlie died in October of 1976.

**00:35:33**

**SR:** Okay, so way before your time?

**00:35:35**

**MD:** Yes, yes. Yeah, so yeah thirty-five years ago, right. No, not that long—thirty-two, thirty-three, yeah.

**00:35:46**

**SR:** Do you have—have you heard stories about what kind of person he was?

**00:35:51**

**MD:** No. What I understand is that one of the reasons Charlie—everybody loved him. I heard he was bootlegging in the '30s. I've heard some stories about that. I heard that during the War he—

**[Interruption].**

**00:36:09**

**SR:** You were talking about how you had heard stories of Charlie bootlegging.

**00:36:13**

**MD:** Yeah. And then—well, I'll get back to that, but I guess one of the things that he got a lot of loyalty from was during the War he was one of the only people that always had meat. There were meat rations and Charlie's always had them. So he just got a lot of people that just kept coming back and made a lot of friends. And I guess Pietro used to deliver in the neighborhood and there's all sorts of stories about them running food to people and during the afternoon just hopping in the truck and driving down.

**00:36:39**

**SR:** Who used to deliver in the neighborhood?

**00:36:40**

**MD:** Charlie did, and Peter—Pietro. He was from Ustica also, and he was one of the waiters.

**00:36:45**

**SR:** How did they manage to get meat all the time?

**00:36:48**

**MD:** I have no idea. Charlie knew a few people. From what I understand it's when he was bootlegging and he was friends with a lot of people. And his cousins—or I think it might have been Salvador, and there was also another Charlie that had a restaurant in Metairie and he was also a Petrossi. And I think Salvador or Sam and the other Charlie ended up in jail for bootlegging, but Charlie didn't. And Salvador's daughter told me that they used to go on Sunday and wave to dad in jail, and they'd get all dressed up in their Sunday best.

**00:37:15**

But their mother had to go back to the restaurant and get money because their father had developed a gambling habit in prison—or in jail. **[Laughs]** So Charlie was taking care of all his other family members while they were in jail for bootlegging. But the last story I heard is that he had a house in Uptown, and I think it was on Napoleon, but it might have been Louisiana though, and he was making his whiskey and the police showed up. And it was either he was going to burn the place down or they were going to let him finish. So apparently they let him finish—let him finish the batch. This is all hearsay, but it came from a family member. They let him finish the batch and then he left the house unlocked and the keys to a brand new Cadillac in the driveway. **[Laughs]**

**00:37:55**

**SR:** And where did he go?

**00:37:57**

**MD:** And he came back to Charlie's. [*Laughs*] But I guess they weren't bootlegging out of Charlie's. They were bootlegging out of a place on Rampart. And I've already forgotten the name of it. If somebody told me I'd probably remember.

**00:38:06**

**SR:** Like a business?

**00:38:07**

**MD:** Yes. I guess it was a bit of a brothel, too.

**00:38:10**

**SR:** Wow.

**00:38:12**

**MD:** Charlie has always had—one thing I do know about him is that when he was behind the bar—and now I know why—is that he always had his sleeves rolled up, and he always had garters on his sleeves. You see pictures of him bartending. And I found out the reason: because the shirts were all one length, and that's why he rolled them up.

**00:38:29**

**SR:** Oh, okay.

**00:38:30**

**MD:** I never knew that.

**00:38:32**

**SR:** Interesting. And the Charlie's in Metairie—was that also a steakhouse?

**00:38:35**

**MD:** No. I think they were more seafood. But I'm not positive. They've been—both those restaurants have been sold and the family has been out of them for years.

**00:38:46**

**SR:** What about—so, the doors behind me in the dining room that lead outside, did those always open? I seem to remember that they weren't open—?

**00:38:57**

**MD:** Yeah, those doors are original and so is the window in there. There were two double doors behind it that was—they were locked, and we had to put in a solid door that does open. But that area, we discovered when we came in, that was for dead chair storage. So any time a chair broke they just opened the door and threw a chair in. So it was a big pile of chairs in there.

**00:39:15**

**SR:** It's just like a little—I don't know what—foyer area or something?

**00:39:19**



**MD:** Yeah. Apparently when they first opened that was the entrance because the bar wasn't built yet. And people used to come in, and they said people used to wait in there, and I know that people were shorter then but I don't know that they were any thinner. *[Laughs]*

**00:39:33**

**SR:** Yeah, it's not a very big space.

**00:39:35**

**MD:** No, not at all. So we threaten the kids if they're bad, that's where you go. You go in the closet.

**00:39:41**

**SR:** Anything else on the history sheet that I didn't ask you about?

**00:39:49**

**MD:** The only thing I always thought was funny was when you—if you look at it, his occupation was listed as “shoemaker” when Charlie came over.

**00:39:56**

**SR:** When he was fifteen?

**00:39:58**

**MD:** Uh-hm, fifteen, and spoke English and he was a shoemaker.

**00:40:03**

**SR:** Wonder if that means he was a shoemaker in Italy or here?

**00:40:05**

**MD:** I guess in Italy.

**00:40:08**

**SR:** Wow, that's interesting. So this is accessible on the web?

**00:40:14**

**MD:** Yes, [www.ustica.org](http://www.ustica.org). Charlie's real name is Gitano.

**00:40:22**

**SR:** That's great. So this is him when he was twenty, huh, twenty? That's the same person?

**00:40:30**

**MD:** That's right, he was twenty.

**00:40:32**

**SR:** It says "waiter," so he must have been working for his brother.

**00:40:37**

**MD:** His uncle.

**00:40:38**

**SR:** His uncle, his uncle.

**00:40:39**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:40:40**

**SR:** Dark complexion but white. Five-seven. He wasn't very big, huh?

**00:40:43**

**MD:** No, none of them were very tall.

**00:40:47**

**SR:** Hundred and twenty-five pounds.

**00:40:49**

**MD:** I can tell that by their desks, too. Their desk is like this big. [*Gestures*] It's very short. I couldn't get my legs underneath it.

**00:40:54**

**SR:** Do you still have that?

**00:40:55**

**MD:** No, it died.

**00:40:56**

**SR:** Aw, well, if you couldn't use it, you couldn't use it.

**00:40:59**

**MD:** The top fell off of it when we moved it. [*Laughs*]

**00:41:00**

**SR:** So he was born on June 9, 1905 and lived on 9<sup>th</sup> Street in New Orleans. It even tells what boat he came over on.

**00:41:10**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:41:12**

**SR:** I don't know how to say that.

**00:41:13**

**MD:** I even have his Social Security number.

**00:41:15**

**SR:** Whoa. I won't broadcast that. He came on the Duca—. I don't know how you say that.

**00:41:19**

**MD:** I don't either.

**00:41:22**

**SR:** I'll have to write it down. But it's D-u-c-a--and then a Capital D, apostrophe, Capital A-g-o-a-t-o, which arrived in New York on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1921. So then he somehow got down here.

**00:41:41**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:41:43**

**SR:** Hmm, that's so interesting. It's interesting, too, that the Italians would just open a really bare-bones steakhouse.

**00:41:54**

**MD:** Well, yeah. I know over the years that they had more things on the menu. They used to have a baked chicken. Somebody told me they had a chicken stew. Just last night they told me that, and it was—he said he had been coming here since '58. So there were other things at some point in time, but I think they just realized that steak was the way to go and that's how it's going to be as long as I have it.

**00:42:14**

Everyone has a suggestion of what should be on the menu, and I have a suggestion for that but I can't say it. *[Laughs]* It's staying the same.

**00:42:22**

**SR:** That's funny. It seems like usually that sort of thing is the other way around. Like, somebody buys a place and wants to put his own print on it, but—

**00:42:30**

**MD:** No. It works well and it's—for everything you add you have to do more things and you have to make more people happy, because if you do add one more thing somebody is going to say, "Well, why didn't you do this and why didn't you do—?" So we'll just keep it the way it was for the last fifteen years that I remember it.

**00:42:45**

**SR:** That sounds good. What is your—

**00:42:47**

**MD:** With the exception of the wine—I'm sorry. With the exception of the wine and the bar. We've definitely done more with that.

**00:42:51**

**SR:** Well, I'm sure that's appreciated.

**00:42:53**

**MD:** Yes, yes, especially when you have to wait. [*Laughs*]

**00:42:56**

**SR:** Right. Yeah, what has the average wait time been since you opened?

**00:42:59**

**MD:** I think we've got it down to about 45 minutes, but it's been as high as two hours on Friday and Saturday.

**00:43:06**

**SR:** Tell me: what was your grand opening date?

**00:43:09**

**MD:** The 14<sup>th</sup> of August. But we had a soft opening the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and then we opened on Thursday very quietly. And then Chris Rose's article came out on Friday for the 60 Second Interview, and that's when—I was also on Tom Fitzmorris' show that day, and that's the day we got just a little beat up. [*Laughs*] In a good way, though.

**00:43:32**

**SR:** Yeah, I'm sure.

**00:43:32**

**MD:** Everybody wanted to come back at that point.

**00:43:34**

**SR:** Well. Tom Fitzmorris, who is a radio and food personality around town, he's said often on his show that questions about Charlie's and Charlie's re-opening were like—that was the main question after Katrina.

**00:43:47**

**MD:** Yeah, he's told me Charlie's is the most asked-about restaurant and most talked about on his show the last three years. And he always said if Charlie's had as many people call in—if that many people used to go to that restaurant they probably wouldn't have had any problem getting it open. **[Laughs]** But we never saw it that busy. And I used to see the parking lot full, but I didn't come in and see the dining room full. Never quite like it is now, so I think all the people that did call him have been to visit us.

**00:44:12**

**SR:** Do you think that the—and maybe at some point I'll be able to talk to the original owners—but did they ever consider reopening after Katrina, do you think?

**00:44:21**

**MD:** She would have loved to. She had a sick relative that she was taking care of. And there was—and none of the staff—they had all been here for so long, but they all scattered. So she



couldn't get the staff, and Dottye was somewhat retired. So, yeah, she would have loved to have done it but she knew that I was the only person that was going to keep it Charlie's.

**00:44:40**

**SR:** The other person who was putting an offer on it, was that person a New Orleanian, do you think? Oh, I guess you said that it was going to be made into condos—or, do you know what that plan was?

**00:44:50**

**MD:** I'm not quite sure what the whole plan was, but it's the people that own the building next to me. We have an adjoining wall and they just wanted more space. Since this is also—it's not just this building; it's the little house next door and the parking lot where you parked. So I think that's what they would have turned into—utilized that to put in some buildings. And then I would have had to—I would have neighbors then, and you can't be loud when you have neighbors. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:14**

**SR:** Do you live on this block?

**00:45:17**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:45:19**

**SR:** Oh, okay, so you can roll out of bed?

**00:45:20**

**MD:** Yeah, it's not that long of a walk and I'm still late. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:23**

**SR:** It's okay now.

**00:45:25**

**MD:** It's all right now, yeah.

**00:45:25**

**SR:** Are there other owners that I should know about beside yourself?

**00:45:30**

**MD:** Just myself and my father.

**00:45:31**

**SR:** Okay. What's your father's name?

**00:45:33**

**MD:** Gene [Eugene] Dwyer.

00:45:35

**SR:** G-e-n-e?

00:45:36

**MD:** Yes.

00:45:38

**SR:** And what is your heritage?

00:45:38

**MD:** Half German, quarter Italian, quarter Irish. And my dad is half Italian.

00:45:45

**SR:** And has your family been in New Orleans for a long time?

00:45:48

**MD:** Yes. Yeah, they have.

00:45:50

**SR:** Do you know how long?

00:45:50

**MD:** No. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:53**

**SR:** You need to find yourself on there then.

**00:45:54**

**MD:** Yeah. I know more about Charlie than I do about my own family. [*Laughs*] My family is smaller.

**00:45:58**

**SR:** Can you tell me anything about—you probably can't, but without giving away any secrets—the method of cooking and why the steaks are garlicky and sizzling, and what that oil is?

**00:46:12**

**MD:** No, I can't really say anything. But they shouldn't be garlicky. But if they are, then we're doing something else.

**00:46:16**

**SR:** That's what someone—. You know, to tell you the truth, to me it didn't taste garlicky but someone else at my table who has eaten here over the years said that the steaks have garlic on them, so I just trusted her.

**00:46:28**

**MD:** I mean, that is possible. I can see how that could happen. But it's not supposed to happen.

**00:46:33**

**SR:** Maybe it's just because the plates are so well-seasoned.

**00:46:36**

**MD:** That could very well be it. *[Laughs]*

**00:46:38**

**SR:** But you can't tell me anything about the preparation.

**00:46:40**

**MD:** We take them out and put them in the broiler and we cook them and then we give them to you, sizzling. *[Laughs]*

**00:46:47**

**SR:** They come out sizzling and there's sort of oil that collects on the plate that is delicious, is all I can say.

**00:46:57**

**MD:** Oh, thank you.

**00:46:59**

**SR:** Did the tables always have tablecloths?

**00:47:02**

**MD:** Yes. Yeah, and I was told that they had—at some point they had red and white checkered, in the '70s, and I was going to do that for the opening and it just didn't work out. When I came in I kept a little bit of everything that was in here, from an A1 to a Lea & Perrins to everything that was in the kitchen. And I have one of each so that way we knew what to order when we came in. So I had tablecloths and napkins, and that's how we—. And, well, plus all the tables were set when we came in. They still had the tablecloths on them.

**00:47:35**

**SR:** Even though it flooded, huh?

**00:47:35**

**MD:** Yeah, we didn't—it was only about eighteen inches at the most.

**00:47:39**

**SR:** Oh, okay, so things weren't floating around?

**00:47:42**

**MD:** No, no. And all the crackers were still in the baskets. Nothing had bothered them. The saltshakers still worked. You just had to tap it. Three years—or two years, I guess.

**00:47:52**

**SR:** Right. For the record, you have A1 Steak Sauce, and Lea & Perrins, and Tabasco. They always had that.

**00:47:58**

**MD:** Yeah, and Crystal. I added the Tabasco; they always had Crystal.

**00:48:02**

**SR:** Okay. What about, have you gotten many newcomers to the restaurant, or is it pretty much people who had already been Charlie's customers who are coming now?

**00:48:13**

**MD:** Yeah, a lot of newcomers already. Some people that said they had just moved in. The other night we had four people. Just little groups. Everybody will talk to you—because I try to talk to everybody and say hi. The ones that have been coming here forever are the first ones to tell you how long they've been coming. Yeah, so, "I've been coming here since 1942." [*Laughs*]

**00:48:33**

**SR:** When I ate here a couple weeks ago it definitely seemed like there were some customers who felt a little bit of ownership.

**00:48:42**

**MD:** Oh yeah, yeah, because they're always the first to tell you, "Son, I'm a lot older than you, and I've been coming here longer than you've been alive." **[Laughs]** I say, "Yeah, but I own it now." **[Laughs]** But they—some of those people, it's been really great because the blue cheese, I kept working on it and working on it. And then even with Rhoda here it just didn't quite seem right. So we would talk to people and talk to people and talk to people, and they'd tell us what they thought of it, and finally I figured out what it was and fixed it.

**00:49:09**

**SR:** That's good.

**00:49:10**

**MD:** It's very good, much better. I mean, it was still good, but it was just—it was just off just a little bit and they all noticed it. People who had never had it before thought it was wonderful. They couldn't tell.

**00:49:20**

**SR:** Right. But it just wasn't—there was something missing?

**00:49:22**

**MD:** Yeah.

**00:49:23**

**SR:** What was missing?



**00:49:23**

**MD:** I can't tell you. [*Laughs*]

**00:49:24**

**SR:** A lot of the people who I could tell had been regulars were going out to smoke. Was smoking ever allowed when you worked here before?

**00:49:36**

**MD:** Oh yes, it was very smoky. And the smoking section would have—you were back-to-back from smoking and non-smoking, and that whole back section towards Dryades Street, that was all smoking. And then the table right in front of it was no smoking. And I think you could just pretty much smoke anywhere in here and they didn't care. The waiters used to smoke back there, and when you walked in you'd see a waiter and he was smoking a cigarette and he'd put it behind the ice machine or the iced tea machine and point you to your table as he's exhaling.

[*Laughs*]

**00:50:05**

**SR:** I don't really remember that. Tell me about the sports memorabilia upstairs.

**00:50:12**

**MD:** Well, most of it's Saints stuff. But anyone that came in, you know Dottie got their autograph. Like the Mannings are huge fans of Dottie's. I haven't seen them yet because, you know, it's football season, so—. But Archie's—I've got a lot of Archie's stuff, and I mean I couldn't even begin to tell you how much stuff she has, but she's left a few things with me. The majority of it is Saints stuff, with the exception of, I think, a Ryne Sandburg picture from the Cubs.

**00:50:39**

**SR:** That's your own?

**00:50:39**

**MD:** Best second baseman ever. No, it was to Dottie. I couldn't believe it when I walked in. I was like, "I don't know how I ever missed that." And then Archie in an Oiler's uniform. And she was an Astros fan, so there's some Astros stuff there too.

**00:50:53**

**SR:** Okay. So all of that survived, but she just took some of it back?

**00:50:56**

**MD:** Yeah. She took what really meant the most to her—or what she could actually get off the wall, because some of the stuff had been there so long if we took it off we had to be very delicate with it. And some stuff was in storage, and like I think she also took a lot of it when she moved downstairs and she wasn't working upstairs anymore. But it was covered. There was lots of stuff.

**00:51:19**

**SR:** Why do you think New Orleanians love this place?

**00:51:22**

**MD:** I think it's because they have been coming here for generations and it's uptown and it's familiar to them. And, you know, everybody I've talked to has said they had been here—there are stories of this is the first restaurant their dad ever took them to, and now people are bringing their kids in. And it's like, "Yeah, the first time in Charlie's!" Kids are getting excited. *[Laughs]* And besides that it's really the only steakhouse that's in the neighborhood. There used to be one on Freret [Street] years ago. And then you have Crescent City Steak House over on Broad, but you know if you don't want to drive too far—. And you know what you're going to get when you come in: steak. *[Laughs]*

**00:52:00**

**SR:** If you don't feel like thinking.

**00:52:03**

**MD:** Yeah. If you want chicken or fish, then you don't even bother.

**00:52:07**

**SR:** Well, you've given me a lot of time. I have one last question, which is: what has been the biggest, sort of, struggle in reopening this? And, what has been the most fulfilling part of reopening?

**00:52:22**

**MD:** I think the biggest struggle is just the amount of money we had to put into a fire escape and a new hood, and just things we didn't expect, and waiting for the money to kind of come to us. And we were—like I said, we knocked on every door and it just wasn't happening. I think the most rewarding thing was when we got the money and we were able to get the doors open. The first day I couldn't believe it. You know, there was one night we got a new sign and we got—we had the sign with no electricity yet. We didn't get electricity until right before we opened because they finally came out and it just took forever and ever.

**00:52:56**

So the day we had electricity, it was a Saturday night and all my friends came over and I think there was like six of us standing in the middle of street drinking beer at 2:30 in the morning just staring at the sign.

**00:53:05**

**SR:** [*Laughs*]

**00:53:05**

**MD:** That night was pretty good, too.

**00:53:08**

**SR:** The sign looks—is it similar?

**00:53:10**

**MD:** Yeah, it's exactly the same. Same case. The only thing—not exactly. The only thing different, it stays “established in 1932” on the bottom now, and the neon has just been replaced. It was there but over years it had been picked apart.

**00:53:24**

**SR:** You mean on the facade, the neon on the facade?

**00:53:26**

**MD:** Yes.

**00:53:28**

**SR:** And the sign, did you take it down and have it restored or did they rebuild—did they build a sign from scratch?

**00:53:34**

**MD:** We had a picture of it and so we just had them—we took the picture and they just did it from scratch. And I found a piece of it when I was on the roof. I looked down and there was a piece on the awning, so they were able to see it better than the picture. But the best picture I have is, I think it was '04 when it snowed on Christmas Day and my brother is standing out front of

the building in his Santa suit and the Charlie's Steak House sign is right behind it, you know.

**[Laughs]**

**00:53:56**

**SR:** That's great.

**00:53:57**

**MD:** Yeah, that's a pretty cool picture.

**00:54:00**

**SR:** And the sign got demolished in Katrina?

**00:54:02**

**MD:** Yes, yeah. It was Katrina, yeah. We found pieces of it up and down the street. But that one big piece was very helpful.

**00:54:09**

**SR:** Well, thanks, Matt, for giving me your time. I appreciate it.

**00:54:11**

**MD:** Well, thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Thank you.

**00:54:14**

**SR:** Yeah, I did.

**00:54:14**

**[End Matt Dwyer Interview]**