**MICHELLE McRANEY**
**Mr. B's Bistro – New Orleans, LA**

*** * ***

Date: September 23, 2008
Location: Mr. B's Bistro – New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 46 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail – Louisiana

**[Begin Michelle McRaney Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, September 23, 2008. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, at Mr. B's Bistro. I'm sitting here with Mr. B's chef. And if I could get you to say your name and your birth date and your profession, we'll get started.

**00:00:20**

**Michelle McRaney:** Okay, my name is Michelle McRaney. My birth date is February 7, 1957. And what was your other question—I'm sorry?

**00:00:30**

**SR:** Can you just describe, in your own words, what you do for a living?

**00:00:33**

**MM:** Yeah, I'm the executive chef at Mr. B's. In being the executive chef here, it's more of a hands-on position. I know a lot of people think of executive chefs as paperwork-type of people. That's not at all true here at Mr. B's, so I'm very hands-on in the kitchen.

**00:00:50**

**SR:** So you're—I mean, I can tell that you've been—it's morning, it's pre-lunch, and you've been running around. So you do the actual overseeing of the kitchen and—?

**00:01:00**

**MM:** Yes, I do. You know like today I've got—we have a dinner here tomorrow night, a bourbon dinner, so I'm getting rabbits in today to get those in marinade. We're making soup right now. We've got—every day there's a little something going on, so and I'm very involved in that.

**00:01:15**

**SR:** Your hand is in the pot?

**00:01:18**

**MM:** Yes, yes.

**00:01:20**

**SR:** Can you tell me—can we start by telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and raised, and your upbringing a little bit?

**00:01:27**

**MM:** Okay. I was born in Florida. I was born in a small town in Dunedin, Florida. We lived there for just a short time. Mostly I was--I was raised in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I went to high school there. Then my-—actually my last year of high school we moved to North Carolina. From there I went to college in Virginia and went to the Virginia Commonwealth University there in Richmond, Virginia. When I was 25 years-old, my sister was living here in New Orleans. I've

always been interested in cooking. My degree is in business, though, but I had always been interested in cooking. They were--they were just starting up a program here at Delgado [Community College] and so I thought, *Well you know it's—I'm not really happy what I'm doing in the business world*. I was working in a bank, not really happy there, so I thought, *You know this might be the opportunity to do something different.*

**00:02:21**

So I came here to New Orleans. I enrolled in Delgado; ended up working—through Delgado what you do is you go to class just one day a week. You spend all day there and it's just, you know, kind of going over the basics of cooking and just kind of develop palates and things like that, but the best part about their program was that you had to do an externship in a restaurant. I happened to end up here at Mr. B's for my externship, so I worked here five days a week. I worked with a lot of great people here at Mr. B's. At the time we had a gentleman here named Jimmy Smith, who was our Creole chef, and I learned all kinds of things from him. I worked here for about five or six years and then ended up moving out of town and went to Colorado for a little while, moved to Oregon for a little while, did—but still stayed in the restaurant business. And then about 15--16 years ago we moved back to New Orleans.

**00:03:21**

My husband is born and raised here in New Orleans, and it was just kind of—we kind of felt like it was just time to come back here. So we came back here. I wasn't sure--I had—by this time I had a son who was now a year and a half old, and so I really wasn't ready to get back into a restaurant like this. In Oregon I had worked in a small restaurant. We were caretaking a vineyard there, so it was--it was a lot different than being back here in this city.

**00:03:48**

So when I came back to town I just kind of, you know, sat back a little while and just tried to figure out what we were going to do. My husband works for the city here in New Orleans, so you know he had his job and we were just kind of taking it easy to see what would happen. One day I was down here in the Quarter just walking around and I ran into Emeril Lagasse, who I had worked with at Commander's Palace while I was at Mr. B's also. I spent six months externship at Mister--at Commander's Palace during that time. And he was just getting ready to open up NOLA, so I spoke with him and it was—it just kind of happened that I ended up being the opening sous-chef at NOLA.

**00:04:24**

I spent a little bit of time there, probably about six or eight months, and Gene Bourg, who is a local food writer, came into the restaurant and did a review of the restaurant and I spoke with him. Through that article that came out, Mr. B's and the Brennans had found out that I was back in town. I really hadn't—I mean you know I just hadn't made connections yet at that point again. And so Gerard Maras, who was the chef here at the time—you know I got together with him and talked to him. He was looking for somebody to do--to be like a chef de cuisine at both Mr. B's and Bacco. And so I always liked working with Gerard. I loved the Brennans, you know. It was just—and while NOLA was good, it wasn't a great fit for me at the time, and so I came on with the Brennans at that point again. So I've spent about almost 20 years with the Brennans, but it's been split up a little bit. I've been back here now for 15 years. I became executive chef here about 13 years ago, so—.

**00:05:31**

**SR:** That's a good story. That's a lot of—there are a lot of elements in that one.

**00:05:33**

**MM:** Uh-huh, there are--there are. You know I've done some interesting things. I worked at a small place in Oregon. Like I said, we were caretaking a vineyard there, so that was completely different than what we had been used to, but it was a great learning experience. I mean we--we weren't wine makers. We were--we were basically farmers. You know we were raising the grapes and they were in turn—they were selling those to a winery to make wine.

**00:05:56**

So that was something completely different for us. We lived in Colorado. We lived in the foothills outside of Denver, but I worked in Denver. I worked with Jimmy--Jimmy Smith there, who had the Rattlesnake Club at the time, who also has restaurants in Detroit, so a lot of different things.

**00:06:15**

**SR:** I was going to ask you when you first came to New Orleans and, I guess, started your training. You lived in a lot of other places in the South, but I guess you hadn't cooked professionally yet, but did the food here resonate with the kind of eating you had done as a young person or was it totally new?

**00:06:37**

**MM:** I think aspects of it were--were new to me. I mean you know you come to New Orleans; this is probably the only place where—or not just New Orleans but South Louisiana—it's the only place where you're going to see a dark, dark roux. You know there are definitely things that

are--that we take advantage of here, indigenous products in this area that we use that you don't see in other parts of the country, and I think every area has those things. So while some of the elements were the same, a lot of them were very foreign to me. Soft-shell crabs: I can remember the first time that Jimmy Smith showed me how to clean a soft-shell crab. You know, so things like that, the dark--the dark rouxs I had never seen before. But I was also new to the kitchen, you know, so it was all brand-new to me. I--you know I had always loved to cook. I had always watched my mother cook. I was raised by my mother and my grandparents and so I always was in the kitchen with them, so—.

**00:07:31**

**SR:** And what kinds of cooks were they? Were they Southern cooks, typical Southern cooks, or—?

**00:07:35**

**MM:** I at the time pretty much thought they were Southern cooks but we did eat a lot of meat and potatoes. We were roasts, we were--we ate some seafood, not a lot of it, even though we were in Florida. But a lot of it was--was a meat and potatoes kind of things. We didn't eat—like my husband is from here; he likes, you know, lima beans, collard greens, turnip greens, black-eyed peas—you know, things like that. So--so our food was different but it was—when we came up here, I mean it was great to see all those things and I very much—I acclimated myself to them very easily you know. It was--it was interesting for me. It was new for me and it was great. It was great.

**00:08:22**

**SR:** What do I want to ask first? What is your heritage, do you know?

**00:08:29**

**MM:** I'm French-Irish. My father was born in Le Havre, France; moved here when he was about 20 years-old. He was actually sent here by the French government to go to school. He graduated from Vanderbilt and he was to go back to France and become an English teacher. He just never went back. And so I—you know the French always loved their food and--and I think that some of it comes from that, because he had always talked about, you know, wanting to have a restaurant. Food was very important in his life and he was so excited. He's passed away four years ago now, but he was always so excited about me being in the restaurant. You know, he thought it was so interesting; he was always interested in what was going on here.

**00:09:12**

And then my grandparents and my mother were Irish, so French-Irish.

**00:09:16**

**SR:** Did you ever have gumbo in your house growing up?

**00:09:20**

**MM:** We did not have gumbo. We--my grandmother did make soups and she did canning and things like that, but a gumbo we never had, and--and if we did—you know I see elements of—I mean there's so many different types of gumbo. I see elements of some of the things that she did in gumbos, but we never called it a gumbo.

**00:09:42**

**SR:** Would one of those elements include a roux?

**00:09:45**

**MM:** Yeah, definitely a roux but nowhere near as dark as the rouxs that we're accustomed to here. I mean, I do for our gumbo Ya-Ya here, I do a roux that is just a deep, deep mahogany like--like you've never—. I mean it's just, it--it amazes me that it can get that dark and still—it's just got that nut flavor to it that's just great.

**00:10:06**

**SR:** Well since you brought it up, we can talk about gumbo Ya-Ya a little bit. Would you—so is it comparable to the color of the walls in here?

**00:10:15**

**MM:** I think so, yeah. It may even be a little bit darker than that, yeah. It takes on a really dark, dark rich color. It's beautiful.

**00:10:24**

**SR:** And you make that here?

**00:10:25**

**MM:** Yes, we do. That's one of our signature gumbos. We do a seafood gumbo here that we run on the menu every day, and then we run—our gumbo Ya-Ya is on the menu every day, too. I personally like the gumbo Ya-Ya better. It's a chicken and andouille gumbo. We call it--we call it a country-style gumbo but we serve it more in a city style. I know that country-style gumbos are--are lots of times served with a potato salad or something like that; we do ours with a white rice. It's got, like I said, the andouille in it, the chicken in it, peppers, onions, great seasonings, lots of garlic, that dark roux, and a real rich chicken stock in it.

**00:11:09**

**SR:** Let's talk a little bit about the roux first. Can you tell me what you make it in and what you use to stir it?

**00:11:17**

**MM:** Sure. I have a--we make the roux in what we call a rondeau, which is a round pot that's probably six or eight inches tall and probably 24--26 inches in diameter. I use—for that particular one I use about two and a half gallons of oil and then equal amounts of flour to make—. What you want to do is, we bring that to a consistency of almost like a wet-sand, is what you're looking for. I have in the past used, you know, a wooden spoon to stir it. Right now I'm just using a real heavy whip, is what I'm doing. And we start that on top of the stove. Because there are so many other things going on in the kitchen at the same time, we cook that roux in the oven and we cook it at about 450-degrees constant—you know, we stir it. In the beginning you're stirring it every, you know, 20 minutes, half-hour. As it gets on that rich color, you want to take every 10 minutes or so and stir it up because once you've--once you've gotten a

black spot on that roux it's done. You've lost it, and so you really have to be careful as the cooking process goes along.

**00:12:26**

But it cooks in that 450-degree oven for anywhere from five to six hours. It's a long process.

**00:12:33**

**SR:** Is it possible to get a black spot and burn it when it's in the oven?

**00:12:37**

**MM:** Oh yeah, it is, it is. I mean you know—I mean I like to think that our ovens are well-calibrated here and we don't have hot spots in them, but it does happen. It does happen, and like I said, at that point you—there's nothing you can do to save it. You have to throw it out and start all over again, so—yeah.

**00:12:55**

**SR:** And this is a recent question of mine that I've sort of been wondering about cooking myself. Do you start—do you add the oil and the flour together when they're both the same temperature? Or do you heat the oil up and then, like, fry the flour?

**00:13:08**

**MM:** I've done it both ways. You know lots of times for time reasons I like to heat up the oil a little bit first and then add my flour, just you know, it--it just gets the process going a little bit

faster. I haven't seen a great difference doing it one way or the other for--for what I'm using it for, so—.

**00:13:28**

**SR:** What about, can you tell me without divulging any secrets what kind of oil you use?

**00:13:31**

**MM:** I actually just use a vegetable oil in it. It's--it's what we call an 80/20 blend: it's 80-percent vegetable, canola oil--vegetable oil, and 20-percent olive oil.

**00:13:43**

**SR:** Oh really, olive oil?

**00:13:44**

**MM:** Uh-huh, yeah. Yeah, but it's such, you know, with that 80/20 blend it—because I know people worry about losing the taste of olive oil and the high heat and things like that, but for what we're using it for with just that 20-percent in there, it--it seems to be fine with it.

**00:13:59**

**SR:** And you use just all-purpose flour?

**00:14:01**

**MM:** Yes, we do, yeah. Now if I'm doing a smaller batch—you know if I'm doing gumbo at home—then I'll use butter in that roux rather than using the oil. I really like that rich flavor of the butter in the roux, but like I said, when I make--when I make gumbo here I'm making 40 gallons of it and we're making it an average about three and a half to four times a week. So—yeah.

**00:14:23**

**SR:** Forty gallons?

**00:14:25**

**MM:** Uh-huh. **[*Laughs*]** It's a lot. It's a lot.

**00:14:28**

**SR:** What do you store it in once it's made?

**00:14:30**

**MM:** We have what we call Lexans and they hold about 10 gallons, and then we refrigerate that. We have what we call ice packs that we drop in there and get it cooled off real quick, and we have a huge walk-in where we keep all of our soups.

**00:14:43**

**SR:** Do you have a color chart back there or something for people who are making the roux if they're not sure what--what color to get it to?

**00:14:49**

**MM:** Well they're just—it's just myself and one of my sous-chefs who make the rouxs. We're the only ones who do it, so—yeah.

**00:14:57**

**SR:** And how dark do you get it on the stove before you put it in the oven?

**00:15:02**

**MM:** I usually don't get any color on it, on the stove, at all. I just you know, like I said, time-wise if I want to kind of move things along I'll start it on top of the stove and heat my oil a little bit just to get it--just to get a temperature in there. Otherwise, I'll go completely cold and go right into the oven with it.

**00:15:17**

**SR:** And do you use that same roux for the seafood gumbo as well?

**00:15:23**

**MM:** The seafood gumbo, the roux is probably about two stages lighter than that. You know it's just for that--for that Ya-Ya that we want that really rich, dark one. Now I won't—I mean the seafood gumbo is dark also, you know relatively speaking, but not—like I said, about two stages less than for the Ya-Ya.

**00:15:43**

**SR:** And I'm curious about what you said about using butter in your roux at home. The sort of conventional wisdom is that butter's burning point is so low that it's not really possible to get a very dark roux. Is that true? What--what do you think about that?

**00:15:59**

**MM:** I mean, I don't find that true at all. I mean, you know, think of brown butter. So that brown-butter smell, that brown-butter taste: it's that great nutty smell and flavor, and that's what you're looking for when you do a dark roux also. You're looking for that nutty flavor from it, so I've never had any problems with that—never.

**00:16:19**

**SR:** And so you've used butter to make a fairly dark roux?

**00:16:22**

**MM:** Oh yeah, yeah. When—yeah because I've made gumbo Ya-Ya at home and used the butter for it, yeah. It does fine. It does fine.

**00:16:27**

**SR:** Huh. I'm going to have to try that. And—

**00:16:30**

**MM:** It's more of a cost aspect that I don't do it here. I mean, you know if I had to make—that's a lot of butter involved in that. And you know, when you're making that large of a batch, I don't think it makes that much difference. When you're doing a small batch at home, you know you--you've got some things you can play with and some flavors that you can—you know you're making 40 gallons of it, do you taste that--that little bit? I don't think you do, whereas if you're making, you know, a gallon of it at home, I think that there's still that little bit—you'd be like, *Oh, there's—that's got that little bit of buttery flavor to it*. So-—.

**00:17:03**

**SR:** Good. Well that's--that's really interesting to me. And so then at the restaurant, can you tell me about the process of making the gumbo? You've already made the roux ahead of time. Can you tell me, like, when you add it in and how?

**00:17:16**

**MM:** Sure. What we do is we will put on—the first thing we do when we come in in the morning is we'll put on a chicken stock. And we use chicken backs for that, a little bit of a mire poix, which is going to be your onions, your celery, your carrots, whole black peppercorns, bay leaves. And we let that simmer very low for anywhere from four to six hours, so you've got a nice stock going, which I feel is very important in this particular dish.

**00:17:42**

And while that is going, then we're getting our roux going because your roux is going to take four, five, six hours also. And we make everything here in what we call, in a kettle, you know. And like I said it's--it's a big kettle. I'll show it to you. It's a steam jacket type of thing.

It's almost like a--kind of like a pressure cooker. It holds water on the outside of it and it heats it that way. So we've got our chicken stock going; we've got our roux going. About an hour before everything kind of comes together, before your roux is done, your chicken stock is done, we put our vegetables in the kettle, which we use red peppers, green peppers, celery and onions, and then we add our seasoning to that. And the seasonings that we use are going to be our blend of what we call our Creole seasoning, which I'll talk a little bit about, and to that we add some basil, some thyme, some oregano, some garlic, some--a little more onion powder to that, and we add some tomatoes at that point and some tomato paste. And we get that—and about 10 pounds of the andouille. For the total batch we use about 70 pounds of andouille. So about--add about 10 pounds of andouille to that and you kind of let that--those flavors kind of marry together. You get a little bit of liquid out from the peppers, the onions—you know they're kind of sautéing a little bit almost in that.

**00:19:02**

And then at that point what we'll do is we'll take our hot roux and drain off any oil that's left over from that, because once you do your final stir, we just let it sit for a little while because it does continue to cook. It continues to cook for quite a while. We dump our hot roux into those vegetables. Real quickly with a wooden paddle we get that stirring very quickly, because you don't want to burn any of your vegetables or your tomatoes that are in there. We get that stirring and then we take our hot chicken stock and we pour that on top of it; again, just working it in, you know.

**00:19:37**

And then, you know, once we've got everything in there we start adding the rest of our andouille. Like I said, for this--for a batch like this we're using about 70 pounds of andouille and

we're constantly skimming the top of it because you have your fat coming off the andouille so you're skimming that off of there and then once it's all in the kettle—everything is in there together—it still cooks for another three to four hours because you still want to cook that flour taste out of there. While a dark roux really doesn't have much of a--a flour taste, you still—you're looking for a richness in it. You're looking for a nice sheen to this soup.

**00:20:11**

You know it definitely--it definitely takes on a different look from the beginning then it does at the end, so that's kind of what we're looking for. And at that point we, you know, what we call drop it out of the kettle, and we store it. We don't add any chicken--chicken to it at that point; what we do is as we heat up the soup, we take chickens that we've roasted, tear them apart rather than dicing them, tear it off of the bone, and we add that to the--to the Ya-Ya at that point.

**00:20:38**

**SR:** To-order, is that what you mean?

**00:20:38**

**MM:** Yes, pretty much to-order, yeah, yeah.

**00:20:41**

**SR:** So a couple things are interesting. First of all that--that you use red peppers also. I hear a lot about, you know, the trinity being green pepper, celery, onion.

**00:20:52**

**MM:** Right.

**00:20:53**

**SR:** I don't hear a lot about red pepper. Is there a reason that you use that?

**00:20:56**

**MM:** It's more just--just a look than anything else. I think that if you blindfolded someone and you gave them a red pepper and a green pepper, you probably wouldn't know the difference between the two. But if you see those colors in a--in a soup, it—you know while--while it cooks down an awful lot, you can still see hints of—I mean you want some texture in there, so you still see hints of those things in there. So it's more just for a look. You could go all green. But yeah, yeah, we do veer off of the--the trinity, though.

**00:21:27**

**SR:** Probably other people do, too; they just—it's just not talked about that much.

**00:21:29**

**MM:** Right, right.

**00:21:32**

**SR:** And then so you--you pour the excess oil off the roux?

**00:21:36**

**MM:** Uh-huh, yes we do. Yeah, yeah, because as it—you know we're constantly stirring it in the oven. Then we'll let it sit out for, you know, 20 minutes or so and it will; it will separate a little bit. And rather than—you know it's just that you don't have to do that. It's just a time-saving thing for us. If we pour off a little bit of the excess oil while still leaving our flour down there, it's just less that we skim off the top as we're cooking the gumbo. So it's just a time-saving thing.

**00:22:01**

**SR:** And so you always make the roux the same day that you're making the gumbo?

**00:22:06**

**MM:** Yes, we do--we do. You don't have to do it that way. I know there are people that say you have to have a—you know, if you have a hot stock you want a cold roux or vice-versa. I've never had, and I've—you know we have a cookbook out and I've talked about this in the cookbook, too. I've always done hot and hot and it--it works fine. It works fine.

**00:22:25**

**SR:** Have you ever had that experience, either in the restaurant or at home, where the roux and the broth don't--don't emulsify totally?

**00:22:35**

**MM:** I've had that problem not with a dark roux; I've had that before with a light roux where--where they call it, it *breaks out*—where you've got, you know, your butter or oil just floating on

the top of your soup and your flour just kind of hanging out in the bottom. I've never had that issue with a dark roux before, though. And I'm not really sure what--what I did or what happened to make that. I mean, you know, they talk about food being a chemistry. Well it is. And something somewhere throws something off, you know, and--and you kind of work through it and figure out what did it so you can correct it for next time. But with a dark roux, I've never had an issue with that.

**00:23:12**

**SR:** I'm perplexed. I have a couple of times and I don't know why.

**00:23:16**

**MM:** Yeah, with a dark roux?

**00:23:18**

**SR:** **[*Gestures*]**

**00:23:19**

**MM:** Huh, no, I've never had that issue. I've never had it. So I'm sorry; I don't know what to tell you.

**00:23:24**

**SR:** No one does. **[*Laughs*]** It's okay. It's a mystery. I guess, well I was going to ask you about your andouille. Where do you get your andouille, if you can tell me?

**00:23:34**

**MM:** Sure. We have—actually we work with a gentleman named Vaughn with Creole—I want to say it's Creole Cottage or Creole Country. I always get it mixed up. [It's Creole Country.] He's here in New Orleans. Before I came here, Gerard Maras was the chef here and--and kind of worked with Vaughn developing different recipes and—but Vaughn is the one who does our sausage for us and it's got a nice peppery flavor to it. He uses only top-quality meat in it, so it's--it's a nice andouille. It's very nice.

**00:24:06**

**SR:** I think we might have an oral history with him, too.

**00:24:09**

**MM:** Oh okay. You probably do, yeah. Yeah, he's a little bit of a legend here, so—.

**00:24:14**

**SR:** And so you talked about that sheen. I know what you're talking about with the gumbo Ya-Ya. It has a beautiful sheen. I've never accomplished that at home. Do you attribute that to the cooking time, or what do you attribute that to?

**00:24:28**

**MM:** I--I think it comes from the cooking time. I mean, you know, soups are—like I said, we're talking about making gumbo Ya-Ya here. We're talking about an all-day process. You know this

starts that you put your roux in the oven at 7 o'clock in the morning and we're pulling it basically out of the kettle 12 hours later, you know. So there's a lot of love that has to go into this, a lot of time. Everything has to cook really slow. I think your stock has a lot to do with it. You want a nice rich stock—and your roux.

**00:24:59**

**SR:** And how many gallons of gumbo do you go through a week here?

**00:25:01**

**MM:** We probably—like I said, we make gumbo, the gumbo Ya-Ya, which I think is a better seller than the seafood gumbo. Sometimes they're--they're very close. For the most part the Ya-Ya is a little bit--sells a little bit more. In a good week we probably sell 80 gallons or so. Yeah, a lot--a lot.

**00:25:22**

**SR:** Can you tell me anything about the origin of the recipe?

**00:25:24**

**MM:** Yeah, the—you know I mentioned earlier about Jimmy Smith, who was our Creole chef here at the restaurant when I started here a long time ago. He has since retired. But his--his story to me—because like I said, all of this was brand-new to me when I first moved here also—his story, to me, was similar to a red bean story. You know how they talk about red beans were done on laundry day? And you know his story with gumbo Ya-Ya was similar to that in the fact that,

like I said, it's--it's an all-day process just like red beans are an all-day process. And the women would--would be the ones who were making the gumbo.

**00:26:02**

And it--it's kind of funny, but he--he talks about, you know, the women in the kitchen, five or six of them. One of them is cutting the peppers; one is doing onions, you know. And it's a family thing. And he said that the men would come home for lunch or at the end of the day and be ready for their gumbo. And he said the men would come home and it would sound like the women were--the women were in there talking. But to the men it sounded like *Ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya*. And so that's where the gumbo ya-ya came from. That's what his story was.

**00:26:34**

**SR:** And did he make up that term or is that sort of a common term?

**00:26:38**

**MM:** Well you know I see that term other places. To me it was always Jimmy's story. And I mean I like to think that it's Jimmy's story, and so to me that's what it is. And--and I think that—and you know Jimmy Smith was from around Cocodrie, you know down in that area, so I mean he was a true Creole/Cajun type of a guy. And I--you know I think that it's things like that that are--that are important for people to know: that the gumbo Ya-Ya isn't just something that, *Oh that's a cute little name*, but there is something behind all of that. There is something to that name, so—.

**00:27:16**

**SR:** I think that's a good point. There are a lot of stories behind the foods in New Orleans.

**00:27:23**

**MM:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah, definitely, definitely, and you know I think this is great what y'all are doing—that it's very important that these--that people remember these things because they'll be lost just like a lot of other things are lost.

**00:27:37**

**SR:** Do you know when he might have first started making the gumbo here at Mr. B's?

**00:27:43**

**MM:** Well Mr. B's has been opened for 28 years now and it was on the menu when we opened up. Now I'm sure it's something that he used to do at home or, you know, other places, but we--we consider the home of gumbo Ya-Ya Mr. B's.

**00:28:02**

**SR:** And can you tell me for the record, for people who aren't from here reading this or listening to this, what you mean by *Creole chef*?

**00:28:08**

**MM:** Well I'm not really sure what I mean by *Creole chef*. I mean I think it's, you know--it's part of where you're from, it's part of where you've been and where you're going. I mean, you know, it sounds kind of stupid I know but—. Creole chefs are--are for the most part, I think, pot

cookers. You know, everything—jambalaya—that's kind of the way they were raised. And they took influences from French food and from African food, from Indian food, that just kind of--kind of all melded together and that's where they came up with all these great spices and seasonings and--and things like that. So I know that doesn't really answer your question, but I'm not really sure what the answer is.

**00:28:56**

**SR:** That's okay.

**00:28:56**

**MM:** Okay.

**00:28:58**

**SR:** It's a very elusive term. I just wanted to get generally what you meant.

**00:28:59**

**MM:** Yeah, it is--it is.

**00:28:59**

**SR:** Mr. Smith, is he still alive?

**00:29:03**

**MM:** You know I hate to say, but I'm not really certain that he is. I want to say--when I was here—if he is, he's--he's quite old because he was probably almost 60 years-old—55--60 years-old—when I worked here 20 years ago, so—.

**00:29:19**

**SR:** Maybe I'll try to track him down.

**00:29:22**

**MM:** Uh-huh, yeah, yeah.

**00:29:23**

**SR:** And so since—you've inherited some of his recipes and probably the recipes of possibly other Creole chefs. Do you consider yourself a Creole chef?

**00:29:33**

**MM:** Oh I don't know if I can give myself that honor. I mean you know like I said, as--as far as the gumbo Ya-Ya, the gumbo Ya-Ya becomes very personal to me because of Jimmy Smith, because there is a story behind it. And you know people behind me, will they know those stories? I don't know. And so does it just become something? Does it just become another gumbo?

**00:29:59**

And I think that that's what really needs to be important. I do consider myself—yeah, at times when I get back there in the kitchen I like to think that I'm Jimmy Smith back there. Yeah, yeah.

**00:30:08**

**SR:** What kind of a personality did he have? What kind of a person was he?

**00:30:11**

**MM:** He was--I mean to me he was great. He taught me a lot of different things back here; I mean you know because all of this was new to me. We made turtle soup, so I saw—you know he was pretty rough around the edges. I saw whole--whole turtles come in here and him butchering the turtles for turtle soup. We would have live crawfish come in for crawfish bisque and we would run them through the buffalo chopper, and you know, so it was all—. But it--but that's the way he was raised and that's the way—and the food took on this great richness to him. He loved the food.

**00:30:43**

So he was--he was a wealth of information for me. I think that—but he was also pretty quiet, too, so you kind of had to—. If he liked you, if he felt like you were interested in what he was doing, then he was great. He would give you all kinds of information. So it's--it's kind of what you put into it as to what he--what he would give you. So for me it was--it was great; it was great.

**00:31:10**

**SR:** What's a buffalo chopper?

**00:31:12**

**MM: [*Laughs*]** A buffalo chopper, it's--it's a piece of machinery in the kitchen and it's a big bowl. It has a lid to it and there's a sharp blade that goes through it and it does like a rough chop on everything. So for the crawfish, when you're making a bisque like that you want live crawfish. You know and you want all that fat in there and all those flavors in there, and so we would run them through the buffalo chopper first and then dump them into the kettle to make our bisque.

**00:31:39**

**SR:** Okay, so when they were live would you run them through the buffalo chopper?

**00:31:42**

**MM:** When they were alive we would run them through the buffalo chopper, yeah--yeah.

**00:31:45**

**SR:** And you still make turtle soup here?

**00:31:47**

**MM:** We do. I only make it—because of the cost of turtle, because I like to use all turtle meat. I know that that doesn't happen everywhere. We've got mock turtle soups now. So I make it

usually during the Christmas season, somewhere around the first of December through the first of January, I'll--I'll run turtle soup then.

**00:32:06**

**SR:** I wanted to ask, so when you came on, and I guess until you did the cookbook, was there a written-down recipe for the gumbo Ya-Ya, or was it all in your head or Mr. Smith's head?

**00:32:22**

**MM:** Well we have--we have a written-down recipe for it, and I guess even when Jimmy was here we probably had one then. But when he was here he did--he did the gumbos, so it was all just a matter of watching him, and they all changed. You know we're using—you know maybe your andouille isn't as peppery as it was two days ago so you wanted just that flavor, so there's always—. While recipes are great for things, they're not anything that should be carved in stone. You know they're--they're meant to be a guideline more than anything else. So I knew basically what was going into them, but until you work with them, until you taste them over and over and over again a recipe doesn't do a lot of good. So—.

**00:33:05**

**SR:** So you don't have just anyone making the gumbo back there either? It's probably you and the sous-chef?

**00:33:12**

**MM:** Yeah, it's myself and one of the sous-chefs who do them, yeah--yeah.

**00:33:16**

**SR:** So one of my questions for you was—it's probably not relevant now that I know your story; it was going to be—. Was it difficult to come into a restaurant and have the signature gumbo not be your gumbo? But I guess maybe if--if you came on with Mr. Smith as a young person, maybe it was your gumbo. I don't know.

**00:33:33**

**MM:** Well I mean, you know like I said, I--I like to think that while I'm back there, that I'm doing Jimmy Smith's gumbo, and I hope that I'm doing it the way he wants it done and that he would—that he would taste it and say, *This is my gumbo*.

**00:33:52**

So part of it is mine, and part of it is not.

**00:33:56**

**SR:** What about if you, you know, were having family and friends over tonight to make a gumbo, what kind would you make?

**00:34:02**

**MM:** Well I guess tonight I'd have to say rabbits. We just got in rabbits today that we haven't had on the menu for almost nine months now. I think that they take on that flavor really well, too. I like greens. You know so--so a smoked rabbit and green gumbo sounds really good to me right now. Hopefully the weather is getting a little bit cooler. So just--just things like that.

**00:34:29**

**SR:** Have you found that your business background, your business training, has helped you in your chef-ly life?

**00:34:37**

**MM:** I think so. I mean I think that any type of—there's all kinds of things you can use in the kitchen. I mean being a good cook is part of it. You know, but you can have someone who—I think that there are chefs who are great cooks, and then I think there are chefs that are not good cooks but really good managers and--and can handle paperwork and things like that. And then there's the combination of the both. I like to think that I'm a combination of the both. I love to cook. But I also still have that--that business knowledge of kind of how to manage things, how to handle the--the food cost end of it, as well as the managing of the people of it, as well as the palate for it.

**00:35:22**

**SR:** I think that's kind of rare. It seems like a--a very useful skill.

**00:35:26**

**MM:** I think it is. I mean you know I--I think it's helped me a lot. I think it's helped me an awful lot in the kitchen, so I'm happy to have it.

**00:35:34**

**SR:** What about in your family—you mentioned that you had a son. Are there—do you have children who are interested in food?

**00:35:42**

**MM:** I have--we have one son. My husband, you know—my restaurant hours have always been a little strenuous I guess you'd say. And so my husband does some cooking. He doesn't do a whole lot, but I mean there were probably two—or you know when Ethan was younger there were probably two or three nights a week where he would have to cook dinner. Ethan, who has just gone off to college this year—this is his first year at Ole Miss, and he spent the summer in the kitchen here with us. And he loved it. And you know, will he—will this be his profession? Probably not, probably not, but you know when you're 18 years-old—. I mean I didn't get in the kitchen until I was 24 years-old, so you know who really knows? But I just want him to have an appreciation for all kinds of things for what people do. And I think that being a cook is a very useful thing.

**00:36:39**

You know the service industry is a great industry to be in. He can go live anywhere in the country, basically in the world, and if you have some basic cooking skills then you can--you can survive. So you know, and like I said, he enjoyed it; he had a great time. He's coming home for Christmas and wants to spend his--part of his Christmas vacation in the kitchen. So hopefully he has an appreciation for it. Maybe not as much as I do where he wants to make that his profession.

**00:37:06**

**SR:** Maybe he'll be able to join the Symposium a little bit when you make gumbo up in Oxford.

**00:37:11**

**MM:** I hope he will, yeah. Yeah, we're hoping he will.

**00:37:14**

**SR:** I read in the Mr. B's Cookbook that—I'm not even sure who was writing this. I'm not sure who wrote the introduction, but they wrote about how you cook from the source—that that's your skill. Can you describe what that means?

**00:37:30**

**MM:** Well I mean I think that means, you know, using products here that are indigenous to what we have here. I just mentioned, again, about rabbit. You know rabbits are just now coming into where they're a nice size. They're healthy--you know they're healthy rabbits now. You know the weather has cooled off, so I think it's taking advantage of products that are, again, indigenous to the area; that I want to keep--I want to keep our sense of being a contemporary Creole restaurant but still do something a little bit different with it.

**00:38:07**

You see rabbit on menus and I--I like to think that we do something a little bit different with our rabbit or with our chicken or with our—you know, whatever it happens to be at that time. But I--I think that definitely staying true to being in New Orleans and being a contemporary Creole restaurant is something that we have to do also.

**00:38:29**

**SR:** Okay, I just have—you have to get to your lunch service. I just have a couple more questions. One, which I forgot to ask earlier when we were talking about gumbo, is: So I understand that both of your regular gumbos are roux-based here. Does the seafood gumbo contain okra?

**00:38:46**

**MM:** Yes, it does. Yeah, we use—we're going to use kind of the same type of thing. We're going to use our—we don't use red peppers in this one. We're going to use the onions, the celery, and the green peppers; again, cook those down with tomatoes, and then we add our okra in also. So it does have okra in it.

**00:39:04**

**SR:** And so both gumbos have tomato?

**00:39:05**

**MM:** Yes, they do, yeah, yeah, uh-hm.

**00:39:08**

**SR:** But it's very—I mean I can just say from my experience, in the gumbo Ya-Ya you don't--you wouldn't necessarily know that. Like, it's very dark.

**00:39:17**

**MM:** No, you--you don't see it in there. The tomato product pretty much cooks itself out and that—you know that lends itself to a deeper color, a richer flavor, you know, whereas the seafood gumbo you can—sometimes you can see a little bit of the tomato is still left in there. But with the Ya-Ya it definitely just kind of cooks itself down.

**00:39:36**

**SR:** And what about filé? Do you use filé in either of the gumbos?

**00:39:40**

**MM:** In the seafood gumbo we use filé. In the Ya-Ya, we don't. So—.

**00:39:44**

**SR:** And at what point do you add the filé powder?

**00:39:47**

**MM:** We add the filé—I add it at two different times. I'll add a little bit when we're--when we're cooking our vegetables down for the seafood gumbo, and then lots of times we'll just finish it with a little bit of the filé also.

**00:40:00**

**SR:** And in your mind are you--are you using the filé as a thickener or as a flavoring agent more?

**00:40:07**

**MM:** I'm using it as a flavoring agent. I know that it can be used as a thickener. But I'm using my roux more for that. I think that I'm—it's more of a flavor thing for us.

**00:40:19**

**SR:** And then I just wanted to ask you, I know that the restaurant had some damage during Katrina, and can you just tell me about that—at what point you reopened and what you had to—how extensively you had to rebuild?

**00:40:34**

**MM:** Sure. We were--we were pretty heavily damaged. You know we are in the Quarter, and there wasn't--there wasn't actual street-flooding that happened here. We are unique, and we used to like to kind of push this that we have a basement here, which always seemed like a neat thing. I mean, who in New Orleans has a basement? And in the basement were offices, the meat cooler, the cheese cooler, the produce room. Everything was downstairs in our basement.

**00:41:01**

Well we had, as you know, I mean sewage backed up, water backed up, everything backed up. So down--downstairs we had about four to five feet of toxic water or whatever down there. And then we also have a garage above us, and through the garage water came in, so it came through the walls, so we lost all of—you know all this wood here is--is new wood now. We have new wood floors. I mean basically everything in here is new. We kept--we kept the look pretty much exactly the same. The lighting is a little bit different but we wanted people—we were closed for 20 months. We wanted people to come back into the restaurant and say, *Ah, I'm*

*back at Mr. B's*, you know. We didn't want to scare people away. We wanted to welcome them back into the restaurant.

**00:41:52**

So you know, our ideas as far as service, as far as food, as far as the look of the--of the restaurant, we wanted to keep it the same. We had been open for 20-some years, though, so you know you're looking at more of like a--a facelift, just a little bit of--a little something where somebody says, *Huh, something is a little bit different,* but you're not really—. You know you didn't want it to--to stare you in the face and be shocked by it. You just want to be welcomed in and--and think that it just looks a little bit different.

**00:42:21**

But we kept, you know, our marble tables; we kept the feel the same, so—.

**00:42:25**

**SR:** Were you able to get back any of your regular kitchen crew?

**00:42:30**

**MM:** I actually have--I have two of my sous-chefs. And then we have Skip Lomax, who has been with the restaurant for 27 years. He is still with us, so we did keep some--some key people. We have employees in the front of the house and the back of the house. We just celebrated our birthday here at the restaurant and I want to say we had four 25-year employees. We had 10 or 12 15-year employees; another 10 or 12 20-year employees, and so a lot of our key people are still here, which is a great thing.

**00:43:12**

I mean you--you don't see that in the restaurant industry and especially in a city, you know, like a very transient city like New Orleans. So we're very glad to have those people who stayed with us.

**00:43:25**

**SR:** And Skip Lomax, he works in the kitchen?

**00:43:29**

**MM:** Yes, he does, yeah. Yeah, and you know I've got—I probably have three people who are--who have been there from anywhere from 15 to 25 years in the kitchen. So yeah.

**00:43:40**

**SR:** What about, as a woman, a woman in this industry, you're not in the majority. Are—is there a particular challenge you've come across, or not—or do you find it an advantage?

**00:43:54**

**MM:** Well I mean I don't really look at it as an advantage or a disadvantage. I think that the only--the only difference is maybe—. Well I don't really know. I really don't look at it as either way. I think it depends on how hard you're willing to work whether you're a man or a woman in a kitchen. I mean it is a challenging job. You know, physically, mentally, emotionally—everything—being a chef in a restaurant is. And so you know, being a man or a woman I don't think has a lot to do with it, other than the fact that maybe physically there are things that I can't do that—but it's not any different—. I don't mind asking for help physically on things any more

than I would expect a--you know, a man to ask physically for help for things. So I haven't--I haven't seen it either way.

**00:44:47**

**SR:** One last question: What do you like most about what you do for a living?

**00:44:52**

**MM:** Oh that's a hard one. I mean I think it's--it's rare these days that people can get up every morning and look forward to coming to work. I mean, I have that. You know it's--the restaurant business is different every day. It's different challenges in the front of the house. *What's going to happen out here today?* You know last night we had--we didn't have many reservations. We had a party of 42 walk in. You know 42 people walking in off the street is kind of like, *Oh, okay*. So you know, what do you do?

**00:45:23**

So there—you're always kind of thrown different things and it's--it's our business to get through them without the customer realizing that they've kind of thrown us for a loop, you know. And I think that that is what makes it challenging, interesting, and fun. I get to work with all kinds of different products. You know, and like I said, my job is a very hands-on job and that's what I--that's what I love about it. I can--I see all kinds of things come through the door and I love it.

**00:45:54**

**SR:** Thank you so much for giving me, and us, your time. I appreciate it.

**00:45:57**

**MM:** Oh sure. Oh sure, that's fine. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

**00:46:03**

**[End Michelle McRaney Interview]**