

**Interviewee: Milton Prudence, executive chef – Tommy’s Cuisine –
New Orleans, LA**
Interview Date: July 19, 2006
Interviewer: Sara Roahen

[Begin Milton Prudence Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Wednesday, July 19th, 2006 and I'm on Tchoupitoulas Street in New Orleans at Tommy's Cuisine with Chef Milton Prudence. So if I could just get you to state your name and your birth date and how you make your living?

00:00:24

Milton Prudence: Milton Prudence, July 10th, 1947. Executive chef at Tommy's Cuisine.

00:00:31

SR: Thank you. Let's start by where--where did you grow up?

00:00:38

MP: Providence, Rhode Island.

00:00:42

SR: Oh okay and how did you come to New Orleans?

00:00:43

MP: I got to New Orleans visiting relatives in 1968 and had just been released from the Marine Corps and was on my way back to New England when I stopped here and never left.

00:00:59

SR: So where were you on your way back from? Where were you stationed?

00:01:02

MP: Los Angeles; I got released from the Marine Corps in Los Angeles.

00:01:08

SR: And what was the year of that?

00:01:09

MP: Sixty-eight.

00:01:10

SR: Sixty eight and you had family down here?

00:01:12

MP: Yes, I got a lot of family in New Orleans.

00:01:14

SR: And at the time did it seem like a good thing to stay?

00:01:19

MP: At the time yes. I--I was enjoying myself. I really wasn't decided on what I wanted to do, so it was someplace to kill time and it was a very enjoyable city at that time.

00:01:35

SR: And what--what--at what point did you start cooking?

00:01:41

MP: I started cooking in December of '68. I had an uncle that was employed at Galatoire's Restaurant and by me being undecided about going back to New England, my funds were running short, so I asked him about getting me a job there until I decided whether I wanted to leave or not. And that's the beginning of my cooking career.

00:02:05

SR: So you had--had you had an interest in cooking before then?

00:02:09

MP: None, whatsoever--never thought about it.

00:02:12

SR: And what--how old would you have been then? I guess--

00:02:14

MP: Twenty-one.

00:02:15

SR: Twenty-one okay.

00:02:17

MP: Twenty-one.

00:02:17

SR: And what--I mean looking back did food--in retrospect did food play an important part in your childhood or your youth?

00:02:27

MP: As much as my grandparents who raised me--both of them cooked and it was a little interest in it for the fact is they made my brothers--I

had two brothers and myself self-sufficient; they taught us how to cook some things. But say seriously to make a living at it, I never thought about it.

00:02:50

SR: And were your grandparents--did they have ties to New Orleans? Was New Orleans cooking part of your life at home?

00:02:56

MP: My grandfather, he had--he was born in New Orleans and well my grandmother was from Virginia.

00:03:05

SR: Virginia, okay, and so did you--what were some of the things that you could make for yourself to survive on as a young person?

00:03:13

MP: They--my grandfather is the first person that taught me how to cook grits, right. [*Laughs*] They were very Southern and my grandmother, she was a chicken and dumplings person and she taught me how to do that--fried chicken, very traditional Southern food.

00:03:42

SR: Uh-huh, so what was your uncle's name who was working at Galatoire's?

00:03:45

MP: Warren Martin.

00:03:47

SR: Pardon me?

00:03:48

MP: Warren Martin.

00:03:49

SR: Warren Martin?

00:03:50

MP: Uh-hm.

00:03:51

SR: Okay, and he was cooking?

00:03:53

MP: He worked there 15 years.

00:03:57

SR: And when you first got a job there what was your first post at Galatoire's?

00:04:02

MP: A dishwasher; uh-hm, I washed dishes for about three months and from there I started working the pantry. And from the pantry it was just going to the line and moving up. For the last 15 years I ran the kitchen.

00:04:25

SR: Can you describe for the recording what the pantry position means?

00:04:31

MP: Pantry is salads and--and at Galatoire's it's a combination of salads and desserts and what you do is you not only have to learn how to make the salads, you have to learn how to make all the sauces that goes with the salads and at Galatoire's we were a very extensive pantry. They had a lot of stuff.

00:04:53

SR: Like the shrimp rémoulade, would that be--?

00:04:55

MP: Rémoulade, Crabmeat Maison, a lot of salads that we--at one time we had a salad for every big department store on Canal Street.

00:05:07

SR: Named after?

00:05:09

MP: Godchaux, Maison Blanche, right Dinkelspiel, DH Holmes had a salad; everybody--every big department store had a salad named after them, right; so--.

00:05:23

SR: I didn't know that.

00:05:25

MP: Uh-hm.

00:05:28

SR: And so then you moved onto the line. About how long was it before you moved onto the line?

00:05:31

MP: I stayed on salads probably about eight months and from there-- when you go on the line, the first place you're going to go to is the fryer and from the fryer I took interest in learning to the right and left of me which I had the broiler on this side and the sauté on this side; so not only was I working the fryer but I was also picking up pointers from both sides.

00:06:00

SR: And so at a certain point you started enjoying yourself in the kitchen?

00:06:06

MP: I started enjoying myself from the time I started the pantry. It--it was an interest with food; like I told you it was something I didn't

expect because my inspiration was to be a school teacher and after I started with the salads I liked--I liked it and my interest kept rising and I wanted to learn more.

00:06:32

SR: At what point did you become in charge of the kitchen then?

00:06:45

MP: About the late '80s we had--the executive chef at the time went to Colorado and he didn't return and they asked me if I would take the job over, which I was doing a lot of the work at the time, so I did. And probably my last 15 years there that's what I done.

00:07:09

SR: Who was--who taught you to cook there? Was it your uncle?

00:07:12

MP: Actually the whole line did. My uncle, of course he took a special interest in me learning. Oh I think my first influence was the head chef at the time. His name was Charlie Plough.

00:07:26

SR: Charlie--?

00:07:27

MP: Charlie Plough.

00:07:28

SR: Plough -- P-l-o-w?

00:07:28

MP: P-l-o--how you, yeah P-l-o-w [corrected spelling after interview]; Charlie opened the--the sauté station in the morning. He done most of the sauces and he saw that I took an interest so he taught me. And my uncle--my uncle made Rockefeller, at the time we had Bienville though

they don't make Bienville any longer. He made mayonnaise; at that time mayonnaise was made in-house. Now they buy it but those are the things that my uncle taught me because that's what his--his job was. But all of the cooks contributed really to my learning you know and if they were doing something that I didn't know how--they were a good group of people to teach you, you know. Then later on about 1970 we had a chef come over from France and he ran Christian's; what's his name--Roland Huet.

00:08:40

SR: Roland Huet?

00:08:44

MP: Roland Huet--and Roland was another one that saw that I was interested and he didn't stay long--he stayed about a year but I learned a heck of a lot from Roland in that year, you know so--. But Galatoire's had some good people that had worked in other places and they contributed. You know it's--cooking is always a--a learning process and

the people that come along in your early stages, they--they--they're your teachers and if they're good you're going to learn well. And I learned a lot from them.

00:09:22

SR: And at that point before Mr. Huet came along were there any other French people in the kitchen when you first started?

00:09:29

MP: No, no, it wasn't. When I came--and just before--before I got there they had a few that had retired, but in my stay we didn't--no; it was no one with a French background.

00:09:52

SR: And was the cooking--when you were cooking it did you feel like you were cooking French food or New Orleans food or--how did you--?

00:10:01

MP: It's a combination really. New Orleans is not--Galatoire's was not traditional French. It was more of New Orleans French and it's--most of the recipes--original recipes from the time when they opened. So basically it was all handed down; now they have a very extensive menu but as the guard changed the recipes never changed. You just--you learned Galatoire's way and that's what you passed onto the next person--Galatoire's way. Even to--today where a lot of people use machines to do stuff, Galatoire's is still doing it by hand because that's the way that we was taught.

00:10:48

SR: Like what kind of things?

00:10:50

MP: Like Hollandaise; we do--we make--like a lot of people will--we was taught to make it in a pot in a double broiler where a lot of people use machinery today 'cause it's easier but you know I like my way better; so--. [*Laughs*]

00:11:08

SR: You still make it by hand huh?

00:11:09

MP: Still make it by hand.

00:11:10

SR: When Mr. Huet came did he--did he teach you things from France or did he also have to do everything--learn everything that Galatoire's did?

00:11:25

MP: He basically--when--when he first came over it was--he had a traditional French background and when he first came over he wanted to incorporate some of that in the restaurant. They would not allow him to but the fact is they had their own way of doing it and that's one of the reasons why he went to Christian's. But the thing was--it wasn't so

much what we were doing that he taught me as it was other styles that he was trained in France. So when it came to stocks, you know--stuff like that he--he was very influential.

00:12:15

SR: Well I guess that leads to another question I had which is you know I've heard a lot and read a lot about how you know Galatoire's recipes are handed down from 100 years ago and--and I've wondered whether it's possible to make your own imprint, whether you can use creativity within that structure.

00:12:39

MP: From gumbo, your--your soups, certain sauces--is you.

00:12:49

SR: That's you.

00:12:50

MP: And any executive chef that takes over there that part of it becomes you; the main, the main body of it is still Galatoire's. Now I learned--Charlie Plough was the one that really taught me how to make soups. Just before I retired there was a French chef; his name was Warren LeRuth.

00:13:16

SR: Uh-hm; Warren LeRuth?

00:13:18

MP: Because Warren LeRuth, he worked at Galatoire's--

00:13:20

SR: I didn't know that.

00:13:21

MP: Right; and they got a--a soup that it's--they even make it today. It's oyster artichoke soup and Charlie got it from Warren LeRuth;

Warren LeRuth eventually went to the West Bank and opened up his restaurant but I learned it from Charlie. But still each individual chef has his own touches and that's--was one of the things that I was allowed to do--turtle soup, oyster artichoke soup, we have a soup of the day--those things became—and Marchand de Vin--certain other sauces, they became mine—crawfish etouffée--that became mine, but you would say like our--our basic béchemel sauces, strictly Galatoire's and you've got to go by their book. So you know you do have yourself to put into it.

00:14:28

SR: And when you say you had to go by the book I'm wondering if there was an actual book or if it was all oral.

00:14:36

MP: No; I had actually a book for every recipe that Galatoire's had and 85-percent of them you have to follow.

00:14:48

SR: You had to follow?

00:14:49

MP: You had to follow; I mean consistency has everybody on the same page and that's where recipes come in. And not--I was made to follow them and I made other people follow them. We got to do it this way you know. What we took pride in was say someone who ate there 50 years ago and when they'd come in to eat they'd say well this tastes just like it did at that time. And it's because we tried to do it the same way--the same amount of ingredients--everything the same way and we took pride in that because if you liked it then and the guys at that time done well then they're telling us we're doing all right.

00:15:31

SR: That is one of the pleasures of going there--is knowing what you're going to eat.

00:15:37

MP: Right.

00:15:37

SR: And why was the Marchand de Vin sauce different? Why were you--did--did that sauce exist before you were there?

00:15:43

MP: Yeah; it did.

00:15:44

SR: And you just put your own touch on it?

00:15:45

MP: Right; that's what--the--the majority of time I was there, Charlie Plough was the executive and--in my cooking experience what I've tried to do was take the best from everybody that I worked with and not saying he didn't make a good Marchand de Vin; I felt I could make a better one. [*Laughs*] So you know that was one of my reasons was that--

and anything that you do you have to get approval from the front of the house which--which I actually--the Galatoire's family--so they liked it; they liked it a little better than what we had so that's how I was able to do that.

00:16:27

SR: You'd do a tasting with the family?

00:16:29

MP: Uh-hm; etouffée--actually I had to wait--there was a Cajun waiter named Nelson. He taught me his style of egg etouffée and then I put my style to it.

00:16:42

SR: What was his name?

00:16:44

MP: Nelson.

00:16:45

SR: Nelson--his first name was Nelson?

00:16:46

MP: Yeah; I don't remember the last name but he was a Cajun waiter and--well he was more familiar with it than I was. So he showed me his way but I put a twist to it. I started using a lobster base.

00:17:08

SR: Hmm; yum.

00:17:09

MP: And you know nobody really in-house had ever done it that way before and it worked. But those--like I say I use that example 'cause that was one of the things that they let me do on my own.

00:17:23

SR: And those things--do you--did you pass on before you left? Do--do you think they're still doing it that way?

00:17:30

MP: Uh-hm.

00:17:33

SR: When I was reading that it was in 1997 I think that they--the Galatoire's family and management officially named you the chef of Galatoire's--

00:17:49

MP: Correct; well--

00:17:49

SR: --and that was the first time; is that right--no?

00:17:51

MP: It was really before that. What happened--it became at that time--Galatoire's never publicly let anyone know who their chef was. It was just in-house; you knew what you were and that was sufficient but they wasn't a family that really promoted their chef positions. In '97 it became fashionable--everybody was putting their chefs out there, so it really was the time that changed, so they just changed with it, but it--it wasn't really something that was new. Like I said, it was something that I had been doing for years already but different media wanted a title, so there it was, you know.

00:18:48

SR: Right; and how did you--did it ever bother you that it wasn't public that you were--?

00:18:54

MP: No; because of the fact that I was--I was going to different functions and I was recognized as such you know. We would do the Zoo-To-Do every year; we would go to the Food Exposition every year

and you know I was doing demonstrations and I mean anybody who-- who really followed the restaurant saw my face and I've never been a person really to have this ego that I wanted the world to know me. I'm more low-key anyway; so no, it didn't bother me at all.

00:19:32

SR: And did it change your life at all when this pronouncement came out?

00:19:38

MP: Not really, no; it really didn't--because I told you I'm really more low-key. If I get--I'm the type of person--publicity wise I'm not going to seek it. If it comes I'm going to meet it and you know--and mostly it's a responsibility to the restaurant but--.

00:19:58

SR: And in some year, I think it was in the early 2000s--maybe 2003, Galatoire's was nominated for a James Beard Award.

00:20:07

MP: It was nominated in 2003; that's the year I left--came in second.
Two thousand-four they won it.

00:20:15

SR: And did you go to the--to New York for that ceremony?

00:20:18

MP: No; I didn't. No; I didn't. The general manager and my assistant went. What happened at the time we was going through some turmoil at the restaurant and I had to be there, so that's how they decided--a lot of the food that went had my input to it but I didn't go.

00:20:46

SR: But you made some of the food here?

00:20:47

MP: Yeah; uh-hm, yeah.

00:20:50

SR: And so you--it was in 2003 that you left?

00:20:54

MP: Right.

00:20:56

SR: And well right now I'll say for the record we're at Tommy's Cuisine, where you're the chef now. Did you come immediately to Tommy's when you left or was there a transition?

00:21:07

MP: It was--well at the time when--I left in June of 2003. At the time--it wasn't--what it was--was my stay at Galatoire's was--had come--came to an end. I'm not happy to say it wasn't a favorable end. And I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I went to Atlanta for about three

weeks. When I came back Tommy wanted to see me. So Tommy at the time was building this restaurant and they was just about almost completed. We opened it the 17th of August in 2003. And I assumed my position at that time here.

00:22:02

SR: So you opened this restaurant?

00:22:03

MP: Yes; uh-hm.

00:22:05

SR: And you were looking for job prospects in Atlanta?

00:22:07

MP: Yeah; I--and it was outside of cooking 'cause at the time after I left Galatoire's I was--mentally I was sort of burned and I--I didn't know--since it wasn't a happy breakup I didn't really know if I even

wanted to do this again. And I went--I had a brother that lived in Atlanta. I stayed with him like I said three weeks. I looked at different prospects; some of them was favorable but it just wasn't home, you know. [**Laughs**] It really wasn't home and I started to miss cooking, so that's why I came back.

00:22:45

SR: It only took three weeks, huh?

00:22:46

MP: Three weeks--three weeks.

00:22:48

SR: So New Orleans is--is definitely home?

00:22:53

MP: New Orleans is home. I--I've been to quite a few cities but it's always coming back; it's--it's home.

00:23:05

SR: Did you know Tommy before he called you up?

00:23:08

MP: No; I didn't. A friend of mine who is a waiter at Galatoire's knew Tommy and he had told Tommy about me and that's how we got to meet. Tommy asked me to write him up some recipes--or some--some menus and--because he didn't really know just how he wanted to go right. And we sat down and we talked food; he liked my capabilities so we went with it.

00:23:40

SR: And I should say for the record that Tommy is Tommy--how do you pronounce his last name?

00:23:45

MP: Andrade--A-n-d-r-a-d-e.

00:23:48

SR: And he was formerly I guess you'd say a partner in Irene's Cuisine.

00:23:53

MP: Irene's Cuisine, right.

00:23:55

SR: Which is an Italian restaurant in the French Quarter?

00:23:58

MP: Right.

00:24:00

SR: And had you had much experience cooking Italian food?

00:24:05

MP: Very little but in 35 years I learned cooking because if you can cook it doesn't take long to pick up anybody's menu and the things that--that Tommy was doing he went over them with me. I knew I could do them, and it's just the idea of getting it the way that he wanted and that didn't take long to do; so--no, it's no problem in learning different foods.

00:24:40

SR: I've eaten at both Irene's and Tommy's and the dishes that are similar are really similar. Did--did he bring some cooks with him that you cook with or did you just work on things and have him taste them?

00:24:55

MP: The thing is when I met him he had--he had also recipes, right--

00:24:58

SR: Oh okay; uh-hm.

00:25:01

MP: And the--well his background was Irene's, so the recipes have to be the same. [*Laughs*] And by working with them recipes we were able to duplicate the tastes because we had him who was able to tell us when we was off or not but also we had one guy, who had worked at Irene's and he was a big help with the menu, you know.

00:25:35

SR: And so here now at Tommy's you do a--pretty much all-Italian menu and then you have specials.

00:25:44

MP: Specials, right; uh-hm.

00:25:46

SR: And the specials are a lot of Galatoire's like dishes. Is that still true?

00:25:53

MP: I would say 80-percent of them are Galatoire's dishes, right. What happened when--when we first started the special station it was going to be something that on a weekly or--and it got to the point we was going to say on a monthly basis we would change it. Some of the selections that I chose sold so well we couldn't change them, and--and what happened--it built into where we had a little menu for the special station. And now the special station has its own menu and we can't really incorporate much in it because it's full. [*Laughs*] But the--the thing is they sell so well and if we take something off we don't want to offend anyone, so we just keep where we're going.

00:26:55

SR: You're back where you were at Galatoire's?

00:26:57

MP: Basically yes.

00:26:59

SR: And what are--what are those dishes--the standards here, the specials?

00:27:02

MP: Crabmeat Sardou, we have crab au gratin, we have a filet with Brabant potatoes and asparagus--

00:27:22

SR: Brabant potatoes is it?

00:27:23

MP: Brabant right; we have done stuffed eggplants--actually anything that someone requests I can do it on--on the station if it's within reason and we have the ingredients. So it's--it's nothing for a Galatoire's customer to come here and request something and they can get it if it's in the line of something that we're doing. So it's--like I said it's developed into a menu of its own, you know. But that was my intentions

when--when I done it; it was to do basically what I was--what I do best and then incorporate some other things but it got overwhelming.

[Laughs]

00:28:20

SR: When you--do you cook at home?

00:28:23

MP: Yes; I do--not often but I do.

00:28:25

SR: And is it the same style? Is it Galatoire's style or do you have--
what sorts of things might you cook at home?

00:28:31

MP: Most of the time I--when I cook at home it's holidays. And believe it or not I'm more of the helper in the kitchen than I am the one that's running it but like--my wife, she--I have to cook gumbo, stuffed

peppers, 'cause you know she might make me make the macaroni and cheese--stuff like that.

00:28:54

SR: She's bossing you around?

00:28:54

MP: Yeah, yeah.

00:28:56

SR: She's a good cook also?

00:28:58

MP: She's a very good cook.

00:29:00

SR: And where is she from?

00:29:02

MP: She's from New Orleans; that's the reason I--I eventually decided to stay here 'cause I met her.

00:29:06

SR: And what--how long was that?

00:29:09

MP: I met her in '72. But no I met her in '71 and we got married in '72 and we've been married ever since.

00:29:20

SR: Oh that's good, and you have children?

00:29:21

MP: I've got three daughters.

00:29:25

SR: Okay; I read in--in--an article when I was doing research that you not only had an uncle who worked in the--the kitchen at Galatoire's but other relatives too.

00:29:36

MP: [*Laughs*] My grandmother worked there, my mother worked there, my brother worked there [*Laughs*]

00:29:41

SR: Oh your grandmother and mother, huh?

00:29:42

MP: Yes; my family goes quite some time at Galatoire's, yes; uh-hm.

00:29:48

SR: Do you have relatives working there now?

00:29:51

MP: No--no, no--no one.

00:29:55

SR: And was--was the last name Prudence of all your relatives?

00:29:57

MP: Martin is their maiden name.

00:29:58

SR: It's all Martin huh?

00:30:00

MP: Uh-hm.

00:30:01

SR: What did you mother do there?

00:30:03

MP: My mother washed dishes; my grandmother washed dishes. Like I said my uncle was a cook. I had a brother that worked pantry. That's the one I told you about living in Atlanta. He's--he's a businessman now in Atlanta. I had a cousin, he worked there; he's--was in Alaska working for the government of Alaska. It's like a lot of the younger members of the family, a lot of them was in college--they would work there in the evenings and so I--like I said, a whole bunch of family that worked there.

00:30:43

SR: Do you--you said that you had originally wanted to be a school teacher.

00:30:48

MP: Yeah; that's--that's my--

00:30:50

SR: I imagine that as a chef you use a lot of the same skills.

00:30:57

MP: Well you're always teaching [*Laughs*] you know and it--it--and you're right. I never really thought about it that way but during the years yes, you do; you're doing a lot of teaching. And the biggest thing is to try to get people to do it the way that the house wants it done you know. When you get someone in this trade that either has been around a short while you're trying to teach them about consistency and if they've been around a long time you're trying to get them to where they realize they have to do it this way because in New Orleans you have the same dish that's made so many different ways and a person with a background--a person with a background with that dish normally will want to do it the way that they were originally taught, and you have to do it the way that--that house wants you do it, you know. Sometimes I have found that it was so much easier working with inexperienced than it was with experienced.

00:32:09

SR: Because you could mold them?

00:32:11

MP: We--right; it--it--you find an inexperienced--he's going to do it the way you teach him. The most experienced cooks want--they're going to relate to their background and not--and that doesn't necessarily always fit with what you're doing and I find you have to do more supervision there than you do with an--an inexperienced person.

00:32:37

SR: Maybe that's why you were able to rise in the ranks so quickly and so far.

00:32:43

MP: Well I think--well I--I think I was lucky in a lot of ways but I think a lot of people helped me because of my interest, and at Galatoire's in the early years it was good because I could only learn what they taught me 'cause I didn't know any other way you know. As the years went by

and I learned a lot about cooking then I started developing other ways. It was like in the early '70s right after Mr. B's opened, Paul Prudhomme used to--on Wednesday afternoons used to come and give lessons on sauces--anybody could go, right. So I used to go out there on Wednesday afternoon and watch him and--and see you know. Sometimes what I would do is go to different kitchens and ask could I observe you know and that's how you learn, you know. You've got to see what other foods look like. It wasn't just about Galatoire's food; I wanted to know what other foods looked like. So at the time Arnaud's, Antoine's--they were--and Galatoire's was the three biggest names around, so I would ask you know--I would go ask the chef could I stand and observe.

00:34:10

SR: And they were fine with that?

00:34:13

MP: Yeah, yeah; they were--sometimes I was offered jobs you know
[Laughs] but I--I wasn't interested really in work. I was interested in
learning; so--.

00:34:21

SR: So Paul Prudhomme would give lessons at Mr. B's?

00:34:24

MP: Yeah, on--on sauces, right; at the time he was running
Commander's Palace or he was in Atlanta and--and Houston and he also
came to Mr. B's, you know and that was a little bit before he opened up
his own place.

00:34:44

SR: It's interesting to me that a little Paul Prudhomme might be in
Galatoire's cooking in the sauces.

00:34:49

MP: No; we've had--I went to Mr. B's. That's where we went through that.

00:34:53

SR: Right.

00:34:54

MP: He didn't come to Galatoire's.

00:34:55

SR: No, no; I mean--

00:34:56

MP: Oh--oh well; I mean you know you learn from who's willing to teach you and I mean he's an extraordinary cook, so I--you know I--I enjoyed just going and watching him, you know.

00:35:12

SR: Considering that you've spent most of your life in the kitchen working dinners I imagine--

00:35:24

MP: Galatoire's was lunch and dinner; now it's just dinner.

00:35:28

SR: [*Laughs*] Retirement huh?

00:35:30

MP: Yeah.

00:35:31

SR: Did you--have you eaten in all those restaurants--Antoine's, Arnaud's, or even Galatoire's as a--as a customer?

00:35:38

MP: I have eaten in Antoine's. I don't really go out much to eat. When you're in a restaurant--in--in my early years, I used to be in Galatoire's from six in the morning 'til eleven at night.

00:35:53

SR: Six to eleven?

00:35:56

MP: And I done that at one period for about 12 straight years. And then when I caught myself cutting--cutting back on that it was like from eight to ten. And when you got three daughters and a wife, one day off, the restaurant is not for your spending, so I--I was--I was never one that when I was off wanted to go to a restaurant. That was--I didn't have much family time and that's what I wanted to use that little time I had--for family. I used to take my girls to wrestling or whatever, you know whatever was demanded of me that day, but I--I really--it was a relief to get away for that day.

00:36:49

SR: How old are your daughters now?

00:36:51

MP: Thirty-four, thirty-one, and twenty-nine.

00:36:57

SR: And are any of them in the restaurant business?

00:36:59

MP: No, no, no; they're not. I got one; she's a cosmetologist, one works at a bank, and then one she's a pharmacist.

00:37:12

SR: Professionals. Can you tell me a little bit about you know for--for diners, Galatoire's is all about--well it's about the food of course but also the theatrics of the dining room staff; we don't really get to see the back of the house.

00:37:35

MP: The way I--and I know quite a few waiters. They--most of them are family members; they have--they have a large group occasions, it's the Fontenot family.

00:37:55

SR: Fontenot?

00:37:55

MP: Fontenot and I--they've been affiliated with this restaurant before I got there. As a matter of fact, I met a lot of them when I started. They joke a lot; they know the food, you know. They've been around it so long, they--they know the food but the biggest thing is they know everyone that comes in--every born local that comes in the door. And they can tell you what they like, what they drink, and most of them keep--most of them keep records on a person.

00:38:36

SR: Their own personal records?

00:38:38

MP: Right; well the thing is you have call parties and they most--a lot of them keep their own books about their call parties, you know. And that's it; they--they learned their trade quite well.

00:38:55

SR: And what is the dynamic like between the front of the house and the kitchen at Galatoire's?

00:39:02

MP: Like most kitchens--when service is going on it's hustle and bustle but when--and when the end of the night is over we're all friends, you know. Galatoire's is--is hectic; it's once service starts; it's--everything is à la carte so someone is always coming at you, but--and it's--and it creates a lot of tension but it's nothing personal. No one takes it as

personal and like I said when the end of the night is over we drink a beer together and we're all friends.

00:39:41

SR: And is it different here at Tommy's?

00:39:44

MP: No; Tommy--Tommy's is not as intense but it's--it's the same thing. We have our moments but it's--it's something I make people understand when I hire them. We're here to serve--not just the customer but the waiter because the waiter has to make the customer happy and bringing personal issues into it it's going to take away from that. I like people number one that can get along, and if you can't do that you can't work for me; you understand. If it's a problem, we sit down, we talk about it, and when we get up it's over. But other than that I let each individual be their own man. I don't stand over anybody; I--when I know you know what you're doing you don't have to worry about me you know. I put expectations on people and I expect them to live up to

that and I think that that's what makes it where we don't have a lot of incidents 'cause everybody knows what they're doing and they do what they have to do you know. We have a time to come to work; I expect you to be there at that time. We have certain things we have to do; I don't have to walk--I don't want to walk behind you to see if you've done it. If--if upper management comes and asks me something all I have to do is say yes 'cause I know you did it you know and that's the kind of people that I have and that's the kind of people I like to work with--people you don't really have to supervise because they're mature enough to do what they have to do.

00:41:21

SR: Do you have any cooks working for you now that also came from Galatoire's?

00:41:26

MP: I have two; I had three--the storm took one away from me. I have a kid by the name of Kenny Harvey. Kenny started working at Galatoire's--he was 13 years-old, all right as a dishwasher.

00:41:42

SR: Wow.

00:41:44

MP: At 18 years-old I made him a cook. Right now he's 39 and he's very good.

00:41:51

SR: Again, his name is Kenneth Harvey?

00:41:53

MP: Kenny Harvey.

00:41:54

SR: Kenny Harvey.

00:41:53

MP: I have Gary Strohman who is presently at Galatoire's. We worked together; Gary has worked for some very impressive people. He has worked for Paul Prudhomme--oh gee. I can't think of the other guy's name--anyway; but he worked for some very impressive people and he's still at Galatoire's. And another kid, but the hurricane got him. His name was Victor Frisco. He was another one that I started at Galatoire's. He was 17 and he worked there for about 12 years. And he went to Bravo and became a sous-chef at Bravo; but--.

00:42:35

SR: So the second person he works at Galatoire's and here?

00:42:38

MP: Yeah; uh-hm.

00:42:41

SR: Oh okay and that's--

00:42:43

MP: Gary Strohman.

00:42:44

SR: Oh Gary Strohman. Where did the person go who the storm took away? Where is he now; do you know?

00:42:53

MP: He's trying to get his house back together.

00:42:55

SR: Right; dealing like everyone else?

00:42:56

MP: Uh-hm.

00:42:57

SR: Are there any waiters that are here from Galatoire's?

00:43:01

MP: We have one; Gilbert--I can't even pronounce Gilbert's last name.

00:43:09

SR: Right; he's the famous--infamous--?

00:43:11

MP: Right; the famous Gilbert--Gilbert yeah.

00:43:14

SR: Okay; I knew he was here at one point.

00:43:17

MP: Yeah.

00:43:18

SR: So on the topic of Katrina, can you tell me your Katrina story?

00:43:24

MP: Basically I lived in New Orleans East. Katrina took all my possessions but we survived and that's the most important thing. I found a house three weeks ago in Destrehan, and my family was in Galveston, Texas up until the time I just brought them back. I was staying upstairs for about nine months but it's all right now.

00:44:01

SR: Upstairs here at Tommy's?

00:44:02

MP: Right; Tommy's has an apartment upstairs and then he allowed--it was three of us that stayed up in the apartment, you know.

00:44:17

SR: Hmm; new home in Destrehan, huh. Do you--do you have plans to rebuild in New Orleans or are you going to stay in Destrehan?

00:44:28

MP: Right now I'm waiting to see how it goes. Right on my block at the present there is one person that's doing everything on the block and I'm trying to see just how the neighborhood is--is--is going to react to the rebuilding, you know.

00:44:49

SR: At what point did Tommy's reopen?

00:44:51

MP: We reopened in October, right, and it was surprising 'cause we have done a lot better than I thought we would do under the circumstances. We had no tourists but what we have developed is a very strong local base and it's much better than I expected.

00:45:18

SR: Well last summer, a month before the storm or I guess a month and a half before the storm, the Southern Foodways Alliance picked thirteen *Guardians of the Tradition*, the culinary tradition of New Orleans and you were one of them.

00:45:35

MP: Uh-hm.

00:45:36

SR: Do you have any thoughts on what that means to you to be a guardian--guardian of the culinary tradition?

00:45:44

MP: From the--from the background that I have and like I said the--the food that I do it's at least 100 years-old and if I teach and pass it on like it should be it might make it another 100 years. So that's--that's

something that I'm proud of because I'm doing something that someone else created that a lot of people enjoy and I'm able to still make them enjoy it; so I'm really proud of that.

00:46:23

SR: Do you think about that when you're cooking ever?

00:46:25

MP: Yes; I do because of the fact, like I said--it's not something I take lightly. Not only family members but like I told you, I have teachers that taught me this and for me to pass it on and--or even for me to do it and do it to the point where people like it and can--can say nothing changed with it; it's like it was years ago that's--that's very important to me because it's like keeping something going you know and it's been my life now. [*Laughs*] I'm not--you know it's--it's more than half my life and whatever I got left I probably will still be doing it so it's been my life; so--.

00:47:20

SR: Well that's exactly what a *Guardian of the Tradition* is I think.

00:47:24

MP: Uh-hm.

00:47:26

SR: Well I think that's a nice note to end on.

00:47:30

MP: Thank you.

00:47:30

SR: I want to thank you for your time.

00:47:31

MP: Thank you.

00:47:32

[End Milton Prudence Interview]