

PHILIPPE LAMANCUSA
Kitchen Witch Cookbooks—New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen

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Project: Ya-Ka-Mein in New Orleans

[Begin Philippe LaMancusa Interview]

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Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, May 21, 2012. I am in New Orleans, Louisiana in the French Quarter at Kitchen Witch, which is a cookbook shop. And I'm sitting here with the owner. I'm hoping that you will introduce yourself by telling me your full name and what you do for a living.

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Philippe LaMancusa: My name is Philippe LaMancusa and I'm sixty-eight years old, and I've been in the food business since I was born. I was raised in New York City, went into the Navy, and after the Navy came down to New Orleans. And my mother was a waitress, my father was a cook, and my stepfather owned a bar and grill outside of Greenwich Village in New York City.

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My stepfather was Greek, my real father Sicilian, and my mother German/Irish. There were five kids in the family and food was the main topic of eating. We didn't know it was ethnic food at the time. We just thought it was dinner. After spending four years in the Navy cooking and four consecutive winters in the Caribbean, when I got back to New York I hated the cold weather so much that I fled south and wound up in 1967 in New Orleans.

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I opened my first restaurant here in 1968. I had two restaurants here and worked around town and spent—after that nine years, I went throughout the West and Midwest cooking and eating and living food until coming back here in 1999. That’s when I first opened the cookbook store in another part of town and was doing so badly I had to take other outside jobs as a pastry chef and as a chef and even as a waiter to supplement my income.

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I took a job teaching cooking before Katrina, and when I came back after Katrina the school did not. And so I looked around for something else to do and didn't want to go back to work as a chef because of the hours and other reasons. And so I found the location that we have now on Toulouse Street, and we opened Kitchen Witch. So we’ve been here for seven years and we haven't bounced a check yet.

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SR: And is this now your only gig?

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PL: No. I have a night job two nights a week tending bar down at Café Maspero. So I still work sixty hours a week, but that’s more like being retired than being in the food business.

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SR: Working sixty hours a week is more like being retired?

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PL: Yes, uh-huh. There were—like when I worked at a steakhouse on Bourbon Street over Thanksgiving or Mardi-Gras weekend, I would work seventy hours in four days. And that was—that’s what cooks do, especially in New Orleans where the lifestyle of a cook is more like the lifestyle of a plantation worker. So yeah, this is—to me, I’m retired now. The shop is open six days a week, and then two nights a week I work down at Café Maspero, and working those two days I may put in twelve or fourteen hours, but it’s a walk in the park. It’s like what my family has done for generations. My grandfather was a farmer. My father and stepfather, they worked truck farms and sold vegetables and in the meantime went to roadhouses and got drunk and worked coal mines when they needed money in Pennsylvania.

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And my mother’s family in New York, they all were in raising children and raising hell and working at restaurants because that was where you could make money fast and make money easy and fly under the radar as far as society went. So I was raised on ground level. And my education came in when I worked in Denver and worked for a man that knew so much more than I did that he became my mentor. And it was after that that I decided that I needed to be a chef and needed to go to culinary school and did that in San Francisco. And so I’ve been working—I worked continuously as a chef from probably—I took my first chef’s job in 1972 at a place called Houlihan’s on Bourbon Street; worked there two years, and that job was specifically geared to serving 1,500 meals a day. And I went into work at eleven and I got out of work at eleven and then went out and did what people do in New Orleans. They just mingled afterwards in places that served adult beverages and then got up and did it again and again—and again and again and again.

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So there- were jobs that I've had that I wouldn't have a day off for months and there were other jobs that I had where I wouldn't have a day off for a year. That's just the nature of the business. And so I was raised and nurtured in the business, restaurant stories, from the time I could listen. And work has been my life; it's been a passion. Food is a passion. And food follows—food is like—it's like being a bloodhound when you have a passion about food because you want to know everything. You want to know anything and everything about whatever and wherever people are eating. Whatever—where are they eating? So you go into different neighborhoods, like on the West Coast I would go into the Hispanic neighborhoods. In New Orleans, I would go into the black neighborhoods. In New York, I would go into the Asian neighborhoods and try to find what they were eating; go to places where there were only that ethnic group eating and know that they had something special there that I didn't have the knowledge of and needed to know. I needed to know what everybody was eating.

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So even now, food is still my passion, although at this age, at sixty-eight, now I *talk* about food. I still read food every day, and now—this week I'm reading Kurlansky's book about salt. Great book, great book, great book. And so I just keep—continually know that there's more for me to learn about food everywhere. That's the thing that my mentor taught me. He taught me that there is so much more to know; that being a chef means that you're never done learning, and being a chef means that you're not a celebrity outside of your kitchen. You're the celebrity *inside* of your kitchen. And then when you become a celebrity outside of your kitchen you've stopped becoming a chef and you've become a celebrity.

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So, I was just in touch with a friend of mine who has worked with me and for me and around the world as a chef, and he sent me an email saying, “Would you believe people actually want us to watch the Food Network? They really want to know what we think of different people on television.” And it’s like, they don’t cook. Food networks, in our opinion—food networks keep people out of the kitchen. They don’t put people in the kitchen.

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SR: In what way?

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PL: What you’re doing is you’re vicariously cooking. You’re watching them. Like down in New Orleans now they’re having *Hell’s Kitchen* auditions, and any person that takes food seriously, or any person that works seriously with food, disdains *Hell’s Kitchen*. It is what they call schlock. It’s just so much theatrics, it’s like watching Maury-what’s-his-name on TV jerk off people on their emotions and things, and that’s—it’s theater, but it’s not cooking. And when you sit down to watch a cooking program, unless you’re doing the cooking yourself at the same time, all you’re doing is like living their food and you’re listening to them say, “Bam,” or, “Isn’t that great,” and it’s like, “Mmm, that’s so good.” And it’s like I’ve worked those shows, and what it is is you’re told to say those things when a chef in the kitchen isn’t talking like that [*Laughs*]. He doesn’t talk to his cooks like that. It’s—cooking is something that’s very personal and that you do and that you do with people you love and with family.

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The worst part about going into any restaurant is having a dish that you know is obligatory to the menu. Like you go to a big restaurant here and you sit down and you know the gumbo is just going to be terrible—that it's going to be obligatory gumbo and it's going to be made in thirty-gallon batches and kept in the walk-in in a five-gallon white plastic bucket that they used to have pickles in or came with mayonnaise in, and you know that you get better gumbo at the grocery store around the corner because they need you to come back.

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A lot of bigger restaurants, they don't need you to come back. They just—you're there once. You'll be at another restaurant tomorrow night and another restaurant the night after that, and you know so you say that they had good gumbo. But good gumbo is not great gumbo. You don't find great gumbo in larger places because they don't make it with love.

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I was just talking to somebody earlier about our cooking here. Having cooked in many of the major cities in the country, I know that our food is not world-class. New Orleans food is not world-class. But New Orleans food is addictive because the food that we cook in New Orleans fills you up and it fills you up in a way that is not only physical. It's spiritual. It's emotional. People get emotional about food here. And when I talk to people about food here, people will say that they know where to get the best gumbo besides what their mother cooks. They know that this grocery store on the corner of Banks and Broad run by Asians—that makes a better gumbo than Emeril could possibly put together. They just do, and what they do is they're situated in a neighborhood that a lot of people don't want to buy houses around there; a lot of people that think it's safe because you know people carry guns and it's safer up there, but the gumbo there is made for neighborhood people.

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Matassa's makes a great gumbo. They only make it once a week. You don't find Matassa's making gumbo every day of the week. You don't find them making red beans every day of the week. You walk into a restaurant that has red beans every day of the week, you're in the wrong place because what they're dealing with—they're dealing with people, bless their hearts, from Iowa or Illinois or upriver in Michigan, and they come down here and they expect red beans and rice. Well, so, the Gumbo Shop has red beans every day. Café Maspero, bless their hearts, has red beans every day. I want to go to a restaurant that only has red beans on Monday because that's the only day I want to eat red beans.

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SR: Could you explain that a little bit for people who don't know why?

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PL: Well, red beans became fashionable once the housewife started to try and become one and simpatico with their servants. Now when I came here in 1967 all white people had a servant of some kind or another. They had a woman to come in and cook or they had a woman that came in and sat with somebody that was elderly. They had somebody that came in twice a week to iron. And these were poor people, except the black people were poorer. And so they took other jobs.

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And early on, say one hundred years ago, Monday was washday. Everything fell into an order here. As busy cities cannot do and rural communities *do not* do, everything in this small country of New Orleans had its own rhythm, its own flow of things, and Monday was washday.

Monday was when—before washing machines, people took their laundry out into outside fires and cooked their laundry in big cauldrons. They had to have something that would be able to sit on a stove.

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Now here, the reason why we can cook things long and slowly is because we have the natural resource of fire-burning materials. Coal traveled by train throughout—or did—throughout the South. My second wife's mother, she was so poor as a child, they had to send the children out to pick up coal from train tracks. The coal that fell off the coal trains. Because they cooked with coal. Cooking with coal came for people—. New Orleans has been behind in so many ways economically, and with conveniences, that our food here comes from having to do things long and slow. So red beans were something you could put on the stove on low fire, let it cook slow while you were out doing the washing. And so Monday became red bean day. Red beans was a different bean than a red kidney bean. It has become a red kidney bean, but red beans was a different bean. It was a red bean. So Mondays—

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SR: It was called a red bean?

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PL: Yeah, uh-huh, it was called a red bean, yeah.

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SR: Did you ever experience that before it became the red kidney bean?

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PL: Once or twice because by the late '60s when I came here, they were all using kidney beans—even Buster Holmes. When Buster Holmes, who was the red bean king—he made red beans every day, because he became the red bean king; he used up to 200 pounds of red beans a day. Red beans are more expensive than kidney beans.

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SR: Is that why they phased out?

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PL: Uh-hm, I think so. I think red beans are harder—probably not as hardy to grow, and even now you'll have to search for a red bean in a supermarket that may have—or any market that may have twelve different kinds of beans. Like they'll have pintos and navys and black-eyed peas and butter beans and black beans. And then if you search on the shelf, you might find a couple of packages of red beans. Kidney beans you can buy in one-pound, two-pound, five-pound bags; red beans you find in one-pound bags if you find them at all.

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SR: Can you tell me how they're different from the kidney beans that we eat now?

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PL: They're not as creamy. They're more like a small crowder pea if anything. And they'll retain their shape and flavor almost to a crunchiness, but smooth. It doesn't have a—when it's cooked it doesn't have an uncooked flavor, although each bean retains its own integrity, where red kidney beans or even cannellini beans, when you cook them and you cook them longer, they'll fall apart and they become creamy. Cooks have become to the point where they love that creaminess even to the point of when an instruction on cooking red beans is when the beans are done, take out a cup of beans, and mash them up and put them in to make the gravy. Those are called Creole creamed beans, that have since disappeared from shelves as well. There used to be, if you bought canned beans and you were that ignorant that you had to buy your beans in a can—they also had Creole creamed beans, and those were beans that had been made into a cream already. There are the schools of thought that putting a roux into a pot of beans will make them creamier.

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Well if you want to use that, that would be something that somebody with money would do because somebody who was poor would not waste flour in a pot beans. Especially it wouldn't be a Cajun bean at all. It would be a Creole bean.

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So beans on Monday. And when I worked—let's see, when I first got here in 1967 I was a waiter at a place called the Andrew Jackson across from the Monteleone Hotel. White tablecloth, turtle soup, add the sherry, make the Caesar salad at the table, flame the desserts. Mondays—red beans and rice on the menu. Commander's Palace, when I worked in there in 1974, when Paul Prudhomme was the chef, he was just changing Creole and Cajun influences

together. Same thing: flaming desserts at the table, waiters in bow ties and tuxedos. Monday—red beans and rice.

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It became a tradition because once the servant class started to dissipate, housewives—although they may not do their wash on Mondays—would, in solidarity I think, have red beans on Monday because they were so used to it. Women uptown would have red beans and rice in restaurants because they were used to it and it made them feel at home. Our food here makes us feel at home, which is why a lot of people, I believe, are loyal to New Orleans. Because the food has grounded them, has given them roots, has given them an anchor here. They know that the food here—I know that right now I could get in my car, and unfortunately do that, and I could drive into Old Gentilly and there’s a soul food restaurant where I can get neck bones and greens. I know it. And knowing that puts a light behind my eyes, knowing that somewhere somebody is making those neck bones and—or they’ll serve it with cabbage, smothered cabbage, and I know that. And that food—I wouldn’t walk across the street to go to a famous restaurant, but I would drive to get neck bones and cabbage.

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SR: What is the name of that restaurant?

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PL: All it has—it doesn’t have a name. All it has is outside—you go up New Gentilly Road and then Old Gentilly Road heads off to the left—to the right rather—and there will be a sign and it’ll just say, “Soul Food.” That’s all it says, and you walk in there and there’s a little window

where you order your food and they have the menu on pieces of paper that are tacked up on the wall and it'll have what the specials are. And then you go through another door and there's a little dining room.

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Now, anybody that doesn't know this doesn't know that there even is a dining room, if—because it looks like a takeout window. And they'll serve their food in Styrofoam, which I hate—Styrofoam containers—and if you don't know any better, you'll just walk back out to your car. But if your nose—if you use your nose, you'll know something else is going on.

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Like the other day I was—everything is the other day. A couple of weeks ago I was down and I was walking towards one of the other bookstores. And I noticed a gaggle of taxis—they come in gaggles. And there was a white van, and the taxi drivers were walking to the van and coming away with a Styrofoam container. This is one block off Canal Street. And I walked over, being my inquisitive self, and the best way to get answers is to be stupid. I said, “Is that food in there?” And the taxi driver with a Haitian accent told me that they were having lunch in there and they were having—. I walked over and I said, “How much is lunch?” And they told me it was twelve dollars, and I knew I was just being taken. They were probably selling it for half that. But I asked them what they had and they had stewed fish with tomatoes that they served with black beans. And the flavor was really incredible, and the thing I liked the most about it, the fish still had the bones in it.

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SR: So this was Haitian food?

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PL: Haitian food. And the guy inside the truck, I think just to mess with me, spoke to me in French. He told me it was poisson. Did I know what poisson was? And I said, “I know what poisson is.” And he kept yammering away in French and I knew enough that he was just messing with me. And so I paid my twelve dollars and I took my Styrofoam container, which must have weighed about three pounds. They had fish two ways. They had it with black beans, and then the other way they had it with rice, a dark-black rice that seemed to be mixed with a little bit of black beans as well. But you don’t find that unless you use your nose.

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SR: So this wasn’t an official food truck?

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PL: No.

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SR: This was a little covert operation?

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PL: Yeah, uh-huh. And you know before the storm [Hurricane Katrina] when I would wander down through the French Market on weekends, there would be somebody down there selling samosas and he’d be selling them out of a truck. And he would go all to the Middle Eastern

stands and he would have his samosas that he would sell to them. Well, once you see somebody going through anywhere with a Styrofoam container, you got to find out what it is. You just got to find out.

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I spend Jazz Fest looking over people's shoulders to see what they have to eat, and you know, "Where did you get that? What is that? Where did you get that?" And you get turned on by what other people are doing.

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And New Orleans is one of the only places I know that is so friendly that when you check out of a grocery store, the person who is doing your checkout will look over your food to see what you're making and they'll give you advice. Like go to Circle Food when it was opened and get some beans and as you're leaving the person behind the checkout counter is going to wonder why you don't have any pickled pork. "You don't have any pickled pork for that?" And then they'll tell you how to cook it. And it's New Orleans that does that. New Orleans—like when I came down here from New York, I was frightened because people were so friendly. People would say hello to me on the street. People would want to engage me in worthwhile conversation. They do. They want to know that.

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The difference between— like in the Tremé, the series that they had they showed shots of the chef up in New York that was from New Orleans and she was off work and she was in a bar drinking. And then they showed shots of New Orleans in a bar with somebody that she knew was drinking. And in New York people were isolated from each other by choice. The only thing that they could have in common would be the television that was on showing—well, in the scene it

was showing a Saints game. And in New Orleans, when the scene shot back to New Orleans, everybody in the bar was talking to each other. Everybody in the bar was ready to have conversation. Everybody in the bar was ready to get into each other's business.

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Go to a place off Esplanade called Hank's. Hank's is a black bar that's been there for years and the clientele are middle-aged. They're forty years and up and they play old Earth, Wind & Fire; they play Frankie Beverly and Maze; they played Marvin Gay; on Mondays they have fried catfish platters. Buy two drinks and get catfish free. It's one of those bars—and you won't see these very often anymore—one of those bars where you can go in and your beer comes in a bucket of ice that's sat in front of you, and behind the bar they have pints and half-pints of liquor. You can actually buy packaged liquor and drink it in the bar. And they give you setups for it. You don't find that, but years ago they had that in places. Years ago when they had the colored entrance or the colored window outside of bars, they served and sold packaged liquor. And Hank's is one of those last places left.

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SR: It's very civilized.

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PL: But you don't find that unless you follow your nose. We were walking down to see—one Mardi Gras we were walking down to see why Mother-in-Law Lounge wasn't open again, and took a turn into the hood, and there was Hank's on the corner. And we just knew something was going on behind that door. And we walked in there and it was like, "How you doing? How you

doing?” And you know people just go in there, and in that type of a social situation the people are colorblind. And that’s what I like about New Orleans. When you find that social circumstance that makes people colorblind, because we live in such—we have an ethnic diversity here that borders on isolation.

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When I first got here it was known that white kids didn't walk in the black neighborhoods. And over the years I’ve come to realize that white people and black people lead two different lives here. The Asians down here, they lead a completely different life and will never know what black people do because they’re not talking. They come down into white land, they make money and they go back home. And the days before the storm it was true, and I found out from a woman that I worked with at the Embers on Bourbon who had been a cook there for many years: one woman in the neighborhood would grow greens, one woman would grow tomatoes, one would grow okra, and they could trade. They would trade off. And then the vegetable man would come by, and the vegetable man, if you had any extra you could sell to the vegetable man—the guy in the truck that now is called the Okra Man, and he’s just hot shit because he’s caught the attention of some white person that’s bought him a new truck.

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But when I got here in the ‘60s there were still unpaved streets, there were still people that their mode of transportation was a donkey and a cart. That’s the way they were kept off the main streets. But the thing about New Orleans today is that you can go down and “see our recovery.” It’s been seven years. “See our recovery.” On Esplanade, on St. Claude. “See our recovery.” You walk two blocks off those streets and see the destruction still there and see how poor people are, and I see how buildings are still boarded up and see that—. When you get off

Esplanade, you go two blocks to the left and all of the sudden only half of the houses are occupied; two more blocks and no houses are occupied. They're still boarded up. It's almost like we're supposed to grow from our main thoroughfares out. In seven years that's not happening. It's still not happening. There's still unemployment going between nineteen and twenty-five percent in young people between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five. We have higher unemployment there. We have people that just sit out on stoops. They're very picturesque. They play dominoes. They're out of work; they work the system.

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But they know where and how to eat. One of the big detriments to the culture here is the fast-food movement. Slow food movement is not going to make a hit here I don't think because people here that have cooked in New Orleans for a while, they know that we've been cooking slow food all these years. There should be an anti-fast food, not a pro-slow food. You know, let's march outside of McDonald's and Burger King.

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SR: Do you feel like—I know after the storm [Hurricane Katrina] it was the fast-food places that were slowest to come back in a lot of areas. Do you think that—? So I felt like for a while we had a lot less fast-food places than other cities, but you don't think that's the case now?

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PL: Well by the same token, when—there was a lot of public feeding going on when we first got back. A lot of people had outside kitchens where they—because there were a lot of places

that—when we got back in October, the Marigny still didn't have electricity. The Bywater had no electricity and people had set up outside camps to feed each other.

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What didn't come back and has still not come back is the Robert's on St. Claude, the place where the Schwegmann's was on Broad Street, the Winn Dixie that was across by the Iberville Projects. The big grocery stores hauled ass. They just uprooted and pulled out. Now they're moving back in, but they're not moving back into the same places. Circle Food Store never came back. That big, rambling, everything-under-one-roof place that people from St. Bernard would just flock to—gone. It's empty. St. Roch Market had met its demise way before Katrina. St. Roch Market was the first place that I came back after—in 1999 when I came back and took the shop on Rampart Street, I walked up to St. Roch because I remembered St. Roch as being a seafood market, as being a big seafood market with people yelling and screaming and stuff on ice and turtles in boxes. And when I went back up there it was a huge convenience store. But what I noticed on the placard outside was they had still the same old names up there that were just painted on, and one of them was “ya-ka-mein.” And I had seen the sign before when I lived here in the '60s and '70s. Up on St. Bernard Avenue there would be a sign outside of the place that said “ya-ka-mein.” And I thought, “What the hell is ya-ka-mein? It must be some kind of thing that they eat here, ya-ka-mein.”

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Well I never did investigate it, but when I went back up after being away for twenty-five years, I walked back up and I walked back in. Completely different. Like I said, it was mainly a used convenience store. And I said, “Where can I get ya-ka-mein?” And they said, “Well we don't make ya-ka-mein anymore.” And one of the things that had turned me on to that was that I

was in Circle Food Store behind a woman who was checking out and she had spaghetti. And she was in a deep conversation with the woman behind the cash register who was telling her that angel hair worked better in ya-ka-mein than spaghetti did. And the other woman swore that spaghetti was the only thing her kids would eat when she made ya-ka-mein.

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And they started talking about ya-ka-mein, so it led me to like—it piqued my interest again. And when I couldn't find ya-ka-mein I started asking about it. I would go uptown and go into a store and say you know, "Is there any place around here that serves ya-ka-mein?" And by and large, if it was a white store people wouldn't know what I was talking about. And then a customer would say, "I think they have some over there." And so I went on a ya-ka-mein hunt, because just like I know that there's great gumbo on Broad and Banks, if I walk past a place or drive past a place or on a bus past a place and I see a sign out that says "gumbo" that I haven't eaten their gumbo, I want to find out what their gumbo is like. Because I've eaten gumbo all over town and the next time I find a place that I haven't eaten gumbo I'm going to try their gumbo because, to me, just like in a Thai restaurant, where you walk into a Thai restaurant that you've never been in before, the first thing you do when you order safely, you order pad Thai. If they make a good pad Thai, you can come back and explore. If they don't make a good pad Thai, you just cross it off your list.

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So for me the benchmark of any place that sells food is their gumbo. And if they have balls enough to put a sign outside that says "gumbo," they better have good gumbo.

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SR: Let me just interrupt you for a minute. So do you—does that extend to the fancier places, like you were talking about before—the fancier places tend to have really crappy gumbo?

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PL: I won't eat their gumbo.

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SR: No. You're talking about lower-end restaurants, corner stores—?

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PL: Uh-hm, yeah, uh-huh. And that soul food place up on Old Gentilly, they don't have gumbo. They don't make gumbo, and if they make gumbo it's probably a special once a week. There used to be a place—there used to be a grocery store up on Conti and Dauphine [streets] and once a week somebody would come in and make gumbo. This was before the storm. And the man would come in and make gumbo that day and you'd go in to get gumbo because that was the only day they had gumbo and you might find a chicken neck in your gumbo or a gizzard or a liver, and it's like you don't care what's in your gumbo. Anything can be in your gumbo. Gumbo is not about ingredients. Gumbo is about taste. I've had squirrel gumbo in Amite. I didn't much care for it because it was a little too thin for me, but you know gumbo is gumbo. You got to try it.

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SR: What about your place in Gentilly? Do they serve ya-ka-mein?

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PL: No. The catch word on ya-ka-mein, I found out through my travels, is you have to find a place that outside on the placards they'll say, "po-boys, plate lunches, Chinese food." By Chinese food they mean that they've probably got some frozen egg rolls that they serve, and they've got ya-ka-mein. And so when I would travel and I would see the sign outside of a grocery store that said "Chinese food," I would have their ya-ka-mein. Because that's the catch word, because people have stopped putting "ya-ka-mein" outside as an advertisement because ya-ka-mein is sinking in the quicksand of the foods that are coming to town now—the people that are trying to bring us to where California was twenty years ago.

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And so after the storm a lot of things dispersed, including neighborhood grocery stores. Things like shoe repair shops, barbershops, laundromats are leaving, and the corner grocery store. I will give you ten dollars for every African American-owned grocery store you can find in the entire city, and still I don't think I would waste more than one hundred dollars.

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SR: Was that different before the storm?

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PL: I think so. And I think so because it was more neighborhood—. Like now one of the curses of our architectural culture is that we're being gentrified. And gentrification is a good thing intellectually. But spiritually it's not a good thing because the same people that were poor before

gentrification are still poor. Only somebody has bought the house next to them and complains when there's a second line outside of their door. Little People's Place up on Barracks [Street] right off Rampart [Street], a little place, second line stop. Every time there's a second line they stop at Little People's place. It was run by two women who were probably four feet tall. They still come around now and again, but when we talked to them about why they were closed, they said because the neighbors complained. And who were the neighbors? The neighbors weren't the black neighbors. You know that gentrification, the bane of that and the other side of the coin of gentrification, is that minorities, once they have made their mark and money move out of neighborhoods and they go to live in better neighborhoods, and the better neighborhoods are usually not the same ones that they left. And re-investing in those neighborhoods that are poor neighborhoods are the young upwardly mobile citizens that don't want to hear noise on a Saturday afternoon. And they don't want to hear the bar across the street having music at night, even though the bar has been there since before they were born. They just don't want to hear that ruckus.

00:40:05

It was in the paper Saturday in the *Inside Out* section: this young couple with a young son from Los Angeles found this wonderful home in Tremé that they've found all these architectural treasures in, like you know brick walkways and the driveway was made out of those big blocks that we use as ballast, and they have a swimming pool. Who has a swimming pool in New Orleans? Who dares have a swimming pool in New Orleans? I mean it's like—public swimming pools are what makes it in New Orleans and a poor person can't have a swimming pool.

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In the same paper they had, “The Patio Planters are having”—“Go visit seven beautiful courtyards in the French Quarter, sixty-five dollars a person.” You think there’s going to be any black people at that Patio Planters? You think black people shop at our farmers markets here? They don’t. Black people do other things. They eat other things. They have other ways to make money, and they are as foreign to us as they may be a rainforest Indian.

00:41:30

SR: Well right, when it comes to things like ya-ka-mein, but black and white people eat red beans on Mondays, right?

00:41:41

PL: Uh-hm.

00:41:43

SR: And eat gumbo?

00:41:43

PL: Uh-hm.

00:41:44

SR: It’s not the same red beans and not the same gumbo.

00:41:46

PL: Not the same gumbo. In Buster Holmes' cookbook, when he made his—Buster Holmes' restaurant is on the corner of Orleans and Burgundy [streets]. It was open about 1945 by this big black man named Buster Holmes. At that time that area of the French Quarter was black. When I got here in 1967 white people didn't cross Bourbon Street because once you hit Dauphine [Street] you were in the black area of the French Quarter. Now there may be three black families in the French Quarter, but then it was known as a musicians' hangout and Buster would cater to musicians who were at that time as poor as they are now I'm sure, but everybody from Louis Armstrong to Paul McCartney, when they would come to town they would go to Buster's for red beans. And red beans were cheap.

00:42:46

In 1967 when I got here, a plate of red beans and rice with French bread and margarine was twenty-seven cents. And even I could make that amount of money. I hitchhiked in in 1967 and I sold underground newspapers on the Bourbon Street to drunk tourists to make enough money to get started. At that time it was called *The Nola Express*. You bought seven papers for one dollar and you sold them for thirty-five cents each. That I'm so used to because I was raised in New York in the '40s and '50s and I sold newspapers in bars when I was twelve. And I was the old kid on the block, so selling newspapers was cool. And hitchhiking into town with no money, you could go up to 1212 Royal Street where the—the last name was Head; they'd put out this newspaper and if you didn't have money they would front you the first seven papers. And you'd go down and you would sell your seven papers. You'd bring back the one dollar you owed and you would give them another dollar for the next seven papers. And you did that for hours on Bourbon Street selling *The Nola Express*. But then when you were hungry you spent twenty-seven cents over at Buster's and you were full. And Buster's rocked. They had a jukebox there

and a piano and a bar and—but after dark that was off-limits. You had to go to Buster's in the daytime because after dark nobody crossed that street. We all came down more toward Decatur Street because Decatur Street was opening up with coffee houses and folk music. And that area, the businesses would close down, which was mostly produce and seafood, and then little other businesses would crop up.

00:44:36

That whole stretch where The Abbey is now was nothing. There was nothing down there. It was the slum down there. The restaurant that I had in 1968 that became a communal restaurant—we moved down to Barracks Street. We had a four-story warehouse that cost us five hundred dollars a month, a four-story warehouse off Decatur on Barracks, and down there there was hardly anything going on. Hardly anything.

00:45:05

SR: What is a communal restaurant?

00:45:08

PL: Well I opened the restaurant with—I came to work down here with my New York attitude and my New York pace. And I got the job waiting on tables. I was broke. I got the job and within six months I had enough money—made enough money at the restaurant that me and another waiter came up with an idea that what the French Quarter needed was they needed a breakfast restaurant that opened at midnight and closed at eight o'clock in the morning. And so he and I opened a restaurant on the corner of Exchange Alley and Conti Street and we called it La Phire

after my name, his name, and my wife's name. My wife's name was Laura, my name Philippe, and his name Renee.

00:45:57

SR: So how did you spell that?

PL: L-a, and the second word P-h-i-r-e. And we had our differences and so I decided to sell my share to him and I went back out into the field and took a job tending bar at a Mexican joint right across from Chris Owens [nightclub]. And I got my own place and I went back about two months later and found the restaurant in shambles. And I had come back to get the money that was owed me. Well truth in fact was if you opened a restaurant in those days between midnight and eight o'clock in the morning you get street hustlers, you get speed freaks, and you get that other element that was around here in those days: you got hippies. And I was not in none of those categories but found the place overrun. And my partner who had discovered the hippie movement also discovered hallucinogens. So the only thing he would cook would be scrambled eggs because it was the only thing he could see in his condition. No matter what anybody ordered, he would make them scrambled eggs. And you know he had a little loft above the restaurant that was no bigger than a studio apartment. And I got there and there were eight people living there, hanging out smoking weed, having a great old time, eating the food from the restaurant, eating my inventory [*Emphasis Added*]. And so I decided if I was going to get my money at all I was going to have to step back inside the restaurant and clean house.

00:47:36

And the first thing I had to do was I had to tell everybody that was living there and eating the food that if they didn't work they didn't eat—simple. That got rid of about two-thirds of them. The other third that stayed got behind the idea of working in a restaurant and having something that they could do and live, and the upshot of that was about six months later, we had enough money to buy out my partner. And what I did was I turned to them and said, “The restaurant is yours. Your restaurant now. It’s our restaurant. We’re working together; we’ll own it together. Whatever we have here, it will be ours together.”

00:48:19

We moved into an old mansion off Jackson Avenue on Chippewa Street. By that time there was between twelve and twenty of us. The landlord on Conti Street had another building down on Barracks that he wanted us to move into. So we moved from our mansion, which was demolition by neglect, and moved into this four-story warehouse. We had a theater on the first floor, the restaurant on the second floor, and we lived on the third and fourth floor, and kept that place going for about three years until the fire. **[Laughs]** And we did outside jobs; we did construction work to keep it going. We changed the menu whenever we felt like it. One week we’d be an Italian restaurant. One week we’d be another kind of restaurant. I’d go down to the—some of us took jobs sweeping the streets of New Orleans. We were like renter hippies. We worked with French Market Corporation, and my job was starting at eleven at night I would sweep from the French Market to Jackson Square and back. And that’s when everything past Café Du Monde was seafood markets. And there was another big coffee stand place like Café Du Monde called the Morning Call. Morning Call was one of my first tastes of where white people would go into the front of the Morning Call and then they had a little diner in the back of the Morning Call, which was for black people. In that area it was the first place I got my first

muffaletta, next to the icehouse that used to be on Decatur Street. There used to be a big icehouse there. They've moved somewhere up Tchoupitoulas [Street] now.

00:50:06

And so I got here in the '60s when rent was cheap, when old families that were here had actually built their own houses in the French Quarter that was then being coming overrun with young people with high ideals like overthrowing government. And the communal restaurant, we actually had a place that did pay its rent through one way or another for about three years that was owned and operated by the people that worked there. And there's not been one since. There hasn't.

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SR: Did it continue to be called La Phire?

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PL: Yeah.

00:50:52

SR: What about the fire?

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PL: Hmm? Well we found out later, years later, that our landlord was indicted for taking out insurance on buildings that he owned and then setting fire to them. Well we always did things at the restaurant by unanimous decision. So we would have these things called family meetings. We

also had family meals. You know we'd stand around and hold hands and, "Ohm." And family meetings we would sit down and we would discuss things and make—it was decided early on that we would not make any decisions that weren't unanimous. It would not be a majority ruling in the family. And we called ourselves a family.

00:51:36

And indeed what I found in New Orleans was I have met more people in my family that I never knew before than the people that I was raised with. I was raised with strangers in New York. Down here I've found family. Down here I've found a happy childhood. New York in those days didn't have childhoods. They were outlawed. They were against the law to have a childhood up there.

00:51:58

Down here it was kind of like expected that you be a child. Well we would do everything by unanimous decision and after three years one day we were having this big meeting to discuss what we were going to do with our first twenty-seven dollars profit. It was the first time we had made a profit. I mean we spent money but we never made a profit. One of the greatest times we had was on Chippewa Street where we closed for Thanksgiving on Conti to go home and have Thanksgiving dinner and we didn't make it back until Monday. It was a beggar's banquet, and we stayed in that house and we just had the best Thanksgiving I've ever had.

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But we were discussing this twenty-seven dollars—getting back to that—and all of the sudden somebody said, [*Sniffs*] "I smell smoke." Well the building was so old that once the fire broke loose it spread and there was just no saving anything. We made it out the door, stood across the street while the building burned down in twenty minutes. And nobody knew why.

Nobody knew where the fire came from. Fingers pointed, like, “Did you leave something on? Did I leave something on?” We were just out on the street [saying], “Uh-hm?”

00:53:22

SR: Well that’s a communal restaurant. [*Laughs*]

00:53:26

PL: The end of the communal restaurant as we knew it.

00:53:30

SR: You’re such a good storyteller that I’m having a hard time asking you—wanting to ask you questions. But I think I should probably go back to ya-ka-mein, even though I have a lot of questions about this place, too. But do you remember—so you went to St. Roch Market to look for ya-ka-mein, and after you heard this conversation at Circle Foods. Do you remember where the first place was that you found it?

00:53:51

PL: On St. Claude [Avenue], because I remember that I was walking back and there was a corner market and I figured, well, if I couldn’t get ya-ka-mein I was just going to keep asking until people told me. And I saw the corner market and I walked in—and probably three blocks past Esplanade going down toward the Ninth Ward, on the corner. I walked in and asked if they had ya-ka-mein and they said, “You want a half-order or a whole order?” Asian. I said a half-order because I didn’t want to get in too deep. And they gave me—it must have been at least a

pint, maybe even larger than that, and when I opened it up [*Sniffs*] and I smelled it, it was definitely Asian and it was definitely lots of green onions on it. And it was brothy and it had dried shrimp that had been reconstituted. Even in those days you would find grocery stores and somewhere in the grocery store there would be little packages of dried shrimp because people used to eat those like candy. Not white people of course, but you know Asian people would and even black people would you know think nothing of little sauce and shrimp—nice, like peanuts. The dried shrimp, once you put them in a soup, they'd naturally rehydrate, but you know that they're not a real shrimp.

00:55:24

And then as I got into the noodles, and they were not spaghetti. It wasn't angel hair. It was more like a ramen and I thought, "Why the hell am I eating this?" And I came across a half a hardboiled egg. And I thought, "I suppose when I get a full order there's going to be a whole hardboiled egg." And then as I was eating it I thought, "You know, this ain't too bad. This ain't too bad at all." And it's cheap. It was like three dollars for this pint and definitely I was full.

00:56:04

I did go back because the shop was on Rampart and Governor Nicholls, and so it was — for me it was just a walk. At that time I didn't even have—I had rented another warehouse space for the bookshop, and I had to put in my own kitchen and my own bathroom and my own—I had to do that myself. In the meantime, I was eating out and it was better than going to Circle K for a hotdog. And I got a full order, and sure enough it was like in a thirty-two-ounce Styrofoam container and there was a whole hardboiled egg. And I just couldn't believe it, and I couldn't figure out why. I mean I can grasp noodle soup. Noodle soup was fine, and if they want to put you know soy sauce or whatever that dark stuff is, which I found out later on was Maggi

Seasoning—that stuff that we used to put into our onion soup at Houlihan’s. We’d put Maggi Seasoning instead of making a stock for it. And so I decided, “Well, if I’m going to find out what this is all about I’m going to have ya-ka-mein wherever I can find it.”

00:57:20

So I started my ya-ka-mein hunt. I went to different places. Monica’s up on Magazine [Street], which is no longer there. The last time that I was at Monica’s was probably a year ago and I went in and I said to the guy, “Promise me you’ll never move. Promise me I can always come here.” And he said, “We’re here forever.” Well, six months later the place was boarded up and, “Coming Soon: Thai Restaurant.” Well Thai restaurants are good, and I like Thai restaurants. I don’t believe that there’s a Thai community here so not going to trust anybody that makes Thai food unless they assault me with flavor. That’s what I need to be—I need to have food that I can love or hate. I can’t have food that is just one way or another. It’s like love. You know, it’s like a relationship.

00:58:10

But that’s gone and so I just went and I got hip to wherever it said “Chinese food,” they’re going to have ya-ka-mein.

00:58:19

SR: What kind did—so there are different versions of ya-ka-mein. What kind did they have at Monica’s?

00:58:24

PL: At Monica's it was less salty, there was more broth. And they had like they do in some of the Asian restaurants, they had those dehydrated shallots on top as well, so there was a little crunch to it. The same hardboiled egg.

00:58:50

SR: Was it also seafood?

00:58:51

PL: They had it different ways. You could have it with meat. You could have it with seafood. Or, you could have combo. And there again was the cashier behind bulletproof glass who would take the order and then somebody in the kitchen would make it, and the person would wait around in this stark room. All they had in that room was like a couple of coolers of soft drinks. It was like an empty room. It felt like an employment hall. I tried the one on Louisiana Avenue, and they had a great hit of garlic in theirs.

00:59:28

SR: Where was that on Louisiana?

00:59:30

PL: It was Louisiana off St. Charles [Avenue]. It was called like Mom's or Mama's or Mother's or something like that. But there again, whenever I would pass a place and it would say "Chinese food," I'd go in and see about ya-ka-mein. I tried it probably in—a dozen would be too many; half a dozen would be too little—probably eight or nine places in the city until I realized what

the philosophy behind ya-ka-mein was. And then being in the bookshop business, I was going through a leaflet from La Choy Foods and came across a recipe, and it was a recipe from the '40s, which still fit in with the soldiers-coming-back-and-wanting-noodle-soup-theory. And it had a recipe for ya-ka-mein and it had hardboiled egg in it.

01:00:30

Now I really don't know why many people would make ya-ka-mein at home because I think intrinsically it's got to have that hardboiled egg. And why a person at home would boil eggs to put in soup, I don't know. I haven't gotten that far. I mean is that myth of the black housewife coming home to make dinner for their children and making them a big pot of ya-ka-mein and boiling eggs? I don't see it's in congress. It doesn't work for me that the same woman that wants to make a quick meal of a broth and—she's not going to make stock, first of all. No families I know, black or white—I'm sure some do—have stock in their kitchen ready to roll. We just don't do that unless you're so far an addicted foodie that you're going to have it in ice cubes trays for whenever you need to use it. So trying to find out what they use—

01:01:32

There was one place that I had it that seemed to be that they would cook everything in water and then add soy sauce, and that was too much. It just got to be this salty broth. So it's a subjective experience eating ya-ka-mein, but it's worth trying to find who makes a better ya-ka-mein if you can find it anymore.

01:01:56

SR: Before we get there, have you landed on a definition of—could you define ya-ka-mein in a couple sentences, New Orleans ya-ka-mein?

01:02:08

PL: I think it runs along—the New Orleans ya-ka-mein is different than other ya-ka-mein.

Because you can go to Chinese restaurants here and they'll have ya-ka-mein on the menu but all it will be is like a vegetable soup with noodles in it. It's not ya-ka-mein. I don't know why they call it ya-ka-mein or why what we make here is called ya-ka-mein because it's simply just a different thing.

01:02:34

It's a noodle soup with animal flavorings, but essential to it is a handful of green onions. You've got to have green onions. For some reason, just like when Poppy Tooker makes *étouffée*, she's got to put green onions on it. I don't know why. But you don't ask why; you just make sure that it has green onions because if you don't have green onions it's not ya-ka-mein. And if you don't have the hardboiled egg it's not ya-ka-mein that I'll call ya-ka-mein. It's going to be a noodle soup. There is in every dish made by somebody that puts their reputation behind their dish a certain ingredient that there's no explanation for. Why do you want to put green onions on it when everything else is not fresh? In Chinese restaurants you'll find fresh vegetable soup that they'll call ya-ka-mein. Not ya-ka-mein. In places that serve the New Orleans ya-ka-mein, nothing is fresh. And if they don't have enough business you'll have to wait for them to cook the noodles. That's the freshest you'll get. They'll just put it together and you'll never see them put it together and so you don't know what they do. You have to guess what they do and you have to have faith in whatever comes out in that brown liquid is going to taste good because there's no set taste for ya-ka-mein except brown. It's got to taste brown and salty and it's got to have a handful of green onions. And then when you delve into it and you reach all of the noodles—now

some people put the hardboiled egg on top. Some people put the hardboiled egg in the bottom, because then if you put the hardboiled egg in the bottom then you pour the soup on top of it and by the time you get to the hardboiled egg, the hardboiled egg is hot. So you keep the hardboiled egg someplace cool and then you put it in the container—this is what I came up with mentally—put it into the container, and by the time you get to the hardboiled egg the hardboiled egg is going to be warm or at least hot, and then you can eat it. But it's got to taste brown.

01:05:00

SR: So even the most Asian versions you've had, New Orleans-style ya-ka-mein—I don't mean the Chinese restaurant version but the New Orleans style, the really Asian flavor, there's still brown in the broth?

01:05:11

PL: Uh-hm, yeah.

01:05:13

SR: Where is/was your favorite version?

01:05:20

PL: The one that had the garlic on Louisiana Avenue.

01:05:22

SR: I think that was called Mama's Tasty Foods.

01:05:26

PL: Yeah, uh-huh, that's gone. They never came back from the storm. One of the first places I went back to after the storm was to re-root myself in New Orleans going back to get things that I've eaten before—filled me up. When I came back in '99 I went over to Johnny's Po' Boys and thought, "God, where is their bread? It used to be such good bread." So after the storm, again I would go back to places and find what I've eaten before and where I've eaten before, things that I've shopped before, trying to reacquaint myself to the tremendous disaster that occurred here. And one of the first places I went back to, I went looking for Mama's, because that was *the* best ya-ka-mein that I had. And I don't know why but there was—like when I opened up the container, garlic just came right up into my nose, and I was like, "This is what it's about. This is what it needs in those other places. It needs the depth that that root can give it." It needs roots and it needs the root, the garlic root, in there. And they were gone. I was like, "Oh."

01:06:44

And I went to another place, a corner place on Magazine, that was like—it almost looked like a converted Tastee Freez, and they had a sign up: "Chinese food." And so a friend of mine was in town and I went up there and I said, "I got to have the ya-ka-mein. Let me go over and see if they have it." They had ya-ka-mein and there was no body to it. And being a thin broth does not mean that it doesn't have body to it, but it was just like not there. And you know when you eat the same description of food in different places, some will have it there and some will just not be there, like going to—.

01:07:29

I worked at Muriel's as a waiter for a few years before I was teaching. And they made gumbo. And in the years that I worked there I tasted the gumbo once. Customers, tourists, visitors, clientele would come in; they loved the gumbo. When I tasted the gumbo, the gumbo wasn't there. It just wasn't there. And when I would go up into the kitchen to do whatever I was doing, I would see a cook that didn't like his job, standing over a pot, stirring a pot of gumbo, making it in twenty-gallon batches. The roux was in a big sauté—what they call them—on the floor underneath the stove. They'd make that in the oven and I knew that wasn't gumbo. You can call it gumbo, but it wasn't there. It wasn't there. It didn't have any love behind it. If you don't find pride and love in your food when the cook is making it, it's not going to have pride and love when it comes out. It's not going to be there.

01:08:49

SR: So even a dish as sort of simple as ya-ka-mein needs to have that element?

01:08:54

PL: Yes, because even like in art you can have the pre-Raphael artists that do everything in minute detail, and you can have form and passion and feeling coming to you. Or you can have Jackson Pollock that just took paint and slung and there was something there. Going into a kitchen and watching professional cooks, professional cooks that get in their zone, that get in their groove, it's like watching dancers, it's like watching people working together almost as a choreography that when words are spoken no words are used indiscriminately. Words are used as fire, like being shot from guns. I need this. I need that. I need that. I need that. Answers here, answers there, the banging of pots, and you know that certain people—there's a certain cook that

is built like a broiler cook. He just is, because that man is playing bass and he's there and he's got things going and he doesn't move. He's like a rock. And then you have the sauté cook who is like a spider monkey. And his arms and legs are everywhere. He's throwing pans around. And they're all working at different paces but they're all like a band, like an orchestra that is just pulling together to make this one thing happen. And once that locomotive starts rolling you're just like—you just got to stand back and wonder how these people do this.

01:10:28

And working in kitchens for so many years, I know that zone. You know that beforehand when it's slow it's just like, "Why am I here? Why am I doing this?" Afterwards it's like, "Shew, I don't know why I still do this." But that in the middle of it when that adrenaline hits, when that 7 o'clock ticket hits the line and is followed by the 7:05 ticket and the 7:10 ticket, and then it's the 7:11 ticket and the 7:12 ticket, all the way until 8:30, quarter to nine, when you're doing ticket after ticket and the wheel man—the expeditors on the other side, we call them wheel men because tickets used to come in so fast they would have a wheel and the tickets would be on a wheel and they would spin that wheel and ask about food—the wheel man would be like an announcer at a horse auction. You know, "I need this now," and, "I need this now," and, "I need this now. Give me that burger, give me that soup. Give me that—is that salad up yet?" And it's like the people behind the line are just, they're trying to outsmart him. And once you're in that zone the adrenaline hits you and there's no finer occupation in life because it's not a hundred-meter dash and it's not a marathon. This is like a horse race. This is like a field of horses going down the track and they're going down the track and it's like chug-a-chug-a-chug. And it's like what—my mentor, when I worked with him in Denver, I worked at a country club for him, he would only allow a record player in the kitchen for music. He didn't want no radios. And the

only music he allowed was either Beethoven’s music or the Rolling Stones. We had a dishwasher that came to work in silk pajamas. We had one cook whose name was Mom because he was responsible for getting us all home in one piece. And we had a beer tap in the walk-in of Pabst Blue Ribbon. And we’d work from nine o’clock in the morning until ten o’clock at night seven days a week. And that was our job. He had more knowledge—this man had more knowledge in him than I have ever seen in any living human being that worked in a kitchen.

01:12:54

He would throw off information. He would throw off information. He’d smoke pot in the kitchen. He’d urinate in the garbage cans. He was just like—he was awful. You couldn’t go out with him in public because he would challenge whole bars to fights.

01:13:08

One day we were doing—we had boned Cornish hens for 200 people all week long. And we were stuffing them with wild rice. And he had made a bigarade sauce that he was so proud of because he had clarified the stock and it had come to that little volcano that stocks do when you clarify them. We’re doing this party of 200 and he’s passed the word that as soon as the food goes out, then we could start getting drunk again. Because the rule was you could drink as much as you wanted to; the first person that got drunk is fired. So we learned to pace ourselves. He jumps up on this prep table and he puts on Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to start the meal. And the symphony starts and it goes, “Da-da-da-da.” And he throws out his arm toward the salad station and says, “Fire the salads.” And I melted. And I thought, “I have got to be a chef for the rest of my life.” “Da-da-da-da, fire the hens.” And it was, “Holy shit.”

01:14:21

He led the kitchen like it was an orchestra, and he was up on a prep table in his glory. And this is a chef that at the time probably topped 200 pounds and was at least six-foot-four, and he was mad as hatter. He was just crazy. But his life was food. And he had learned from another chef that he called his mentor and worshiped. And once I saw this man, John Bourg, do this in a kitchen, I understood what it was all about—the cooking; that it didn't matter what you were doing. It mattered the rhythm and the harmony and the beauty of the food that you were creating. And that happens with neck bones and cabbage, and that happens in places that take their time. But it only happens when the chef is in the kitchen. It doesn't happen when the chef is at one of the other locations or doing a television show. It happens when you have the resident maniac on premises, and once you have that—because every cook in the kitchen follows the lead of the person in charge. If you have a person who is an off-the-wall maniac, cursing and yelling and intimidating the staff, you'll find the staff doing that to each other. And when they can't do it to each other and it reaches then bottom totem pole, they'll do it to the wait staff. They'll do it to the dishwashers.

01:15:55

You find a chef that is self-contained and calm and secure in their image of themselves, they don't have to scream. They just have to put their finger out like Beethoven's Fifth and say, "Fire the salads." And you know that's the signal for those people behind the salad station that have got 200 chilled salad plates—and that those salads are not premade—to keep those waiters as busy [*Finger Snaps*] as they can possibly be picking up those salads. Not fast enough, not fast enough. Get these salads out of here because next comes the appetizers. And when they fire the appetizer, those waiters better be back. And it's like the whole kitchen has a camaraderie like a street gang. It's almost like, "Don't fuck with us." And that you find, and you find it in any place

that has a chef with any ego about his food and not himself. “I make the best gumbo. I make the best ya-ka-mein.”

01:17:01

By and large a number—like at Mama’s, the person that made the ya-ka-mein watched me when I opened it, because I opened it before I even got out because I didn’t even know if there was going—I wanted to make sure that there was going to be an egg in there. The person who made it came over and watched me. And they watched me smell it, and I looked over and I just smiled and nodded. And it was like, “This guy knows.” And I smelled that garlic and I knew that this guy was proud of what he did, proud of this thing, whatever it is. *[Laughs]* And the next time I see ya-ka-mein on the menu I’m going to make sure that there’s black people in the kitchen and I’m going to order it because I need to know if they make a better ya-ka-mein.

01:17:57

SR: Do you have like—well, I have two questions. Number one: Do you have a current favorite? And number two: What is it that makes you start wanting it? Is it a craving of flavor? Is it a craving of—I know there’s a story that people eat this when they’re hungover. Or is it something else?

01:18:18

PL: I’m not sure. There’s hangover food in a lot of places and they all usually have to do with a broth and with salt. You know when you drink you lose nutrition and you lose—you probably sweat a lot as well. I’ve smelled some really sweaty drunks in my time that. I think it’s just that. Plus, the heat, the hotness of the temperature, settles down. And the carbohydrates of the

noodles. But you find that in udon, you know—. [*Interruption*] And you find that in—like I can make udon at home and use miso, and the feeling starts to come back because the miso is something that is a product of time as well.

01:19:16

But it doesn't—unless I put the green onions on it, you know I'm not going to do anything but miss ya-ka-mein.

01:19:25

SR: So do you crave it if you're hungover, or do you crave it just when you're trying to connect with place? Or when do you crave it?

01:19:33

PL: Um, I crave it intellectually. I'm cursed with the kind of metabolism that doesn't get hangovers. And so as much as I used to drink, if I ever felt that kind of withdrawal from alcohol—because it's a poison—I would just have beer for breakfast, which a lot of people in this town do. They don't have hangovers because they're on their work in the morning and they've got their breakfast in a bag that they've stopped in a convenience store to get. You can't have a hangover if you still are drinking, and you find like when I worked down at other places that are fast alcohol places, you'll find people come in from their jobs to get a drink. You'll find people that work on the river—.

01:20:35

SR: Should I pause so you can get that?

01:20:39

PL: No. You find people that work on the river at different places; they're coming in for a drink. You'll find waiters coming in for a quick shot of Hennessy, or a shop girl on her break having a half a carafe of rosé wine, and it's just like here it's not encouraged so much as it's just expected that people drink. People that get hangovers are people that stop drinking.

01:21:09

SR: That's the problem.

01:21:10

PL: People that don't get hangovers are people that either keep drinking or they know when to stop drinking in the evening.

01:21:18

SR: What about, would you say you've come across a ya-ka-mein recipe in a book?

01:21:25

PL: You know I've got a cookbook store and I've got forty Chinese cookbooks over there and I haven't found it in any cookbook. Now I've learned that it's a Cantonese dish, but by and large the Cantonese didn't write cookbooks, I don't think. There are Chinese cookbooks and I've looked through them all and I've looked through the Chinese regional cookbooks trying to find a

region. No, they go from yams to Yangtze, but never ya-ka-mein. The only place I've found it is in the La Choy, and the last one I found was dated back to 1927.

01:22:05

SR: I think that's the one you sent me? I brought it. Yeah, it's right here.

01:22:08

PL: Yeah, from 1927, and look at that picture of that wonderful—the woman with the Chinese ghost behind her in the kitchen.

01:22:18

SR: Right, it's a Caucasian woman with a Chinese ghost.

01:22:19

PL: Uh-hm.

01:22:23

SR: So why do you think it's Cantonese?

01:22:27

PL: Well to be honest, Wikipedia says it's Cantonese in origin, but then it also explains that it's a dish that is more New Orleans-based and not found in other cities except Philadelphia and Baltimore, where supposedly they make it with ketchup and brown gravy. But the La Choy is—

they mention the ya-ka-mein here and they talk about the use of a hardboiled egg here, but they don't talk about that coming from Philadelphia or—. It's when you boil five ounces of fine noodles or vermicelli, rich chicken, beef, or other broth for four minutes; divide the noodles and the broth into serving bowls, garnish with halves of hardboiled eggs, slices of cold roast pork or chicken, sprinkle with chopped parsley or green onions, serve La Choy soy sauce.

Straightforward, huh?

01:23:34

SR: Sounds pretty accurate. [*Laughs*]

01:23:36

PL: That's before the Depression, 1927. [*Laughs*]

01:23:42

SR: How do you garnish yours? Do you?

01:23:45

PL: Green onions.

01:23:47

SR: Soy sauce?

01:23:48

PL: Only if I can get the good soy sauce. La Choy makes a soy sauce that's basically just water and salt and caramel coloring. But if you get some of the ones that are made with fermented soybeans, I use that. It's going to be salty enough.

01:24:10

SR: But like when you would get it at Mama's, would you put anything on yours?

01:24:15

PL: No, no. And then I learned that later on people put hot sauce on it, but I like the taste of it as it is.

01:24:24

SR: What is your theory, if any, about how this became a New Orleans thing?

01:24:40

PL: I think that it possibly came with the Asian community here. And then somebody finding one of these pamphlets, because I think probably that if I'm intellectualizing deep enough that the Asians were probably of a higher class than the black people here at one time. Certainly the Asians owned a lot of the French Quarter. That probably they had black people working for them, and it probably came about that they started cooking those soups with noodles. It's certainly—it's not a chicken noodle soup. It's not a beef noodle soup. It's not anything to do with anything that Campbell's can possibly put together. It's got to be Asian. But I can't really

see a black housewife, or a white housewife for that matter, or even an Asian housewife, finding a recipe that includes half a hardboiled egg. It's a mystery. I mean, why?

01:25:57

It's got to be because you're combining breakfast and lunch together. You know maybe it's some kind of a poor Asian brunch dish, or maybe it's something they threw together like the Cobb salad—just you have these ingredients there. Let's put them together and eat them. But why anybody has a hardboiled egg sitting around is a mystery.

01:26:20

SR: Have you ever found a Louisiana or New Orleans cookbook with a recipe in it?

01:26:25

PL: No. I'm sure that it's not in the *Times-Picayune* [*Picayune Creole Cook Book*] or any of the—not even in the current rash of cookbooks that have come out, nobody touches on ya-ka-mein. Ya-ka-mein is like this redheaded stepchild in the cooking here. And it's going to disappear and people will talk about it years from now. And other people will think that they're just from another planet.

01:26:54

SR: It's going to disappear why?

01:26:55

PL: Because our mom and pop places are going out of business with our gentrification. Even the Asian corner grocery stores are closing down to make room for economically more viable—and those are places, I believe, that you'll find that when you have a mom and pop store that it's run at the landlord's whim, and when the landlord thinks he can make more money he's going to close you down or he's going to raise your rent.

01:27:32

SR: Is there any place that you know in the Quarter that has it?

01:27:36

PL: No, no. It's hard to find things in the Quarter that you even recognize, and certainly nothing Asian. I wouldn't go to an Asian restaurant. I'd look for the Asian grocery stores.

01:27:54

SR: Okay, well I'm going to let you—speaking of mom and pop businesses, I'm going to let you open yours back up. But I just want to go back and ask a couple follow-up questions about things that you mentioned earlier and I didn't want to interrupt you at the time. You said that you had two restaurants in New Orleans. Were they—did you have a restaurant besides—I forgot how you pronounced the last one?

01:28:16

PL: La Phire.

01:28:17

SR: La Phire.

01:28:19

PL: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, when I worked at Houlihan's I fell in love with a waitress who became my third wife and the mother of my youngest daughter. And at that time they didn't sanction romances between the chef and wait staff. Casual sex was another thing. You could have casual sex with anybody you wanted to at Houlihan's, but having a relationship was out of the question.

01:28:49

But we were one of those couples that decided that we wanted a relationship as well as casual sex. And one day we were walking down Frenchman Street, and at that time Frenchman Street was a ghost town. There was a bakery. A Swiss bakery was on there; there was a place that opened that shucked oysters; there was a shuttered bar called the Dream Castle; and there was an empty laundry and dry cleaning plant, which was probably 2,400 square feet. It still had old equipment in there and there was a "for rent" sign. And we came up with the idea that if we built a restaurant we could work and live and stay in love forever. I'm sure there's one of those elements that still works.

01:29:46

So for fourteen months we rented the place for \$200 a month, and we emptied it out, and with the help of one person that lived in the neighborhood, I learned to run electricity, I learned to run water, I learned to put in gas, I learned to put in ventilation. And we opened a place called Valentine's, which is now a place called Snug Harbor. And we left after three years after not

making any money because I didn't learn from my mentor how to make money. I only learned the joy of cooking. So I would do things like not put salt and pepper on the table and not even start to cook anybody's meal until they ordered it. I had nothing premade. And we didn't have a liquor license so we had gallons of wine with a donation jar, and it became a hangout. For I think it was three--four years, we were able to pay the rent, but we kept having to borrow money to renew the licenses. And so we pulled the plug on it and went—. I had gotten a job in New Mexico cooking on an Indian reservation. But Valentine's was runaway princesses and smugglers and dope dealers and street people and musicians and lovers. And there again, we lived on the mezzanine and before we knew it there was the other cook was living upstairs with us and the dishwasher was living upstairs. A couple of the waitresses found room upstairs. And—they never did own it though, [*Laughs*] but we all worked and lived together because that was just—. And it was a chore living in a construction zone. We lived in—the two of us and my daughter was almost born here—and lived in a construction zone for fourteen months and had outside jobs until we could—. We would go to the dump and we would dump off stuff that was left from the laundry and dry cleaning plant. But then we started finding things. I found a pizza oven. I found old stoves. I found things that I could put back together. We bought used refrigerators and we painted the kitchen garish colors with clouds on the ceiling and a sun on the wall. And we had a dishwasher named Mumbles because he had somehow got thrown out of a car when he was baby and he was never right in the head, but he would come around and he would wash dishes for ten dollars a night and he would mumble the whole time. He would just mumble. And he wore this weird toupee and he would take baths in the sink, and we just had—we'd have characters around us all the time.

01:32:42

You know an Irish band would move in for a season, and there would be Irish music. Naturally we had a stage. We had local musicians that were getting paid shit everywhere else so we could pay them the same amount of money. And we had local people come in and some of them that have gone on to do great things. Jimmy Robinson played there for a while. This woman that played there that was just—and it was just a wonderful place to be. But then it just got time to leave.

01:33:17

SR: How many wives have you had?

01:33:20

PL: I've had three verified wives, another woman that I lived with for nine years, and another woman that we were engaged and lived with for a few years. And then my relationship now is one of—Jesus, it's almost about twelve years now. And various other things that just follows me.

01:33:45

SR: How many children do you have?

01:33:49

PL: Three that I know of, and it's not egotistical. It's just that there were many, many times when there were—. There were a lot of times in my past before the AIDS epidemic—because I'm of a certain, a mature male of a certain age—that I was around and at the rodeo before AIDS, and so there was a time in our history when there was nothing that you could catch that couldn't

be cured with penicillin. And so it was like there was free love and there was free sex because it wasn't that big a deal. It was like rubbing somebody on the shoulders. It was just like a thing that you did. It was fun; it was wonderful; it was a communion, and it was okay that it was over because there were other things to do.

01:34:42

It was very promiscuous decades of my life. And it was wonderful because in the French Quarter when I got here it was like a candy store and the kids were in charge and rent was cheap, living was easy, and everybody was doing some kind of a drug. You know and they were not the hard drugs that we know now. I mean nobody wanted to do heroin or cocaine or crack or—that stuff was just weird. We were all into things that would expand ourselves and make us more together. There were concerts, free concerts, at the park where 1,000 young people would show up and it was free. Bands would play free and we'd have huge picnics and the city would get wind of wherever we were and try to change us, and they just petered out, because the adults couldn't stand the kids having fun. It's a fact of life.

01:35:45

SR: Are any of your children in the food business?

01:35:48

PL: My daughter I sent to pastry school and she decided that was too hard of work. My oldest daughter has a general store up in Florence, Alabama. My son I haven't seen for thirty-five years, so I don't know what he's doing. But you know that's just what we call risotto under the bridge—.

01:36:17

SR: A general store is kind of in the food business.

01:36:19

PL: Uh-hm, uh-hm.

01:36:20

SR: It's interesting to me that you consider this in the food business, Kitchen Witch.

01:36:23

PL: It is because I invariably—I need to talk about food to people that come in here, because with between 9,000 and 10,000 titles, a lot of people won't know what they're looking for. And then a lot of people that will pass by here and see that we're a cookbook store will come in looking for something other than Creole and Cajun. They will be looking for something in the baking department or something French or food literature, or a young cook wanting to know more about food.

01:36:57

I have a young cook that he just was in the other day. He needed to know about risotto. He didn't know anything about risotto, and I had to find a book for him so that he could learn risotto.

01:37:10

SR: So you said that you have about 9,000 to 10,000 titles. How many did you start with?

01:37:14

PL: Five thousand, but they were five thousand of my own. I had my own library because my mentor had his own library. And one job that I had when I was working in Mill Valley, California, is I had a ninety-seat restaurant. Started out as a sixty-seat and turned it into a ninety-seat restaurant. And when I got there it was one of those jobs where I didn't take a day off for a year and a half. The place was \$300,000 in debt, and they had only been opened six months.

01:37:44

And so they hired me as a consultant and the upshot was that I consulted them into a job, because everybody that they had working there was taking advantage of them. And I became the chef and I started doing specials other than their menu, and those turned into theme dinners. And so it wound up for eight years I would make a calendar every month. Every month I would have a different calendar and it went out to a mailing list of 5,000 people in this small town. On the first weekend I was doing soft-shell crabs. Second weekend I was doing Thai food. The third weekend I was doing Basque food. The fourth weekend I would do South American food. And that went on for eight years. I would do different things that, you know, I would come up with an idea that I wanted to do the food of Route 66 and do a whole month of from Chicago to Los Angeles food—food along the way.

01:38:40

I would do food stretching the barbeque trail from Chicago to New Orleans. I would do—every Thursday we would have Thanksgiving dinner. Every Sunday we'd have brisket. And I did that for nine years, and to do that I started amassing this collection of books. Because when I did

Thai food one weekend I would go out and I'd buy everything I could learn about Thai, and I would go eat at Thai restaurants and decide what I was going to cook. And if I was doing French food from the provinces, or if I was doing Spanish food or I was going to make paella; if I was—I learned to make Mexican food. If I was going to—anything. I would just do that. And so I had 5,000 cookbooks when I got back to town. And being a great inventory, I was able to open up a cookbook store.

01:39:29

SR: Was that painful for you to sell those books?

01:39:30

PL: It was at first until I was reminded by Debbie, my partner, that I'm in the business to sell them. And I was kind of reluctant to sell my cookbooks until I got the epiphany that when I sell a cookbook I can buy another one. So now the 5,000 cookbooks have turned into 10,000 cookbooks, and now I can buy cookbooks and I can discover new things about cooking and read them myself and just put them on the shelf.

01:40:03

SR: Do you still have a personal cookbook collection?

01:40:06

PL: No. I've got certain cookbooks that I keep at home, certain ones that—like I have the Escoffier that my mentor gave me that was not for sale. I have a couple of cookbooks that my

daughter gave me that are just not for sale. And by and large what I have instead of a cookbook is I have a kitchen and I have fifty years of experience. And in my kitchen I have every ingredient that I can get my hands on. So when I go into the kitchen my kitchen is my cookbook. And I do things, like today I'll go shopping and I'll find out what is in season and what is inexpensive. Like when tomatoes go down to one dollar a pound, which is almost unheard of, I'll buy twenty pounds of tomatoes and I'll make a big tomato stock and I'll put it in small containers in my freezer. And I'll make a spaghetti sauce or I'll—when corn is coming in I'll make a corn and tomato chowder.

01:41:00

But in my kitchen I have brown rice, white rice, arborio rice. I have bulgur and I have couscous and I have six different kinds of pasta, and I have barley and I have shelves and shelves of different spices and spice blends that I've put together. And I've got different flours and I—you know I may decide one day, like a week ago when I was out shopping, I decided Granny Smiths are really looking good. I want to make an apple pie. I want to make an apple pie. And so at eleven o'clock at night I'm in the kitchen and Debbie is in bed, everybody has gone to sleep, and I'm making apple pie because I want to make an apple pie. And so my kitchen is my cookbook now.

01:41:43

You know I've got udon noodles; I've got soba noodles. I've got spaghetti and linguine, and I've got penne pasta and I've got rotelle, and I've got rosemarina and I got orzo and I've got these things and when the whim hits me, that's what I do. And on Mondays after I go shopping, my kitchen is crammed with different foods that are in-season and inexpensive. And I'll cook that, and then the next—today when I'm going shopping, my refrigerator is empty. I've got to

start all the way over again. I make fruit smoothies every morning, so I've got to have—go today and I've got to find out what melons are looking good, find out who has got the best deal on strawberries, find out why blueberries aren't lowered in price because they're in season god-damnit. I need to find blueberries and they're just not—. But there are some big—they're not Crenshaw but they're another kind of melon that somebody has that I saw advertised that I want to get some of those today.

01:42:48

You know and I've fallen in love with the Mexican papayas now this season, the great big honkers that work really good. And every week I'll buy probably four pounds of ginger to just use in different things. I use it in—make a ginger salsa, make a watermelon salsa. Watermelons with jalapeno peppers make a great salsa. But for them I have black beans. I got to have black beans. I have pinto beans. I have butter beans. I have black-eyed peas. I've got chickpeas. They're all waiting. I've got northern, great northern beans. They're waiting for me. They're waiting in my kitchen.

01:43:27

And you know I've got thyme and basil and oregano, and I've got herbs growing in the backyard, and I've got like—I've got a mania for cooking. That has not diminished. But I'm not using cookbooks anymore. I've got miso and I've got soy sauce and I've got sesame oil and grape seed oil. And I've got—well, if raspberries or whatever come down in price, I'll make my own raspberry vinegar. I put things together and have them. I've got a blend of olive oil. I've got a straight extra-virgin olive oil and then I've got neutral oil for frying. But I've got corn flour that I can use, and I've got cornmeal and I've got polenta. It's just like, no, I don't have cookbooks at home. **[Laughs]** I just don't.

01:44:12

SR: I know that Debbie is a vegetarian, right?

01:44:14

PL: She's vegan.

01:44:16

SR: She's vegan. And are you? Or do you cook that way?

01:44:18

PL: I cook that way at home. I'll eat the pan off the chair. I'll eat anything. I long ago decided that if I was going to become a chef I had to eliminate any culinary prejudices that I had so anything that I disliked in my life as a foodstuff I ate until I got it. Once I got it I would add that to my repertoire of things. And any time thought I would turn my nose up at something I would force myself to have that and have it again until I got it.

01:44:53

At one time I didn't like avocado. I couldn't figure out avocados. What did it taste like? I mean it's like some kind of an egg dish gone bad. I had it in a salad once and I thought they had put some kind of an animal in there like maybe it was a slug. But I was raised in New York City. We didn't have avocados there. Finally I got to the West Coast, and when I got to the West Coast and saw avocados ten for one dollar I had already gone through my avocado learning experience and knew that I was home, you know. And I love avocados. I love avocados. But I didn't like

them. I didn't like cranberry sauce. Now I love cranberry sauce. I didn't like butter beans. And when I got my first job here in New Orleans, it was the day after Thanksgiving weekend that I got my first day of work there at the Andrew Jackson Hotel. We had virtually nothing to eat over the weekend. I was with my first wife then. And when I got my job at the Andrew Jackson they made the staff meal and the staff meal was butter beans and rice. And I was so hungry, and after having served food all during lunch and watch that food get thrown into the bus tub and go into the garbage and had butter beans and rice. And I thought, "Well, god, I'm hungry." I took one bite and it was the best meal I had ever tasted. I went back for seconds I loved them so much. But I didn't like the limas—all butter beans growing up. I didn't like them at all. They were just dry and like sawdust in my mouth. But now it's like, "Butter beans? I love butter beans."

01:46:34

SR: They have a knack with those beans down here, too, I think. The northerners don't quite cook them the same.

01:46:40

PL: No, no. And now I cook in crock pots when I do beans because I can't cook a pot on the beans on the stove all day. What I do is I let them soak in the crock pot and rinse them off, and then I let them cook for twenty-four hours in the crock pot, because you can't rush beans. They've only got that one place where water gets in, and you got to let those things rehydrate.

01:47:03

SR: Okay. I should ask you for the record Debbie's last name?

01:47:08

PL: Lindsey—L-i-n-d-s-e-y.

01:47:10

SR: And is she your partner in the business as well in life?

01:47:14

PL: Partner in business; partner in life.

01:47:16

SR: Okay, on that note, you've given me so much of your time, and I know that you could talk for another five hours. You're one of the best talkers I've ever come across. [*Laughs*] But I'm going to let you open your store because you've been generous in closing it for this interview. And I'll take some pictures. So thank you so much for sharing your time.

01:47:34

PL: You're welcome. Thank you.

01:47:38

[End Philippe Lamancusa Interview]