TERRYL JACKSON
Prejean's Restaurant – Lafayette, LA

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[Begin Terryl Jackson Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, June 19, 2008. I'm in Lafayette, Louisiana at Prejean's Restaurant with Chef Terryl, who will tell us how he pronounces his name and give us his birth date—and please say what you do for a living.

00:00:19

Terryl Jackson: Chef Terryl Jackson. I am the Executive Chef here at Prejean's Restaurant. My birth date is October 7, 1968.

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SR: And can you tell me where you were born in Louisiana, and where you grew up?

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TJ: I grew up in Houma, Louisiana, down in Terrebonne Parish.

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SR: And that's what direction from here?

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TJ: It's southeast of here. It's about 45 miles southwest of New Orleans.

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SR: And what about your family's ancestral heritage? Were your—is your family from here, and do you know how far back and where they came from?

00:01:04

TJ: Not exactly sure, you know, how far back but my family all are from Houma. I came to Lafayette probably about a little over—less than 10 years ago.

00:01:22

SR: And Houma, that's not in Acadiana—is that correct?

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TJ: No, not considered traditional Acadiana.

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SR: So you're a convert?

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TJ: Not really **[*Laughs*]**—still true to my roots back in Houma.

00:01:42

SR: Do you—does your family identify as Creole?

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TJ: Creole, yes.

00:01:50

SR: All right. Tell me a little bit about what gumbo was like in your house growing up.

00:01:54

TJ: Quite different than what we experience here in Acadiana. Gumbo—just a kind of history about gumbo—they used several different thickening agents, and one of those is filé, and so that was the common thickening agent that my mother used with her gumbo, so she pretty much made a filé gumbo. And that was, you know, what I grew up on but it was a real collage of a lot of different ingredients. She used seafood and turkey necks and ham bits, some chicken, a lot of different—it was a real mixture of different ingredients that she put into the gumbo, but not as thick or [as] much of a roux as you experience here in Acadiana. Like a lot lighter, but the filé was kind of the real presence of the gumbo.

00:03:00

SR: Am I understanding? Did she use a roux at all?

00:03:02

TJ: She did use, you know, some roux, but it really wasn't—. Here in Acadiana roux is like the real bold presence in the gumbo, but across Houma and New Orleans it's a combination between filé and okra that they use as a thickening agent for the gumbo.

00:03:25

SR: Well one thing I was going to ask you was whether your cooking traditions at home growing up were influenced at all by Native American cultures, and I think filé—people say—comes from Native American—originally from the Native Americans of Louisiana. Was that something that people talked about when you grew up?

00:03:44

TJ: Not really. It's been since my growing up and finding out about the history of--of gumbo. You know, growing up you didn't ask, *Where did this come from?* You know, you just really ate whatever was put on the table. But since I found that, yes, it was a Native American influence, and of course around Houma you know with the Houma Indians, there is a real big presence of that particular tribe there, and so filé was really the prominent ingredient that was used in the gumbo there.

00:04:18

SR: And so tell me how she—and maybe how you—at what point filé would go into the gumbo.

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TJ: My mother always put it at the very last, at the very end. A lot of restaurants leave it, and it's kind of like--like salt on the table, so it's—. But she actually puts it at the very end of the cooking process so it actually goes into the pot for her.

00:04:44

SR: Is it possible—can you describe for the record what filé tastes like?

00:04:49

TJ: It has this real herby feel to it. I guess that that's probably the best way I can describe it. It's real earthy and has a real earthy feel to it.

00:05:06

SR: And when you were growing up, where would your mom buy the filé?

00:05:12

TJ: There was this man who—well, I say a man but he was actually my god-brother who was a--he delivered for UPS. But there was this place that was down in South Lafourche, down in Galliano, where he would actually go and pick it up. I don't know exactly where it came from; I never got to go to the place where he'd get it, but she would get fresh ground filé from this guy out of Galliano and I don't—really couldn't tell you who he was or where the place is, but she swore by it.

00:05:51

SR: And the UPS man would sort of do that as a little side business while he was driving around? **[*Laughs*]**

00:05:55

TJ: Well not really a side business. It just was, you know I think he delivered to the store and he just kind of picked it up for her.

00:06:05

SR: Huh. Did you know people in your community who did the ground filé by hand?

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TJ: No, I didn't know anyone. The only guy I knew of was a guy that I heard of from Galliano.

00:06:16

SR: And you mentioned that your mom used the filé as a thickener. In my experience, I have—I don't have a lot of experience cooking with filé but it doesn't create a really thick gumbo, is that true?

00:06:30

TJ: Right.

00:06:30

SR: Like, how would you describe the consistency of your gumbo?

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TJ: It kind of gives you almost the feel of--of okra without actually having that particular vegetable included, because it has that—not the taste but the texture of--of okra when you put it,

you know, in the gumbo. So it's like you said, it's not really—it doesn't really thicken it a whole lot, because here in Acadiana the gumbos are real thick and hearty, almost like a stew, but there around Houma it's really closer to a soup style.

00:07:11

SR: And she wouldn't put okra in gumbo?

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TJ: Well she made a separate okra gumbo, which is something altogether different. It didn't even—it wasn't even like a soup. It was much thicker; it really was a closer kin to like smothered okra, but she called it okra gumbo because of the way—the process in which she did it. She put sausage and--and chicken parts in it, so it—really awesome dish.

00:07:39

SR: Tomatoes—would you she put tomatoes?

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TJ: No, no tomatoes in hers.

00:07:45

SR: I should ask you: What was—what is, or was, your mom's name?

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TJ: Daisy Jackson.

00:07:52

SR: Is she still living?

00:07:52

TJ: She is, along with my grandmother who is 96 I think, she is, so—.

00:08:00

SR: And so your mom, it sounds like, was the primary cook in the house?

00:08:02

TJ: Yes, in our home, but I guess I would say that the--the best cook in our family was my grandmother.

00:08:11

SR: And what did—did she and your mom differ in their gumbo styles?

00:08:16

TJ: Not really. They were really—they were very, very similar. I think I'm the only one who's kind of spun off and done something altogether different. But they were very, very similar in their gumbo styles.

00:08:28

SR: It's interesting; I've never had a gumbo with—made with turkey necks, I don't think, so when you were describing earlier that there would be turkey necks and ham…I can't remember exactly what else you said.

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TJ: Chicken wings. We'd do crab, there were crabs there; shrimp—

00:08:52

SR: All in one gumbo?

00:08:53

TJ: All in one gumbo.

00:08:56

SR: I have a lot more questions but I'm going to pause for a minute because another gumbo just arrived. What one is this? Well actually, maybe you can tell me what it is and describe it.

00:09:05

TJ: This one is our duck and andouille gumbo. All of our other gumbos have sausage in it, but this one actually has andouille, as well as—as well as duck in the gumbo as well. This one is probably the most hearty of them all. It has more of a roux presence in this particular one than the chicken and sausage or the shrimp gumbo that you've sampled.

00:09:38

SR: Yeah. We have three gumbos on the table right now, and I just spilled on the tablecloth. I'm sorry.

00:09:40

TJ: It's quite all right.

00:09:42

SR: And so, yeah—and so if you could just describe the other two real briefly. So there's chicken and sausage, and that's just a smoked sausage?

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TJ: Yes, it's just a smoked sausage done by a local sausage maker here out of Poche Bridge, and the real smoked flavor of the--the sausage is really the kind of the thing that's prevalent in this one. In the seafood it's just a seafood stock that's there; the stock itself is not as hearty as the chicken and sausage and certainly not as the duck. But start with a basic seafood stock and then build, you know, from there.

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In this duck gumbo, of course duck is the feature ingredient, you know along with the andouille, but it's a real, real hearty, real bold flavor for such a gumbo.

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SR: It's so dark and rich-looking it almost looks like a molé sauce.

00:10:48

TJ: Yeah, it—and that's the difference between Acadiana and the rest of, you know, the world where gumbo is concerned. If we could say *world*, but their gumbos are real all roux-based gumbos; they use lots of heavy roux as a thickener for the gumbo.

00:11:12

SR: And so the duck and andouille—what kind of stock does that use?

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TJ: We use the—of course it's—what we have in there are—. When we can't get the carcasses from the duck, you know we use chicken because we want the poultry feel to it, but that's pretty much the thing that actually gives it a lot of its flavor, and we use a lot of smoked products so it really has a smokey feel to this particular gumbo.

00:11:49

SR: And do you make the stocks here?

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TJ: No. I wish we could, but because of our volume—I mean we're very, very high volume, so we actually get soup stocks in.

00:12:03

SR: And the sausage, does that come from Poche's?

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TJ: It does. It comes from Poche's.

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SR: We have another boudin oral history project, and they're—Mr. Poche is one of our subjects.

00:12:17

TJ: Great, great, awesome sausage. It really is, so—.

00:12:21

SR: And then tell me—I'll try it, but tell me about the—we were talking earlier about the roux, and I'd like you to tell me what you can about where you get the roux; who makes it. And then also, do you use the same shade of roux for all these three gumbos?

00:12:37

TJ: Yes, we do use the same shade of roux. It's all a dark roux. Miss Eula Savoie, and Savoie's Cajun meats and products, she makes our roux for us, and of course her roux is in pretty much all the stores in the area. But she makes a special blend or a special batch of roux for Prejean's Restaurant.

00:13:07

SR: Can you talk about the pot that she makes it in?

00:13:09

TJ: She has this—she's got several cast iron pots that she makes the roux in, but she's got this one special pot and it's the only one that she does my particular roux in. And she won't ever let anyone else see the pot, so if anyone hears this and goes out and wants to go on a field trip to Savoie's, she won't let you see it.

00:13:38

SR: How come?

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TJ: I believe this particular pot is her baby, and of course rouxs are--are—she doesn't like many people to see her process for preparing roux. And rightfully so. It's—in my opinion it's the most consistent product that's out there. It's always the same, never ever different, and she is a real big part of why we're so consistent here at Prejean's because if the roux is not consistent, then certainly you know the gumbos won't be consistent as well.

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SR: You know, I knew that she was a real person, but I never imagined that Eula Savoie was actually the one making the roux. So are you saying she makes the roux?

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TJ: No, she's not. She doesn't make the roux. Miss Eula, of course she—at this point she's you know rather up in age and her health is somewhat deteriorating, but there was a time when she actually ran the plant where she is, but she—I still say that she's responsible. She's still the driving force there, you know at Savoie's.

00:14:50

SR: Well I was hoping that she was getting to relax a little bit because I can tell that she's successful from, you know, how prolific her roux is. When you—well I have so many questions. Let me just back up for a minute and ask you where you got your training. And--and feel free to eat some of this. That is—the duck and andouille is incredible.

00:15:17

TJ: My training—I had this, you know, rather informal training. Of course I grew up in a family of people who cooked. My mother and grandmother cooked in schools back in Terrebonne Parish, as well as my mother cooked for the Houma-Thibodeaux Archdiocese, so cooking is kind of in my blood. I have since, I guess since age 16 I've been working in--in the food service business and have really kind of been a journeyman between here, you know, throughout the south between—mainly between here and Atlanta, Georgia, learning several different types of cuisines. I think the first thing I learned outside of just Creole and Cajun cuisine was Caribbean and then Italian, Asian, of course traditional French techniques, some German, and then I came back here.

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My father got sick with Alzheimer's and I came back to help my mother out with him, and so that's how I got back to Louisiana, and I stayed in Houma for quite some time there and worked with the Copeland organization for a bit. And then moved here to Acadiana and started working here at Prejean's Restaurant as their catering chef. And the then-chef—the late James Graham was the executive chef here, who is kind of the architect of the menu here—he moved on and there was another chef who was here in the interim. He has since moved on, and then I kind of fell into the position of being the executive chef here, so that's pretty much where my training has been. Kind of the school of hard knocks, which most say that's probably the best place to get it.

00:17:29

SR: So I guess I was going to ask you what you thought of the food here, which is—sounds like it's very different from where you grew up; I mean relatively different from the food in Houma. But you traveled around a lot before you came to Lafayette, so it probably wasn't that weird.

00:17:49

TJ: Coming here, it really wasn't that weird, and I still have to say that the food in--in Houma isn't all that different except for there is more of a presence of spice, you know, here in Acadiana as opposed to anywhere else in the state. You know the use of spices is really dominant here. When you go to New Orleans, you know they say it's spicy, but it's really the spice there is not the same is what it is here in Acadiana.

00:18:29

SR: And by spice, do you mean—just for the record, do you mean hotness, or do you mean combinations of seasonings?

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TJ: Both: the combination of seasonings as well the heat profile of the—of the spice itself. They use a lot more heat here in Acadiana, and it's not just cayenne or red pepper that they use here. And--and one of the things where here at Prejean's, what we use: we use three different types of peppers in most all of our dishes, which gives you more of an even spice—you know flavor profile—as opposed to just cayenne, which is just flat out hot.

00:19:19

SR: And the other two peppers are?

00:19:21

TJ: Black and white, which—and all three peppers really attack different areas of the palate, so you get a smoother feel of spice, you know, across the palate as opposed to just one blaring—the cayenne, which commonly rests at the back of the--the tongue and throat.

00:19:48

SR: I know that I have a couple Paul Prudhomme cookbooks, and he uses all three peppers in a lot of his recipes. Does his food resonate with you at all after having cooked in Lafayette for quite a few years?

00:20:01

TJ: Well Paul Prudhomme is really—you know his sister's restaurant is two exits down from here, so he's from this area, so it—. You know that influence that he's taken to New Orleans is really something that he has gotten from the culture or his upbringing here, I believe.

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SR: Another gumbo arrived. What is that one?

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TJ: This is our seafood gumbo. It has a combination of--of crab, shrimp and crawfish and we put oysters in on request.

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SR: Is that on the menu or people just know to ask?

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TJ: No, they just know to--know to ask.

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SR: I'm trying to get a good picture of it. All right. You had mentioned earlier that—I asked you what your favorite gumbo was and--and you said that it wasn't here. Did you mean your mother's, or—?

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TJ: Yes, uh-huh, I meant my mother's gumbo.

00:21:12

SR: And if you're—if you were to make gumbo at home, what would you do? I mean, you know, you were having some friends over and you wanted to make gumbo. What sort of gumbo would you yearn to make at home?

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TJ: Kind of a hybrid of my mother's gumbo. It's a cross--it's really a cross between, you know, the rich bold roux stock and Acadiana gumbo, as well as I use filé as well for my mother's recipe.

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SR: And do you put the filé in at the end like your mom?

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TJ: Just like I was trained. **[*Laughs*]**

00:21:50

SR: Could you just sort of take me through, starting at the beginning the process, of how you would make a gumbo—just sort of let me know how long--to what shade you might make the roux, when you would put the vegetables in—?

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TJ: I'm laughing because I've got an on-the-record and off-the-record kind of process for doing gumbo.

00:22:13

SR: I'm sure.

00:22:15

TJ: One of the things about, you know, the influence of--of gumbo—and you know most people believe that gumbo is a Cajun dish, but it's actually Creole, and the gumbo implores the--the layering process. You know, everything doesn't go in the pot all at one time, and for me, my process is--is a little different because, of course, my roux is already—you know Miss Eula does a great job of doing my roux, so it's all ready, so I don't go through the process of actually say physically making a roux. But the layering process for me starts with the sautéeing of the vegetables; starting there, and once they have gotten tender, the onions are transparent—using of course what we call the holy trinity of onions, bell peppers, and celery—and then I'll add all of my dry spices, you know of my red peppers, black peppers, white peppers; sometimes some onion and garlic powder, and so the--the heat from the peppers and the oil that's in the pot will allow the spices to release their flavors.

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From there, that's when I include the stock whether I've done a stock from poultry bones or pork and beef bones, or one that we've pre-purchased, you know, here at the restaurant. Then

we incorporate the stock itself. Once the stock comes to a rolling boil, then we'll add our roux. Adding the roux and waiting for the right consistency and color and allowing it to cook for about a minimum of 45 minutes, sometimes longer than that depending on, you know, who the Saints are playing on that particular Sunday, and waiting for all of those flavors to come together. And if it's seafood, the seafood doesn't go in until the very end. If it's chicken and sausage, those will go in sometime midway through to where—or just after the 45-minute mark, to where that can then become tender. Once we've got about 20 minutes left on it or so, then I add garlic, fresh garlic, and I add the fresh garlic on the back end because it has a--tends to give a lot bolder flavor when you put the garlic in on the end. I'll add dried shrimp to mine as well, and then about two minutes to finish; then I'll add the filé, and--and I like to allow it to sit uncovered to kind of marinate for about at least an hour before anyone touches it just so that all of the flavors can come together. And of course, you know, timing is the key, and one of the wonderful things about Creole and Cajun cuisine is that of all of the other cuisines that I've learned to cook, to prepare, and it's the most difficult because of the timing that's involved in it. You can learn all of the other cuisines by reading the cookbook, but this—it really has to be in your blood. You really can't just replicate this by, you know, reading a cookbook. We, as a matter of fact, have a cookbook here at Prejean's Restaurant and the phone calls and the emails are countless with people who call back and say, *You know we just didn't get this quite right*. So it's really, really difficult to replicate doing it because of the timing and the layering of ingredients that's involved in it.

00:26:34

SR: Do you have to get on the phone if someone does that?

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TJ: Most of the time I am on the phone when someone does that, so—.

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SR: I'll remember that you're open for that. Oh there's so many questions; I guess I would ask first: so it's interesting to me that you use dried shrimp. I think that I've definitely had gumbos like that. I don't think there are so many people who use that in New Orleans. What do you like about dried shrimp versus fresh shrimp?

00:27:09

TJ: The intense flavor. The intense flavor of the--the dried shrimp is really what I like about it, and of course that's an ingredient that my mother used so it—you know in having other gumbos outside of my mother's gumbo, you notice that--that flavor wasn't prevalent in it, and of course in hers you could actually feel it. Not so much—not a lot, but just enough to where you can feel the presence of those shrimp.

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SR: And the filé: Can you sort of give us an estimate of how much you would put in, I don't know, two gallons of gumbo?

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TJ: Goodness, I don't know the last time I've made just two gallons of gumbo. **[*Laughs*]** But I-- I guess you would probably put maybe a—my mother would probably put probably a half-cup to sometimes a cup of filé in her pot, which is probably about three and a half to four gallons of gumbo when she'd make it.

00:28:21

SR: That's a lot.

00:28:21

TJ: Yeah, it is.

00:28:22

SR: You really, really get a lot of flavor from that then, I guess.

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TJ: Really, really—a real herby flavor to it, and like I said earlier, kind of the feel of having okra in the gumbo but without actually having it in there.

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SR: And what is the look of her gumbo/your gumbo?

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TJ: Her gumbo has a much lighter color and texture than anything that we're experiencing here. It's probably a brownish or a medium-brown—brownish-green tint because of the filé that's in there.

00:29:06

SR: All right. Can you—so two more gumbos just came out. **[*Laughs*]**

00:29:10

TJ: All right. This right here is kind of the hybrid that I was telling you about, which is a chicken and sausage but it also has filé in it.

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SR: Okay. And here at the restaurant, when you make that, do you also put the filé in at the end?

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TJ: We actually don't make this; I just made this one for you today.

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SR: Uh-uh.

00:29:39

TJ: I did.

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SR: Wow. I'm honored. I better actually eat all of that one. I'm a little bit overwhelmed by all the gumbos on the table right now. Wow. So is this similar to what you would make at home?

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TJ: Yeah, this is a little similar to what I make at home.

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SR: I'm going to try to hold this and this at the same time. So I don't actually see vegetables.

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TJ: That's because we do such a long simmer. There are—I mean we use lots of onions, peppers, celery, bay leaf—also to kind of give it that earthy feel without putting in the filé, but--but we cook it so long that they--you lose those, you know the presence of them there because they go in the beginning as opposed to at the end.

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SR: I've never done an interview while eating before. There is--the filé has almost a lemony flavor, too, like not lemon juice but like essence.

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TJ: Right. It really has—like I said, it's—and we say lemon but not saying a citrus(y) kind of feel to it, but just like you know something that actually is real, real earthy—.

00:31:07

SR: Like lemon verbena-type thing, like that herb.

00:31:10

TJ: Right.

00:31:10

SR: That's delicious. Now will you ever make that as a special here, or—?

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TJ: What we've found is that here in Acadiana people really don't care for filé as much as—so you don't find—you know a filé gumbo is really uncommon. It's very, very rare here in Acadiana.

00:31:35

SR: If your mom—I'm imaging that you have family members that come and eat here. What do they think of the gumbo in particular?

00:31:43

TJ: They actually love it. Of course they think that mine is better than my mom's sometimes, but they won't tell her that of course. But for the most part they actually--they actually love it.

00:32:00

SR: What—oh the other one is—?

00:32:02

TJ: The other one is the offering that we use that we offer annually at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. It's the one that we're probably the most famous for. It's our pheasant, quail and andouille gumbo. And it's—this is our pretty much world-famous gumbo.

00:32:29

SR: I want to know how you get away—I mean I've had this many times because it's a Jazz Fest staple for me. It's one of the first things I ever ate at Jazz Fest and it's unbelievable. How do you get away with not serving it regularly in the restaurant? You must have people asking for it constantly.

00:32:46

TJ: Oh we do constantly have people coming by to ask for this gumbo but it's really a Festival exclusive, and it's—you know, right now we've started to do several other festivals so we include it there, but if you're going to get this particular gumbo, it's a Jazz Fest exclusive.

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SR: And when did that start, do you know?

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TJ: I'm not exactly sure. Pheasant, quail and andouille gumbo was before my time here at Prejean's Restaurant. Like I mentioned him earlier, James Allen Graham, he is the one who actually created this particular recipe. Over the last couple of years I've kind of tweaked it a little bit, you know, so it's--so it's kind of evolved just a bit, but still remaining true to its original recipe.

00:33:52

SR: Can you—it's okay if you can't, but can you mention any ways that you've tweaked it to personalize it a little bit?

00:33:58

TJ: More of an influence of garlic, so that's it.

00:34:03

SR: That makes sense. So I'm sort of curious, you know you--you're very tied to your roots in Houma, I can tell, especially when I tasted that gumbo. Like that tasted so—the filé gumbo tastes so distinctive. I don't think I've tasted a gumbo like that before. But here you are; you're the chef at this really huge, very famous and well-respected restaurant, and I can tell that you're really proud of the food that comes out of this kitchen. What do you identify with more now—I mean, this region, that region, or does it not matter?

00:34:45

TJ: I don't think—not for me, it doesn't matter. I mean I think that, you know, all of them, both regions, they all have a very, very distinct identity, and understanding those identities for me, you know, are really kind of the joys of cooking; being able to learn in two different regions of this great state is really kind of the bonus for me. And then being able to make a hybrid gumbo, the both of them, I think I really have just gotten kind of the best of both worlds.

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SR: I want to just go back really quickly to the Jazz Fest gumbo, because you mentioned earlier to me before we started recording how much you sell at Jazz Fest. Can you talk about that a little?

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TJ: A little bit. Well not so much that we—how much of it we sell. We go in preparing about four tons of gumbo, and of course we always have a good bit leftover, but that's pretty much what our par is going into the Jazz Fest.

00:36:02

SR: And do you prepare it here in the facility that I saw in back, or how do you do that?

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TJ: We did until about two years ago, but it's actually prepared in New Orleans at a manufacturing plant there that we go and we actually—it probably takes us about three--four batches to actually get to the four-ton mark.

00:36:27

SR: Wow, that's pretty amazing. You also mentioned earlier in this conversation something about making a gumbo while the Saints were playing. Can you talk a little bit about the communal aspect of gumbo?

00:36:38

TJ: It is actually, you know it's the—it is the one thing I think that brings us altogether, the gumbo, and it doesn't matter what type of event it is. Of course if it's just Sunday morning watching the Saints, or you know any type of reason to get together—someone got pregnant and is having a baby shower, you know that's a reason for us to get together and make a gumbo. There was a deer that was slaughtered so we're going to make a gumbo. And it's just not one particular reason but here in—all across the state, I believe that that's the—you know, to make a gumbo is a reason to get together. And it's something to be said about family and friends coming together and partaking really from the same pot. You know, community and just the fellowship of--of friends, I think really, and gumbo pretty much embodies really our culture because that's what it is: it's really just the coming together of a lot of different things, you know, a lot of different cultures and the cuisines from the Spanish influence to the Caribbean, West Indian, as well as the African influence. So you know that's really what gumbo really is: just a coming together.

00:38:10

SR: I've never heard of anybody saying that they were going to make gumbo for themselves.

00:38:15

TJ: No. It's impossible to make gumbo just for yourself. That's one of the things about gumbo, is that you make it; you've got to share it. You've got to share it.

00:38:27

SR: Wow. That made me think of something. I guess one thing I was wondering earlier: On this table we have so many different ingredients in different dishes in different bowls and we're calling them all gumbos. Is there—do you have any gumbo--personal gumbo rules, like something—an ingredient or a technique—that if someone used it you could not call it gumbo and respect yourself?

00:39:02

TJ: I was just this year--was in Atlanta, Georgia, and I won't mention the name of the restaurant that I was there. And they—of course throughout the United States I've gone to various cities, and in most all of the restaurants there is a Cajun something on the menu. And most of the time against my better judgment I'll always say, *Okay, I'm going to try their Cajun whatever-it-is.* And in this particular restaurant there was a gumbo on the menu and my curiosity was piqued. I wanted to see what this gumbo was going to be like.

00:39:44

Well of course it came to the table and it was nothing like any gumbo that I had seen. It had corn and butter beans, and oh my goodness, I think it had pinto beans in it and I was—*My*

goodness. This is, you know—we put a lot of things in the gumbo but I had never, ever seen a gumbo like that, and needless to say it tasted like no gumbo that I've ever consumed.

00:40:09

SR: Was it good?

00:40:11

TJ: Of course not. **[*Laughs*]**

00:40:15

SR: Right, so corn and butter beans are out.

00:40:18

TJ: Certainly, corn and butter beans are out.

00:40:20

SR: What about, I've seen recipes for, and I'm about to try to make, a gumbo with beef. Have you heard of that? Have you ever made that?

00:40:27

TJ: Yes, and that's a--used to be kind of a staple kind of in New Orleans, a beef—and pork was sometimes included in gumbo as well. So, but yes, I've heard of beef included in a--in a gumbo.

00:40:49

SR: Have you ever made one?

00:40:52

TJ: I don't believe I have, although there are times when I've been very intoxicated making gumbo so I can't say that I remember every ingredient that I've ever put into a gumbo.

00:41:09

SR: Fair enough. You know, you cooked in places outside of Louisiana as a younger person. Now that you've come back and you're really immersed in this regional food culture, do you think you could go to another place and happily cook?

00:41:30

TJ: I think I could, mainly—and I think that's what should probably be the challenge of--of our local restaurateurs, is to if they could possibly franchise, to go into other places, to be able to show the world what real Cajun-Creole cuisine is really all about. Like I was sharing with you earlier about the--the gumbo that I had in Atlanta, I really would like for someone in Atlanta to really enjoy what an actual—or--or what we believe an actual [gumbo] really is. That's probably one of the most misunderstood things about, you know, Creole and Cajun cuisine: a lot of people feel like if you just throw a lot of pepper in it, then that's what makes it Cajun, and it's really—or Creole—and that's really not what it's all about. So if I had to go out or encourage others who ran restaurants to go anywhere else in the nation and world, would be to be true to what real authentic Creole and Cajun is.

00:42:44

SR: Well that brings—that reminds me of a restaurant in New Orleans where the chef went and opened up a restaurant in New York that's not open anymore, but Jack Leonardi of Jacques-Imo's; we were talking about him earlier because you feel a kinship with his cooking at Jacques-Imo's in New Orleans. Can you talk a little bit about that, like what in his food, in his style of cooking, speaks to you?

00:43:11

TJ: Just the real—you know he still continues—you know Jack at Jacques-Imo's, he keeps true to real bold and over-the-top flavors, kind of like what we do here at Prejean's Restaurant; slightly different, but he maintains the--the integrity of whatever it is that he's putting on the plate whether it's salmon or whether it's mussels, or he does an awesome savory cheesecake that has alligator sausage and I think shrimp in it, and—but he really, really maintains the integrity of whatever the main ingredient is, but at the same time takes it to another level with very, very bold and over-the-top flavors.

00:44:03

I want to say also that you mentioned about, you know, him going off to--to New York and—but it was not for his lack of success there in New York that he shut down. He really came back. It really was a choice of his. But Jack is an awesome chef and businessman, and Jacques-Imo's, outside of Prejean's, is probably my favorite in the world.

00:44:31

SR: Yeah, that's true. I think he--I think he left that place after Katrina or something, but I was evacuated in New York for Katrina and went there for some home flavors and they were definitely there. Tell me a little bit now about the menu at Prejean's outside of the gumbo, the sort of—maybe you could describe what you would call this type of food, and also if you could, tell us what dishes are original to you, if any.

00:45:06

TJ: The cuisine here at Prejean's is best described as—I mean, of course we've put it in a genre that we call a Cajun Nouvelle, which is kind of new Cajun. It's really kind of—we've taken all of the cultures, you know a little bit from every culture. We've got a pasta dish that we've put kind of a Cajun twist to; we've got a crawfish enchilada. We've--of course then we also have the traditional Cajun theme dishes: we've got a duck dish that's on the menu, and of course a lot of the fish that we—that are kind of indigenous to our region of the country. We've got a stuffed red snapper. We do a stuffed catfish, and so it's--it's really a healthy mix of a lot of different cultures and cuisines, but we, like Jack—bold, over-the-top flavors.

00:46:13

SR: And when you say *over-the-top*—I just want to clarify it for the record, that doesn't mean imbalanced?

00:46:19

TJ: No, no, not imbalanced; meaning, when we say *over-the-top*, meaning like it's--it has this wow-factor. When you think about, if you can imagine for those who have never been, I like to

think of what we do here is like having Mardia Gras in your mouth; that it's, you know when you put it in your mouth, it's just—it's a real big party in your mouth, but like I said, to where it's still true to the actual flavor of what the main protein actually is.

00:46:56

SR: And are there any dishes on the menu currently that didn't exist before you came to Prejean's?

00:47:04

TJ: A few dishes. We've got what we call a Chicken Cancun. It has a Caribbean feel to it but we also top it with the crawfish butter cream sauce. Goodness, there are several dishes; we haven't totally changed the menu but we've—and I'm kind of drawing a blank because we also do daily Chef Specials here, which allows us to be really, really creative. Our menu hasn't changed in, you know, probably 15 years—not drastically changed. We've added some things and taken off some things, but you know for the most part it stayed the same. But every day you could come here and you could find something totally different. We do a soup du jour, which could be anything from a smoked chicken, tasso and artichoke bisque, to your common variety broccoli and cheese soup. So really a great mix on the menu.

00:48:19

SR: I know that you're at the level where, you know, you create dishes and have your own cookbook, but is there a cookbook that either in the past or currently you consistently turn to or admire—at any point in your career?

00:48:38

TJ: I can't say that there is a particular cookbook; more so just actually studying the actual cuisines. I think I've more so been—my style of cooking has been more influenced by the various cuisines that I've been exposed to and--and trained within, so not one particular cookbook that, you know, I actually turn to commonly.

00:49:04

SR: Tell us a little bit about the numbers that you do at this restaurant these days. How many people can the restaurant hold when full?

00:49:12

TJ: When full we're probably somewhere around 325--350 mark depending on how we can pull in a chair or--or 25.

00:49:28

SR: And like on Father's Day, how many people do you do?

00:49:33

TJ: This past Father's Day I think we did somewhere in the neighborhood of around 500 covers.

00:49:41

SR: That's a lot.

00:49:43

TJ: A lot, and that was really a slow Father's Day; Mother's Day was something altogether different though.

00:49:51

SR: Oh okay. What was Mother's Day?

00:49:51

TJ: Mother's Day was somewhere in the neighborhood of about 750.

00:49:58

SR: So people let their fathers off the hook on Father's Day and let them go do what they wanted? **[*Laughs*]**

00:50:02

TJ: Well I think they brought them in on--on the Saturday night before.

00:50:07

SR: Yeah. So 750 is a lot. I asked you earlier, but for the record, can you tell us how many kitchen staff you have?

00:50:14

TJ: I got between--I keep between 45 and 50 kitchen staff in commonly. Our restaurant employs about 150 employees. And we're, you know, a stand-alone independent restaurant, and that's a lot of people but it takes all those people to accomplish what we--what we accomplish.

00:50:40

SR: Can you describe—because we're talking about gumbo today—you have a lot of different rooms in the back kitchen area; you have a really impressive complex, a lot of space. Can you describe the area where the gumbo is made and what equipment you have in there?

00:50:58

TJ: Back there is what we call our sauce room, and we employ a full-time saucier; his name is Bob Beard, and he's really the one who prepares all of the gumbos based on the recipes. He works back there and there are three steam jacketed tilt kettles back there and two of them are 30-gallon kettles and one is a 40-gallon kettle. So when they make our gumbos and étouffée, they make those in 30 and 40-gallon batches at a time.

00:51:37

On average we probably can go through—he'll probably make three 40-gallon batches of chicken and sausage gumbo a week. And that's just the chicken and sausage gumbo; that's not counting the seafood or the duck and andouille gumbo that we make here as well.

00:51:58

SR: And you have a recipe book that he follows or—?

00:52:02

TJ: Yeah, he has a recipe. It's a standard recipe and I have to say that there are only three people in the entire restaurant who knows those three—I mean all of the recipes.

00:52:20

SR: Not very much.

00:52:20

TJ: No, not very much. We don't travel together much either. **[*Laughs*]**

00:52:25

SR: Yeah, that's a good idea. You talked about the great cooks in your family. You started cooking at a really young age. Did you have any male role models in the kitchen?

00:52:37

TJ: None at all. All of the males in my family, of course their job was to--to barbeque on 4th of July and Labor Day—those holidays—so when we saw--when I saw males cooking it was really on the holidays and it was outdoor cooking, or you know grilling, but no male influences.

00:53:01

SR: Were there other people in your family in your generation that went into food service?

00:53:05

TJ: None others. I was the only one who I guess stayed true to what my mother and grandmother did.

00:53:14

SR: And so I'm curious: When you're cooking at the restaurant or at home, you know you're really—I think that chefs in these types of restaurants in this area are really cultural preservationists in a way. Do you think about that when you're cooking, ever, that you're really helping maintain and preserve something?

00:53:43

TJ: And that's--that's one of the things that's really, really important to me, making sure that we preserve this cuisine even for where it is right now because even now it's evolved kind of into something altogether different than what it actually started out being. Some feel like that's a good thing and others feel like that's a bad thing. You know, but I kind of—I guess it's a double-edged sword for me. I remember the old way of cooking, but you know I like the new way as well.

00:54:21

SR: Well you're a chef that uses creativity in—?

00:54:26

TJ: Right, lots of creativity, and that's more so for our Chef Specials. You know one of the things that we pride ourselves on here at Prejean's is the consistency of it all because any

successful restaurant has to be really, really consistent. You know we understand that smell and taste are the two senses that are closely tied to what we remember, so when people come here, commonly what we get is that, *Man this tastes exactly the way it tasted the last time*, you know, and that's because we--we try and maintain the same way of doing things. And that's in essence a way of preserving our culture and our way of doing things.

00:55:12

SR: If you were to--if you weren't working tonight and you were to come in here for dinner, what would you order?

00:55:19

TJ: Oh goodness. I read a--an article in, I think, this *Roadhouse* book or something like that, and what they spoke about--about our restaurant is that, they actually said that they'd make a recommendation but, you know, no need to. And that's one of the finest compliments that any chef could ever get: that you know it doesn't matter what you order on the menu. It's all pretty good, so I take comfort in that. If I were to come here I could probably order anything on the menu and it would be good.

00:55:58

SR: I believe that, but I'm also just curious—I guess maybe I should ask if you were to have a couple nights off and cook for yourself at home, I'm just wondering your—. I think a lot of times for chefs, for chefs that I've had experience with, the sort of creative part and the craving part are

not always the same. So you might not necessarily eat the crawfish enchilada or the chicken—I forgot what we said, Cancun?

00:56:38

TJ: Chicken Cancun.

00:56:38

SR: Yeah. I'm wondering—I guess I was trying to get at, like, what is your type of comfort food, maybe?

00:56:44

TJ: I remember growing up and my grandmother cooked this dish of eggs and rice; that's all she called it. You know, and for me right now, I'll wake up, or even at night you know, that's something that I crave and it's just a simple dish. It doesn't have but four ingredients: eggs, rice, salt, and pepper, you know, and it's a very, very simple dish but it's a dish that I grew up eating. My grandmother was the master of doing it if there was such a thing. **[*Laughs*]** But not a lot of—you know very, very simply. It's like you said, the creative end or versus just eating comfort food—that's what I commonly eat when I'm at home.

00:57:34

SR: That sounds good. Is that like scrambled eggs, fried eggs?

00:57:39

TJ: Scrambled eggs; it's kind of a spin-off of, say, fried rice. Of course start off, she'll you know fry the rice in--in butter and then she'll add her salt and pepper and then she'll finish with the--with the eggs, and she won't cook that very, very long; just long enough for the eggs to cook in the rice, and I mean very, very filling and satisfying.

00:57:58

SR: So rice was a staple on your table growing up?

00:58:02

TJ: Oh certainly. All throughout, you know most of Louisiana rice is very, very prevalent on the table except maybe north of here, say in Alexandria, but all throughout Acadiana, Houma, New Orleans, you know—jambalaya; of course gumbos with rice, red beans and rice. So rice is definitely a staple on the table.

00:58:32

SR: One thing that I've noticed is cooks in Acadiana tend to talk about gravies a lot more than cooks in New Orleans do, for example. Gravy, like rice and gravy, wouldn't—people don't act so poetic about it in New Orleans as much as they do out here. **[*Laughs*]** What about, sort of in-between in Houma? Did you grow up with lots of gravy?

00:58:54

TJ: Oh lots of gravies. It's kind of, New Orleans is a lot closer—I mean Houma was a closer kin to what we--what you got here in Acadiana. Of course you know how you—you know got the

gravies here in Acadiana and in Houma was because they had to live off the land. So it was a lot of wild game that they used in the cooking, so you had to, you know, really smother and cook the rabbit for a long time—or the duck. These are things that had to—because you had to cook--cook them such a long time for them to become tender, that's how you got a lot of the gravies, and of course that's here and--and in Houma; not so much in New Orleans though.

00:59:41

SR: So did you have hunters in your family?

00:59:44

TJ: Oh yes, a lot of family members who were hunters. Not my dad so much, but I had a lot of uncles who did a lot of--of hunting and trapping, so that's you know a lot of wild game back in Houma.

01:00:04

SR: What did your parents do for a living?

01:00:07

TJ: My mother was a housewife; my father did a lot of different things. He was a diesel mechanic; he ran—he was a shop foreman for the City of Terrebonne Parish Government. He also had a trucking company that hauled oil field equipment, so he did a lot of different things as well he ran kind of the Shade Tree Mechanic Shop from under our carport. So—.

01:00:38

SR: I'm not going to keep you much longer, but I would like to ask you: you showed me some cooks' trucks in the back, I think you called them.

01:00:46

TJ: Right.

01:00:48

SR: And there are a couple trucks that are—one is outfitted with dishwashing equipment and the other two are kitchens. And you told me that they were purchased when Hurricane Katrina happened, and can you just talk about what they were used for at that point?

01:01:05

TJ: Right after Hurricane Katrina and the aftermath of all of that, you know better than 3,000 you know soldiers were here around the city and area of New Orleans, out of Belle Chase, the military base there. And Prejean's was called upon to go there and serve these troops that were there, and so they fed 3,000 troops three meals a day out of these--these trailers. Those—and quite an honor to do such a thing, to--to serve those who were leaving their families to come and serve people who were in dire, dire need.

01:01:52

SR: Where did the food supplies come from?

01:01:56

TJ: At that time of course Katrina—people really don't realize you know how devastating this storm was. It affected food like you would not believe. There were plants that were in New Orleans that it—it really changed the face of how we even got food. Case in point, I know that Jack Miller's Barbeque Sauce, you know which is not far from here in Ville Platte, they had to change their recipe because they weren't getting the same type of Cajun Chef mustard that they were getting before. And a lot of our products, while we were there, the food service vendors—distributors—came out of New Orleans, so a lot of the food was coming out of Houston and Dallas, Texas that we were getting to feed the troops that were there in Belle Chase. So it--it really--it really disrupted food as we know it.

01:02:58

SR: And the system is that you are on a list for emergency—you said it was an emergency preparedness list.

01:03:04

TJ: Right.

01:03:05

SR: The funding, was that from the federal government?

01:03:07

TJ: Yes, that's from the federal government, you know, and it's really kind of a preferred list of vendors in the event some type of disaster comes about. There's a process that you have to go through to get on the list, and I'm not sure of all the details of how that actually happens. But you know once you're on the list, in the event some type of catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina would ever happen again, you know Prejean's Restaurant is one of the vendors that's already set up to go and be there to serve. With these trailers that we have, which are—if you can imagine an 18-wheeler semi-trailer, that's what they actually are, outfitted with walk-in refrigerators, you know. We can ideally be anywhere in the country in a matter of 48 to 72 hours.

01:04:05

SR: Wow, that's pretty incredible. And that—I don't think you were here at that time. You took a little break at a point, but the person—the owner of Prejean's or whoever decided to acquire those trucks, that must have been a from-the-heart decision at that point.

01:04:24

TJ: Well it--it actually was. I mean it—and you know you don't actually just decide, Oh, I'm going to go and buy some kitchen trailers and I'm going to wait around for Hurricane Katrina to come about. It really was born out of, at the time a necessity, and so that's how those trailers came about and came to be. You know, God forbid something like that would ever happen again, I hope—you know we have them and I would hope that we never, ever have to use them ever again because it comes at such a loss. But in the event we have to, you know whatever community that we'd have to go to, there's an assurance in knowing that there is someone out there who is prepared to come to their aid.

01:05:15

SR: You mentioned earlier to me that you had a restaurant in Ville Platte for a while. Did you serve gumbo there?

01:05:22

TJ: I did.

01:05:24

SR: And what was it like?

01:05:25

TJ: It was the one that you had here earlier. We actually did the--the filé gumbo there.

01:05:33

SR: How did that go over?

01:05:35

TJ: Really well, really well. It was one of the things that we actually—that people would actually come there for, was you know, for the gumbo.

01:05:46

SR: Well I'm not going to keep you any longer. I have one last question, which is: Can you tell us what you like most about your job?

01:05:56

TJ: The thing I like most about my job is actually seeing the smiles on people's faces. When you actually can say that you're responsible for making someone happy, when someone can come and--and have a real deep and sincere appreciation for something that you've done, something that you've created with your hands or the people that you're responsible [for] around you—you know you've assembled a team of culinarians who can actually put smiles on people's faces. That's probably one of the most gratifying things for me, to be able to have people smile and walk away saying, Man that was really, really good.

01:06:46

SR: Well thank you for giving me your time.

01:06:48

TJ: It was my pleasure. It really was.

01:06:50

SR: And your gumbo.

01:06:54

[End Terryl Jackson Interview]