



Bryan Stanfield  
Trattoria ZaZa

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Date: November 23, 2021

Location: Birmingham, AL

Interviewer: Michelle Little

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcript

Length: Sixty minutes

Project: Birmingham Central Business District 2022

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Michelle Little: Okay. So this is Michelle Little and I'm interviewing Bryan Stanfield at Trattoria ZaZa, and it is Tuesday, November 23rd, the week of Thanksgiving.

Bryan Stanfield: Absolutely.

Michelle Little: And this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance oral history project on the Central Business District in downtown Birmingham. So to get started, Bryan, will you just tell me where did you grow up, where are you from?

Bryan Stanfield: I was born in Donelson, Tennessee, just outside Nashville, but I grew up for most of my life in Decatur, Alabama. We moved around a little bit growing up, but Decatur is where I spent most of my childhood.

Michelle Little: Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Any siblings?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. My dad, Allen [sp], my mom, Sue [sp]. My dad's a chef so I grew up in kitchens in and around, which is why we moved around a lot.

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He was switching from job to job, et cetera. We ended up moving to Decatur. I have a older brother, Jim [sp]-- or I had an older brother, Jim. He passed away when I was twelve. He was sixteen. Died in a car accident. Yeah, that's the gist of my family.

Michelle Little: All right. So can you tell me a little bit about the restaurants your dad worked in and . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Well, I can tell you stories from him. By the time when I was born, he went from working in a lot of independent restaurants to going to corporate restaurants. He worked for a company called Morrison for most of my life, which was a food provider for hospitals and colleges.

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Which we moved from Nashville, when I was born, to Birmingham when he worked at UAB, to Nebraska where he worked at some college up there-- I can't remember off the top of my head-- and then down to Decatur where he worked at Huntsville Hospital. But before that, he worked in this restaurant called The Safari Room [sp] in Nashville, which had a giant fish tank over the bar. It was all kind of fine dining steakhouses for him. He worked there for a long time, and he worked at a place called Zagreb's [sp] in Indianapolis, which is the vast majority of his cooking experience was being the chef over there. My dad has a-- one second.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Drink some water. Go ahead.

0:03:01

Bryan Stanfield: All right. Can you ask the question again or can you ask a different . . . ?

Michelle Little: Yeah. So we were talking about--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: You want me to ask a different question or . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: Or you can ask the same question, just give it again.

Michelle Little: Oh. So we were talking about all the different restaurants your dad worked in and just what you remember about-- it sounds like you moved around a great deal.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Yeah. We moved around probably eight times in my youth, but it was all really early on. Once we moved to Decatur, I was nine years old, and we were in Decatur from nine till I moved to Birmingham when I was nineteen.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: So a majority of my life in Decatur.

Michelle Little: Okay. So lots of moving around early on--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: --and then settled in to Decatur.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Little: And now, where did you say he worked in Decatur?

Bryan Stanfield: When he was in Decatur he worked at-- I can't remember the name of the facility when we first moved to Decatur, but he worked at Huntsville Hospital for the majority of the time.

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Michelle Little: Huntsville. Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: He was the director of food and nutrition at Huntsville Hospital.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. So did you learn to cook from your dad?

Bryan Stanfield: I wish I learned more to cook from my dad. I grew up eating great food. My dad loved cooking. My mom loved cooking, too. We had a garden in the backyard. It was great. We'd spend a lot of time just on the back porch talking food philosophy kind of stuff. But, no, I was very interested in food but just having a kind of like, I don't want to hear it from you, old man, kind of thing, I did not take the time to learn from him that I should have. But it's your parents, it's harder. But I was around it a lot and I saw it a lot.

Michelle Little: So your mom gardened, as well?

Bryan Stanfield: Both my parents did. We always had a small little garden in the backyard at any of our houses, and it predominantly was just tomatoes and watermelons in the summer.

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Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: So I was always looking forward to that, that time. But my introduction to seasonality is my dad being excited for, hey, it's almost asparagus time! Asparagus is really great right now! And then we'd eat asparagus, like, five meals a day for three months. And same thing when sweet corn came in. It's, like, oh, we're going to eat sweet corn five meals a day for two or three months. I didn't know a ton about what was growing, what was coming, just how excited he was for what was coming.

Michelle Little: I love that! So who did you learn to cook from and how did you . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: So most of my childhood I was very interested in cooking, not from my dad for whatever reason, but I was very interested in learning. I loved watching-- I grew up in the

late [19]90s, early 2000s, and that was the big food boom on television, Anthony Bourdain, Iron Chef, all those big food programs.

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So watched a ton of that growing up. I would always talk to my dad, like, hey, I want to grow up and be a chef. He's, like, no, you don't 'cause you're just gonna get-- the ground up, you're gonna get paid nothing. It's gonna be really hard. Don't do this. Go to college. So when I graduated high school, we talked along about it and I was just, like, all right, I'll go get a four-year degree. So I moved to Birmingham to go to UAB. And I was in that process of, I don't really want to be doing this, I want to cook. I was spending all my time, instead of doing assignments, reading food blogs, cooking at the dorm. And I'd met, through just small jobs when I first moved down here, some friends that introduced me to Chef Brian Somersfield who eventually gave me a job, took me under his wing, kind of showed me cooking.

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Michelle Little: So what did you study at UAB?

Bryan Stanfield: I studied international relations and then I double minored in economics and Mandarin.

Michelle Little: Wow!

Bryan Stanfield: 'Cause I was, like, I want to get a job, so let's focus on this stuff.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: I think everyone starts college, like, hey, I have some idea of this. And you start taking college and it's great 'cause it introduces you to so many broad things. So I started out premed, then I started taking some anthropology and cultural classes. Like, oh, this is super interesting. It's like my love of food but it's learning more about everyone's culture. So I went through anthropology, and I was, like, I'm never gonna get a job from this, to trying more practical versions of all that. And then I ended up doing that, which I didn't-- I ended up dropping out my senior year to cook.

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I'd been doing that for about a year and a half. I'd finally went from being a server to a dishwasher, and I begged my way onto the line. And when that happened, I was, like, well, I'm done with school. I'm just going to do this only.

Michelle Little: So what was your first restaurant job?

Bryan Stanfield: ZaZa.

Michelle Little: ZaZa was your very--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: You'd never worked at any other--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Wow. So right here in this--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. So ZaZa was opened by Brian Somersfield and Geoff Lockert in, like, November 2009. I started here in January 2011, as a server. And I worked that for about a year. Then I worked as a dishwasher for about a year. And then I switched over into the line.

Michelle Little: And so tell me everything you remember about your first few months working here. What are your memories of that time and what the restaurant was like?

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Bryan Stanfield: My memories of when I first started serving here?

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: I was kind of like in awe of everything. Again, I'd always wanted to do this, but they were doing real cooking. It wasn't like going to Applebee's or going to all these chain restaurants that I'd grown up going to, or even my dad's cooking, which was really great but very meat and potatoes, steakhouse kind of cooking. It was way more composed, way more thought out. So that was really exciting. And also, they were doing it for just, like, no amount of money. So I think that was-- I was saying kind of my introduction to seasonality when I was kid, but when I first started here, like, what all you can do and what all there is.

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And every season was just, like, oh, man, there's so much. And just being able to see it firsthand. And then, Brian was really great about-- he knew I had an interest and kind of showing me, talking through things with me when I was, like, oh, I've never seen this before. Like, I read about something in some cookbook. He's, like, oh, let's do that at the restaurant. You can kinda see how we do this. That was awesome. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And so can you speak to kind of what their original vision for this place was? When they opened in 2009-- correct-- there wasn't much else on this stretch of road--

Bryan Stanfield: No.

Michelle Little: --other than Café Dupont.

Bryan Stanfield: Dupont. Quickly after they opened Brick & Tin across the street opened, but there was, like, a Subway and Quiznos down here at the time and that was that.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

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Bryan Stanfield: Brian had spent a while living in Rome after he went through college, and I think-- so he went to CIA, Culinary Institute of America, graduated, moved to Rome, was just kind of like being debaucherous in Rome, and kind of fell in love with that al taglio style pizza of just grabbing a slice and going, that street food pizza. Moved back to Birmingham and, after working for Frank for a while, saw the downtown business here and was, like, oh, this kind of quick service would be fantastic in a place that you can be-- you have your work, your house, and then you have your hangout spot. We'll have that nice espresso machine, nice espresso counter, grab your slice of pizza, in and out really quick, and build a little community here.

Michelle Little: What were the crowds like at that time?

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We've seen so much shift in downtown and who's working down here, and what is down here, and what's open at night.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Who was downtown at that point?

Bryan Stanfield: For the most part, we were breakfast and lunch only. There wasn't much night business back then, especially back then. It was mostly bankers, lawyers. We had the Birmingham School of Law in this building until a couple of years ago, 2018 or so. So a couple professors and a lot of law students. And that was a majority of our clientele.

Michelle Little: And before we really get into the restaurant and when you purchased the restaurant, you said you worked as a barista at some point, as well, right?

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm. Yeah. So in high school and in college I worked at Starbucks as a barista.

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Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. So that would have been the [19]90s, right?

Bryan Stanfield: No. That was 2004 to 2009 or so, 2010.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. I still remember my hometown not having any Starbucks when I was there.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: What did you learn when you working at Starbucks, and did it translate to anything?

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think you can always pull life lessons out from whatever you're doing. Without others, there's a lot of like, hey, the quality, et cetera, could have been better, but they're doing it on such a massive scale. What's great, though, is that they try and be, like, the third place, like I was talking about with Brian, for wanting to be a kind of a hang-out spot. That's the best part, the kind of building a sense of community, being like, hey, you have your work, your house, and this is a spot you can go when you're not at either of those.

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That was what I loved the most about it. Having my regulars, being able to interact with people every day was great. And that's also what I loved about here is we're extremely regular driven, being able to talk to the same people every day, see them grow and change, be a part of their life, us be a part of their life.

Michelle Little: Nice. Okay. So you started here in 2011.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: And then, can you kind of talk me through realizing you wanted to stay here and then . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: So I started in 2011 as a server and just being, like, wow, this is amazing! This is so fun! I love the community, et cetera. And after a year or so of begging, I got to work in the dish pit and started to learn a little bit more of the actual cooking of everything.

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Sorry. Ask that one more time.

Michelle Little: So it was kind of a broad question. I just asked about you realizing that you wanted to stay here. But as you were talking-- so you moved from server to-- you called it the dish pit?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. A dishwasher.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: I was a dishwasher. Sorry.

Michelle Little: Okay. But that was more than washing dishes. It sounds like you learned about cooking and all, as well.

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. So in most restaurants and especially ours-- we're very small. When I was working it was three people in the back of house and that was it. So your dishwasher also did all the pizzas and all the pizza prep. And then you had a guy who was doing pastas and sautéing, and you had a guy who was kind of working the oven doing specials. So that was, like, hey, now I get to learn how to cut things. And the pizza prep's great. It's a great introduction to things 'cause it's all about knife skills and learning how to do things. You have two people that are much more experienced kind of standing over you and telling you how you're doing it right or wrong, which is just great.

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It's a ton of repetition. So that was really fun. I've always enjoyed that, like when I was being a barista at Starbucks. It's like that hump and pump, like you gotta get it all done really fast, do it as best you can, try and be better the next time you're doing it, et cetera, which is one thing I've

always been attracted to in food service. So I started washing dishes. Eventually, Brian and Geoff opened up El Barrio down the street, and when they did that there was an opportunity for me to move down there and work on line and get out of just doing half dishes, half prep, be fully on the line, which I jumped on. So I worked down there for two years. So at that point in time, I guess I had been cooking for about four years. I had had the opportunity there to work with a lot of experienced chefs, experienced cooks.

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Worked my way from the very bottom to the top of the line, get on salary, be the sous-chef down there. And at the end of the two years, I was at a point where me and the girl I was dating at the time were working on an opposite schedule and we kind of wanted to figure out something where we could work together. So I talked to Brian and Geoff about leaving the restaurant to open up my own restaurant at the time. I put my notice in, and when I did that, they were, like, hey, how about instead of doing this you just buy ZaZa from us? So that's how that process came along.

Michelle Little: Oh, okay. Okay. So you were ready to leave and try something--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's still a lot left to learn, but at that point in time I felt like I was not necessarily growing anymore in that position and I'm always trying to grow more.

Michelle Little: What kind of place did you want to open?

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Bryan Stanfield: So originally when we first started talking about it, it was 2014 going into 2015, and just kind of looking around Birmingham seeing what wasn't here and what we thought would do well. And so we were looking at doing a ramen shop, an izakaya kind of place, which I think would have done well. Now there are quite a few of them that have done very well. So I was in the process of recipe planning, trying out different things, when they were approaching me, like, hey, ZaZa . . . and I was, like, well, that just makes way more sense. And I have years of experience doing this, I know the clientele, I know the business. It's making money right off the rip, so let's jump on that.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So what is the process like of buying a restaurant? What does that entail?

Bryan Stanfield: It's pretty straightforward. It's just you have to find a valuation of the restaurant that you can both agree on.

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Usually, I think the industry standard is two and a half times a yearly revenue, and that's just what it is. And then, there's always that, like, you have an emotional buildup in there which can make it more or less. So we were eventually able to kind of reach that agreement on that.

Michelle Little: Exciting. So did you change anything after you purchased it?

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Did you have a new vision or . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Right off the rip, we absolutely did not. I was very nervous about how people would-- 'cause things are different, even if nothing about the process is different, just knowing that there's some over-arching thing being different, they'll think it's worse, et cetera. So I was very cognizant and very self-conscious about people saying, oh, now that Bryan owns it instead of Brian, then it's going to be entirely different.

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So we change the menu every season. The first menu when we came on, it was very similar to what it was beforehand. And then slowly we changed everything up a little bit just naturally 'cause I'm a different person than they are. Kind of got to put my own imprint on the menu. But we always have staples that have been just proven through customer feedback that these are just great and we're gonna keep using them. But we always put new things on every once in a while. Eventually, we added on Friday night dinners just as a way to expand again. And then, we did that until we shut down for renovations in 2019, I think is right. 2019?

Michelle Little: Yeah. Yeah, I think so.

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It is funny that you're both named Bryan, so even y'all's names . . . [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Bryan Stanfield, Brian Somersfield. People always get us confused. We're both tall dudes, too. Yeah.

Michelle Little: So Friday night was the first dinner that you added? You just did dinner on Friday nights?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. When we first took over, we just did Friday night dinners. For our staff of twelve at the time, doing dinners every night was too hard. And also the space we had it was too hard. We were a nine-hundred-square-foot restaurant with four-hundred square foot of serving space, four-hundred square feet of cooking space, and then, you know, like miscellaneous storage and whatnot. So doing it every night was just-- no way we could do it. But we wanted to kind of break into that market and try out some different things, so Friday night was where it was at.

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Michelle Little: Did the crowds come? How did it go at first?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. It went really well at first. By that point in time, we had a pretty good name established so when we announced we were doing it, it was, like, we were overwhelmed too much at the beginning. It was, like, wow, we're not prepared enough for this. But, yeah, I think that, after the initial couple of Fridays of that, it kind of petered out. People were, like, oh, well, it's not a new, exciting thing anymore, and we kinda settled into the-- the thing I love about ZaZa, is every week we see the same people. We'd have the same thirty, forty people come in, and we had an additional however many, but we always had those people every week. And every Friday night we'd do a different four or five entrees, different four or five appetizers, and so they'd always come and be very excited about it.

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[Unrelated conversation] Give me one second.

Michelle Little: Oh, sure. Yeah. Let me pause this. [Pause] Okay. On again. Let's see. So we're kind of up towards talking about the renovation, I think.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: But also, I kind of want to explore-- because you personally have been in this building for so long, and while it was empty. I think Birmingham School of Law moved out maybe in 2012.

Bryan Stanfield: So I can't say for sure when they moved out, but I feel like they were here until, like, 2016 or so.

Michelle Little: They may have been, yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: Like, after I bought the spot, they were here for a little bit. But even then, it's a ten-story building and they took up maybe two stories of it. The whole time I've been here it's probably been 70 to 80 percent vacant.

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We'd have a couple business here and there, a couple law offices. A lot of the lawyers that aren't in this building say this is where lawyers go to die.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: When you're at kind of the end of your practice, it's shrinking, you just come here 'cause it's cheaper. That's our building.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So did you start to kind of explore the building and observe what all was left and . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: I mean, immediately, that was always kind of something that everyone on staff did. So first, I said it was mostly vacant and we had kind of free rein when Brian and Geoff first opened up and up until 2019, we had a garden on the roof where we were able to grow things for the restaurant. So they didn't really care what we did here. The owner lived in Florida. The management, not that it wasn't good, but just that they were, do what you want 'cause there's no one else here.

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So we'd go into the basement, check things out that used to be half our garden roof, and then when people moved out, yeah, absolutely go through everything, see what was left. It's kind of like building spelunking.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Exactly. So did you start the garden or . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: No, no. That was Geoff. Before I worked here, he built the whole thing.

Michelle Little: Oh, wow! So almost right off the . . .

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Right off the road.

Michelle Little: That's amazing! How big was it?

Bryan Stanfield: It was three beds that were, I'd say, 12 x 5. It took a massive amount of work, I'm sure. And just the amount of time it took for him to get the soil up there, intense.

Michelle Little: Yeah. That's so impressive.

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So what all did y'all grow? What were y'all able to grow?

Bryan Stanfield: Well, being in the middle of the downtown on the tenth floor, you're limited 'cause just the blacktop effect, the heat, the constant sun. So it's a lot of peppers, some tomatoes, and really that's about it in the summer that would do consistently well. And in the winter arugula was pretty much the only thing that could consistently come down. We've had some herbs. Basil did all right up there, but in the hot sun it kind of would wilt, too.

Michelle Little: What was the watering process like? [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Well, they have spigots on the roof and so you just pull it over.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: And originally Geoff built it with some irrigation, so all you had to do was turn on the spigot. Eventually, that rotted out and you had to just do it with a bucket, but yeah.

Michelle Little: And did the elevators remain in working order during all the years of . . . ?

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Bryan Stanfield: Oh, I don't think they've ever really been in working order. They would occasionally break down. But up until-- literally last week they demolished the elevators, so up until then they've been around. They'd take you to the tenth floor and you'd have to walk two more flights to get to the roof, but yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. And so what other weird things did you discover in the building during all those years when it was abandoned?

Bryan Stanfield: I don't know about weird things, but there's a lot of interesting things downstairs. So this, when it was originally built in 1903, was the First National Bank building. The First National Bank was housed here, so down in the basement there is a giant 1900s safe with this beautiful intricate-- it's like a wartime, maritime military craft painted on it, which is just beautiful.

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A lot of gold inlay. And there's a couple more saferooms that have old architecture firms and architecture plans from all around Birmingham from 1910 to, like, 1940, which was all very interesting. Then you have rooms on rooms of rooms of just old-- the hardware and old computers, et cetera from offices that were just abandoned, and people were, like, oh, we're not gonna be here anymore; we'll just leave all this stuff. So there's just lots of people's lives that they just kind of like left. There's an old locker room down there that has people's old check stubs, their old clothing that they just left in their lockers when, I guess, they decided that they're not working there anymore, which is all just cool.

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You get a little snapshot. Old papers, same thing. It's, like, oh, yeah, see what's going on. The old check stubs are interesting 'cause, like, oh, man, someone worked eighty hours and they made thirty bucks or something. Wow. Times are different.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah. And I think I mentioned to you one time I went in-- I guess it was after your renovation and when you had to leave the restaurant to go to the restroom, 'cause the restroom used to be inside, right?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And I snooped in a closet back over towards the left, and there were survival biscuits, like, these large gold cans of survival biscuits.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm, yeah. Yup. So those survival biscuits were on the way to our old storage room. But down in the basement, in the very back corner, there is a tiny little fallout shelter that I'm assuming was built in kind of like World War II times, I'm not sure, that had just a ton of those survival biscuits in there.

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Which, to this day, they're still okay, the ones that aren't water damaged.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I'd love to know what happened to those. I haven't . . .

Bryan Stanfield: So most everything in the building now that was movable has been either tossed out or sold. In fact, a couple people came through the building at one point in time and kind of picked through for resale anything that was kind of small and movable. So I think there's maybe some of those opened ones, but any ones that were closed they could make money off those, so they sold them.

Michelle Little: So what happened to the-- you don't still have the garden?

Bryan Stanfield: No. When Orchestra bought the building in 2019, for obvious reasons, they didn't want people on the roof that weren't building employees 'cause that's not safe. So they said, hey, no more of that.

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I get it. There's liability issues. There's no railing on the roof. It's very short. You could fall off. So they didn't want that.

Michelle Little: Okay. So when Orchestra purchased the building, did you guys consider leaving?

Bryan Stanfield: Absolutely.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, yeah. So when they purchased the building-- well, it was before 2019. That's just when they decided the demolition was gonna start. But, yeah, when they purchased the building, everything was okay. When they decided that, hey, we're gonna renovate the building and it's gonna drastically affect you guys being here, and for a while, regardless if you renovate your space, you're gonna have to shut down for a little bit so we can do work to the façade out front, we definitely looked around. The biggest thing is we have a great community down here. We've been down here for a long time.

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We know the customers and we didn't want to move too far. So we looked around at a couple buildings, but nothing really worked the exact same. We looked at the corner spot right across the street and then the Iron Age Building over there for a little while, but it kinda, when it came down to it, what Orchestra offered us to stay was, like, oh, we'll just stay. 'Cause either way, we'd have to shut down for a little while even if we opened up somewhere else 'cause the buildout times.

Michelle Little: Okay. So you looked at that building right there, like, next to Chocolatá?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. We looked at that building over there and then we looked at the White Columns [sp] and the Iron Age Building, that space right over there.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: We looked a little bit at moving by Railroad Park, but that kind felt a little too far for what our clients were, being just the downtown lawyers and bankers and whatnot that don't really go more than a couple blocks, only walk for lunch.

Michelle Little: Um-hm, yeah.

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So tell me about the renovation process, like, deciding to do that and what that process was like.

Now you want more water. Okay. We can pause.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, I was thinking about it.

Michelle Little: Do you want to pause?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, let's do.

Michelle Little: Okay. [Pause]

Bryan Stanfield: What was the renovation process?

Michelle Little: Yes.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Tell me about . . .

Bryan Stanfield: So the renovation process, it was my first time to kind of get hands on with developing and designing a restaurant, which was a great, great experience. I take a lot of interest and care in the food, but the cosmetics of the restaurants was kind of beyond me. So we had a couple designer friends that had been regulars in the restaurants, so I brought them in to kinda help me with the aesthetics of the restaurant.

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Deciding on the shape and flow of the restaurant took probably most of the time. Like, how can we expand the dining room but still keep it where the kitchen's open, we can talk to the customers is a big deal, they can see the pizzas laying out front was a big deal. And then, keep the same kind of flow. So that took a while. Once we decided on exactly what we wanted to do, just figuring out the actual design elements of it. I was lucky enough to, like I said, partner with my friend, Andrew Thomas, who is a designer based out of Good People who was able to, like, hey, here's three tables, here's three colors, you pick one of these. Here's three light fixtures, you pick one of these. It narrowed my choice down. That was still nerve wracking.

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All the respect in the world to people who can do that as their job. I cannot. So it was very interesting, and it was great to be a part of that process, but I'll just stick with cooking.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah, that's a totally different game. I can't imagine. Now, how much did the footprint expand when you renovated, or did it? I've debated this.

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, absolutely.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: So where the kitchen is right now was all part of UPS. The restaurant ended where the counter is over there, so it went from nine-hundred square feet to just under sixteen-hundred square feet, so almost doubled. So, yeah, everything you guys are standing in right now-- for the camera-- they can't see that-- but everything you're standing in right now, it was the kitchen before, and then, the dining room was on the other side of this column only, plus the customer bathroom.

0:36:01

Currently, right below you is where our old espresso machine used to be. Those two circles were the drain.

Michelle Little: Oh.

Bryan Stanfield: That square behind you was where the oven was before. Yeah, roughly double.

Michelle Little: Okay. And so were you able to expand your kitchen-- I mean, how many people currently work in the kitchen compared to how many people worked before?

Bryan Stanfield: So just overall we went from a staff of twelve to a staff of twenty-two, so about double, the total staff. Our kitchen went from four to about ten right now, so a little over double is all.

Michelle Little: Okay. And now, I know y'all took the restroom out and that's in the hallway now.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Did you expand into the--

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm. Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Because that, on the other side of that wall, is the lobby, so that's as far as we could go that way.

0:37:01

Michelle Little: Right.

Bryan Stanfield: There were some design plans to potentially give us space on the other side, make us kind of like a cafeteria, open to the lobby, you'd walk into the building, and it'd be all ZaZa in the front. But I didn't really want that kind of cafeteria feel. I wanted a lot more intimate than that, so we decided to not go with that.

Michelle Little: I see. Okay. 'Cause those two spaces have also been empty for a while, right?

Bryan Stanfield: On the other side?

Michelle Little: Right. On the other side of the lobby there was . . .

Bryan Stanfield: So on the other side was The Clip Joint. Our good friend Laura was over there for a long time cutting hair. She moved down the street when everyone in the building got kicked out. And then, on the other side of that on the corner spot it was couple different businesses over time. Most recently, it was a company called Whiteboard-IT, but they moved to

the tenth floor well before the renovation happened, and then they moved out of the building, obviously, when renovation happened.

0:37:59

Michelle Little: Okay. And do you remember, there used to be-- I'm sure you remember this guy-- there was this little jewelry repair shop kind of, I guess, where the restroom is right now.

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Do you remember that little-- it was just one guy.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, it was. So we actually had several just, like, tiny little jewelers that had been in this building. I didn't know that particular one. He didn't come to the office much anymore. There's another one on, like, the sixth floor who had been here-- him or his dad had been here since the building opened in 1903. And he was here up until he was in his late [19]80s, came here every day, and he was here up until the building removed everybody in 2019.

Michelle Little: Wow. Do you remember his name?

Bryan Stanfield: I can't. I can't.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Milton something. I don't remember.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. Yeah. And so now, I guess where he was, that's where they put the restrooms in.

0:38:59

I don't know how accurate this is, but I've heard that, because the building was so old and mostly men worked in the building in the early 1900s, there weren't enough women's restrooms.

Bryan Stanfield: So I can't speak for that exactly, but it would kind of make sense. They do have some women's restrooms now, but it obviously looks like they were added after the fact. If you go to the tenth floor of the building, they have this beautiful, ornate bathroom with a skylight and all this gold inlay. It's great. And there's a little closet halfway down that's the women's restroom, and it just looks like they added it in much later. So I could see, but I'd never heard that.

Michelle Little: Okay. So, now, how long did the renovations of your space take?

Bryan Stanfield: It was very quick. We closed down in February and I think we opened back up in the end of June, start of July.

Michelle Little: Okay.

0:40:01

Bryan Stanfield: So they gutted the restaurant, changed the square footage, rebuilt it entirely in six months. I was very impressed. It felt too long in the process. I was, like, you guys need to speed this up, but overall you built out an entire restaurant in six months, so . . .

Michelle Little: Yeah. Were you coming in every day, like . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, absolutely. I was either coming into the space or I was going to the--  
[Phone ringing] Do you want me to stop?

Michelle Little: Will it keep ringing or . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: Not that long.

Michelle Little: We'll wait till it-- this happens and sometimes we just kind of wait till it stops.

Q2: So y'all are closed-closed today.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: You can't help them today. [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: No. Yep.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Bryan Stanfield: So I was either coming into the restaurant or the white shell of what will be the restaurant, or I was going to the offices of the design firm or the construction company just to meet with them, talk about elements, or just, like, hey, guys, what's going on?

0:41:06

Just updates. Which they were great with that.

Michelle Little: Yeah. What was the hardest decision to make, was it, like, kitchen-wise or ... ?

Bryan Stanfield: Like I was speaking about earlier, just the layout of the restaurant where we could keep the same kind of flow that's worked for how we ran the business. [Phone ringing]

Michelle Little: They're really determined. [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Just kind of pause for a minute.

Michelle Little: Okay. But then, everybody's so good about putting, "We're closed for the week." [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Yep.

Michelle Little: Okay. So designing the layout you were talking about.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Keeping the same flow that worked for us, being a counter-service restaurant, being able to still have our kind of espresso bar, still have the pizzas out front where people could see that, we could talk to them about that, was all very important in figuring out how we could make those elements all work together.

0:42:08

And then, also, we wanted to add on dinners five nights a week where we were doing table service instead of counter service, so how we could kind of work both those separate concepts in the same space was always kind of the question. How do we make that flow together?

Michelle Little: Yeah. It works so well. I love it.

Bryan Stanfield: It is. It did. Now, during COVID, we switched to all counter service, no more table service, and I don't know if we'll ever go back to doing table service now. We'll see. It was always kind of a problem or just an issue to run your counter service. You had your employees that knew how to do that, and then you had your employees that knew how to do table service, and they weren't as interchangeable. So it was really like running two restaurants separately.

0:42:58

So now that we're just one lean, mean machine, it's, like, I'm not sure if we'll go back.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Yeah. So let's talk about that, 'cause not long after you reopened the pandemic hit.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Yeah. Before we hit a year. Yeah. Not long after we reopened. We reopened end of June, start of July, and then December you started hearing issues in Wuhan, and in January, I think, you started hearing, oh, in Washington there are some cases. And then we as a staff started talking about it, and we decided to close down right away, close down our interior and kind of pivot to a only-curb-side, only-delivery restaurant to keep us safe, keep customers safe, figuring out how we can keep running the business in that.

0:44:04

Michelle Little: Yeah. So y'all went ahead and closed even before the orders were written?

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, yeah. I'd seen a restaurant in Washington pivot from what they were doing into a strictly to-go, different concept, and they really made a great push about, hey, we're this whole new fun concept; come try us out. I was, like, oh, man, that's a great idea. If you're gonna do it, lean into it hard. So I was, like, well, we're inevitably going to have to do this. Let's just lean into this as hard as we can and try and make this a thing, pivot the business, which is exactly what we did. We renamed the business for a while from Trattoria ZaZa to ZaZa Casa, 'cause it's, like, we're going to your house. We changed the logo. We made a hard push on that.

Michelle Little: That's incredible!

0:45:00

Yeah. So how long did y'all do that and how did that go?

Bryan Stanfield: Well, obviously, it was different, but it was great. Up until that time we had never done whole pizzas. We had only done pizza by the slice. We did catering whole pizzas but to the customer, like, call in, hey, thirty minutes you have a whole pizza, we'd never done that. So we transitioned to that. It was a little bit of a learning process, but it was obviously an easier transition for us to go to a to-go and delivery concept versus other restaurants that were more kind of like fine dining or table focused. So, yeah, how'd that go, that was the question.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, it went--

Michelle Little: Well, and just how long did y'all have to operate that way?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. I'd say the initial, like, wow, this is incredible what you guys are doing, that outpouring-- I think a lot of restaurants felt that. It was great. Honestly, we were busier right off the rip than we were right before that when we were doing our regular stuff, so that was incredible.

0:46:00

Felt great. And we kept that up until-- I think we did it for about fifteen months until the numbers started coming back down, we were feeling pretty good about it, and we decided we'd do limited indoor dining again. And then, like, literally, two weeks after it's, like, oh, man, the numbers are jumping back. It's another wave. But at that point in time I didn't really feel like-- I felt like we knew enough about it that we could do it in a safe manner with less eating inside, so we didn't pivot back.

Michelle Little: I know you guys have always had a little bit of outdoor seating--

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: --but when did outdoor dining kind of come into play during the pandemic?

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. So we've always had maybe twenty or thirty seats outside. And we shut all that down at the start of the pandemic 'cause we just didn't know. [Unrelated conversation]

0:47:02

So we had outdoor seating, about twenty or thirty seats just throughout the entire history of ZaZa. We shut that down when we shut everything else down at the start of the pandemic. I would say probably maybe eight, nine months in we brought some back in. And the city, also kind of seeing, hey, the need to pump business up, and REV Bham, a business, a nonprofit here in Birmingham that's trying to bring businesses downtown, they partnered with Birmingham to kind of renovate our sidewalk, give us a little more seating space. So we were able with that to expand to about fifty seats outside when we reopened in September-ish with our outdoor dining.

0:48:02

Michelle Little: And then, there were some Dine in the Streets events, right?

Bryan Stanfield: Yes. That was same kind of thought processes for the city. It seems like people are comfortable dining outside. We want to bring more business to the businesses downtown. So they thought of the process to allow us to permit to shut the streets down so we can throw more tables outside. So especially the first year, we were doing it at least once a

month, sometimes twice a month, where us and the other businesses out here kind of get together, have the street shut down, and be able to dine in the street. The first couple ones we played movies during. We'd have live music during. The movies were great, but it was just the time of the year-- it only works when it's dark early. When it's light early, it's like, oh, we're playing a movie that no one can see.

0:49:02

Michelle Little: [Laughter] And then, logistically, what is that like for your servers to do-- did everyone just get their food at the counter and then go find their seat outside?

Bryan Stanfield: So we've always-- being that counter service, you come in, you get a number, and you go sit down and then the servers will run the food to the table. So the only difference was they just walked it slightly further than they would've if it were inside. And by that point in time, when we started doing Eat in the Street, we'd already been serving to a bigger patio, so they were kind of used to running around outside, finding and taking a number. So the only issue is that maybe you needed another server sometimes 'cause you just have so much more distance to travel.

Michelle Little: What was your staffing like during the pandemic? Did you ever have to cut down on staff?

Bryan Stanfield: So it was always very important to me to provide a job for people that wanted it. So I was lucky enough to-- I never had to lay anyone off through the pandemic 'cause we pivoted to doing delivery in-house to keep all the hours for us.

0:50:05

Immediately, people just not feeling safe, unknown what's happening, how it's transferred, we went from a staff of twenty-three at the time, I think, down to about fourteen, 'cause we had enough people that just didn't want to. But then, everyone that wanted hours, we were able to give hours to.

Michelle Little: That's fantastic!

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. And again, very fortunate that the city came out and supported that where we were able to provide that for people. And then, immediately, we were able to bump back up to eighteen or so.

Michelle Little: And have you had any staffing trouble, just finding enough staff now? Every news story is pointing--

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. I would say Birmingham, in general, having such a vibrant food scene-- [Unrelated conversation]

0:51:03

Birmingham having such a vibrant food scene, but having such a, I guess, small population to pull from, restaurants have always had a hard time staffing entirely in their kitchen or their servers. So it's always kind of been an issue. In general, we haven't had a ton of problems with that. Everyone at my restaurant, the dishwashers, the kitchen, the servers, everyone makes \$17 an hour, so just paying a little more we've not had too much of a problem getting people in the door, but it's always kind of a problem. But we generally have low turnover. Most everyone that's worked for me has worked for me for multiple years, so there's not a whole lot of need for it.

Michelle Little: That's great. And so now, there's a lot of construction going on. [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

0:52:01

Michelle Little: Can you talk a little bit about what you're going through? The cameras aren't getting this, but we've got the scaffolding out front, the lobby is under construction. What are some challenges you're dealing with with that right now?

Bryan Stanfield: Well, if the last two years have shown you anything, it's just, like, constant pivoting. So it is a little frustrating sometimes to have the scaffolding out front, but at least we're still able to operate, and you just have to adapt to what is there. We have less outdoor seating than we had before, but now we have a little more indoor seating than we did here in the pandemic, so overall it's roughly the same. I don't know. You gotta make do with what it is and keep trying to operate.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I know the plans for the building have changed a couple of times--

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: --since Orchestra announced their original-- The Frank design.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

0:53:02

Michelle Little: And I think now it's apartments. Yep.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. It's a hundred and eighty, 400 and 600 square foot micro lofts is the new plan.

Michelle Little: So what do you think or hope for when that's gonna be completed, and what do you think-- how it might impact ZaZa?

Bryan Stanfield: Well, I think potentially it's incredible, having a hundred and eighty or a hundred and twenty, whatever, having people that are in the building 24/7 outside of when they go to their job would be great. 'Cause our hardest times are when people aren't at work because, being in the business district, your clients are just there when they're at work. So having people there at night, having people there early in the morning will be great. I'm looking forward to it. They say it's gonna be next November 2022.

0:54:00

I, in general, have worries that they'll be too high priced, and they won't be able to attract people down here. I think in general there's a housing issue in Birmingham, just overall in the country, where people can't afford to live anywhere, so I'm a little nervous about that, but we'll see how that goes.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I mean, it has the potential to really expand.

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, absolutely. We stopped doing breakfast last year. Just there was not enough business down here. When we have people in the building, absolutely. That would be fantastic. We've been in this building for almost twelve years now and it's never been more than 30 percent occupied, so I can't even really fathom what it's gonna be like.

Michelle Little: Yeah, that's true. Have you seen the lunch crowds, the dinner-- because I feel like maybe people are starting to creep back into the office.

0:55:05

Bryan Stanfield: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: But how have you seen the crowds shift as you've opened back indoor dining and . . . ?

Bryan Stanfield: I would say, again, we were very fortunate that people were supporting us even when they weren't coming downtown, they were taking it home, they were picking it up more on their off-work hours. Now that people are coming back downtown, which is happening, you just see kind of that more of a concentration of business during your normal eleven to three lunch hours, work hours. You definitely do see it. Now, it's not 100 percent back. We used to have a hard start at eleven and a hard end at two, two-thirty, and not much business after that. Now, it's pretty consistent the whole way through. It's a little less of a mad dash in the middle and a more just, like, consistent business the whole day.

0:56:01

Michelle Little: Okay. Oh, this is a random way to end, but I wanted you to tell me about the espresso machine and that it's been here for-- [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Little: Yeah. What's the story of the espresso machine?

Bryan Stanfield: So this is a Victor Arduino Venus bar. It was handmade in Turin, Italy in 2009, when the restaurant was opened. It is a manual two-group head machine. It's kind of like the Lamborghini of cars. It's beautiful, it performs pretty well, it's very problematic, and when it has problems, it takes a while to get it fixed. But it is without a doubt a beautiful conversation piece, which is what you want.

0:56:57

Over the years, it performs pretty well but we've lost it probably a combined year and a half for different issues. We'd have to have it sent off for a while or we were waiting on a part to be made. But we love Richard and . . .

Michelle Little:       Yep. He's a beauty.

Bryan Stanfield:       Um-hm.

Michelle Little:       All right. Well, is there anything--

Q2:     Can I ask a question?

Michelle Little:       Oh, yeah.

Bryan Stanfield:       Yeah, sure.

Q2:     I would like to know the story of the name, and I know the restaurant has gone through a couple of iterations of the name.

Bryan Stanfield:       Yeah, yeah, yeah. Absolutely, absolutely. So when Brian was in Rome, one of his favorite al taglio pizza places was ZaZa Trattoria over there, which isn't an uncommon name. There are a couple of them. There's one in Florence, as well, not related but just a rip-off of pizza. So when he opened up here, he used the same ZaZa Trattoria for the first eight months or so, and then a restaurant in Montgomery called Sa Za threatened, like, hey, it's too close to our name so we're gonna sue your guys unless you change your name.

0:58:07

So they pivoted-- they had just started up. They had no money. They were trying to figure everything out. So they didn't even want to fight-- even talk to a lawyer about it, so they changed the name to Trattoria Centrale, which was always kind of a-- being two words that are kind of a little harder to say or pronounce, people are unsure, it was always kind of an issue. Most of our regulars, even though it was only ZaZa for eight months, still called it ZaZa. So when we bought the restaurant over and we were renovating, it was, like, well, we definitely want to go back to this name that's much easier for people to talk about. Talked to a lawyer and, like, oh, no, you can call your restaurant whatever. A restaurant in Montgomery doesn't have any say over this. So we switched back to ZaZa.

Michelle Little: I love it. Well, is there anything we didn't cover that you want people to know about your restaurant or . . . ? Oh that's--

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, is that someone y'all know?

Michelle Little: No.

Q2: No.

Michelle Little: I think I do know them.

Q2: By accident, yes.

Bryan Stanfield: Oh, okay. [Unrelated conversation]

Michelle Little: But, yeah, is there anything we didn't talk about that you wish we had covered or that you want people to know about ZaZa?

Q2: If you want one second to think about it . . .

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah, yeah. I'm thinking about. I mean, I don't know. I don't think so.

Michelle Little: And don't feel any pressure to come up with anything.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

Michelle Little: I just always ask people at the end of an interview. Sometimes people come into an interview with, like, they know this thing they want to talk about, and we don't happen to cover it.

Bryan Stanfield: No. I had nothing I wanted to talk about.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Bryan Stanfield: I was really hoping that you could lead this . . .

Michelle Little: [Laughter] But, yeah, if there's not anything, okay.

Bryan Stanfield: Yeah.

0:59:57

[End]