

Rose Campisi
Rose's Devil Crabs
Tampa, Florida

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Date: February 11, 2015

Location: Rose Campisi's Home Residence – Tampa, FL

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Deborah Mitchum

Length: Twenty-One Minutes

Project: Tampa Devil Crabs

START OF INTERVIEW

(Sound of Ms. Campisi's aquarium in the background.)

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:14*]

Sara Wood: So it is Wednesday, February 11, 2015. I am in Tampa, Florida with Ms. Rose Campisi and we are at her home here. Usually I have people go ahead and say hello and introduce themselves. Can you say hello and tell me your name, Rose?

[00:00:29]

Rose Campisi: Hi. My name is Rose Campisi, native of Tampa, Florida.

[00:00:33]

SW: And can you tell me your birth date for the record?

[00:00:36]

RC: Um, nine, twelve, fifty-three [September 12, 1953].

[00:00:38]

SW: And can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

[00:00:41]

RC: I basically grew up in this area. My grandparents had a grocery store [Orange Front Market] and my father was in the produce business, and I pretty much stayed in the same area.

[00:00:53]

SW: And could you tell me your grandparents' and your parents' names for the record?

[00:00:56]

RC: My grandparents were Isabel Campisi and Angelo, they owned the Orange Front Market on Nebraska, and my parents were Victor and Katie Campisi.

[00:01:05]

SW: And you said you grew up in this area here. Could you talk about what the name of it is and what it was like back then?

[00:01:10]

RC: This area that we live in now is called Seminole Heights, which was the place to be back in the day, and I pretty much came back to my home, to my area, where I enjoy being and [pauses] that's about it. [laughs]

[00:01:29]

SW: Could you tell me a little bit about--? You talked about this a little bit before, but your grandparents came here when they were real small.

[00:01:38]

RC: My grandparents came over; they were like five and eight. They came over and they came into Ellis Island, which from there they came to Tampa, Florida. As they grew older they worked in the cigar factories and rolled cigars and that's where they met, and from there they got married and they opened up their grocery store.

[00:01:54]

SW: You said they were both from Palermo?

[00:01:57]

RC: Palermo, Italy, yes.

[00:01:58]

SW: And do you know, in terms of--? I want to ask you some questions about the devil crab, but do you know if your grandparents had this tradition back in Palermo?

[00:02:13]

RC: No, they did not, and my grandparents—. I'm the one that started it in our family. My parents did not have it, and it's just something that I started when I had my own restaurant, at the produce market.

[00:02:27]

SW: Can you talk a little bit about how you started in the restaurant?

[00:02:33]

RC: I started after my husband was killed in an automobile accident my brother and I opened up a restaurant, called Red's Twins Café in honor of my dad, at the produce market, and from there I just—. I actually was making devil crabs before that, and the reason I started it was because my husband was in the military and we were stationed out of state, and we always loved devil crab so I started making them for my family. Then when I came back to Tampa is when I started making them for other people and friends and family.

[00:03:10]

SW: Can you tell me your first husband's name?

[00:03:12]

RC: My first husband's name was Ernest Brantley.

[00:03:16]

SW: And so this was something—. Ernest grew up here in Tampa as well?

[00:03:20]

RC: He was from Georgia but he lived here probably most of his life, and that's where we met, was in Tampa.

[00:03:27]

SW: Do you know where in Georgia he was from?

[00:03:28]

RC: Dublin, Georgia.

[00:03:31]

SW: So you both loved devil crabs, and then where—? He was in the military so you guys were in North Carolina, Louisiana, Hawaii.

[00:03:40]

RC: Correct. We were in North Carolina first, where my son was born. From there we went to Louisiana, where my daughter was born, and from there we went to—. And actually I started making the devil crabs in Hawaii. That's where we started.

[00:03:51]

SW: Were crabs abundant there?

[00:03:56]

RC: No, [*Laughs*] but when you want something that bad, you know, you just – and it was just for us, so it really wasn't that big of an expense.

[00:04:07]

SW: Do you remember the first time you had devil crab?

[00:04:11]

RC: At Ricottas is where we started because my husband then lived in that area and every Saturday we would go and have Cuban sandwiches and devil crabs. And they didn't make them back then; they bought them.

[00:04:29]

SW: Do you know who they bought them from?

[00:04:32]

RC: Probably Santo's.

[00:04:34]

SW: And that was called Ricottas, the--?

[00:04:36]

RC: Ricottas.

[00:04:37]

SW: Okay, so how did you learn how to make them?

[00:04:43]

RC: Actually the first time I made them was a disaster, so my mom worked for the school lunchroom and she said, "When I come to Hawaii I'll teach you how to make them." So, I said "Fine," so when she came over she was the one that taught me to use the slice of bread to hold them together, because mine just scattered out in the frying pan. So she taught me how to make them and ever since then I just [*pauses*] kept up the tradition.

[00:05:09]

SW: So she was making them for the school lunchroom?

[00:05:11]

RC: She did not. She just knew how they were made so she taught me. And then she taught me the recipe that she knew but then as I was remarried to my second husband we kind of tweaked. . . did our little thing to it ourselves.

[00:05:27]

SW: Could you tell me your second husband's name for the record?

[00:05:30]

RC: My second husband is Harold Murphy. He's from Buffalo, New York.

[00:05:36]

SW: And what was the school that your mother worked at?

[00:05:38]

RC: She worked for Riverhills Elementary School in Temple Terrace [*in Tampa, Florida*].

[00:05:43]

SW: So do you know how she learned? Was it something that she picked up – you know, not making them in the lunchroom – but were there other women or men who worked in the lunchroom that taught her?

[00:05:52]

RC: She belonged to the Sons of Italy, which is like a club, and I'm sure the ladies there, when – because they did a lot of the cooking for the Sons of Italy, and I'm sure they made them there or they've shown her how to make them.

[00:06:05]

SW: You were telling me this, this morning, when you were making them in the kitchen, but can you tell me a little bit about what you know of the history of them, or how they came to be the devil crab?

[00:06:15]

RC: From what my understanding is, the people from the cigar—. Back in the day, with the people that worked at the cigar factories, whenever they went on strike they had to still continue to feed their families. Crabs were plentiful back then and they used to go crabbing because it was very inexpensive and they would bring it back and the women would make the—. They called them croquettes, crab croquettes, and that's how they fed their families.

[00:06:40]

SW: When I've been hearing about it and reading about it people talk about how the devil crabs are sort of a combination of three traditions: Cuban, Spanish, and Italian. Is that true, do you think?

[00:06:55]

RC: I think it's more the Spanish people, and probably the Italians but mostly Spanish.

[00:07:03]

SW: And in the cigar factories way back when it was mostly Cuban, Italian, and Spanish workers?

[00:07:12]

RC: Correct.

[00:07:13]

SW: Did your grandparents ever tell you any stories of working in the cigar factories?

[00:07:19]

RC: My grandmother told me that she had met my grandfather in the cigar factory, and I guess he was trying to get to know her and wanted to date her, or whatever, and she was scared

and she left and went to another cigar factory and he followed her, and so I guess that's when they ended up falling in love and getting married.

[00:07:41]

SW: So he followed her to the next factory?

[00:07:43]

RC: [*Laughs*] Yes.

[00:07:44]

SW: Do you know what year she opened up her store?

[00:07:47]

RC: It started out as a fruit stand, and they were known for like—. They used to sell gladiolas, the flowers, and they would have them all across the front of their market and people would come every Sunday and buy the gladiolas and take them to the cemetery. My dad was probably—. I would have to say my dad was, mm, it would had to have been in the '40s [1940s], [*pauses*] because my dad was born in '22 [1922]. It was probably in the '30s [1930s], because he was like eighteen when he got married and they had the store then.

[00:08:29]

SW: Did your grandmother grow the gladiolas at home?

[00:08:32]

RC: They bought them.

[00:08:33]

SW: And was the produce market around back then?

[00:08:36]

RC: Yes. The produce market's been here since 1934.

[00:08:40]

SW: And did your grandmother--? It started as a fruit stand. Do you know how she decided to expand it, or what happened and how it changed?

[00:08:49]

RC: It was a produce market – it was an open-door produce market – and then they ended up enclosing it, and then she brought in the groceries and they had the meat department. And from there my father left and went to the produce market and that's where my father had his business. From there he went to raising cattle and taking them to the slaughterhouse and we had our own meat market and he sold them to families.

[00:09:17]

SW: And where did he have the cattle?

[00:09:20]

RC: We had different feedlots throughout the area of town. He would rent a big feedlot and we would just-- He would put them out there and my brother and I, my twin brother, we would go out and help him every day and feed the cattle.

[00:09:34]

SW: How long did he do that for?

[00:09:36]

RC: Probably-- [*Pauses*] I was probably about eight, and he. . . I was twelve when he passed away, but he was probably doing the cattle business for about six years.

[00:09:52]

SW: Do you see people doing that here in Tampa anymore?

[00:09:56]

RC: No. Ma and pa shops are a thing of the past.

[00:09:59]

SW: Did your grandmother sell devil crabs at her store?

[00:10:02]

RC: No, she did not.

[00:10:04]

SW: And that was on Nebraska.

[00:10:06]

RC: Correct.

[00:10:07]

SW: And can you talk about what it is today, or when she closed?

[00:10:10]

RC: After she closed the place was more or less just a storage unit and then a gentleman took it over and had it completely demolished, and now he has a café called Trinity where he feeds the homeless people breakfast and lunch.

[00:10:27]

SW: Do you know how your dad got started at the produce market?

[00:10:34]

RC: I'm not real sure because I was much younger, but I'm sure from his grandparents' store. I guess our family was just for the love of produce [*laughs*] and he went to the market and had his own business there.

[00:10:50]

SW: Was he doing the produce market and the cattle at the same time, or did he leave the produce market?

[00:10:57]

RC: He left the produce and went to the cattle.

[00:10:58]

SW: Do you know [around what year that was?]

[00:11:00]

RC: Probably around '58 [1958], '59 [1959] he left the market, because he passed away in '64 [1964.]

[00:11:08]

SW: You know, walking around the market with you today, everyone knows you, and you guys go way back at that particular place. Did it still feel like there was a great relationship with people there, even after your father passed, or how did—?

[00:11:25]

RC: Well my father, when he passed away in '64 [1964] I was twelve, so I mean we went up there as kids. But then I purchased the restaurant in 1991 and, I mean things have really changed in that period of time, but I still feel like it's in my blood and I enjoy doing it.

[00:11:48]

SW: Can you tell me [how you came] to buy the restaurant?

[00:11:57]

RC: My husband was killed in 1990 and I—. My brother was at the produce market and the restaurant had come up for sale, and he talked to me about it and said, you know, "Maybe me

and you should venture into it,” so I purchased the restaurant. We named it Red’s Twins Café because my dad’s nickname was Red and I had a twin brother, so we did it in honor of my dad, and we ran it for probably about eighteen years.

[00:12:27]

SW: What were you thinking, getting into the restaurant business? Were you worried?

[00:12:32]

RC: Was I worried, owning the restaurant? No. I always wanted to own a restaurant. I mean that was a little different than what I had in mind, but it was a good venture. [*Door beeps as Ms. Campisi’s husband enters the house through the front living room door.*]

[00:12:45]

SW: Can I ask you a few more questions, and then I’ll get out of your hair for the rest of the day? [*Laughs*] How did you decide what to—? First of all, I guess, could you explain the nature of the market, that it’s not just – you weren’t open from like 8:00 am to 3:00 pm – the nature of the hours of the business and who came in?

[00:13:07]

RC: The produce market is ran during the night because all the people have to come from their stores or their markets and restaurants, so they have to purchase their produce so they can be back to their area, their stores, by morning. So the market opened at 2:00 in the morning. People were lined up at the gate. They came in, they bought all their—. You know, they made their purchases. They came into my restaurant, because I opened at 3:00, and as their trucks were being loaded and the produce brought down to their trucks they all sat in there and that’s where they—. It was more or less a meeting place. They came from all different areas. They were all

friends with each other. That's where they had their breakfast and they left and met back the next day. So I was open from 3:00 am to 12:00 pm six days a week.

[00:14:01]

SW: How did you decide what to fix, what to serve?

[00:14:04]

RC: When I first bought it the guy had his menu and I kind of, when I got in there, I changed things around, and I was supposed to have a special every day by 7:00. So we just planned a special every day and I pretty much listened to my customers of what they wanted and we just-. It was like one big family. We had a good time.

[00:14:27]

SW: And could you talk about some of the things you made, that you were known for there or what they asked for?

[00:14:31]

RC: My specials usually were yellow rice and chicken. I made Steak Milanese. We had spaghetti and meatballs. We had meatloaf and potatoes. Just good hearty lunches.

[00:14:44]

SW: Did you make the devil crabs for the restaurant?

[00:14:46]

RC: I did. I started making them at my restaurant and they were a hit there so we just kept going from there.

[00:14:55]

SW: Why did you decide to get out of the restaurant business?

[00:15:00]

RC: The market had really downsized and slowed, and because of the market—. All of my customers were from the market and they were customers of the market. I had no outside business. As the market started downsizing I kept losing business, so it was time for me to move on.

[00:15:20]

SW: And then what did you do after? Did you take the devil crab business from there? Is that how you kind of branched out?

[00:15:27]

RC: I did. After I closed the restaurant people were still asking me for them, so I would make them, and then I got into the produce business. I worked for Coastal Produce where I ran his business for probably about eight years, and I'm piddling around still in produce.

[00:15:49]

SW: Can you talk about some of the things you do for Coastal now?

[00:15:51]

RC: Coastal, I go on Thursdays and Sundays and he cross-docks meat for the higher end restaurants, such as Hard Rock, and I go on Thursdays and Sundays and I unload his meat trucks for him and then he delivers them the next day.

[00:16:10]

SW: I just have two more questions for you, Rose. I know we talked about this and we went around town today. Could you talk, just for the tape, [about] some of the places you make the devil crabs for today, some of the restaurants?

[00:16:24]

RC: I have Plato Latino. I have A&P Produce. I have Café de Marco and Wahoo's out at the beach.

[00:16:32]

SW: And then you were saying you—. Sometimes people will call you up and you'll make them—.

[00:16:36]

RC: Right. People call me for parties, or Super Bowl parties, or weddings, or baby showers and they'll put in their order and I make them for them as well. I make minis.

[00:16:46]

SW: And I'm just wondering, we were talking about this earlier this morning, but just in terms of the devil crab tradition and how it's, you know, prevailed in Tampa but you don't see it as much even now; just how it's changed in the last maybe ten or fifteen years of you making them, anything that you've noticed in the change?

[00:17:07]

RC: No—. For awhile, I guess, before I had gotten into the devil crab business, I mean we went to, you know, one place to buy them, but now that it's starting to be like, I don't know, kind of competition, but more people are making them and it's just a fun thing to do; keep up the tradition in Tampa.

[00:17:32]

SW: And I know we talked about this earlier but I want to ask you again, do you still eat them?

[00:17:38]

RC: [*Laughs*] Not as much as I used to. I had one today with you, but normally you—. When you make something so much you just—. You don't eat them as much as you did.

[00:17:51]

SW: I'm wondering too, why do you still decide to make them, because, you know, we were talking about this I think yesterday, and you still make them and you've been doing it for so long. What keeps you doing this?

[00:18:04]

RC: Because I enjoy people talking about them, I enjoy watching people eat them. They just, you know, it's—. They just love them and I just enjoy making them.

[00:18:16]

SW: I explained to you yesterday, we don't ask people to give away recipes or secret ingredients or anything, but can you just talk, on a basic level, about what goes into a devil crab?

[00:18:25]

RC: I sauté my peppers and onions and garlic. I use a marinara sauce, hot sauce, and my crab meat of course, and I wrap them in bread and dip them in egg and Italian breadcrumbs.

[00:18:45]

SW: And is that pretty much the way that your mom did it?

[00:18:48]

RC: Yes.

[00:18:49]

SW: I know I've already asked you this, but do you know who taught her?

[00:18:54]

RC: No, I really don't, other than, like I said, she probably seen someone make them, because she really did not make them, and then as I started making them and I been, you know, more and more and they've been getting out, my brother used to-. She'd say, "I taught her how to make them and she's getting all the credit for them," and my brother said, "Well, tell her you need some royalties from them." [*Laughs*]

[00:19:15]

SW: Well, Rose, I've taken up a lot of your time today, but I'm just wondering, is there anything else you want to add that you think is important about devil crab or Tampa?

[00:19:25]

RC: It's just a great place to live. I've always come back to Tampa. I would never leave.

[00:19:33]

SW: Is there something that's special that you would want people to know about Tampa, for people who aren't from here?

[00:19:40]

RC: We have great beaches. The weather's a lot nicer here. We're the warmest state in the whole United States. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

[00:19:51]

SW: And just in terms of the changes you see now in Tampa, is there anything remarkable that you would want to talk about in terms of how Tampa's changed since you were growing up here?

[00:20:03]

RC: No. Actually I think they're trying to bring it back to the way it was, because it just—. There's a lot of changes but people are, I think, coming back to like the '50s [1950s] and '60s [1960s].

[00:20:19]

SW: What do you mean when you say that?

[00:20:21]

RC: As far as the way people are living, as far as bringing back old businesses, and just trying to bring back the tradition.

[00:20:31]

SW: Do you think there's a place for devil crab in that?

[00:20:35]

RC: There will always be a place for devil crabs. [*Laughs*]

[00:20:37]

SW: Well, Rose, thank you so much for doing this today. I appreciate it.

[00:20:41]

RC: Not a problem.

[00:20:43]

SW: I'm just going to say too that we are sitting next to an aquarium, so the brook you hear in the background is this really beautiful aquarium in Rose's living room.

[00:20:55]

END OF INTERVIEW