Chris Dupont
Café Dupont
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Michelle Little: Okay. So today is Monday, January 10th-- hard to believe-- 2022, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Chris Dupont at his restaurant, Café Dupont. And this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District in downtown Birmingham. So Chris, to get started, will you just tell me about your childhood, growing up in New Orleans. And you don't have to tell me your age if you don't want to but give me a general sense of just when you were growing up in New Orleans. [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: Growing up in New Orleans I was a child of the [19]70s. That's an era where there was one of everything. You had one phone. You had one or two radio stations. You didn't have a lot of distractions. So my life was fairly uncomplicated growing up in a lower middleclass area of New Orleans, a suburb.

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And both of my parents worked. They were part of the generation that have had one job for thirty-eight years. And so I was left home a lot of the times after school, before school catching a bus. And so to eat, to me, was I had to cook my own meals. And that's where it kind of got started where self-sustaining, self-resourcing. And if I wanted good food, I had to cook it, and from eight years old on up. And our house was a little [19]70s bungalow and we had a brand-new stove oven. We had a microwave and a toaster oven. That was the big thing back then, having a toaster oven. And they were all brand new. They had instructions still in the oven when I started using it--

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: -- 'cause my mother did not cook, and neither did my father, of course.

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So it was a unique experience to start cooking and learning on my own.

Michelle Little: And did you have siblings?

Chris Dupont: I did. I have a older sister, and she was three, four years older than I am and so she was definitely doing a lot more than I was. She was playing softball, cheerleader. She was doing so many things that she was always on the go. And so a lot of times growing up, like I said, I was left alone and to my own devices. But as a young kid I picked up a sport, tennis, and that was the height of playing tennis, John McEnroe, Björn Borg, Vitas Gerulaitis. There was all this hype about tennis. And I started playing when I was a young kid. And just so happens we had some tennis courts very close to our house.

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And this pro tennis teacher was out there teaching for free on the weekends and I started going, I just realized that wow, I could do this. And at a very young age I started traveling, playing tennis tournaments, and that kind of fueled me into now I need to-- as an athlete, I can't eat Froot Loops and Apple Jacks all day long. I have to try to manipulate my diet through food, and that's how I started learning about cooking and how to sustain myself in the right foods, the right proteins. And that's kinda where it all started.

Michelle Little: So what were some of your favorite things to cook?

Chris Dupont: It was kind of simple. Just for me to scramble an egg without burning the pan was step one. Learning to use low heat as opposed to high heat. And my mom had this *Joy of Cooking* cookbook that was always on the counter.

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And I think it still had the original tape on it, it was never opened. [Laughter] So I started reading it and just part of, okay, the first step was egg cookery, how to learn how to do eggs and do sunny side up, soft on the other side, boiled eggs. So that's really where I started was eggs and trying to learn different techniques. We had two sauté pans. One was a Teflon coated and one was a metal, so I would just play around with both of them. And then you graduate into, now I want steak and eggs. Now I have a protein with my eggs and start learning how to do that without setting off the smoke alarm and making sure I was using the vent as properly as I could.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: But those are my first memories, besides as a little kid we got the Easy-Bake oven, the original one, and we would make little muffins with the lightbulb.

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And I thought that was just so cool, that it was the magic of the Easy-Bake oven, not anything else we were doing. But that was excellent. It was a good learning experience.

Michelle Little: So how far did you play tennis, on into school?

Chris Dupont: Yes. I played tennis till college. I actually got a college scholarship, so that's how I got to Birmingham. Played at Birmingham Southern College here. And played four years, from [19]81 to finishing in [19]84. So tennis was always a thing for me, and it kinda kept me focused,

kept me out of distractions. And as a high schooler, I would work in restaurants in the summertime to get enough money to travel in the fall and in the spring to play tennis tournaments. So I would go out on my own on a bus or get a ride with someone and go to various parts of Louisiana and play certain tournaments.

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Go to Florida. I've been to Tennessee by myself. Just part of that learning experience. I didn't cook, I just worked in restaurants. And as a sixteen-year-old was my first job at this restaurant called Christian's Restaurant in New Orleans, and it was semi famous at the time. And it was in an old church that was just beautiful, the stained-glass windows along the wall. And you would walk into the room at 3:30 just like everyone else. You'd get into the restaurant and the sun was beaming down on the building and just all this beautiful angelic light coming through the former church, and it just was shining on all the tables. It was just a epic experience just to be in that room from 3:30 to 5:00 with the sun beating in.

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And to me it meant something. I just loved the space. And I was horrible in the dining room. I was not very coordinated. You'd think I would be, but I was very nervous because everyone was so hyper about getting things right, don't make the wrong step, never follow me, move around me. The waiters were very particular about waiter assistants and bus boys, so I was always walking around like I'm trying to avoid to make a mistake instead of trying to be proactive. So after a few drops and a few missteps in the dining room, they put me in the kitchen, not to cook but just to fill water, and I was basically the water boy. And the water dispenser was the former holy water dispenser. They kept it.

Michelle Little: Oh!

Chris Dupont: So they put a spout on it, and I worked the holy water station. So I would just fill up the pitchers and put water in the glasses.

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And that was my first step. And right next to it was what we call a salamander. It's a elevated oven and has flames. And that's where they would warm up the escargot and the toast points that would go out for that first course. So they just said, Chris, put this in the salamander. And I would step on these little crates so I could see what was in it, what was happening. So when you see it bubbling, getting brown, pull it out, put it on this, put the toast on, and just keep it right here on this table. So I was working the holy water station and the escargot station. And after I did that for a few times and you realize at the end of the night all the kitchen staff, they were, like, man, you did a great job! Or that's awesome! Chris, you were right on top-- it makes you feel like, wow, I'm part of a team. It made me feel good and I really enjoyed that experience. And without thinking I was ever going to be a chef or work in a kitchen, it was definitely a good feeling.

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And every time I would show up for work, the guys would be, like, hey, how was your tournament, what happened? And I'd say, I lost in the second round. [Laughter] And they would give me Baked Alaska. It was, like, here, have some cake.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: And then we'd work the night, and I'd work two or three nights a week, and then I would travel on the weekends and come back. It was just such a great story to tell when I would come back, 'cause most of the guys in the kitchen were Europeans and they loved tennis, they loved soccer, sports that weren't happening in New Orleans. And so it was great to tell that story to them, and they were interested. And it was just a great little moment to spend. And from there I started traveling more and I had to leave that job behind.

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And then, once I got a scholarship to college, I had a full four or five months off and I started working back there again. And it was just a great experience. And I always wanted to have that room. I've never captured it, but to walk into a room and feel that light and that warmth. And just you knew you were in someplace special that just felt good. So I've never recaptured that feeling in a dining room, but it was something that I did experience, yeah. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: That's beautiful. So tell me a little bit more about college, then. You came to Birmingham Southern?

Chris Dupont: Birmingham Southern. I was here in [19]81 and I did not leave. I stayed every summer.

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To me growing up in New Orleans, the only hill I've ever seen was a levee and when I got here it was, like, wow, all the trees, and there was mountains! [Laughter] But really, they're just hills. And I would climb up just these mountains and go to Oak Mountain Park. And I was just, like, wow, this is a totally different world. I didn't want to go back to the hotness and urbanness of

New Orleans, so I stayed. For three-and-and-a-half years I did not go back. And graduated early but wound up playing that last year. And Birmingham, we really didn't have a food scene, and I wasn't interested in working in the culinary world. I was really focusing on what's my next chapter in tennis. I had gotten a place to go to Mexico and play some tennis tournaments there for my summer after I graduated, and I was focused on leaving. And my roommate at the time was just beginning working at The Wynfrey Hotel, and he was part of the opening crew.

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That hadn't opened yet. And he invited me to go there and just to work with him there just setting up kitchens and opening up boxes. It was months before they opened. But I said, yeah, that sounds cool. So I was spending a little time there doing those things. And one day the chef came up to me, and he's from Ireland, his name was Chef McNeilly, and he had a horrible stutter, but he would stick with it until he would get it out. And it's in that broken Irish accent and a stutter. And he would come up to me and just say, hey, "Lad, uhhhhh . . . " And it would just go on and on. And just, like, "Hey, you thinkin' 'bout workin' with us?" And I was, like, "I don't know. I don't know what I can do." This kitchen is huge. There's three floors. There's so much stuff. And he would come up to me all the time and just speak to me. But it was awkward for me 'cause I'd never run into someone that had a speech impediment, so it took me a minute to get comfortable to speak with him.

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And over those-- month or so, we got to have longer conversations, and he got more comfortable with me, and he could speak without too much elongated stuttering. And so I got to know him, and I said, "You know what, I have a month or so before I leave to go to Mexico. Yeah, maybe

I'll just come in and stand around and peel some onions or whatever." And that's how he kind of convinced me to start. And did that for about a month or two, then I took off for Mexico. And I was in Mexico till the end of August, and I was at one of my last tournaments in Guadalajara and I was playing on clay, and I hated playing on clay but that's all we played on, so I was used to it after a few months.

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And wound up twisting my ankle really bad and had to stay there for a elongated time, for about three weeks, with a fractured ankle. Couldn't get on a plane. So by the time I left Mexico I was-- just had enough of Mexico and I've had enough of tennis. [Laughter] I'd just had enough. And I flew back to New Orleans, back to Louisiana, just moved in with my parents for a minute, which was enlightening to go back home after five years. And I was just trying to regroup. And I got a call from my ex-roommate, and he said, "Hey, Chef McNeilly would love to see you if you're not doing anything right now." I said, "Well, I'm just recovering from an ankle injury, and I think I'll just come to Birmingham and do rehab." And that's kind of where I started with Chef McNeilly. And then Chef McNeilly calls me before I left and he goes, "Hey, can you pick up some Bushmills Black Label Irish Whiskey, 'cause we can't get it here? So if you can get that . . ." So I wound up getting him three bottles.

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And he was, like, "Oh, mate, this is absolutely gorgeous. Thank you so much!"

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: And so from that moment forward they made me feel comfortable. And I still was not convinced, and I was never convinced that this is who I'm going to be. It was just another means to an end to get me back out playing tennis. So everything I was learning was just fun to me. It was, like, oh, yeah, turning a mushroom. I'll get it. Yeah, this is fun. And finally, one day I was working there on a more and more basis, and they put me on Sunday brunch, which no one ever wants to work a Sunday brunch, at The Wynfrey Hotel. And my roommate, they put him in charge of it. His name was Gray Byrum, and Gray was just a superstar with show mirrors and putting together station after station of beautiful food. And it was, like, all right, be there at 4:30 in the morning.

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And we start making bacon and grits, and we start making about seventy eggs full of scrambled eggs. And everything we just start piling on, putting in hot boxes, and getting out to this beautiful display. And after we started doing that on Sundays, I was, like, I'm invested now. I want to make sure this looks good and this looks right. And so I would come in on Saturdays and we would get the cooler ready for what we were gonna do on Sunday. So that was kinda my project of doing that. And I thought, well, this is still fun, but I'm not invested, and I'm not connected. But it was still fun. And Chef McNeilly would come by and show me something, show me a little technique here or there, and then he'd walk off and he would go do his thing.

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But Chef McNeilly was one of those superstars of this culinary world where you would never know him in this culinary world because he's not a guy that will promote himself. But he left his home in Ireland when he was fourteen, started working in restaurants in England and in Paris.

Worked his way to the Swiss Alps. Just an encyclopedia of knowledge for what to do with tomatoes, eggs, anything to do with salmon, anything to do with confits, from pâtés to terrines, the man just had it in his brain 'cause he was taught that. And he was taught by people that were taught even in an old-school way. And then he was being taught old school. And it just never translated to a modern kitchen 'cause it takes so many people to produce that kind of food.

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So Chef McNeilly, in my mind he was just a superstar. And one of the earliest memories of him is coming in early morning for a Sunday brunch and we had a convention in town or a bunch of people staying in the hotel, and they were having breakfast at the little café restaurant. And I saw Chef McNeilly on the line, and he was sweating, and he was barking out orders in Irish. I think he cooked about three hundred egg dishes that morning, and just a symphony of pan after pan, and egg and pan and plate up. And the man never, ever seemed like he was out of composure. And he was just doing it and just keeping everyone calm on the line as the orders kept coming in. I mean, the tickets that long. [Laughter] And he would just break 'em up and put 'em on the line, and just, like, we need this, we need that. And then I'd say, "Hey, Chef." And he'd say, "Go get me four flats of eggs. Crack them, get 'em scrambled."

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Those are the kind of things that he would say. And all of a sudden, I'd bring it to him, and he would say, "Super job!" And I saw him do that that day and I just kind went, man, that was just amazing! And it stuck with me that he didn't do anything culinarily great but just the way he commanded something that was out of control, but he was keeping it under control. And that to me just said, wow, that was great!

Michelle Little: Yeah. Incredible composure. [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: Yes. It was definitely incredible. I feel like he's done it a thousand times before that moment. I just happened to see it that day.

Michelle Little: So how long did you stay there at The Wynfrey working?

Chris Dupont: I stayed at The Wynfrey for almost a year.

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They didn't really have a space for me, and I didn't feel like I wanted a space. I was still traveling, and I was still trying to become a tennis player, still had dreams. They were slowly fading as time went on. [Laughter] Economics were slowly creeping in, and I felt like, well, every tournament I went to I kept saying, well, this is my last one. This is it. If I don't make it in the main draw here, then I'm out. And so I just kept saving money and going to another tournament and going to another tournament. So that was a whole 'nother world of meeting people, traveling in vans, sleeping in vans, sleeping in locker rooms of clubs that were hosting tennis tournaments. And so I learned very quickly that wherever I am I have to create a resource, I have to create sustainability, whether if I'm staying in this locker room or I'm living in a van.

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So you learn how to adapt very quickly. And after a few more months, I decided I think I need to become a little more serious about what I want to do. And my roommate called me and said he was leaving to go to Washington D.C. to work for some other chefs and other people. And he said, "Come on back to The Wynfrey. Chef McNeilly would love to have you." And I came back, and he asked me to work in their flagship restaurant, it was called Winston's at the time.

And this other chef, his name is Willie McGaha [sp], he was the chef of it. He was a young guy, real tall, super smart, super intelligent. Had a degree in zoology. And he just knew how to compose food. And I'd never been, I guess, that precise about food as he was.

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So he taught me a lot. He taught me some great lessons about where plate design and food quality starts at the cutting board. If you're breaking down a piece of snapper, you want to break it down-- 'cause you have to have in your mind, how am I designing this to fit on my plate? And so understanding that, that's how you'll portion it, that's how you'll break it down. Do you want skin on, skin off? Do you want it square? Do you want it elongated? And that'll depend on how you're going to plate it up, what's accompanied with it, and the design of the plate, whether it's a rectangle, circle, square. So all those things just weren't part of my mindset at the time, and Willie would say, "Listen, we're gonna do this stuffed lamb loin." And I would go through the motion.

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And he'd say, "No, don't twist it like this, turn it like this. Fold it. Because what I want to see is when I plate it up, I'm gonna sear it on this backside. That will not be the presentation side, the other side will be." So just learning those little techniques about how to design food on the cutting board, that's the first step. And then the next step is actually cooking it, and getting it right is the next step. But that's really where I kinda started thinking, well, maybe I know something. Maybe this is something that's a part of me. And every day I came into work I never thought of it like this is gonna be my last day, whereas in parallel to that, tennis, every time I went to a tournament I thought, this is my last one. I can't. That's it.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: So going back into the kitchen was actually fun, and I never felt pressure. Of course I made a bunch of mistakes.

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Of course I got yelled at a few times and of course I was always the new guy for most of the time, but it didn't bother me. I just kept on going, kept my head down. And then, as any artist or any chef, you eventually learn what you like to cook is normally what you like to eat. And so you start developing your own style, your own way of plating that you feel comfortable with, your own cooking techniques that you like, food pairings that you feel are best. And those take time for you to elevate. And it also takes time for you to get into motion of producing them over and over again. And so from there, I left and went back home, and I started working in restaurants in New Orleans.

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And my first job was at this restaurant called the La Tour Eiffel, the Eiffel Tower Restaurant, on St. Charles Street. And this was the original restaurant that was in the Eiffel Tower. And they were doing renovations in the [19]80s and the early [19]90s to the tower, and they were building a new restaurant, so they took apart the old restaurant. And this group bought it out of New Orleans, shipped it to New Orleans, and erected it on St. Charles Street and enclosed it in glass. It was the most beautiful place I've ever walked into. And they even had the old bar chairs, the bar stools, everything that they could keep from the original restaurant, and they brought it to New Orleans. And the chef and owner, his name was Daniel Bonnot, and Daniel was about 5'6", 5'5", but extremely trim.

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And he had beautiful hair. [Laughter] I mean, the guy was French, you could just tell. He was just beautifully made, the way he came in and he was always wearing a starched button down, chef pants, and accompanying loafers. And he would put on his chef's jacket over his button down with a tie, and put on an apron, and he would produce food-- mainly he would help the pastry chef a lot or garde manger, what we called the cold area. And every night he would expedite, he would call out the tickets, see every plate that went out. And Chef Daniel was just like Chef McNeilly, he was just a superstar in my mind. And everything he did I would just watch him. [Laughter] And I was just, like, what is he doing over there? And any work he would produce that would go into the cooler or the freezer, I'd go in there and I'd grab something. I was just always tasting his stuff.

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And I would taste it and I would go, wow, this is freakin' amazing what he just did! And even from simplest stocks or a little reduction he was doing or the vichyssoise soup that he would do, anything that he would produce I would want to taste, even though I wasn't allowed, and I wasn't supposed to go and do it. [Laughter] But I just said, I'm watching him, I'm watching him. And he was just a superstar in my mind. And I worked with him for almost a year. And this was early [19]90s, and I was probably making, when I started with him, it was, like, $8.50 an hour, which was at the top of the scale for an hourly employee back then. And by the time I left, I think I was at $7.10 an hour. So every time you'd make a mistake, he'd call you in and he'd say, you know, I think twenty-five cents off your next paycheck will make you think more or make you want this more.

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Michelle Little: Oh! Wow.

Chris Dupont: So I lost over a dollar in the year I was there, just so many little mistakes. And he probably could've got me down to zero for all the mistakes I probably made if he was really watching me. But it was intense to be with him. It was intense to be around him. And I learned very quickly to avoid him as much as possible. And the last thing you want is Daniel looking at you or staring at you for any particular reason. So that was an eye-opening experience, but as well it taught me to be disciplined about food every day. And Daniel came in every day fired up, ready to produce. And he didn't care how good we were yesterday, he wanted to know what and who we were today.

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And you could always tell when he was angry. He would start cursing in French and yelling in French. And even though I didn't understand it, but I was just listening if my name came up. [Laughter] That's the only thing you wanted to know, is he talking about me, 'cause that's crucial. And the worst thing I guess in French culture, the ultimate insult, is when the chef comes around and works your station. So if Daniel sees that you're failing on a busy night-- and this happened to me. I was in charge of doing trout amandine-- and we would do eight-hundred people a night, so we were constantly pumping out food. And my job was just to finish the sauce, which would start in the same pan that we were sautéing the fish in. And my job was to add shallots, capers, deglaze with white wine, little lemon juice, parsley, bring it down halfway, add cold butter, and make the sauce.

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And I was doing great for the first thirty or forty of them, and then we started getting busier and busier. And it's a three-man team, the guy making the fish, doing the sauce, and then I had someone behind me that was plating up the dishes. And then they would present them to the expediter. So I broke the sauce one time for about twelve-- I had a pan full of about twelve and I broke it, and I knew it was going to break, meaning that the sauce was not this creamy look to it, it was this clear kinda buttery look. And that's exactly the opposite of what it's supposed to be. And I tried to turn, and I was looking at it, and the other two guys looked at me and I was like, "F- . . . " And they were, like, "Just plate it up and hopefully Daniel doesn't see it." We got about halfway through it, and he saw it, and he just said, "What . . . " and just started cursing ". . . is this?" And the other two guys that were with me just kind of moved away from me, of course. [Laughter]

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And I stood there and Daniel kind of dropped his head in between the expediting line and he just started letting me have it. And I thought, well, that's the end of it. Okay. I'm just gonna make the sauce again. And so I turned around, got a pan on, started, and he walked around, and he said, "Go! Just get out." And I went, "Get out? Okay. Get out. What does that mean?" And he said, "Go sit down." So there was this chair at the end of the cooks' line, and now I realized what that chair was for. I had to walk all the way down to the end of the line, sit down, and watch Daniel make amandine sauce for probably the next fifteen or twenty orders, and curse at me and yell at me and show me a pan from up and down the line.

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And then he walked away. And it's up to you-- now I know-- it's up to you to get up and run over there and get back to your station, not wait to be called. And I was sitting there, and Daniel walked off and one of the waiters tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Get up. Go. Get there." And I was, like, oh, okay. That's what I'm supposed to do. So I ran there and worked the station. And that night I learned about being precise about amandine sauce. And it was just one of those moments where he wasn't ugly or mean to me, but it was a lesson I definitely needed to learn. And that carried over into everything else really that I did while I worked there. And it was very difficult is all I can say. And that cost me fifty cents! [Laughter] That amandine sauce catastrophe cost me about fifty cents off my pay.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Whew.

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Chris Dupont: And he would tell you, hey, take it or leave it. I've got plenty of guys that would love to work with me. And it worked for me, so . . .

Michelle Little: Oh, gracious. That's heartbreaking. [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: It was definitely scary, yes. But funny now, very funny.

Michelle Little: Yeah, now we can laugh about it. [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: You can't do that now 'cause they'll leave. They'll walk right out. But back then kitchen culture was about the chef-- I don't want to say berating you, but the chef having ultimate control over what you are and what you do. And I learned a lot from him. I got off the nighttime shift a few weeks after that and I started working lunch, which was great for me because that's

Daniel's time. He loved to be there for lunch doing the cold soups. He would work the cold app or he would make pastries during the day.

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And he was always helping the pastry chef. And I got to stand and watch him a lot of times with what he was doing, and they kinda kept me out of the way. I just was grilling salmon. That's basically all I did was grill salmon for lunch. And from that experience, one day Daniel came up to me and said, "Make me lunch." And I said, "Okay." So I made him something off the menu and I was, like, all right, cleaning up, day up, and comes up, throws the plate on the table and goes, "Too salty." And it was, like, two bites out of it. And I was, like, okay. I guess there's ten cents off my pay right there at some point. Next day did the same thing, "Make me lunch." And I made him a pasta dish, something that was on our menu, and he brought it back and he was, like, "It was too sweet." I said, "Well, let me . . . "

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He's like . . . [demonstrates a hand gesture indicating “no” or “stop”] And this little game went on for a few months until finally one day I knew he was going to ask me for lunch, and I was always thinking, all right, I want him to eat his lunch today. And so one day I grilled a piece of salmon and put a little salad mix and fried some onion rings and did a little grilled lemon and put it on top of it, put it on the window. And he kind of stared at it a minute, took it off, came back and he goes, "That was the best plate of food you've done." And I was, just, ahh.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: "But I didn't do anything." He said, "That's the point. You were just very simple. Try to bring out the natural flavors." So from that day forward I would cook him something but always have a little mixed greens or salad with it. And then he got tired of that. So this went on for about three months. And then tragedy happened.

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One of his financial partners got killed in a plane crash. The bank called in the notes. Daniel didn't have the financial strength to continue or buy out the restaurant. I think they owed, like, 3.2 million back then. And they gave him six months to try to get financing to take it over or the bank was going to take it over, and he couldn't, and they wound up closing. But before that, he moved me on to a restaurant group. It was called Flagons Bistros, and another French chef who was a friend of his, Michel [sp]. And he recommended me. Michel-- I went to interview and said, "Daniel recommended you." And so that was very important for me, and that was my first sous-chef job to work in a restaurant. And I credit Daniel for making that call for me.

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So from there that restaurant closed. It's always been closed. It's been a reincarnation of many different things but it's still there. And I go to New Orleans quite often and drive by it and just go why? This thing could've been. And so now it's still there empty, sitting for lease. But it's a reminder of how failure can happen in the restaurant business very quickly.

Michelle Little: So tell me about you coming back to Alabama. How long did you stay in New Orleans?

Chris Dupont: I was in New Orleans for almost three years, and then I got a call back to work at Highlands. I came in and interviewed and they hired me. It was just before they were opening Bottega. They had just opened Bottega the café side, they hadn't done the dining room side yet.

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So I spent some time at Highlands while they were opening the café side, and so my goal was to be there, but they wound up keeping me at Highlands for most of the time. And I was in constant flux there. I was either working at Highlands or at Bottega back and forth. I never really had a space. It's very important as a cook or a chef to have your space, 'cause you know every day you come in what's in your little food prep cooler, where your cutting boards are, your mindset for what needs to be prepped today, because you know 'cause you left last night and you know exactly the order in which you want to produce things today, how busy you are. But there I was more of a fill in, hey, I need you to work the grill on Thursday, and then come back and work garde manger at Highlands.

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So I never really had a home. I was a mercenary, basically. [Laughter] I was being sold out for different times, different nights. So I never really felt comfortable there. I never really got traction as far as, I guess, the familiar space, time for you to get good at something, even though I enjoyed going there, working a few hours, hanging out with the guys, and then not knowing where I'm gonna be the next day. That was kinda fun, but yet it got to be old after a time. So I spent a few years at Highlands and Bottega, almost two years, and I was fired. They said, we just don't think you fit in or we're not seeing the progression. And that kinda hurt me. That was my first firing I've ever had, and my ego was definitely angered by it.

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And I realized that in this business you have to maintain a level of professionalism, maturity, and you have to continually learn, reading, reading books, magazines, keeping up with trends, as well as going back to the beginning of where cooking started, and the five mother sauces, and how to do the basics as well as the historical basics. And once I left there, I realized, all right, I'm going chart my own course by becoming the best culinarian I can become. And so it was really a favor to me that now I didn't rely on where I was working to get the knowledge or the inspiration.

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Inspiration was going come from me. It was going come from inside. And so that put me on a different journey for being a cook or a chef.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So tell me about your next steps and then . . .

Chris Dupont: My next step was at Bongiorno's here in Mountain Brook. I went there and I was gonna be the chef at Arman's in English Village, but I didn't take the job. I didn't feel comfortable in another big place. I liked Bongiorno's. It was small, and Guiseppe, Joe, at the time, said I want you to develop something that's not us. You're gonna have basically your own menu. So I did six specials a night. And his menu was around sixteen, eighteen dollars was the high end, and we were producing specials that were twenty-six to thirty dollars.

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And basically, I was running my own little hybrid kitchen right out of Bongiorno's. And I was really just testing recipes and things that had a Northern Italian spin to it, but yet it was classical techniques. And I wanted to work on those things 'cause I knew I had already established that I'm

gonna have my own restaurant. Before I'm done with a cook or a chef, I wanted to have my own place. So I was thinking the whole time I was at Bongiorno's that one day just imagine this is yours. What decisions would you make? How would you plate up? And I didn't really pay attention to the food they were doing as far as the normal chicken marsala, white sauce and clams, and the pizza and bread they were making. I just paid attention to what I was doing. And so basically, I was running a small little restaurant inside of a restaurant.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

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Chris Dupont: And I would go on the weekends at the time, every weekend I would drive around the city of Birmingham and think, where am I gonna have my restaurant? And I would look at spaces and try to find spaces from Hoover to Vestavia to Mountain Brook. And I had no money, but I really wanted to have my own place and just walk around, make phone calls about when you see a for lease sign. So Sundays and Mondays was really my adventure days to see myself somewhere else. And one of those weekends my wife now, but my girlfriend at the time-- I said, "Well, I want to go look at this space in Hoover. It's this new little mall they're opening up." And she said, "No. We're not going to go look at spaces that you are not going to get today." We're going to drive to Springville, Alabama, and we're gonna go antiquing.

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It just is a beautiful little town that has antique shops, and it's about thirty miles away. "Let's just leave the restaurant world behind and let's go do something else. Let's have a date." And I said, "Okay, let's . . . do that."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: So we drove to Springville, it's about fifteen miles past Trussville, and got into town. And it's a main street town. There's a main street, there's a four-way, there's one of everything. There's "the," it's a "the" town. The gas station, the library, the church, the main street.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: And so we get there, and we parked a car on Main Street, and I get out of the car, and I look towards the sidewalk and the wall, and I see there's this screened-in porch. It looks like it was a restaurant or is a restaurant. And I was, like, oh, wow. And then there's a sign that says, "For rent, restaurant." And I was, like, Leslie, look at this! And she comes around and she looks at it. And there's a phone number.

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And she says, "Nope, we're not . . . don't." I said, "Listen, I have got to make this phone call." And so I got some change. There was no cell phones then. I walked down to the gas station at the pay phone and called that number, and it was the local optometrist, who was in the building right next door, and his name was Dr. Campbell. And so I'm making the phone calls. Leslie's out antiquing. And Dr. Campbell says, "Well, who are you?" I gave him a little bit of my background, and he said, "I can be there in fifteen minutes," 'cause he lives in Ashville just right up the road. I said, "Okay." So I still hadn't found Leslie 'cause she was walking up and down the street. I went back to the building, met Dr. Campbell, we walked through seven thousand square feet. Everything needed to be redone. It was old. It was tired. But to me it was, like, wow, this is great!

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And I said, "Well, how much is the rent?" And he goes, "Three-hundred-fifty dollars a month." And I said, "I'll take it!" Even if I don't have a restaurant, I have to take that. And I said, "Well, can I sign a lease today? I want to get it today." And he said, "No, around here we don't do leases. Let's start with a handshake and see what you can do." And I said, "All right." That was the best news I got. Leslie came back to the car, and Dr. Campbell gave me the key. Already had the key to the building. So by four o'clock that afternoon we were touring the restaurant and what we could do, and that's how we started.

And so I made a plan. It's gonna take a while to turn it into a restaurant. So Leslie and I would get up about five a.m. and we would drive to Springville, and we'd start cleaning and working, and then go back to work by one o'clock about four days a week.

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And Leslie got tired of that very quickly.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: And so I would go in at five and start doing the work. And on her days off she'd come in later and finishing the things that-- we'd make a list for each other. And then, about four months later, I was ready to open. And that was eye opening in itself. And just trying to find the name; we couldn't think of a name. And I just threw it out there, Café Dupont, in assistance from Leslie who was, like, "Listen, just put your name on it. Just start. Just get it out there. Doesn't matter what the name is." I said, "Okay." So that's what we did. And the town was abuzz of the restaurant until they saw the menu and they saw the prices.

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And I realized very quickly that I just designed the wrong restaurant for the wrong place. And my market is not thrilled about what I just produced or what I was doing. And so it was a struggle. We moved out of our apartment. I sold my car just to get money to keep going. I sold my wife's car just to keep going. We moved into the back of the restaurant in the office, which was about five-hundred square feet, and Dr. Campbell put a shower kit in one of the bathrooms in the back for us so we could live there. And I got rides from my employees to go shopping, to the local orchard. All these things that we were doing were based on sustainability. I just wanted to keep it going.

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And I started learning what's now called farm-to-table. I was basically farm-to-table before they came up with a name for it. I would go to the orchard. I'd go to the local blueberry, blackberry patch. We'd get watercress from the spring in the center of town. And then the Springville Garden Club showed up one day and they brought me a bag of things, these couple of guys that would meet at the library right next to my building every day. And they said, "We heard you could use some of our vegetables." And I said, "Great." And he brought me a bag of this beautiful eggplant, tomatoes, okra. It was just a whole mix of things that they were growing, these five guys that was the Springville Garden Club. And they looked like-- I don't think they ate the vegetables, but they were definitely good growers.

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And they're, like, "Yeah. We can bring you this every day. We always have more stuff." And I was, like, "That's awesome!" So every day I was getting these beautiful hand-grown vegetables

within a few miles of the city of Springville, and I never knew what I was getting. So I started coming up with I was gonna do a four-course meal, a six-course meal. And so I would base it on what I'm getting that day, or what I got the evening before. And so our restaurant quickly turned into courses only, 'cause I had to find a way to have these six tomatoes go through twenty portions instead of just using a little bit of the tomato. So learning that culinary skill was very important. The heroes of that, Charlie Trotter, and the heroes from before that, the few others that have come along, just got their books and started reading. And I just realized, wow, I can deconstruct all this and make it into three courses. I could go to someone's menu and say I can give five courses out of that one dish that they just produced.

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And so in 1995 we were courses only, three to seven, and that was just unheard of. And I realized, wow, if I'm gonna lose, I'm gonna lose in a way that-- yeah, I wanna be a pioneer for my loss. [Laughter] I don't want to show that my loss wasn't in vain, that I was trying something new. And so that went on for about two months, and we started getting a little traction. There were a lot of surrounding towns from Steele, Ashville, Springville, Trussville, Argo that people would come into town on the weekends. And thirty covers or forty covers on the weekend was sustainable. I was paying rent, paying labor, able to eat, but still living in the back of the restaurant. I wasn't making any money, and really, I was using all my money for payroll and food.

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And so without help from St. Clair Federal Bank, from the manager there who became a friend, her name was Charlotte Matthews, and she was just a big fan of what we were doing in town,

and she saw the need. And I would call her every day and I would just say, "Hey, I know I'm at zero today, but I'll have money in the next few days so just carry me for a few days." And she would do that for me. And I would be at zero and then I'd have two thousand in the bank. And all said and done, after four or five days I'm down to, like, five or seven hundred dollars, but I got my bills paid and I got things done. And without her carrying me a little bit-- because we were in the world of cash was still preferred, but I would get a lot of checks, and there was still this sprinkling of credit card payments.

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And back then we didn't have the digital era so we had that swipe, so you would swipe and then you would deposit it to the bank and then the bank would send it in, and it would take you seven days to get your money, basically. Right now it's within hours, but back then it was seven days. So if I had two-thousand-dollars' or a thousand-dollars' worth of credit card receipts that I'm supposed to get within days but I'm still carrying a zero, they would help me. So in that financial situation I just kept going and I just thought, can I sustain this? Can I keep this thing going? And it was just getting harder and harder, because I was working six a.m. to twelve every day trying to do lunch and dinner, so it was just very difficult to sustain. But I had the energy. I smoked a lot of cigarettes. I was probably two packs a day at the time.

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I'd smoke mine, then start smoking employee's cigarettes. [Laughter] It was just whatever I could do, coffee, cigarettes, I was trying to keep going. And then, one day, I got a phone call after about six months and it was from Deanna Crider, who is the food writer at Birmingham News at the time and she says, "Hey, this Deanna Crider." I said, "Yeah, hello. What did we do wrong?"

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: And she said, "Well, we came out to your restaurant a few weeks ago and we are going to do a review on you on Friday and we just wanted you to know so that you'll be aware that your restaurant is being reviewed tomorrow." And I said, "Okay." And I was so worried. I said, surely, we must've screwed this up somewhere along the line. I don't know who they were, how they got in, what the name was. Everything was kept on a ledger. That was our reservation book. Of course, they didn't use their real name.

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And I was just bracing for the, okay, I have no idea what's about to happen. Our wait staff was basically a couple of high school students and the plumber's wife, and that was our staff. [Laughter] And I worked with them every day, every day, every day about trying to be professional and the right words to speak, and all these things. And of course, we didn't have a liquor license at the time so people would bring in their own, so that was a whole 'nother separate issue to learn. So the next morning I get up, started getting phone calls for reservations. And in Springville I had no car, no way of getting the *City Scene* it was called at the time. The Birmingham News doesn't make it out it out to Springville the same morning that it happens in Birmingham, so I had to wait till someone called me and read the article to me. And I was, like, thank you.

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And it was five stars, and they said everything was great. They had a six-course meal for six of them. And after a while, I was, like, oh, I remember that table. They were the only table that night that came in. It was, like, on a Tuesday or Wednesday, and that was our night, that six stop.

And I think that was one of our best shows probably for them. And they were just so amazed, like, wow, how are you doing this? Who told you to do this? And they were just, like, we recommend you going for a one-time experience, 'cause no one else is doing it. And that's where it all started. From that moment on every weekend we were busy from doing sixty to eighty--going from thirty to eighty to a hundred, having people wait, walk in. It was a challenge to just all of a sudden now I have to double my staff and double the training.

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And getting people to realize how to open up a bottle of wine. 'Cause even though we did not have a liquor license you were allowed to bring wine, alcohol, mixed drinks. Everyone was bringing, and they expected the restaurant to supply you with glassware, setups from cut limes, lemons, martini glasses, or how to open up a bottle of wine. My staff was, like, we open wine this way.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Chris Dupont: So we had to have full-on classes. I brought in wine reps that weren't selling wine to me and had them come out to Springville, traded them out food to teach our staff how to open up a bottle of wine, and how to present glassware. Those things were valuable to us to get to the next level to look like a full-service restaurant. And so we were in Springville for about seven years, and throughout that time my wife got pregnant.

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We were living in the back of the restaurant. We finally got out, bought a little house in East Lake, and then started back driving, got a car. All of those things started happening little bits by

little bits. And tried to get a liquor license from Springville and they just wouldn't give it to us. 'Cause I thought, I'm gonna stay here forever. This is where I began, this is where I'm gonna finish.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Chris Dupont: And they just said, no, no, no, no. And I realized in order for me to have higher level staff-- now I have people who have been with me a while that want more money 'cause they're driving from Birmingham here, and I don't have that extra revenue of selling wine or alcohol or having a bar. That's costing me. And so, after much agonizing on what to do, I realized, well, I need to leave. And part of that financial journey, too, is that throughout that first two years I wound up buying the building from Dr. Campbell, and so now I have an asset.

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Now I have something to loan from or lean on. But I wound up selling the building to the local insurance agent, which was a great profit for me. I turned that money and bought this building downtown in 2001. I bought this building. I walked through where we're sitting here in this room. The floor had a huge hole in it. There was a huge hole in the roof. There was many things wrong with it. But to me this was my New York City. This was going from, like, Green Acres, it was going from Springville to downtown Birmingham in a beautiful historical building that was built in 1868, and it just had that feeling when you walked in like I had when I walked into Christian's in New Orleans.

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You knew that this felt like this could be something really, really good. And I wound up getting an SBA loan, a 504 it's called, which you buy the property, and they invest in your improvements. I was the first one to get a 504 in downtown Birmingham, I think in the city of Birmingham. And that kind of was the catalyst for me to learn the financial side of owning a restaurant, owning a building. And we thought we had enough money to renovate the full space, but we wound up just renovating this room upstairs and the dining room, not the bar that you see now. That came six years later. So that was a great experience to go through a year of construction and seeing that side of it, coming here every day and realizing wow, this is taking forever, forever.

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And I had an eye-opening experience one afternoon. I was sitting downstairs, and the front of the building was off. You're just sitting inside the dining room but there's no front. [Laughter] Just you and the street. And it was, like, thirty degrees outside and I was waiting on the plumbers. They were cutting a hole in the floor downstairs to do the plumbing to get to the kitchen and other areas. And I was sitting there on a bucket of sheetrock, and I remember it was, like, five o'clock, and I just remember this huge line of cars that were on 20th Street that were leaving, that were going. And this little contractor came up to me and he goes, "You see where all your customers are going, right?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he goes, "Nobody eats downtown. Everybody leaves in the afternoon."

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And that just hit me, like, wow, you're probably right. I will be the only restaurant open in the evening full dining experience. Probably in the past twenty-five years no one has opened a

restaurant. So we've skipped a generation of people coming in to dine in a certain area. That generation wound up in suburbs and other places. And it just started to dawn on me that this is gonna be another challenge. But I still felt great that I wasn't in Springville. At least I am forty miles closer to the customers that drove to Springville anyway. So I just kept that as-- that was a confidence card that I had in my pocket that I knew that if I could do it there without alcohol, without a bar, I could do it here. And I was just supremely confident. And then we opened up about a year later and the first couple of nights were like Springville nights, kinda dead.

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And I realized very quickly that downtown at night was just dark. Everything was off. And finally one of my kitchen staff, we walked outside, we were leaving one night, and we realized all the streetlights are off. So they weren't keeping them on. The city realized there was no businesses open at night. In order to save money they were just turning off all the-- and I think it was Mayor Kinkaid at the time-- I think it was Kinkaid or it could've been someone before him. It could've been Arrington before him. So this was just part of, why are we keeping it open? Everyone's gone. So I called my local contact at Operation New Birmingham and had him contact the city and it turns out they're right, they don't keep the streetlights on past a certain time.

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So we arranged a meeting with the mayor's assistant at the time and asked him, hey, can we have streetlights on? We're open at night. And they said, "Well, we've never heard of you. How do we know you?" And so the first things we had to do is to prove that we're open. I said, "Well, I want you and your staff to come out to dinner." So they had a Birmingham City Council staff dinner

with me, like, the next week, and they all walked outside and they're, like, "Man, it's really dark outside." [Laughter] I said, "Yes, it really is. It really is dark outside." And so they called me one day and said, "Hey, we're gonna turn the streetlights on for you, but it's only between 1st Avenue and 2nd Avenue. We're not gonna turn the rest of the streets on, but we're gonna give you this block." And I was just thankful for that. And I said, "Great, I'll take it!" And it just illuminated having that on-- it just brightened up the whole street. It was such a contrast to what it was before.

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So that was just another confidence builder, like, hey, someone cares. And a lot of the mayor's staff would come in and say, "How's things goin'? What's the customer count? We're tryin'." So they got onboard fairly quickly. And I realized that city hall is not this anti place, it's not this antibusiness place that-- everyone was telling me, oh, city hall is horrible. They don't work with people. I found that to be completely false. Everyone was trying to work with me. Operation New Birmingham and their hybrid that was trying to commercialize the city, trying to get the city back. There were a lot of people that really cared, and I did not know that till I was open for a few months. And we just started building. And people would call me out in the dining room and want to meet me and say, who is this guy?

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And 99 percent of the time I'd get called out into the dining room and meet new customers, and they wouldn't mention the food. They would just mention, we're so glad we're havin' dinner downtown 9:30 on a Friday night just like every city we've traveled to, and you're doing it. We want to say thank you. We appreciate what you're doing because we need to bring this back. Our

city has to mature. And so I started creating customers just from their loyalty of wanting to support the city and myself. And that's really how it started, and we've just been building upon that foundation, and added the bar seven years later, got another 504 loan. So it's been a financial journey, a chef's journey, learning how to deal with people inside of your space from twenty-year-olds to thirty-, forty-, fifty-year-olds.

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And understanding how to deal with the financial sector of what you do, who to talk to, how to be comfortable making those phone calls or meeting them. And then, also learning the political side of having those conversations, how to reach out to people there. And just trying to every day make a new resource or a contact with someone. And then go back in the kitchen and cook. So there's so many different elements to doing what I do that it's hard to pin down the skillset that you need. You have to have a wide variety of skills and to be comfortable in any setting that you can be.

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Michelle Little: And tell me about your lunch crowd. You mentioned a lot of these office buildings were pretty full when you moved in, is that right?

Chris Dupont: Yes. In 2002, [20]03, [20]04, a little bit of 2005, we had SouthTrust Bank across the street. That was their main office. We had Colonial Bank right next door, NBC Bank on the corner, John Hand Building offices, and then right across the alley right here is the Brown Marx Tower. Those buildings were full of people. They were in full operation. The banking industry, the other industries from legal to accounting that was happening at the Brown Marx Building. So

during that time for lunch, you would have a thousand people on the street walking around looking for a place to go.

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We were open for lunch here for eighteen years and I closed it two years ago-- two-and-a-half years ago I stopped doing lunch. That was a life choice, not a restaurant choice. [Laughter] So it was a different time where it would seem like everything that's happening was happening downtown. Lots of people, lots of energy, lots of suits. People coming in dressed nice, having lunches that were either a celebrate lunch or a business lunch or any version. But we weren't compromising our food for lunch. You were basically getting a dinner menu at lunch. And the prices were reflecting. We were eighteen to twenty-two dollars for lunch, which was kind of stiffy to what everyone else was doing, the five-dollar roll and the six-dollar hamburger.

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But I wanted to maintain a certain level of commitment to excellence, no matter what shift it was. And then, about 2005, 2006, the financial crisis started to creep in. The housing crisis started to creep in. The banking industry started breaking up. SouthTrust got sold. Colonial Bank got sold. A lot of the support staff for banking industry that was in the Brown Marx Tower started leaving. NBC bank got sold. So then this whole community of the financial district started to re-evolve, and re-evolve really meant it was devolving. It was becoming less. And we were left with these huge buildings with just a fraction of people to work in them now.

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That definitely hurt us. It hurt lunch. It hurt the downtown momentum of trying to renovate and reactivate the downtown. And that threw a curveball into everyone, the political side, the commercial side, the Operation New Birmingham side, which is really REV Birmingham right now. And so that took some time to get used to that. I was used to dealing with slower times 'cause I came from a place where it was zero many a night, so it didn't bother me as much as it bothered others that had been set up for volume. I was set up for small plates and smaller volume, so it didn't hurt us too much, but I definitely saw the de-evolution of what was happening on the street.

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And property values started dropping. I wound up buying the building next door to me and the other building next door to it and the other building. Through that two-year period, property owners were, like, we want out. And the businesses they were leasing to left. So at one time, by 2007, I owned everything on the block except Bromberg's building. And it wasn't expensive. It wasn't like I was buying expensive properties. The building next door I bought it for fifty thousand. The building next door to it I bought it for seventy-something. And the one next to it I bought, like, a-hundred-and-fifteen thousand. And these were all doable mortgages at the time, and I wanted to have another restaurant, another restaurant, 'cause I was thinking in my mind more of a protectionism 'cause I wanted to control who my neighbor was going to be.

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And it was very important to me to make sure I preserved what I was building, so having the opportunity to get to control your space next door and the space to it and the space to it was important to me. So I was merely buying them for defensive measures rather than I had a plan

for it. And then I got to sell them to who I wanted to sell them to. Yeah. [Laughter] So it's just part of my control mania, I guess, of myself and being a restaurant owner, being mister micro about everything. And so, yeah, that was another financial learning step about owning your property, owning the street. So that was definitely eye opening. And from there, 2008, 2009, we started getting a better feel.

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We started having more apartments and condos, buildings getting sold that had big plans. The building across the street here cattycorner and then the apartments, of course, I don't know the name of those buildings, but Paramount is in there now. And then we built out another huge structure down the street which used to be AmSouth Bank. So there's a different feel again by 2007, 2008. And so we're back to momentum. Now we're thinking, oh, everybody's gonna move downtown. Well, we don't have a grocery store, we don't have a gas station. We're missing some real support elements if you want people to live downtown. They were trying for at least four or five years, maybe ten years now to get a grocery store downtown. And I thought that was a game changer to finally get one.

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And then the folks bought the Elyton a few years ago, started building it, hotel, then another hotel. And now we're in this era where the big buildings have been sold and they're becoming hotels. We have two coming. The Brown Marx Tower is being demoed for a hotel. The old Commerce Building around the corner is gonna be a hotel. The Elyton now has two hotels. So now we're in this new financial world of we're buying big buildings and making hotels, which is great for us. The Elyton across the street supplies us with a good, steady five to fifty customers a

week at various times. And I think the other hotels that open up will be about the same. And this is a huge investment to have a full-service restaurant, to be committed to white tablecloth service, to be committed to full service.

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It's something you have to want to do because there are so many details that you have to stay on top of. And 50 percent of them you'll get right on a nightly basis, and 50 percent you'll get wrong. Not meaning a total of 50 percent, but each individual employee will get 50 percent of what they're supposed to do wrong and 50 percent right. And it just depends on which employee it is. There's some employees that are just really good at bits and pieces of what we do. And then there's other things they just don't do well. And it's made up for it by the other employee who does that really well but doesn't really do the strengths of the other person. So you have to find a good mix and know people's strengths and weaknesses, and try to build on the strengths, of course, but try to fix the weaknesses on a daily basis.

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And it's all about pressure. It's about not taking shortcuts when you're under pressure. Those mindsets that creep in. Oh, I'm really busy, I'm not gonna drape a napkin over my plate right now. Or I'm really busy, I couldn't just go do tea service, I have to kind of throw it all on one tray. Being really busy is not an excuse for doing something not accurate. I don't want to say wrong, just not accurate. So teaching this group of twenty-somethings, after twenty-seven years of owning a restaurant and twenty-seven years of twenty-somethings, and this group of twenty-somethings is totally different than the first twenty-somethings I had in 1995. And trying to reach them is a creative art in itself to try to-- it's like being a coach.

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You can't just coach one way. You have to evolve with the players and the people and the mindset and the culture that's happening around you. And so trying to reach everyone to really find out, hey, can you do this? Can you really do this? And do it in a way that's not personal, but only about functional. And here our two favorite phrases are form and function, and form and function are all part of excellence in trying to make sure everything you do looks like it was planned. Nothing is off the cuff. No words are spoken that are just made up. Everything seems to be programmed. It's happening in a symphony of-- you've well-rehearsed it a million times.

1:19:04

And trying to get people to do that and feel that 'cause they've never done it before, it's very difficult to say, I need you to feel a certain way that you've never felt before. And if you don't have any historical basis how to feel that way, I have to try to get you there. And these are important lessons to learn as a restauranteur, a chef, to try to get people to perform for you or for the form and function. And the opposite, same way, function and form. If you're not having the right function, then the form never looks right. And trying to get them to not see the restaurant personally or individually, seeing the big picture. So when I walk out in the dining room and I see four waiters, three WAs, a manager, and they're all moving in a succinct way, they're all doing the right movement at the table, and they're moving in the dining room the way they're supposed to.

1:20:06

Prime example is we never try to have two people pass each other. We always yield. 'Cause it's small lanes in the dining room. And especially we always yield for a customer that's walking

down, maybe going to the bathroom or leaving or wherever they're moving from their table. It's an immediate stop and turn and give right-of-way, either through a hand gesture or just wait. That yielding component is an important part of what we do, so that we want guests to know that they are the king and queen of this place. We're here for you. Everything that you're doing we're going to yield for you. That's 101 here is to yield. That looks great when we're doing thirty-five, forty people and everyone has a consciousness of, oh, I need to yield or I need to move, I'll stop.

1:21:04

But once you go from thirty-five people to eighty-five people, and now you're doing from four tables to six tables, now you're doing each and the waiter's doing twelve to twenty covers, the form and function starts to slowly wane. It's, like, hey, I'll yield if I can. That's not the form and function. So to me I'm the most proudest when I go out and I see the restaurant is busy and everyone is trying to maintain their composure of just that one basic item of yielding. And the second thing that we do is very silly, but it's just one of those things that sets the tone for our form and function. If you get up and go to the restroom or if you leave the table, most of the time you take your napkin and you just kind of crumple it up, throw it on the table, and you walk away.

1:22:01

And I've just decided that I want people to know that we are creating service for them, that we care, we're watching you even though you left the table. So immediately a WA or waiter is supposed to go over to that napkin, take it, fold it, drape it on the back of their chair so when they walk back from the restroom, they see their napkin draped on the back of the chair. They pick it up and they're just-- it's a feeling. It's not like we're looking for a standing ovation every time that

happens, but it's a feeling you want to impart to the guest that they're being taken care of. And another one of our points, with the napkin again, is when we pull plates, dirty plate, glassware, whatever we have in our hand, we always have a clean napkin and we drape it over before we walk away, 'cause we want to make sure we are looking exactly pristine, the way the food came out and the way it's going to leave the table.

1:22:56

Now, when you're really busy and you don't have that napkin and you're bussing your table and you just have to-- and I see it and I look at them and they stop, and they don't have anything, we have to compromise. And then I gotta have that conversation, hey, you knew you were going to that table. Why didn't you check for a napkin? That's the form and function that has to be part of you before you create any kind of action. That's hard to teach. And it takes daily hour by hour, minute by minute teaching of every one of your staff members. Just those three little basics. And we have ten or twelve, but just the one, we always yield, is 101 here. Two is napkin on the chair, or we just go replace it and pull it. And usually if it's a two top or a three-- someone that leaves, and if the waiter comes over and replaces it, doesn't say a word, just picks it up, folds it, put it on top of the chair and walks away, you just showed in front of five other people that you care, that you're watching.

1:24:08

I'm still on your watch. You're still within my reach. And I think what people miss in the restaurant industry is it is about food, it's about process, it's about technique, but they also miss it's a feeling that you're imparting. So many great reviews we've had is about feeling. They never say-- mainly, it's, like, it wasn't this particular sauce or this butter or this way that they do things,

it's we felt amazing when we left. That's the best review to me is that you leave here feeling a certain way. Because on the opposite side of that, when we get a negative review, it's never about the steak was overcooked or this was undercooked or too much salt, it's always about we felt like we were discarded.

1:25:05

We felt unappreciated. We felt . . . And it always starts with feeling. And I picked up on that years and years ago. It's a feeling that people want when they come back or they arrange to come here for the first time, especially if you're coming here for the first time and you've heard, well, we do things-- you're gonna love it there. It's the best place. And someone had hyped you up. And they show up and they're expecting that right away. So we want to deliver through form and function. That is just part of what we do. It's not we're gonna treat this customer so much better because they're new or they've been here a bunch of times. So instilling that into your staff I think creates a successful model for you to sustain over time.

Michelle Little: Yeah. All right. I have one last question 'cause I know we're running out of time. [Laughter]

1:26:01

Chris Dupont: Yeah.

Michelle Little: What do you know about how long the building was empty before you purchased it or what businesses were here prior?

Chris Dupont: I don't know-- it was called Dyson's Deli before I picked it up. So there was a guy that was doing deli catering out of the kitchen downstairs. I think its most recent memory is 20th

Century Grill, and it was in the [19]30s and [19]40s. I think it made it to the [19]50s. But 20th Century Grill, you can still see on our concrete floor downstairs where the stools were cemented to the floor and bolted to the floor. So it was a counter restaurant that had a kitchen, like a counter kitchen, and had a hood system in the main dining room.

1:26:59

It caught fire at some point in the early [19]40s, I think, and don't know if it opened back up. Just not a lot of history on it. But it has a history of being a restaurant and I would say in the last fifty, sixty years. But before that laundromat, jeweler, person that made hats, and I'm sure a tailor at some point. There's some photos of the restaurant that are archived at the City of Birmingham, but not as many as you would think there would be. But when I first bought the building, I was telling you the story that I went to the closing and during that time in the early [19]90s it wasn't digital. You would sign a title card. And there was about a dozen other signatures on that card. And I realized when I was sitting there at the title lawyer's office that I'm signing a card that the first signee was in 1871.

1:28:05

And I just looked at that card and I was, like, wow! Man, this is just-- I'm being part of history. And it was a heavy moment at the moment, but when I looked at those names and I left and I was driving home and I realized, wow, that was an important moment, but yet it was insignificant because I didn't know any of those people and I didn't know any of those businesses before here. And that just led me to the thought process of when it's all over for me, someone's gonna maybe sign this card again and look at my name and go, who cares who that guy is, and just sign it and

move on. So it was a big moment but kind of an insignificant moment at the same time, but I still felt like I was part of a privileged group to sign my name on that card here.

1:29:01

So yeah, now this is its current reincarnation for the last almost twenty years, and I think it'll continue.

Michelle Little: I love that story. That was a great note to end on. I love that.

Chris Dupont: Good.

Michelle Little: Thank you so much for sharing your story with us today.

Chris Dupont: You're welcome.

Michelle Little: Thank you.

1:29:26

[End]