Chris Hannah
Arnaud's French 75 Bar — New Orleans, LA
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Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Transcription: Lori Lawton
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START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at* 00:00:02]

Rien Fertel: Alright, this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance, continuing on the Iconic French Quarter Bars and Bartenders Trail. It is April 13, Monday, 2015 just a quarter to one in the afternoon and I am at — we're doing kind of an offsite interview. I'm at Church Alley Coffee which is one of my favorite coffee spots in the city of New Orleans, and I'm here with Chris Hannah, who is an old friend, and I'm going to have him introduce himself and we will talk about his history and the history of some cocktails and the Arnaud's French 75 Bar.

[0:00:45]

Chris Hannah: Hello. I'm Chris Hannah and I'm the head bartender at the French 75 Bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana.

RF: How long have you worked at Arnaud's French 75 Bar?

[0:00:58]

CH: Eleven years.

RF: So what year was? Track me back when you started there.

[0:01:02]

CH: Okay, in 2004 I started at French 75 Bar.

RF: And how did that come about? Was it your first job in the city? Had you been in the city? What happened?

[0:01:13]

CH: Yeah, it was my first job. I moved here in '04 [2004] and was just walking around putting out applications and I got a call back and did an interview and started working at Arnaud's Restaurant and the French 75.

RF: Had you had the drink? Had you been to Arnaud's before, to the French 75 bar?

[0:01:30]

CH: No, I had never been to, actually just walking around the Quarter, I had never been to any of the restaurants that I applied and I had never been to Arnaud's. It was the first time I ever walked in there.

RF: Was it your first time in the city, in New Orleans?

[0:01:42]

CH: I visited the city before, but I did it like a college student would. I was always on Bourbon and just visited, so it was my first full day walking around, living in New Orleans.

RF: So you got hired immediately. What was the hiring process like? Who interviewed you? What happened?

[0:02:03]

CH: I had to come back for an interview. I had to talk to a couple maître d's and the owners. It was pretty interesting how they did it. After getting hired, I had to talk to the owner of the restaurant and go to his office and talk to Archie Casbarian and then they had this FBI guy you had to go through. It was really, really quite odd, I had never experienced that before.

RF: He wasn't actually FBI? It was just a thorough interview?

[0:02:30]

CH: Yeah, he was like my name, he got a social security card, and they did a thorough check. It was pretty weird. They don't do that anymore, but that's what they used to do.

RF: So your name and your personality is very tied to that bar today and we'll talk about that. Was there someone there then in 2004 that was *the man* behind the bar that was like the iconic guy?

[0:02:57]

CH: Yeah, that would be my first mentor. I always reiterate that Bobby Oakes was working there, Chris McMillian worked there. They were best friends and so Bobby Oakes actually had — he had his Ramos gin fizz in *The Wall Street Journal* in the late '90s. He was there fifteen years before I got there, Bobby Oakes was, and he trained me on all the New Orleans drinks and how to make them the French 75-way and they've been made the same ever since.

RF: I'll be interviewing Chris McMillian at a later date soon, but tell me more about Bobby Oakes. Who was he? Is he still around?

[0:03:37]

CH: Bobby Oakes is still around. After the Hurricane [Katrina], his job with Entergy got more important. He was bumped up because of how many people didn't come back to the city and he was there only Saturdays at that point, so I worked with him every Saturday and then the Hurricane came, and after the Hurricane, he went to North Carolina because he had a daughter, and I think she had to finish school, and the school she got into was in North Carolina, so he came back afterwards, but he never really worked back at the French 75 Bar. We brought him back like maybe three times just to have fun, just to have him back there, because he had a big following as well. People still, even now, ask if I've ever met Bobby Oakes when they come back and visit, because he was there for fifteen years. They were really happy that somebody knew who Bobby was and made drinks like the Ramos gin fizz, Sazerac

, and French 75, and told them the history of those drinks when they would visit. He's still here. He still lives here.

RF: So that was his kind of thing behind the bar; he'd tell the stories behind the drinks?

[0:04:39]

CH: Yeah, so because of that I got to learn the histories as well and then I realized that there are just so many drinks and so many fun stories behind them, and that really got me into that, and got people into visiting the bar and then more has been written about people going there and having that experience. They liked being talked to when they have cocktails and something to say behind each drink.

RF: When you started in 2004, what was the breadth of both your cocktail knowledge and your New Orleans knowledge?

[0:05:11]

CH: All of it was very, very mute. I did not know Sazerac. I didn't know milk punch. I didn't know a Pimm's Cup. That's also why I didn't get hired at Dickie Brennan's, which is funny, because I pulled out their application and the application says, "Do you know how to make these drinks? What do you think goes in them?" I was like, "Wow! What goes in a milk punch?" You've got to be kidding me. And a Ramos gin fizz it was like, "I had never heard of this." So I didn't get hired at Dickie Brennan's. And then Arnaud's decided that since I had cocktail knowledge, I mean I knew how to make a Manhattan and an old fashioned and what everybody else in America was making, I worked at really, really nice restaurants. I really considered myself a decent bartender, until I moved down here. And then luckily they let me train and work service bar and I got to learn how to make drinks with Bobby Oakes, and then just to be able to make sure that I was making the drinks the right way at Arnaud's. Because you have to be presentable; it's a really, really nice bar. You have to be able to talk to guests. They don't let everybody work at the French 75 and they were kind of worried about me in the beginning, which is funny eleven years later.

RF: How old is the bar itself? I know the restaurant is almost a century now. How old is the bar?

[0:06:25]

CH: The bar was always a private dining room for the restaurant. At one point it was storage, because after it was an all-male dining room. And then after Germaine Wells passed

away obviously sold it to Archie Casbarian, it was just a little storage room and then they decided to make it a lounge for guests to go into to wait before they're going to dinner. That would be maybe in '79 [1979] or '80 [1980] was when that bar was opened. And then it was opened as Arnaud's Grill Room, because all-male dining rooms back then were called "grill rooms," so they called it Arnaud's Grill Bar, then they called it Arnaud's Bar. And then they were looking down the street and they were like, "Everything says 'Arnaud's,' we need to call it something else." And so they named it after one of Count Arnaud's favorite drinks, and Archie Casbarian wanted it called the French 75, so it's been the 75 for maybe fifteen years now, but it was a bar since I would say definitely 1980.

RF: So Bobby Oakes predated the actual naming of the bar, the present name?

[0:07:29]

CH: Yeah.

RF: Were there any other bartenders heavily associated with that room?

[0:07:36]

CH: Yeah, there is actually one more and his picture is on the wall in this hallway, inside the offices, and I forget his name. I think it's Mike Treveni [sp] and he was there a very long time as well, enough to get his picture drawn, and it's on the wall. I can get back with you on his exact name, but he was actually very, very associated with the bar when it was Arnaud's Grill Room. I think it's Mike Treveni, but he knew Bobby Oakes, and I guess he also helped train Bobby Oakes, and then Bobby Oakes was there longer than Mike was.

RF: Let's talk about — what is the French 75 that you mentioned?

[0:08:14]

CH: The cocktail? It's a champagne cocktail made with cognac, a little lemon — a little fresh lemon and sugar, shaken, strained and then topped with champagne, lemon peel to garnish.

RF: Can you give us the history of Count Arnaud? There's been short books written about this. Can you tell us a short history of the man? Or at least, when you're hired there, do they give you a history? Do you have to learn a history to present to guests?

[0:08:43]

CH: Right, yeah. The short history is always he was a maître d'. He had a very large following, large enough for him to finally buy his own place. And then he was really, really popular. He was a French Quarter character, had a great following. His mansion is still on Esplanade. His wine list rivaled Antoine's. His whole mentality of dining was excellent. He is in books written by his daughter to help prolong the legacy, but she wasn't running the restaurant very well. It was just too large. There's twelve rooms upstairs, there's three main dining rooms, so she sold it to the Casbarians. And they wanted to keep his flare of dining alive in New Orleans because it was something that was probably going to be lost if we keep losing all these old restaurants. His quote that is my favorite quote when they interviewed him and asked him what makes his restaurant so successful is actually my mantra behind the bar, and what he said was, "What makes my restaurant good and why it's going to stay is because I keep a delicate balance between the old and the new." So he has old cuisine and he's okay with having new ideas on how to make an old dish. The same thing with cocktails.

RF: Yeah, how does that translate into the bar, to the French 75 room?

[0:10:06]

CH: Well I've got to realize and look around; it's a beautiful old bar. People are going to want to come and have classics, but they also want to have something that's new. They want to have something they haven't had before, and I'm not going to stray too far from the classic to make a cocktail, and I believe that's also the same thing as what Arnaud's said about his dining. I always try to make sure we keep in the bar and that's how I train all the new people working behind the bar.

RF: Before you came to New Orleans, where were you bartending? Where were you living and working?

[0:10:40]

CH: I was bartending in Baltimore for four years and then I was bartending in the Outer Banks of North Carolina for one year and then in Raleigh, North Carolina for two years.

RF: I didn't know that. Were these bars high and low-end restaurants? What were they?

[0:10:54]

CH: Well the first one was obviously a beer bar. It was a really late, clubby kind of bar, but I like nicer restaurants and so I started working at a nicer bar. And then when I went to Outer Banks, I wanted to work at one of the nicest restaurants because I always associated that with good money, less hours, like a higher level of clientele. And it was the Duck News Café in Duck which is a really, really nice restaurant.

RF: What's the name of the town?

[0:11:28]

CH: Duck, North Carolina.

RF: Like D-u-c-k?

[0:11:32]

CH: Yeah, Duck, North Carolina. Duck is in the Outer Banks. It's just above Nags Head and below — I don't even remember anymore — it's below Sanderling, but Duck was really, really nice and then I moved to Baltimore and I worked at a Charleston restaurant, Legal Sea Foods for four years and it was the same mentality. I wanted to stay with restaurants so I could have a little bit of food on the bill so you can up the checks and get larger tips without working straight on just highballs and beer, which means I'll be there until like three in the morning. They were really nice restaurants, so I was making really nice drinks for a decent clientele and then I moved down here. Those were the places I was looking for when I was hiring, when I was filling out applications.

RF: This is the late 1990s, early 2000s. What were bar menus like then? Because we've seen a radical shift in the past fifteen years.

[0:12:28]

CH: Well, we did have lemon drops, but we also had the side car, which people consider — it is a classic, but yeah, we had a lot of flavored vodka martinis that were just shoved down everybody's throats throughout the country until I realized the big difference was when I moved down to New Orleans. I'm really glad that I was able to see the way the '80s have treated bartending, and then come to New Orleans and realize it never really affected New Orleans. I

look at all those menus and they still had — whether they were being ordered or not, all of our menus have always had Sazerac, milk punch, Pimm's cup, and Ramos gin fizz on them.

RF: At Arnaud's, you're saying, throughout the years?

[0:13:10]

CH: Yeah, Arnaud's and actually all of New Orleans. Look at any other menus. I really like that in New Orleans it's always been this little bubble, and I never really realized it was like that with cocktails as well until I came down here. But that's how all the menus changed and actually, in our bar, what we did, which helped make the rest of the change throughout the city was we knew, well I knew that there was going to be a renaissance in cocktails in the early 2000s and so I wanted to keep all of our classics, but then I was also able to properly make a lot of other drinks and make my own syrups and make different drinks. The more those were written about, the more the restaurants were like — you've got to maître d' be in the mind of some of the other bartenders and so he's reading about this, "Well, I can do that too." And I'm glad that it had that approach. Obviously everybody wants to make something of themselves, so when they go to the bar they don't want to keep making the same drinks. It's like all of that little wave of the cocktail revolution spread through, so even though we had our own drinks, we were also making better drinks now than we were in 2004.

RF: And eat your sandwich. We'll take a break. I want to ask what originally drew you to New Orleans. Why did you move here and not New York or San Francisco?

[0:14:37]

CH: I actually was trying to come here to learn how to run a guest house and after visiting here, I'm more of an old soul. And I loved everything down here. It was like always further in the past than everything else. And so when UNO was the first place to have this graduate program for hospitality and tourism, I was just like "Well, I already have one degree," so I had been calling them. I'm used to moving. My dad was in the Navy, so every three years, I always had this thing in the back of my mind that there is always something else, there's something else. I liked Baltimore. I had a lot of good friends, good jobs, but I was just thinking there has to be something else, and so I wanted to come down here. I was always a huge fan of Louis Armstrong and jazz, so I wanted to come down here and experience everything that's still close to the way it used to be, the dressing and the music, the awesome architecture. And then I used the graduate program as more of a crutch. Do you know what I mean? That's why I'm going to move here, because it was between here and San Francisco, Le Cordon Bleu had a similar program and I was happily looking at that as well. I just knew I was going to move from Baltimore, even though I liked Baltimore. You're just at that age where there's always something else. So I moved down here and I've been here eleven years, and I have two more classes left. I just haven't been able to get back to campus. After the Hurricane, coming back, I've always been part-time and I'm working full-time. I think it was really more of a crutch for me to give myself an excuse to move down here, but really it was obviously the music and the people and the culture and the food.

RF: So you were taking classes and working at Arnaud's at the same time?

[0:16:37]

CH: Yeah, I was for five years part-time and then I took one semester off, and then the bar got too busy. And I never got back around to readmitting and getting those last two classes. It makes sense to go ahead and finish, since I already have one degree, I'm only two classes away. But now, with how the bar is going, I'm not so sure about obviously working the guest house.

RF: People who move to New Orleans like me have kind of a 'falling in love with New Orleans story.' Do you have one? Was it immediate? Did it take time? When did you know that you wanted to live here and that you were deeply attached to this place in some way?

[0:17:25]

CH: I think a couple of those questions I don't really know the answer to. I think the reason why I haven't left — I mean I've never lived anywhere eleven years; I've never lived anywhere more than four years. But probably when I realized how much fun it is to actually be a part of something. So you could be a character in New Orleans. I don't think that I could have been a character in Baltimore or New York. Down here, everything is like — it's a smaller city. Everybody knows each other and we all play a part of being what New Orleans is. I've always said that New Orleans is really a play and that we all have our roles in the play. Everybody is on stage. That kind of feeling and that kind of belonging and actually being a character like one of my favorites is Danny Barker. Obviously I love Uncle Lionel. Every time I saw him, I would try to take a picture with him. I have at least eight pictures with Uncle Lionel. So I guess that's it. The closer you can be with a city that I've never experienced before, or never thought about moving after that.

RF: Did you read deeply in the history and the culture of the city when you moved here?

[0:18:43]

CH: When I got here, I got much more — I had to because I had so many people asking me all these questions at the bar, and I just never wanted to not be able to answer a question, so I bought so many books, I went to so many talks, and like when I was in UNO, I heard more about different people speaking each time, so I made a point to go to so many people talking like Dooky Chase, when she had her talk. I made sure I saw her speak. And then other jazz musicians. I would always go to the Louis Armstrong Festival because they have a lot of interviews, so you could actually see him and watch him getting interviewed. Things like that are really, really kind of important.

RF: Before we took a short break, you said when you moved here in 2004 that you had some sense that the cocktail world was changing. Where was the writing on the wall? How did you know? Where did you think things were going to go? What was happening in those early 2000s?

[0:19:48]

CH: The first time I made sour mix we actually used fresh egg whites and I was like, "This is like the most ridiculous thing." And then I saw that somebody had a book and it was like this is how you do it. This is actually the way you're supposed to do it and then in New Orleans, everybody uses egg whites. I was like, "Wow, this is weird." And then the first time there was Tales of the Cocktail, I saw people coming down here, and then they were talking about how the cocktail was invented here and they were talking about the histories and everything, and I just knew that there was going to be a change, that everybody was going to go back to the way things were supposed to be done. So it had to have been Tales of the Cocktail. When you see people

coming from another country to come here to a cocktail festival, and I'm just like looking and watching. And then people having seminars, I just knew it was going to spread.

RF: And that was around the same time, the first Tales? Tales of the Cocktail is a big cocktail convention event.

[0:20:52]

CH: Yeah. The first time Tales got huge was 2007, so in '04, '05, and '06, even after the Hurricane, it started to a gathering, but it was only one night. 2007 was the first time it was three or four days and now, since 2008, it's always a whole week, every single year. So that's when I saw younger people traveling from different cities coming down here and then with the interest I just knew that New Orleans and the bar, we were making drinks, but also we had to keep up and doing the same thing New York was doing, and San Francisco.

RF: We're reaching the ten or twelve year point of this cocktail renaissance throughout the whole world. What do you think launched this? Was it a notion? Was it a person? Was it a book or an event, a drink, or a confluence of all these things? What was going on fifteen years ago, ten years ago to bring us to where we are today, where we all know cocktails and read about them?

[0:21:59]

CH: I would still say Tales of the Cocktail is the first time that Dale DeGroff came down to give a talk. Wondrich was here. Dr. Cocktail, Ted Haigh, the guy who actually is the

curator of the Cocktail Museum, he's down here. Beachbum Berry, who's been researching tiki drinks for over thirty years, he's here. I think when they realized, when they were finally brought to the same area, all of these people, who might not have even met before — like I don't think DeGroff met Beachbum Berry. DeGroff is in New York and he's doing his style, Beachbum Berry was in California doing his. I think bringing them together — and then Wondrich, being the historian that he is, made him realize he had to do all this research. Wondrich's book came out in I think '09, or '08 maybe, so it took him I guess like six years to get all that history done. Obviously that didn't happen like twelve years ago, like we're saying, or fifteen years, but the fact that they finally realized that birds of a feather flocking together, finally hanging out, and converging down here, that is my number one reason for the cocktail changes, because then they were able to talk to each other. Dr. Cocktail lives in LA and he finally was able to meet Dale DeGroff. Dr. Cocktail's book came out in '04. Gary Regan has been writing cocktail books since the '90s, but they weren't really history books, they were just recipe books. So when he wrote his first one, *Joy of Mixology*, it's like when those things first came out for young bartenders to actually read them and actually older bartenders who wanted to actually make good drinks and realize they're doing something wrong, that's when all that started to happen. But I still think Tales of the Cocktail bringing everybody here for the first time to one area is what sparked everything.

RF: Going back to that first Tales of the Cocktail, what was the first cocktail or drink that experience a renaissance where people were like, "Oh, we can make this better around the world?"

[0:24:20]

CH: I would say probably the Manhattan and then the Sazerac, because even when I started and I was making Manhattans, I was always shaking them because I didn't know any better. I was just getting it cold.

RF: I still shake mine which I'm doing it wrong. I've been —.

[0:24:35]

CH: Right, yeah, yeah. So things like that, like methods of making drinks. What was the question again?

RF: Talk about the Manhattan and the Sazerac, and especially we'll talk about the Sazerac. What did you learn about the Manhattan over time?

[0:24:50]

CH: Yeah, I would say I learned that I was making it wrong. I learned that there's a difference in vermouths. I was shaking martinis, I wasn't adding vermouth to martinis. So the martini is one and then the Sazerac is — Sazerac is still made more differently than any drink in history, still. My quote in Aaron Young's story of the Sazerac is, "The Sazerac is consistently the most inconsistently made cocktail in the history of cocktails."

RF: How so? You have to explain that.

[0:25:22]

CH: Oh, I mean everybody adds whatever bitters they want. Like ours is the most unique Sazerac at French 75 Bar, but I'll talk about that later. People add different bitters, they'll still do cognac. They never make it the same. Some people still put it on the rocks, which is fine. Well, it's not fine, but it's fine if you want it on the rocks. But it's never made the same. The Manhattan is still made the same. Martinis are still made — I mean you're still doing the same thing with martinis, you're doing the same thing with Manhattans, but Sazerac's are always changing. People add rye and cognac, two different types of bitters, not the same amount of bitters. The manhattan is always 2-1-2 like the area code, two ounces of rye or bourbon, an ounce of vermouth, two dashes of angostura and nobody really shy's away from that, but the bitters in the Sazerac go from one to fifteen.

RF: One to fifteen dashes?

[0:26:17]

CH: Yeah, anywhere you go, it's always made differently.

RF: What is it about that drink that is so malleable?

[0:26:27]

CH: Well, people still want to have it with cognac. They come down here and they ask for cognac at my bar and I don't blame them. And the other thing is the absinthe and the Herbsaint. That's another thing. People use different pastis, different anise liquors, in it as well, so it can be made with cognac and Herbsaint or cognac and absinthe, and then the bitters are different. No matter where you go, you're never going to have the same Sazerac. Do you know what I mean? But you are going to have the same Manhattan. That's what I'm trying to say.

RF: Is it because the Sazerac is so old? Is it because it's one of the original first cocktails? And Manhattan, we can actually point to a time and locate people who drank the first Manhattan.

[0:27:11]

CH: That's exactly why, because the Sazerac and the old fashioned are cocktails that morph into what they are. Sazarec, I agree with McMillian, he has the best story of the Sazerac. His should be the one written down. I was reiterating it to Naren Young when he did his story on the Sazerac. But you'd have to ask McMillian and I agree. I'm so glad he said it. Sazerac is a style of drink that then earned a name. Everybody was rinsing their spirits with absinthe and medicinal bitters back then, and then just because the Sazerac House became famous, they named their house drink, which is what everybody was drinking, the Sazerac. So then, when everybody makes their Sazerac, everybody feels like they have their own right to make it their way and that's why. So we make ours our way. Nobody makes it our — our way is very unique to the bar. And people are taking the Sazerac because, you're right, it's because it didn't go down to one person who made the Manhattan and borrowed their recipe. People feel like they have free range on the Sazerac. Every bar is different.

RF: In the same way in Louisiana we call all soft drinks Coke. It's taking a name that was an actual proprietary name, there was a Sazerac brand. How do you all make the Sazerac? What is the recipe at the French 75?

[0:28:31]

CH: Our Sazerac — and I don't like to "genderfy" cocktails, but I like to think it's a really masculine way we make it. What we do is we pull a glass out of the freezer, we rinse it

with Herbsaint, and we make sure there's still a little bit of a puddle. We really like a high anise note in our Sazerac. We do six dashes of Peychaud bitters, and then we have the rye in the fridge, so we pull the rye out of the fridge, and we pour two ounces straight into the rinsed glass with the bitters and the sugar, a little simple syrup, and give it a stir, lemon peel, and then serve it. It's the least diluted Sazerac out of all of them. Sazeracs are always going to be stirred or shaken or whatever and then they're going to be a little bit more diluted and ours is not being diluted at all. It's like more right up in your face kind of thing. That's what I mean about more of a masculine style cocktail, and it's a style that's very unique to the bar. Bobby Oakes was doing it for fifteen years, I've been doing it for eleven, so in my opinion, and I really feel confident in saying, it's the most continuously made Sazerac in the whole world, because everybody changed when they realized they were making things the wrong way, if they were making a Sazerac at all since 2005.

RF: They started making "authentic" Sazeracs, but you all were doing it well before that. [0:29:59]

CH: We were doing it incorrectly before and we are doing it incorrectly still. It's still very incorrectly made, but it's the way we've always been doing it. So it would be one thing like I was always worrying if I had to change the style of our Sazerac because everybody was watching us like during Tales of the Cocktail. Each year, in 2009 and '10, I was thinking, "Man, we have to stop doing this because people are watching and they're going to be like, 'Oh my god! Look at what they did! They didn't do this the right way. That's not the proper way to make a Sazerac.' " So I was actually told —

RF: It's not hip or something?

[0:30:33]

CH: No, it's just way wrong.

RF: Okay.

[0:30:37]

CH: Yeah. We're not stirring anything thing. We're not doing it the way on every YouTube, every book tells you to do it. It's very incorrectly made and so I'm telling you, biking home, I kept wondering, "Man, we're going to have to change this drink." I was really worried that everybody in New York was going to come down here and tell us " 'the French 75 Bar is doing the wrong Sazerac.' " But I realized if I could describe how we're incorrectly making it, that actually makes it almost okay, but then again, like I said, if it's the same one somebody had twenty years ago and it's the same one they can still have, that's more important to me and nobody, not one bar, has made the same style of Sazerac for that long. So that became more important to me than being ridiculed for doing it wrong, so we still make the same Sazerac.

RF: I love that. You said that when you moved here, you did not know what a Sazerac was, you didn't know how to make it. How long did it take you to get comfortable making it? Was it just a day? Was it a week?

[0:31:38]

CH: Well, rinsing the glass, rolling the glass in the air, that wasn't something — I never thought I would do anything like that. That took a little bit of getting comfortable. We used to have to throw a little bit in the air too, but luckily like now, I can just get away with rolling it in the air, but that took a little while, because I had just never heard of Herbsaint anyway, and I had

never done anything with absinthe because at that point, it was illegal and I wanted to make the same one, so it did take a while. I really didn't want to do it until I practiced it in front of Bobby and had him just do the base part, the right amount of Herbsaint, the right amount of bitters, and the right amount of sugar, and tasting that and making sure that was right before pulling the bottle out of the fridge and pouring it in.

RF: I'm real interested in kind of mentor/student relationships in the food world. What kind of teacher was Bobby and what makes a good bartender/cocktail mentor and a bad one, in your experience?

[0:32:43]

CH: I think just being able to explain in a way why somebody is doing something wrong without ridiculing them. And then I think — I'm not so sure about all the generations that are going to be coming up, but the ability to actually be told you're wrong and then being like giddy or excited about making sure you do it the right way and not having a problem with asking somebody. But you know, I work with some younger guys and never wanted to argue with them if they were doing the wrong things. If you put the importance on why they're doing things in the bar and not doing it my way, more as "Hey, it's important," that things stay the same at the French 75 Bar, and if they realize that that's above me, it's not all about me, Chris Hannah, blah, blah, blah, I think that also helps. The younger bartenders who are working in the bar as well listen to me without thinking that I'm telling them that I'm their parent. Do you know what I mean? They know it's important and know that I know that everything is important for what the guests have, so they're much more inclined to do whatever I say.

RF: What year did you become the head bartender there? And are you? Is there a title that goes along with your position at Arnaud's?

[0:34:03]

CH: Yeah. After the Hurricane it was me and Tito, and Tito was there before me, but he was in nursing school, so I became the head bartender when they realized that more people needed to start working in the bar because it was gaining much more popularity. We went from working one bartender on a weekday to three. We were unable to — the popularity grew.

RF: And this was directly attributed to the rise of the cocktail —?

[0:34:31]

CH: The rise of the cocktail culture, and then me and the bar being part of the bar as being mentioned, so when people came to visit, the more your bar is mentioned, the more people are going to come visit you, and that's because the rise of the cocktail culture and then when people are writing about who's making good drinks and who's keep good methodology of making good cocktails in New Orleans, when this is happening, so obviously the French 75 was now being mentioned with Carousel Bar, Sazerac Bar, where it really wasn't so much before. Before it was always Napoleon House, Carousel Bar, Sazerac Bar, and that was it. And then the writers realized there were things to write about, and that's how Bobby Oakes got his Ramos gin fizz in *The Wall Street Journal*. Why wasn't it the Sazerac Bar's, because they're the ones who are supposed to own the recipe? But anyway, what was the question?

RF: You becoming the head bartender.

[0:35:35]

CH: Yes, so all that became much more popular and busy and they needed to hire more people on, and then, because I was there and I knew the story of the restaurant and everything, I was obviously training. The other guy graduated from nursing school, so while he was in school, he started working less shifts. I became the head bartender, I would say, at the end of 2006 after the Hurricane.

RF: You've mentioned the Hurricane a few times. What was that experience like to you? Did you leave and not think about coming back? I left and did not come back for three years — and we're nearing the ten year anniversary and I think it's good to talk about these things.

[0:36:21]

CH: Yeah, I left, but for some reason, I don't know if I was brainwashed, I don't know, I just thought everybody was supposed to come back in January. So it was like I left, but I knew it was always temporary. You had Craigslist ads for temporary housing and everybody was saying, "I have a job and a room." Do you know what I mean? So I answered one of those and then I went to Mexico, pretty much. I went to Lajitas, way, way bottom of Texas, on the border. I always thought about the restaurant, even when I was read — when I was writing, I was waiting to come back and work at the bar, put on a tuxedo, and be part of the French Quarter. So yeah, I always knew I was coming back.

RF: So you came back in January. I have no recollection between August and December of that year, of 2005. But I start to have — it's just totally erased from my memory, but I start to have memory of January and coming back once a month to see my girlfriend here and how weird the French Quarter was when we'd go out. Can you describe what the French Quarter was like, and how tending a bar was like in January in an open city that was still all kinds of fucked up,

when it was still patrolled by armed guards and still had a very small population. What was it like? Electricity was not reliable at all times. What was it like then?

[0:37:50]

CH: It was really, really strange. I'm really glad that I was writing down things back then so I can look at them. The patrol cars, the military existence was really weird. It was so slow. Man, 2006 I decided it just wasn't going to happen, but people coming back and everything was just like — the discussions were just insane, people coming in and crying, being mad about the Hurricane — about Mardi Gras. I just remember ladies just yelling that there shouldn't be a Mardi Gras and that it's bull crap. "My friends aren't down. They haven't been able to come back. We shouldn't have it." It was a really, really insane time. We were running out of bananas, so you couldn't make bananas foster. It was really, really weird. You couldn't even buy milk in some places. Yeah, '06 [2006] was really, really rough, an interesting time, and that was definitely a year that I thought I would have to move somewhere else. We had captains, obviously, who had really awesome jobs wherever they went because they're really good servers. Since the job was so good, they just never came back. I was just like, "Oh really? They didn't come back? That's really weird." So then I started thinking in my mind, "Oh wow," they're staying because it's obviously better, the money is better, so I was thinking I was probably going to jet also. Yeah, '06 [2006] was a really rough, rough year.

RF: People talk a lot about the resurgence of the French Quarter in downtown New Orleans post-Katrina, and they talk about it in terms of a revived tourist industry and a re-interest in the city and a renewed media interest in every single magazine, every single newspaper has a heavy presence here. In the French Quarter there's also a lot more cocktail bars offering better

cocktails, and that seemed to happen a few years after Katrina. Did these things go hand in hand, or was the cocktail renaissance here part of a larger cocktail renaissance? Would it have happened without Katrina do you think, the resurgence of the French Quarter as a drinking destination, and not just Bourbon Street, plastic cup drinks?

[0:40:20]

CH: I think it doesn't have anything to do with the Hurricane. It's definitely part of the whole revolution. So that was bound to happen. It just so happens that the Hurricane happened in '05 [2005] and so I guess maybe some places were able to reopen and probably at that time everybody wanted to be in the Quarter anyway because there was no foot traffic anywhere else after the Hurricane. It was mainly, obviously the French Quarter, but I think it was bound to happen.

RF: Over the past ten or fifteen years, we've talked about a re-interest in certain drinks, you mentioned a revival of certain spirits like absinthe and such — is there anything that you think is a detraction, that is bad, that has come about because of the cocktail movement in the past ten years? Is there anything going in the wrong direction, either in America or in the world?

[0:41:23]

CH: In the wrong direction? I don't think anything is going in the wrong direction. I mean, I don't like molecular mixology and I shouldn't even be allowed to say that. Do you know what I mean? I can get in trouble for that, but no, I think the only thing in the wrong direction would be people wanting to be a bar star instead of a bartender, which means that you're not really going to actually tend bar and help a guest get along with his stay. It's getting to be more about, "Hey, look at me." And I wouldn't say that's necessarily bad, but if there's anything bad

in the hospitality industry going that way with bartending, I think that would be the one thing is people wanting to be bartenders because maybe they want to be in a magazine, instead of the real reason I thought we were supposed to be filling out applications because we wanted a job. I never thought that I would ever be in a magazine for bartending. I've worked in restaurants for over twenty years now and I was on the line for six years and I realized I liked bartending a lot better.

RF: That raises an interesting question that I've been wanting to ask. There seems to be a split in both bartending and restaurant culture. There is the service part and then there is the craft part. Which one most immediately attracted you first: the service industry part, comforting customers, or the inventiveness and the craftness of the old and the new, having to do with drinks?

[0:43:05]

CH: It's the hospitality part. That's why I moved down here because when I was in Baltimore bartending, I also had a real job. I was in an accounting department for four years and I bartended for four years part time, so I had two jobs, and I realized what I like doing was helping guests get along with their stay. I would write on napkins when people were visiting where they needed to go, which bars they needed to go to in Baltimore, and that's why I was looking at UNO's hospitality and tourism graduate degree, and that's why I moved down here. So for me, it was always that part of the bar. And then after I realized there were so many different drinks that were out there and that you had to make some ingredients in order to create these drinks, that was the fun part. And then just wanting to do that to make sure the bar was mentioned because I'm a really big fan of Count Arnaud and I didn't want our bar to rest on its

laurels and just say, "Oh yeah, come here because we're old." So the whole craft part was just to keep up, and also help the city keep up with New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. Yeah, it was definitely hospitality first and everything else I just never realized was going to happen.

RF: You've talked about the old and the new, is there a drink that you've created that you're most proud of?

[0:44:25]

CH: Yeah, I like the Walker Percy. I like the Rebennack. I like the Pableaux Martinez. It's really a martinez, but everything is one or two things, either a sling or a sour and then as long as you realize that, then you don't let it get to your head too much. So the Pableaux Martinez is a martinez with a different vermouth and an amaro obviously for our friend Pableaux that he likes. And the Rebennack is like something I'm really happy about and the Contessa and the Walker Percy, those are some drinks I'm pretty proud of.

RF: What's the Walker Percy? If I know that one I forget it. I know the Rebennack. I've made that from your recipe. What's the Walker Percy?

[0:45:09]

CH: The Walker Percy is one that I'm really happy about because it's like a whole half ounce of Angostura and a half ounce of a pomegranate syrup and two ounces of bourbon and then a little lemon syrup, shaken. And I'm proud of it because it's hard to make a drink with a half-ounce of Angostura without it being overbearing and overpowering. And he wrote *The Well of Bourbon*, so I'm pretty happy about that. And I guess the Winter Waltz is in several books. I'm pretty happy. We do that every year.

RF: You work just really steps from Bourbon Street. What do you think about Bourbon Street? Do you like Bourbon Street? Do you ever go to Bourbon Street? I know you have to travel down Bourbon Street sometimes, but what do you think about the place?

[0:45:59]

CH: I like Bourbon Street. It's a buffer. We need to have Bourbon Street. I think everything I say is going to be negative in a positive way. The people who come to Bourbon Street, if there was no Bourbon Street, they'd be in my bar. No offense. Obviously I want everybody to come to the French 75 Bar, but we're never going to make fishbowls or Hand Grenades, and I'm glad it's there for that. It's much more fun, it's something to talk about. Bourbon Street, I don't have a problem with that. I think Pat O'Brien's courtyard is beautiful. You should come have a Hurricane at Pat O'Brien's or even a mint julep. Check out all their rooms. I didn't even know there was that other room where they actually make decent cocktails. I'm a fan of Bourbon Street. I know it's disgusting, but if you were never able to see somebody actually sleeping passed out on the sidewalk, at least you got to say you saw it, and it's because of Bourbon Street. If there was no Bourbon Street, you wouldn't see this and you wouldn't be able to go home to say, "Hey look, I just saw this." There's a give and take. I like Bourbon Street. It is weird that I work so close to Bourbon Street.

RF: Especially considering the digs that is the Arnaud's French 75 Bar and your uniform and the way the place looks and what is upstairs, there's a museum upstairs. Was that all attractive when you saw it? Were you put off? Did you want to wear a tuxedo? You wear a tuxedo for all service. Everyone wears a tuxedo. What did you think about it? Was it cheesy? Was it off-putting? Was it endearing? How did you feel?

[0:47:45]

CH: I guess it's really weird, man. I guess it's going to have to be endearing. I remember as a kid riding my bike home thinking about all these things that made sense and I just knew — I was looking at this really awesome old movie my dad made us watch, and this party was amazing in the movie, but I just knew that if I could be in that party, if I could be that server, I could be part of that party. I was looking at this guy and he was wearing a tuxedo and I was like, "That's how I'm going to be part of this party." So it's more endearing to me. It wasn't off-putting at all. I didn't think anything of it. It's like I said, it's like New Orleans is a play and we all play our part, and that's my costume for my role. I guess it would have to be more endearing, but over a couple of years I realized that some people really never ever want to wear those tuxedos and I was like, "Okay, now I get it."

RF: Do you remember the movie?

[0:48:42]

CH: No, I wish I did. It had to have been something that Humphrey Bogart was in, you know? Everybody is all dressed up and the servers are walking around with trays of champagne, and I just knew that was going to be — it was like I have to do that in order to get in that movie, because I'm not going to be famous. Do you know what I mean?

RF: I just have a couple more questions. In some way, you have obtained some level of fame just for the fact that you travel around the world now as both a representative of New Orleans, I'd say, and a representative of the bar, but also a representative of the classic cocktail maker who also makes new cocktails. When did that start: traveling around the world making drinks for hire or for conventions or for whatever it is, and what are your feelings about that?

[0:49:33]

CH: For me it started in '08 [2008], and after I realized that that's actually a thing — the first time I got an email: "We want you to come to New York. You won this sherry thing. We're really glad that you're going to be able to come from New Orleans because we've never had anybody from New Orleans come up here." I actually told them, "No, I've got to work. I'm sorry." And then I got an email back and they were like, "No, no, we're going to pay for your flight and we're going to pay for the hotel." I was like, "Oh, okay," Because I couldn't afford this trip. I was just like, "You've got to be kidding me!" That and then they chose fifty bartenders to go to Vail the next year, and I was on that trip. Then it's just been really, really cool because I remember because of the hotels and tourism program I was in, I watched the video of Huey Long flying his bartender up to New York to make a Ramos gin fizz and I was just like, "Wow!" So then I was thinking to myself that's exactly what I'm doing which is really, really crazy. I've been to Hong Kong two times now, going to France, going to Russia. It's been really, really a lot of fun, and I'm really glad that I've been able to help represent New Orleans and saw these places. Like Indonesia last year wanted to have a New Orleans party for this company's fifth anniversary, this restaurant company. They flew me out there for a week and it's just been a really nice compliment to be one of the people from New Orleans to represent the city. That's another reason why I'm happy about making proper cocktails in this community. People brought me in from New York and all my best friends are actually like the better bartenders in the entire country. It's an amazing community. I'm very happy to represent New Orleans in that way. It's been really cool. When I talk to musicians, it's so funny because they always get to go and they should, they go to all these amazing events throughout Europe, going out there representing New Orleans. And so it's like such an amazing feeling to be doing almost

the same thing. I'm not nearly like a musician. It's not even nearly as hard as being a musician, but it's fascinating to actually represent New Orleans in that way. It's pretty cool.

RF: One New Orleans question. New Orleans is a famous city. It's a cosmopolitan city, I'd argue, but it's also famously, I think for people who have lived here, a kind of insular city. I am not from New Orleans, but I've had people tell me you will never be from New Orleans unless you were born in Orleans Parish and you went to this high school and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Are you a New Orleanian? Do you consider yourself a New Orleanian after living here for eleven years? And if so, that determiner, when did you accept that?

[0:52:36]

CH: I mean I always feel bad about that question because I just watch other bartenders and I watch the guests say, "Are you from here? Are you from here?" But I don't really identify with that questions because, because like I said, my dad was in the Navy so we moved every three years and never lived anywhere for four years and I've been here eleven years. I'd say I'm a New Orleanian and it's because of how much I love the history of the city and how much I want to make sure what I do replicates something. Like I said, it's the balance of the old and the new. I want to know the history of the city and I want to make sure if I do anything outside, when I do all these trips, I want to make sure that it's always going to replicate what I think of the city, what I like about the city. That's why I make drinks after authors and jazz musicians. So I think that makes me feel okay with saying that I'm a New Orleanian and everybody else thinks I'm from here anyway. All my bartenders, when they think of Chris Hannah, the person they think of is New Orleans. Not one person would ever think San Diego or Baltimore or Hawaii or

Panama or anywhere else, so I guess I just fell in love and embodied and totally accepted this town like that, so I'd say I'm a New Orleanian. I feel bad about that question though.

RF: Well I do too, but I'm not the one who asks it, people ask me and then they deny it to me. They deny my —

[0:54:11]

CH: I feel bad that somebody would say that to you.

RF: Yeah, but only people who are born here and that matters so much to them will even ask that question in a way where they can then deny someone's "New Orleansness."

[0:54:32]

CH: Yeah, it's not fair, especially when so many people born and raised here forgot about what other people who have moved here and love about it anyway. Some people don't even like Sazeracs, or whatever. Not that you have to. But it's like people who were born and raised here completely forget how amazing it is. They might not even listen to jazz. I don't think it's a very fair question and I don't even care if anybody is born and raised here to be honest with you, because I mean I'm not.

RF: In a way, you've become part of the fabric of New Orleans, but you've also become this iconic New Orleans figure, and I want to know if you're comfortable in that role. People do, friends of ours have dressed as you. Other bartenders have dressed as you for a night, for benefits behind the bar during Tales. Are you comfortable in that role?

[0:55:28]

CH: I think it's funny. I think it's really weird when somebody I don't know walks up to me in the bar and says, "Hey, I saw that baby dressed as you." And I'm like, "I don't even know who you are." And then, "I saw there was three of you here behind the bar." I mean it's fun. People like always say 'imitation is some kind of flattery,' but I don't buy into that. Everybody's just having fun. Like I said, it's a costume kind of thing and now they finally have that doll, the doll that Wayne Curtis made.

RF: The Chris Hannah doll, right.

[0:56:10]

CH: Yeah and that idiot puts it behind his bar at Angeline. Have you been there yet?

RF: No.

CH: You've got to go to the bar. I want somebody to steal it. I want to bring it back. I just want to mail it to my mom so it's not on Facebook anymore. I'm in Russia and this guy walks up to me with a really, really Russian accent: "I wanted to friend you on Facebook, but I didn't know if I should friend Chris Hannah or Little Chris Hannah." I just wanted to smack somebody. Do you know what I mean? I'm in Moscow and that's the question I get. No, it's fun. It's cool. Like I said, it's a costume. You're there eleven years and so something's going to happen.

RF: Alright. My last question: you've named drinks after authors. When we get together, when I go to the bar, or when we're just hanging out the two of us as friends, we talk about literature and books a lot. You love to read. I love to read. So I want to get two book recommendations just for anyone who might ever read or listen to this audio. Your favorite local,

be it New Orleans or Louisiana, story and then your favorite work of literature that either revolves around drinks, cocktails, bartenders, or has a very great scene with a bartender, cocktail, bar scene.

[0:57:27]

CH: Yeah, I always do *All the King's Men*. I love that. That book made me even change the way I even write emails sometimes for local. For bartenders, man, I'm still looking dude. Obviously *Casino Royale* obviously has an awesome bar scene, but I'm definitely still in search of my favorite whole sequence of either the conversation of the bar — everybody always looks to see where a cocktails name dropped. I love that. I hope that becomes more popular. I don't know. It's going to be hard to take away. Maybe *The Hour*. I forget who writes it. *The Hour* has an awesome almost complete bar speak throughout, it's called *The Hour*, and I forget who wrote it. I have it, but I guess maybe when you write it you can get the author's name because he deliberately, completely tells you how to make a martini and how wrong you are for making it a specific way. It's just awesome.

RF: Is bar speak — do you think there's a particular bar speak, both behind the bar and that happens in bars?

[0:58:45]

CH: Yeah.

RF: And that is a common language throughout the world, I should say, from your travels. So you go to Russia, they're speaking Russian, but they're also speaking English, is there a common bar speak that happens there, a common language?

[0:58:59]

CH: There's a way to order drinks and when I say "bar speak" I'm also — the fact that cocktails are known by name and stuff like that, and in a way for a guest to be at a bar and be really confident and showy like how he's going to talk with the bartender. That's kind of what I mean. There's this one essay that I would have to forward to you on this guy, it's called *Martini City*, and these guys are walking through a town and discussing what makes a martini and what makes a martini city and I don't know the name of that, but I can forward you that as well, but I would probably say *The Hour*.

RF: I'll check it out. Okay, this was fun. I want to thank you.

[0:59:42]

CH: Right on. Nice to talk to you brother.

END OF INTERVIEW