Melissa Martin
Mosquito Supper Club
New Orleans, LA
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Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
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[00:00:00.00]

Justin N.: Go ahead and start recording. My apologies right now to the transcriber; we're working with one microphone. This is Justin Nystrom, Loyola University of New Orleans. Today is October 14, 2020. I'm here with Melissa Martin of the Mosquito Supper Club and it's 2835 Dryades, is that right?

[00:00:22.11]

Melissa M.: 3824.

[00:00:26.27]

Justin N.: 3824, I could mix those up.

[00:00:26.27]

Melissa M.: Dryades and General Taylor.

[00:00:31.27]

Justin N.: Dryades and General Taylor.

[00:00:32.25]

Melissa M.: I always say "We're behind The Columns." Most people know where that is.

[00:00:34.16]

Justin N.: Sure, sure. Yeah, I guess so. I was thinking Martin's (Wine Cellar) is right over there.

[00:00:39.12]

Melissa M.: Yeah. Martin's, too. But yeah.

[00:00:45.03]

Justin N.: We're here as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance's COVID-19 Oral History with restauranteurs and checking in that we've been doing since the beginning of summer. Of course, it's October, and things have evolved a little bit more since the middle of summer, but we won't let that stop us.

[00:01:03.25]

Melissa M.: Uh-mm.

[00:01:03.25]

Justin N.: Great. Thank you, Melissa, so much for being here.

[00:01:06.23]

Melissa M.: Oh, thank you for coming over.

[00:01:13.24]

Justin N.: I want to start with some ancient history, as in March, which seems now an eternity ago. When were you first aware that this pandemic was going to affect you?

[00:01:25.26]

Melissa M.: Well, I mean, I guess before it was going to affect me, I actually was very sick in January, which I suspect now was COVID. So sick that I had to take off almost ten days, and then I was moving; I had sold my house and was moving. I got into my new house and literally, like, couldn't breathe for a week and was coming off of the sickness but was choking and choking. I kept calling my mother and saying, "Something's wrong with me, and it's different than any sickness I've ever had." I kept calling my general practitioner, and she was like, "I can maybe see you in March." So, I just . . . kind of do what you get when you get the flu other times, I just rode it out. But a lot of the times, I woke up in the middle of the night thinking I was going to choke to death. My sous chef here actually joked that it was COVID and I actually shot back, "We can't really joke about that. It's a really serious thing." I kind of started feeling better Mardi Gras-ish, which—I left town for Mardi Gras. I think I realized early March, in the first week of March, that watching the news around the world, there was no way we were going to escape this, knowing what travel is like in the United States. My wheels just started spinning of how, what was going to happen. The weekend that we were shut down, we had already ended family-style service and was seating people—we were seating everyone outside. We had our first sort of taste of what the new restaurant would look like.

[00:03:23.01]

Justin N.: Mm. You weren't planning on moving away from family-style service, though?

[00:03:28.21]

Melissa M.: No, I wasn't. I was planning on possibly offering two different settings for folks like me and my mom who like to eat at 5:15 and then, for folks who are more Spanish-style, they can handle the late nights. [Laughter] So no, I was not planning on it. we were planning on opening our bar and opening bar service, and outside, just kind of treats, snacks and treats. We were not planning the overhaul that we have done now.

[00:03:58.08]

Justin N.: So, this pushed you along a little bit more to do that, I guess.

[00:04:05.18]

Melissa M.: Well, there's no other choice. I can't do family-style. In order to save the business, we unfortunately have to be open. In a perfect world, we would have been able to remain closed and figure out, financially, how to make it happen. We've actually never been closed. We shut down for two weeks, but then we re-opened; started cooking for hospitals through Feed the Frontline. Then, from there, we transitioned to to-go when the funds ran out for that. Then from to-go, we transitioned back into our tasting menu once we were allowed at 25% capacity. We started feeding twelve people at 5:30 and twelve people at 7:30. Then, from there, we've just been evolving. We took a break in August, which we always do. We always close down in the summer for some period of time, then re-open September 17 with our new business plan. That's been kind of crazy. We're a month into it.

[00:05:14.27]

Justin N.: Wow, wow. Yeah. So, I've read some of the more recent press, and you said that you have more staff in the past, right?

[00:05:25.08]

Melissa M.: Well, now we have the same amount of staff as we had.

[00:05:27.09]

Justin N.: So, you've been able to staff back up?

[00:05:31.09]

Melissa M.: Yes. So, we essentially laid everyone off except for my sous chef and my assistant. Once we started doing to-go and we got P.P.P. money, we tried to bring people back. Some people were open to that and some people were resistant to that, so we winded up losing a lot of staff, which I don't blame anyone. Everyone has to go their own path during this. But when we re-opened, we were at the same numbers we were before; we just had six new staff members.

[00:06:04.12]

Justin N.: Mm. So when you say the staff, they just weren't comfortable coming back to work or . . . ?

[00:06:09.16]

Melissa M.: Yeah, you could say that.

[00:06:12.13]

Justin N.: Fair.

[00:06:13.26]

Melissa M.: I mean, I had to be open and honest with people and say, "Do you want to be on unemployment and do you want to work?" A lot of people just chose and were more comfortable on unemployment. I kind of let them make those decisions.

[00:06:24.06]

Justin N.: Um-hm. So, you work with a lot of local providers. I mean, that is the zeitgeist of this restaurant, locally-sourced. How have these relationships changed?

[00:06:41.29]

Melissa M.: No. I mean, some of the relationships which were easier to communicate with were the farmer's market, that became difficult because the farmer's market became this sort of different, drive-through thing, which meant figuring out who was at which farmer's market and what was available and then what was available to a restaurant versus what was available to individuals. There was a lot of caps put on things. So, it was like before, I could go and get enough dairy from the dairy folks, but then if I go in this Good Food app or WhatsGood app, then there's all these—you can't have that many gallons of milk or whatever. So, things like that—which, you know, going to the farmer's market was a

little bit easier to communicate and make it happen. We had the phone number of pretty much everyone we used before, so we just called people and said, "How are we going to make this work? How are we going to buy from you?" And was able to—I remember, one day, Ellis at Major Acre Farm, "Just bring me what you have and we're going to cook it." For Feed the Frontline. Now, we have relied heavily Covey Rise and J.B. Foods, because they kind of are a digital Hollygrove (Hollygrove Market). They have a melting pot of many different farmers and meat producers. That's easier for us to use right now as we try to navigate it. I still deal directly with fisherman. I drove down to Houma to pick up our oysters on Tuesday from Wilson's Oysters, and then I can swing by Lance Nacio's place at Annemarie Seafood and pick up from him, because it's one bayou over from my parents, it's like five minutes away from my parents' house. But other than that, we're kind of just waiting to see what does it look like? Even this Tuesday, when I was going to go to the farmer's market, I wasn't quite sure if I was supposed to pre-order. You know? 'Cause if I go on Sunday, I have to pre-order. So, I wasn't sure if the Tuesday market now is—do I pre-order? Can I just show up? I'm very much a person that likes to be reflexive of what I see. When I went and got satsumas in Chauvin the other day, I literally went to all the tables and ate the satsumas and decided which ones I liked the best, and then I circled back and I bought those satsumas. So, I just ordered satsumas. I'm not pleased with them. You know what I mean? I'm a person that I love to be able to go up to a table, taste something, and then decide, "Well, this is the direction I want to go."

[00:09:20.27]

Justin N.: Hard to do that with an app.

[00:09:25.26]

Melissa M.: It is hard to do that with an app, you know.

[00:09:26.19]

Justin N.: Do you think, though, the apps are here to stay with that?

[00:09:34.14]

Melissa M.: Yeah. I mean, I'm very thankful for these companies like Covey and J.B. and other companies that sort of fill a void for restaurants that Hollygrove was really great for. I mean, I loved Hollygrove for my house and for the restaurant. So, I think that, for restaurants, it's really good to have someone organizing in that way. Also, when you go to a farmer's market as a chef, it's . . . you're kind of the bad guy, buying everything. So, we almost need another outlet, because you don't want to take away from individuals and families. So, it's kind of like, we need another outlet so that farmers can push out as much stuff as they possibly can, but that restaurants don't just get it, and everyone can enjoy in the bounty. But we want to make sure we can support these farmers and fishermen so that they can keep doing what they're doing.

[00:10:29.24]

Justin N.: Right. I think they're probably pretty happy that you're buying their stuff.

[00:10:31.13]

Melissa M.: Yeah, I know. But, you know, you always have . . . someone who's like, "Oh, it's that person! They're going to get everything." [Laughter] So, pre-ordering really helps, which I have to say I am terrible at.

[00:10:49.08]

Justin N.: That woman with all that satsuma juice on her shirt.

[00:10:49.28]

Melissa M.: Yeah, pretty much.

[00:10:56.23]

Justin N.: You said that you had worked with, I'm guessing, Feed the Frontline, Devin DeWulf and all that. How soon did that kick in?

[00:11:06.28]

Melissa M.: Basically, two weeks after my sous chef—I called her up, I said, "We have this opportunity." I was still paying her salary at this time, but I said, "This would really allow me to be able to bridge the gap to keep paying your salary." At that time, I also asked Esther if she was interested in doing that or if she wanted to go on unemployment. She said, "No. I want to try and do it." She actually cooked all the meals for that, for Feed the Frontline. I and Regina (Parkinson), my assistant, was dealing with the launch of the book and everything that came after that.

[00:11:47.12]

Justin N.: Yep, yep, yep. So, on Feed the Frontline, I talked to several people who were involved in that. Did you feel like that was actually something that was—did you feel like you were actually educating people about Mosquito Supper Club's presence in that?

[00:12:02.29]

Melissa M.: Not really, no. I don't think that was our goal. Our goal was just to do something with food to help anyone that needed help amidst what was happening to everyone.

[00:12:13.08]

Justin N.: Mm-hm. Did you continue on with that, once it moved past Feed the Frontline?

[00:12:19.01]

Melissa M.: No, but we weren't asked to, so it's like, we got our last food order and then Devin let us know that that was going to be our last food order, that they were transitioning. That was that.

[00:12:30.02]

Justin N.: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So, the P.P.P. office, how did that process work for y'all? Did you feel like it was effective?

[00:12:38.01]

Melissa M.: So, I was one of the first people to receive the P.P.P., so I received the P.P.P. before the rules of the P.P.P. changed. So, all the money was gone at the point that they were like, "Actually, you have twenty-four weeks to spend this money." So we, at that point, had eight weeks to spend the money. So, in order to—and at that point, we could only be a to-go restaurant; we couldn't have people in here. So, it really wasn't effective for us. We got to try out to-go food, which was basically, you're opening a can of worms on a new business plan and seeing how it works and realizing that it's not really going to work. [Laughter] You know? What was really terrible about it is that we had to bring employees back to make it work, and those employees that we brought back were pretty unhappy about the situation, because they had been home on unemployment for, like—you know, at this point, almost two months. They were not used to working in a place, so they were scared, and they were just in a very different place from those of us who never stopped working. You know? So, bringing those people back I think sent a lot of people into a frenzy, a spin, and those people don't work here anymore. What we winded up doing is just taking money and dumping it into cheques, because we only need so many workers to do to-gos. So, we brought back two, three more people, and two of those people are still here, but definitely another person moved on because they wanted to be back on unemployment. You know? Didn't want to stay with the restaurant. It really didn't help us. If it would have come at a time where I was opening the dining room, and if I would've had, like, twenty-four weeks to use it, it would be really helpful. Like, it would be really helpful right now as we try to open as a new restaurant and figure out what that means for payroll and try to keep people safe and make it worth their while to work. All of those things.

[00:14:50.13]

Justin N.: Yeah. So, the to-go experience was not a positive one?

[00:14:48.12]

Melissa M.: I mean, it was, like, fun. [Laughter] I mean, Regina who's my friend and my assistant, "Well, we were like a Jewish deli for a while, and then we evolved and we were all food that you can heat up at home, and then we were like short-order cooks and . . ." One weekend, just for the fun of it, we had a Bikini Bottom, Spongebob Squarepants weekend, where we just served pineapple daiquiris and served pineapples and made Krabby Patties. So, you know, we were really pulling at strings to make it happen, but financially for a restaurant, you need people to sit down. I created the restaurant with a very specific business mind in place, and that meant that you had to pay eighty-five dollars to eat here, and it's like, that's what we need to capture in order to serve the food that we're serving, to pay people the way we want to pay, and to keep the lights on. So, having to adjust that was . . . is still quite difficult. So, I don't think—I mean, we did it. We used our P.P.P., and that money went straight back into former employees' accounts. So, in that way, did it work? Yes. Did it work as far as helping out the business? Not really. You know. I think it would have been better for us to be closed in that time and then held the money for, like, now when we can actually try and give it a go.

[00:16:25.08]

Justin N.: Mm. Mm. Super interesting. Yeah, I mean, I guess it does sort of underscore the role of the actual restaurant. It's hard to put into a sack a nice night out.

[00:16:41.13]

Melissa M.: Yeah. As chefs, we weren't allowed to have P.P.P. money, so we couldn't pay ourselves as owners. Then I wasn't also, I wasn't allowed to get unemployment. So, that became difficult. Then some of my employees never got unemployment, even though they tried and tried and tried. I mean, the system is not easy to navigate. So, in that way, it was nice to dump money in their checks, because I knew they needed it.

[00:17:07.19]

Justin N.: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Just make sure we're recording—I had this cold sweat that I forgot to turn it on.

[00:17:16.11]

Melissa M.: Of course.

[00:17:18.06]

Justin N.: So, what about the local government response to coronavirus? What has been your interaction or impression of what the city's been doing?

[00:17:27.18]

Melissa M.: I mean, I think the city and the state, in one way, as best as they thought they could, but I don't think that people acted fast enough and that it was a good response. If you see the way other people have handled it around the world, you just wonder. I think that there just hasn't been enough help for people, for citizens, for small businesses, for everyone around. I mean, there's no incentive to stay here and open a restaurant in New Orleans. I got some bill in March that was like, "You didn't pay this; here's the ninety-dollar penalty. You're two months late." Blah blah blah. So, it's like—you know. Then the insurance companies that are asking for general liability and workman's comp insurance based on your sales from last year, so, you've been audited and all of a sudden you owe so much money and you don't have any employees and your business isn't even open and you're not bringing in any revenue. Disappointing, just across the board. But I think that . . . I think that no one had any idea of what they were up against. So, what the mayor did, what the governor did, it sort of just is what it is. I like how stoic he is. [Laughter] But other than that, I think maybe we needed more drastic measures, especially in our smaller parishes. You know, I mean, Jefferson Parish is still kind of a shitshow. [Laughter]

[00:19:14.13]

Justin N.: I was at the grocery store last night and I was putting my groceries in the car, and it was a very large group of people at an outdoor patio listening to a very bad cover of Journey. Yeah. Which, it's kind of Jeff Parish in a nutshell, I guess.

[00:19:29.11]

Melissa M.: Yeah. It's like, I live next to Bayou St. John, and it's like, always just packed with people. Just packed now. And it has been, pretty much the whole time, so it's like even walking our dogs has been difficult.

[00:19:48.26]

Justin N.: Some restaurants, most conspicuously, I think, Tracey's made the news for sort of flouting . . .

[00:19:55.23]

Melissa M.: Yes. But my son has one of the best stories. He's an E.M.T., and for one of the first Saint's games, he went and picked up some extra work temping people before they came into the dome. He's like, these don't work, the temperature things, whatever, but we temped people. So, they temped everyone that came into the dome, but then they sat everybody in the same section. You know? So it's like, here it is, it's the Superdome, and we're like, "We don't want to pay to have someone clean whole dome." Come on, people.

[00:20:23.13]

Justin N.: So, what kind of staff have you been seeing coming in? You hear somebody's coming in for an interview. What type of people are coming back to work?

[00:20:36.08]

Melissa M.: I think people who enjoy working, who don't want to be at home wondering what's next. I think people realize that, hey, we might all get shut down again, but we're just

going to try and move on. I mean, my new chef de cuisine comes from Calcasieu. He was furloughed at the Link Group. My new manager, general manager, he comes from Paladar (511). So, I think that we are in a position now that there are a hundred people waiting to take your job and waiting for a job opportunity because there is not that many out there. That was definitely one of the reasons to get the restaurant open as soon as possible, not only so that my employees could work, but also so that I would have a job. You know?

[00:21:32.23]

Justin N.: What has been the response to re-opening by customers so far?

[00:21:28.08]

Melissa M.: Most people are very happy. You know. Most people who actually follow what we do and don't see it as this hip thing, who actually understand the story and understand what kind of restaurant I was trying to create, a sustainable restaurant on all fronts, people who have read the cookbook, people who understand that we're doing Grandma's tasting menu and not Alenia's tasting menu, those people are, by far, incredible and they're wonderful to serve. People who come in here drunk and don't want to wear masks and they call in the morning and complain about everything, those people are the people that make you sad on a daily basis because you feel like you're risking your life and your staff's life to provide an experience, and people still want this magic that was happening before the pandemic. They don't realize how hard it is to just come to work, how hard it is to work for eleven hours in a mask, you know? Which you never take off whenever

you're working in the restaurant and at night, and how difficult it is to give directions in a mask and how you have to scream at people. And how I would love to coming out here and talking about the menu and doing what I used to do, which is come out before dinner and tell a story and talk about the menu and then, before dessert, I would come out again and talk about why we do this. That part has been taken from me, and I can't go to every table and scream through my mask, because literally, I am like lethargic from screaming through a mask. I think, for some people, it's been hard. They feel like the experience is gone. But for some people, they understand that we're already pushing ourselves beyond what we ever thought we could do. Hopefully, those things will fall into place.

[00:23:38.25]

Justin N.: I've heard from a lot of restauranteurs that seating capacity and sustainability, financial sustainability, are obviously very closely related. So, you went from this family—we're sitting here at a long table—and how you went from this family-style seating, which is relatively dense when it comes right down to it, and you had to reconfigure. Tell me a little bit about your reconfiguring plans to put enough seats to make this work.

[00:24:09.25]

Melissa M.: Yeah. So, we never utilized our outside seating; we just used it for private parties and if you came early to eat oysters with us, so, we knew that we had a gem outside in the courtyard. And even though it is weather permitting, we knew that that was going to—we needed to be seating people outside. Then, as far as inside, we had extra, little tables that

we just kind of spaced out all over the place. Then we got a ruler and we measured six feet, and we said, "Okay, we can seat twelve people at 5:30 and we can seat twelve to fourteen people at 7:30." We have to split it up; we can no longer just do one seating. We have to do two seatings, and we're still trying to figure that out, because we never want to push someone out. So, we're now going to change our second seating to 8 and not 7:30. So, people can get a longer time. We had someone come in the other day, sat at 5:30, and they didn't leave until, like, way after the 7:30 seating people came. So, they gave themselves the whole night. We want to be able to allow that, but we also have to be in reality. Say, like, "Unfortunately, we do have to flip these tables now." You know. So, we still do our tasting, which is the flagship idea behind the restaurant, is sort of a little adventure through seafood in Louisiana. Now, we offer—which is just a little bit more accessible, which was always my idea to do this for locals. You come to the supper club, you've done the experience many times, you've sat at a table with strangers for three hours, you've left happy, but you want to just come and have a drink and sit in our yard. So, now we have that experience, too, where you can just make a reservation to sit in the courtyard and eat off our bar menu, which I say is a teaser to the tasting menu.

[00:26:02.15]

Justin N.: I've noticed that oysters are now a bigger part of this.

[00:26:03.21]

Melissa M.: Yeah. We've always did oysters a part of it, you were always able to come in early and eat raw oysters, but it was not offered to the public. It was only offered to our supper

club folks. So, they had kind of their own private, little oyster bar, and that was always outside. So, now we are—I'm getting to bring back a little bit of my oyster bar that I closed. Some years ago, I was the Curious Oyster Company, and dabble back in those things that I used to serve there, which has been fun. We added a *fruits de mer*, which we're pretty excited about, because that's just how I grew up, all this boiled seafood. So, we're trying to figure out what works, and we change something every week. Not just in the menu, just like in the business. What is the best way forward?

[00:27:01.00]

Justin N.: What has been the biggest surprise of your way forward?

[00:27:05.15]

Melissa M.: Hm. I think that, whenever I started the restaurant, like I said, I sort of threw the restaurant model against the wall and I let it break into pieces on the floor. I only picked up the pieces that I wanted. I think that I'm being forced out of that. I'm having to go back and turn tables, which is never something that—I wanted it to feel like a European restaurant. I remember my son in Paris being like, "Do you think we're almost done?" "Oh, God, no." We talk about that night in this restaurant, where there was a fourteen-top singing the whole time. My son speaks fluent French; I think we have recordings of it. It was just so amazing. I wanted people to have that feeling. I hated when I went out to have a dinner with one of my friends and then, like, our two hours was up but we were having such a great conversation and we knew that we had to leave so the restaurant could make money. I think that's something that we have to consider now here, that we do need to

move people after two and a half hours. As sad as that is, it's just the way it is. We need to at least try to get two turns out of the restaurant. You know, we're moving at a much faster pace, whereas Supper Club was meant to feel like you're on the porch, slow down everything. For some people, they couldn't handle it. They're like, "What are we doing?" But for a lot of people, I think that they really appreciated just a long, slow meal and getting to pass around food and big cauldrons of gumbo and things like that. We actually brought back our supper club style for my friend Margaret (Jones), who owns Scriptura and their sister, Sallie (Mykris). Their mother passed, and so, after the funeral, they came here for a meal, and me and my assistant, Regina, was so excited to put the food out. They're like, "Can you put it out like Supper Club?" I was like, "Yeah." And Margaret chose the menu. She was like, "I want boulettes," and whatever. So, we put out this very family-oriented meal for Margaret's family and friends, and I was so nostalgic for the old restaurant. I think I'm experiencing a death. You know? Of this thing that I created that worked. It was not . . . it had problems. It was not perfect. Nothing is perfect. And especially when you're trying to change something. When you're trying to change something within yourself or within your business, there is so much pain and struggle involved in it. I think, worldly, what's happening to people right now is, there's too much change. Every week is another level of change. So, that is very difficult. Also, with that change, the way that we've adjusted the restaurant now, if we can get people to get it and understand why it costs what it costs, and what we were trying to do before, and this is what we've landed on now, then I think that the restaurant will be able to support a lot of people, and those people will get paid very good money. I think that we will still be onto something if we can keep it up. It will also allow me to continue to do the things I love,

which is write and explore some other things. I think that, in the original Supper Club, which we've been doing for so long, I very much had to be here. You know? So.

[00:31:06.02]

Justin N.: Um-hm, totally. Forgive me, I think I've been added to a group for my kid's school.

[00:31:15.00]

Melissa M.: Yeah. I'm one of six kids, so I sometimes pick up my phone, and it's like thirty-five messages, because I have a group text with them.

[00:31:22.12]

Justin N.: There. I will receive no more. That is . . . so, I brought a copy of the cookbook with me, and we talked a little before we started about your literary background. Do you feel like this is something chefs have to do now, particularly in this post-COVID restaurant world? To be more of a media presence? I know that's something that's been building for at least three decades now, but in a way that a cookbook—like real, tangible elements of media presence, rather than just an Instagram feed or something. Do you feel like that's . . . ?

[00:32:08.15]

Melissa M.: I don't know. I think every chef has a different path, and some people want to be the face of things and want to be out there all the time, speaking for this, speaking for that, pushing for this, pushing for that. I think I'm a really private person. I try to not put my

face on the Instagram ever, even though it happens on there a lot. My publicist would like me to put my face out there a little bit more to make a connection with a person. But I think, for me, since the very beginning, I just feel like a medium for the bayou and for the women on the bayou that I love. So, for me, it was always about telling their stories. And for me, with the restaurant: the restaurant was to tell stories. It was just part of my art. There was always going to be a book. So it's like, the book didn't come later because I wanted some sort of publicity. The book came because I felt like the sort of cookie-cutter Cajun idea needed to be dismantled, and what we actually ate needed to be talked about. And those things. I mean, I believe that great women around this country, there's so many great female chefs. There's so many great people of color in this business. That I think it is great to give these people a voice. Because you know, my partner is a serious Socialist, and he's one of the smartest people I've ever known. But he doesn't understand that the revolution is also in food. I think that, for people to be able to connect that and to connect how important something as simple as a tomato is and the path of that tomato and the person that grew it and how you get it, and all of the politics that's so ingrained in food. I mean, Jesus, we saw right when COVID happened the amount of slaughter of pigs because they were getting too big to get on the slaughter line. If that's not, like, a wake-up call for every American of what is the problem here? We just slaughtered all the pigs because they're too fat. And so now, we're not feeding anyone. Whether them try to come up with a plan, we just slaughtered 'em all. Oh, God, we don't know what to do with the carcasses now. That's like such a huge problem. That's why we eat no feedlot meat at our house. You know? But if we can, like, sound this out, and if I am a chef and I get a voice, obviously, I'm really low on the totem pole—most people don't know who I am—but if I

get a voice and I can sound that out and make a couple of people understand how absurd we've become and how embarrassing it is, what's happening to our food chains, then we're doing a good thing. I certainly don't want publicity. I'm approached a lot to do T.V. shows and different things, and I always ask, "What is the political angle?" Is there a way to make it where we're bringing in these elements of the things that I obviously preach here at Mosquito Supper Club? If there isn't, if it's, "Can you cook against whoever?" Are you ready to take on . . . I don't know, what's his name that they offered me, and I was like, "No." No, I don't want to kill a boar because that's not something that I would ever do, or even cook a boar, you know? If you'd like to go fishing with me and my dad, that's more reality for me, and not some smoke and mirrors media shit.

[00:35:58.21]

Justin N.: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Bobby Flay would just put a lobster tail on the top at the end of the day.

[00:36:06.06]

Melissa M.: Is was that other guy, that like angry chef, but he's like, nice now?

[00:36:12.24]

Justin N.: [Laughter] For now. Is this new opening . . . so, I've talked to some people and they've put together a plan for now. But a number of them said, "This is in no way sustainable. I am just treading water." Is this treading water, or is this a way forward?

[00:36:40.06]

Melissa M.: No. For us, I think it's a way forward. We worked on a much smaller level for seven years. We were serving twenty-four people a night; we're talking about seventy-five to a hundred people a weekend. And we were able to figure out how to make that work. I mean, that means I can live on a teacher's salary. But I think that, because we have such low overhead and because we built it in that way, and because I never wanted to owe a whole bunch of money or be in a whole bunch of debt, I was happier to just create something that I was happy in and that I could take off a lot of time in the summer and I could write a book and all these things. I think that we have a better path forward because we always stayed small. And for me, I want to go to small places. When I get to get into a little table at a tiny restaurant, and I get served an amazing meal from someone's heart, then that's what I want. I'm never, ever seeking out a place that seats a ton of people and is loud and buzzing and people want to be seen there. So, that's what I wanted to create here, a place you could sort of tuck into a feel really intimate.

[00:38:07.01]

Justin N.: That's great, that's great. Do you have a lot of relationships in the restaurant community with other people, and do you feel like communicating with a lot of people about other . . . some restaurant owners really are plugged in, and I've found some actually aren't super connected.

[00:38:20.25]

Melissa M.: Yeah. I mean, I have relationships with people that I talk to on a weekly basis. I talk to Chef Sue Zemanick, and so, she and I—sometimes I get the brunt of the harshness of her week, and sometimes she gets the harshness of mine. We have made it a point to call each other and see how the other person is doing. Her restaurant (Zasu) is the same sort of size as mine, and it's right by my house, so it was my neighborhood place. I could call them and be like, "We can be there in ten minutes if you can sit us at Table 12! Our favorite table!" Or whatever. They always took care of us. Her, Kristin Essig is one of my friends, so I stay in touch with her. Thalia was my favorite new restaurant in the city, so I'm devastated that she's not going to be running that restaurant anymore. Then, you know, I've been friends with Michael Gulotta for a while, but he's so busy with his kids that we just talk a little, just a little bit. "I'm sending you some t-shirts and a book, Mike!" And I see them on his kids and that makes me happy. I've been in touch with Graison Gill at Bellegarde Bakery. I've been keeping in touch with people that I've been knowing in this industry for so long—Kristin and I worked at the Crescent City Farmer's Market together. I mean, at least fifteen years ago, and so, people that have really sunk into New Orleans for a long time. I mean, I've been friends with Graison from Bellegarde Bakery for, I think, twelve years now or something. Then Sue, also, was trying to poach me from Satsuma when I opened it forever ago. [Laughter] Which I appreciated. So, really trying to stay in touch with people that I—we can see it through each other's eyes because we've been in this city for so long.

[00:40:14.17]

Justin N.: Um-hm. What's the future for this town in restaurants?

[00:40:20.08]

Melissa M.: I don't know. I get really sad to think . . . I saw so much change after Katrina, some good, some bad. So, I get really scared to think what might happen and how people might come in to sort of adjust what they think New Orleans needs. There was a lot of that that happened after the storm; people came here and was like, "Oh, you need this," or blah, blah, blah. I get really nervous and wonder what it is going to look like. You want your old standbys to be there, just because they are part of the heart of the city. I mean, Chris Hanna took the French 75 Bar and brought worldwide attention to it. Even though he's not there anymore, there's something about that beautiful mahogany bar and that crazy Mardi Gras museum after you've had too much to drink, that scary Mardi Gras museum, you know. And that sort of big institution of a restaurant that, you know, I want to eat the souffle potatoes with the drink. So, I don't know; I don't know what is going to happen. I kind of am on a day-to-day basis, and sometimes I'm on an hour-to-hour basis to deal with each day. When I reopened the restaurant, I had six new employees, so that was—it's quite a feat. I just hope that there is some semblance of New Orleans whenever we are on the other side of this. I think we all pretty much know we won't have Mardi Gras, and that would be a really bad thing, but I think there still can be something—one of the things I love about right now is sort of the best of New Orleans for locals is the summer, but it's the worst temperature, so you're like, "I want to kill myself." So, what's kind of great right now is that if tourists come here, or even for us, the city is sleeping and there's something really beautiful about that. I mean, we go and ride our bikes early in the morning in the French Quarter, and it's just incredible, you know? So it's like, I think in

so many places around the world, they're getting their cities back. I think it's a time to really refocus what we want to come back, you know? Do we want all these t-shirt shops? Do we want Bourbon Street still? And really refocus what the city should be. I certainly wish there were incentives for us to be here and incentives to keep our restaurants open, but there just isn't.

[00:43:14.10]

Justin N.: I have kind of one last question to hit you with, as somebody who's around nineteen- and twenty-year-olds a lot. What would you tell someone who really dreamt of being a chef about doing it right now?

[00:43:32.06]

Melissa M.: If food is in someone's heart and that's what they need to do, then they should do it, because they will never be happy if they don't explore it. Maybe they'll see it through to a certain time, and maybe they'll change their career. I mean, I changed my career mid-way and I became a chef after I lost my job at Loyola. I did, you know, what I was already kind of doing on the side, but it was what I could do to support—I was a single mom—to support myself and my kid. I was so happy it was here for me. Sue and I talk about that a lot, as like, "Wow, we knew we would always have a job in food." But food has a . . . being a chef has a timeline on your body, you know? It's very difficult, as you get older, to sort of keep it together. So, you have to really think it through and make a plan if you want to be in this industry, and make a plan, how you're going to get in, who you're going to work for, creating businesses that make sense in this day and age. Creating sustainable

businesses, creating sustainable businesses from the beginning and making sure the business model can handle and afford all those things, helping people, creating community. Then figuring out—it's so hard to give up your kitchen. I didn't leave my kitchen for five years here, and then I passed the baton over to Kiera (Watt), who isn't here anymore. She's baking at Levee Baking Company, but she's an incredible chef. For me to be able to finish my cookbook, I had to pass the baton. That's something you also have to think about, of when it's time to pass the baton, and then letting other people be creative in your restaurant. There's a time when you're going to have to say, "I know I can do it, but . . . " Let somebody else sort of come in and help and evolve. A lot of people have trouble working for me because I change things all the time, but for me, that's what life is all about. It's constant change. The restaurant has to be changing all the time. It's not like we're changing and we're going to be, like, a different ethnic food next week, although we will, for one night, with Dakar Nola. But the restaurant itself has to always be evolving in some way.

[00:46:03.01]

Justin N.: Sure.

[00:46:04.19]

Melissa M.: If you're going to do it as a career, you have to consider that.

[00:46:09.12]

Justin N.: Right. Is there anything else you feel like you want to add to the record?

[00:46:15.00]

Melissa M.: I think that one of the funny things that people should know is that I had no intention to ever ship my book. I intended to have it in the restaurant for people to buy, and I had intended to go on a three-month book tour that Artisan had planned for me that was going to be absolutely incredible. I think the day that I set that on my desk and I erased my book tour off my calendar, something I had worked my whole life towards, was . . . pretty devastating. I was excited to sell the book here because I had big plans to pay off my student loans with the sales of the book, and I think it always happens that way, where you have a check coming and you're like, "Ooh, I'm going to do this!" But the book saved the restaurant. So, my assistant and I were able to sell over $52,000 in books, and I mean, that's not the cost of the books, but still, we were able to bring in so much cash to keep the restaurant going that it's . . . it's just kind of unbelievable now to think about. That was very exciting, that we were able to reach so many people in a different way, and we had such an outpouring of people that read the book, which was more important than you cooking from the book, because I always say the recipes are just a guide. Everyone should change a recipe, you know? But that was very encouraging in a time of great darkness, and a time that's still great darkness, you know? It was encouraging to have so many people buy books from local bookstores. I mean, I was over at Garden District Books, signing books, constantly. And they were thanking me. Now we're pushing the book sales back to bookstores, but I mean, he couldn't even keep up. We were both just selling so many books. In a time of Jeff Bezos being the richest man in

the world, if you can get some of that money into, like, small bookstores, and into small businesses, it was very encouraging.

[00:48:27.28]

Justin N.: That's fabulous. Congratulations.

[00:48:29.08]

Melissa M.: Yeah. Thanks. [Laughter] And then, we had never retailed anything in our life, so we had to learn how to ship a book and try to get good prices and all of that. I owe that all to my assistant for just figuring it out. Then I was honest with her—I was like, "We're going to make a lot of mistakes." But, you know, we did it. It worked, and it helped to keep the lights on, pay the rent, and pay people. I guess one day, I'll pay my student loans off. [Laughter]

[00:49:00.23]

Justin N.: Volume Two.

[00:49:05.09]

Melissa M.: Yes. [Laughter]

[00:49:07.26]

Justin N.: Melissa, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. It's been great.

[00:49:13.12]

Melissa M.: Yeah, thank you.

[*End of interview*]