Brent Tranchina
Bywater American Bistro - New Orleans, Louisiana
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[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:01.15]

Rien Fertel: All right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is November 30, 2020. I am in the Bywater neighborhood, at Petite Clouet Café. It's just after 10:30 in the morning—a very chilly morning in the city. This is my fifth of what we're calling the COVID/Bywater American Bistro-adjacent interviews for this project. I'm going to have someone, I'm sitting down with, introduce themselves.

[00:00:38.24]

Brent Tranchina: My name is Brent Tranchina. I was born June 3, 1983. I, once upon a time, worked for Bywater American Bistro. No longer employed by them.

[00:00:54.11]

Rien Fertel: We've been starting these interviews by me just asking, how are you doing? How is your state of being or well-being? You can answer this in a myriad of ways. How are you doing?

[00:01:10.11]

Brent Tranchina: Personally, I'm doing fine, but I guess—are you asking in the context of COVID-19? 2020?

[00:01:16.05]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] You can answer it both ways, yeah.

[00:01:20.10]

Brent Tranchina: Who knows? It's kind of just a weird year for everybody. With respect for COVID-19, I don't know how I'm doing. That's just kind of up all up in the air. A lot of it has to do with just making sure that my personal family is doing fine. The better off they are, the better off I am, so it's all contingent on the health of the family. 2020's a weird year, anyway. Just a lot of ups and downs. But luckily, I've been very fortunate, and I feel very fortunate to have good health, to have the support of my wife and other family members, and to currently have a job. And also, my family seems to be very aware of what's going on and healthy. It's a little bit easier dealing with everything that's going on, knowing that it could be worse.

[00:02:25.27]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

[00:02:28.17]

Brent Tranchina: I always try to keep that in mind. It could be worse, but it's not.

[00:02:32.01]

Rien Fertel: You mentioned family several times. Are you from New Orleans? Or where are you from? Kind of give us a sense of your trajectory in professional cooking. So, did you could you take this any way you'd like, but I'd like to know if you grew up in a food-focused family? And how you kind of worked your way up through the restaurant scene and the kitchen scene.

[00:03:02.20]

Brent Tranchina: So, originally, I'm from here. I was born here. I always like to joke around that I'm a Charity baby, because a lot of people don't necessarily know what Charity [Hospital] is anymore, or just think of it as the old building that doesn't exist post-Katrina. My mom is from Trinidad and Tobago, and so I grew up eating both Creole-Cajun food, a lot of fried foods, from my dad's side, and then Indo-Trinidadian food from my mom's side of the family. That's always had me interested in eating. I've always been a big fan of just eating food. And then gradually, as I got older, I kept staying in the kitchen with my aunts, wanting to—basically thinking that the closer I was to the food, the more I could eat it. But, at the same time, just having an overall fascination of it. I didn't really get into food until I got to college—in the context that I am now—just because I think, as I wanted to learn more about everything, that also included just food, food history, and food culture. It was something that I could dive into, that I thought maybe explained a little bit more about my families on each side. I did anthropology for my undergrad and studied a lot about cultures and food cultures, and that really piqued

my interest. For grad school, I was urban anthropology with a focus on food insecurity, so that's what I wrote my thesis on.

[00:04:50.05]

Rien Fertel: Where was that? Where could you study that and convince professors to let you study that?

[00:04:53.16]

Brent Tranchina: UNO [University of New Orleans].

[00:04:56.07]

Rien Fertel: Okay.

[00:04:57.24]

Brent Tranchina: It was for—post-Katrina, I was studying the effects that Katrina had on the local food accessibility here in New Orleans. I basically tackled it from a perspective of: all the grocery stores are gone, very few are returning, and there's a lot of non-profit organizations that were coming in, saying, "This is what you need to do." I was trying to understand the difference between a non-profit that was from outside of New Orleans, Louisiana coming in to do assistance and organizations that were already here that had been doing work since the 80s, and then what were they trying to do, and were there overlaps, disagreements, agreements, stuff like that. After grad school, it was right around

the time as the Great Recession, during the Obama administration, and unfortunately, there was no real paying jobs after that. You wanted to work in a non-profit, you were probably going to make $25,000 a year. So, I just kind of fell back into cooking. I never really left after that. I started cooking at Commander's Palace, which was probably the most ideal situation to start cooking. I didn't go to culinary school, but there was like a culinary school. Tory McPhail was the first high-end chef I've ever worked for kind-of-thing. He was great. He was very pragmatic in a way that I thought you would only see on T.V. But it was just his character. I thought he was a really good person. He also promoted me through the ranks a little bit faster than probably I was ready, but it was also because I was egging him to do so. From there, I met a bunch of great sous chefs at Commander's Palace, and one of them recommended that I go to California and stage at Benu under Corey Lee. There, I met what is probably considered the most technically-gifted and proficient all-around just greatest chef I've ever been around. I didn't quite understand how amazing it was while I was there, but upon retrospect, that guy was rather fantastic in everything that he did. But he was also so regimented. I understand now why he was that way, but I didn't understand then. I think I was just maybe a little too difficult for him. After that, I came back home, worked for Dinner Lab. After Dinner Lab, I went back to California and I worked at Coi under Daniel Patterson, which eventually transitioned to another chef. Heaven forbid, I can't remember his name right now. Matthew, Matt, Matt, Matt, Matt, Matt. His name was Matt. It'll come to me. Matt took over as chef of Coi, and essentially took that team from two stars to three stars. After that, I came home and I worked with DTB under Carl [Schaubhut], who was a former

Commander's Palace chef that I worked with at Commander's Palace. He has since passed due to losing from cancer. After that, I went to Compère Lapin and Bywater American Bistro.

[00:08:53.15]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Were you on the opening team at Bywater?

[00:08:55.00]

Brent Tranchina: Um-hmm. Nina had hired me to be the opening sous chef for Bywater American Bistro.

[00:09:03.18]

Rien Fertel: How long were you there? Were you there up to COVID or did you leave before?

[00:09:12.10]

Brent Tranchina: So, I was there till—let's see. In November, I had left for a week to go with my wife to a honeymoon. Then came back and I got transitioned to Compère Lapin. And then for, like, a week, I went back and worked with Nina at Bywater American Bistro when it had opened up during COVID time. And then I had parted ways with her after a week during COVID, because it was just too much.

[00:09:50.13]

Rien Fertel: Bring me back to when you first realized that COVID would affect your—either your job stability—and when you went back to work, I guess they were closed for a couple months, your situation in the kitchen. You're the first person that's not front of the house that I've spoken to, so I'm really interested in what it felt like personally, when the restaurant closed and also when the restaurant reopened.

[00:10:30.01]

Brent Tranchina: So, when it closed in February, I don't think anybody quite understood what we were looking at. After the first couple weeks, I think it was more along the lines of, "This is a two-week break that we're all getting." Which was great, because as the industry goes, you don't really get a lot of time off working in kitchens. So, it was like a forced, mandatory break that I think that everybody in the kitchen could have used, no matter what.

[00:11:07.00]

Rien Fertel: Coming at the heels of Mardi Gras and everything.

[00:11:12.05]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah, just in general. I worked with a lot of cooks that never took vacations ever, right? They would just work all year round. It's hard. It’s hard not just being on your feet all the time, but watching some people who are getting into their forties and fifties,

and they've just spend the last twenty-five years grinding and grinding because they can't afford to not take a break. So, it was nice to have that kind of break, for everybody, across the board. I think, getting into the first month where everybody started having to deal with rent is when everybody, including myself, was just like, "This is not gonna end well." It was very little—there was talk of relief, but no relief had shown up by that time. So, me personally, I started doing side projects. So, I started doing a pasta business out of my house and just started selling pasta.

[00:12:08.09]

Rien Fertel: Fresh, homemade pasta.

[00:12:08.12]

Brent Tranchina: I was doing probably forty to fifty pounds a week of just getting flour and making fresh pasta. I would just put it on my Instagram and be like, "Hey, I'm making this. If you want, please just let me know how much you want." I didn't put a cap on it. So, there was the first week where I was just like, "Oh, I don't have enough fridge space for this." So, I just had to figure out how to manage that.

[00:12:38.13]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Did you have any other side projects?

[00:12:43.22]

Brent Tranchina: I did, but I'm trying to remember.

[00:12:44.08]

Rien Fertel: I checked out your Instagram. Were you making hot sauce, too?

[00:12:48.07]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. So, I have forty-plus pepper plants that are all Caribbean-based, Trinidadian peppers.

[00:12:57.04]

Rien Fertel: Like in your backyard?

[00:12:56.21]

Brent Tranchina: Actually run right along the side of my house, because that's the only space I have. [Laughter] But yeah. I make basically what amounts to—it's like a combination of New Orleans and Trinidad-style hot pepper sauce combination. I just kind of make that and sell it on the side. That's more of a, I love growing things, and I love growing peppers. I just did stuff like that to make ends meet. Then, the checks started rolling in for unemployment. I still made hot sauce—well, I always made hot sauce—but I still made pasta, but I slowed down on it, because I didn't think that I needed to do it just to make rent. So, after that, I've just kind of—I've always been a prolific note-taker and writer

since I started getting into food. I have a lot of books that I've been trying to compile all this data that I've been putting together for the last ten years of cooking—ten plus years—trying to figure out what it is about food that I like and what it is that I want to, I guess, preserve or have a legacy thereof. It's been very much a time of reflection in, what is it that I've chosen a career of? What is it that I want to pursue post-COVID, I guess?

[00:14:36.24]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask that, but I want to just fill in one blank. You said you did go back to work at BAB, Bywater American Bistro. I think they reopened in June. Can you talk about that? Anything you want to share about coming back and leaving.

[00:14:50.05]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. So, at the time, I want to say sometime starting in June, my friend who runs a restaurant on Tchoupitoulas—.

[00:15:00.19]

Rien Fertel: What restaurant?

[00:15:02.28]

Brent Tranchina: Barracuda.

[00:15:04.29]

Rien Fertel: Okay.

[00:15:06.12]

Brent Tranchina: Was invited to do World Central Kitchen meals. He could not facilitate World Central Kitchen all by himself. He had asked me if I was interested in cooking World Central Kitchen for his restaurant, and he would pay me while he was continuing trying to figure out how to reopen the restaurant. I decided to do that, and we were doing anywhere between eight hundred to a thousand meals a week. It was nice because that was just literally—because Molly's, at the time, was shut down, he got Molly's to let us use their kitchen. It was literally just me making a thousand meals every week. So, I was doing that.

[00:15:51.27]

Rien Fertel: And this is Molly's Rise and Shine?

[00:15:53.23]

Brent Tranchina: Yes. Because I was doing that, I got a phone call from Nina [Compton] saying that one of her sous chefs decided that he was going to do—they had already decided to re-open. But one of his sous chefs said that, I don't know if one of his parents got COVID or there was a COVID scare, and he was moving back to—I don't know what state that he was from—but he was moving back to his parents' to go take care of them, which I think

is a really noble thing. She asked me if I could help out. So, I said, “Yes.” Because I'm always trying to—I don't know. I just said, “Yes.” What that ended up being is, I was working seven days a week, going to World Central Kitchen, do World Central Kitchen work in the morning from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. And then from 10 a.m., going home, taking a shower, going to Bywater American Bistro at noon, working till 10 p.m. or even later, depending on what it is, then coming home and going straight to bed, and doing that seven days a week. It just proved to be too much. I was just too tired, and I had kind of stretched myself too thin. But that was one impetus for leaving. The other impetus was, I didn't feel comfortable being in an open kitchen restaurant watching guests come in and so freely eating and drinking without a mask, almost like nothing had ever changed. It was honestly their behavior about this whole COVID situation, and being so lax about it, that made me so nervous in June and July, of how this is going to get worse, in my mind. Then, also, the idea of them staring at you, wondering how much precautions are you taking for them, but they're taking no precautions for the people who are employed. Honestly, the only people when I was there that really took it seriously were the Pelican players that would come in before the playoffs. They would come in and sit at the bar. They probably took the most precautions when it came to wearing masks, being vigilant about everything. The one thing that I knew people who were taking this seriously were people who would get up from their table or the bar, put their mask on, go to the bathroom, or leave. A lot of people didn't do that. They just left the mask at the table; were hugging each other. It was like, "I don't know." It was a little too nerve-wracking for

me, and I didn't feel safe. Also, if I get COVID, I have no income. I can't afford to not have income. I can't just stay home.

[00:18:50.13]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So you transferred to World Central Kitchen or focused on that?

[00:18:57.20]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. I just did that. I was already doing that full-time, but just continued to do that, because it was easier for me to be alone and make money than it was to deal with other people.

[00:19:07.28]

Rien Fertel: Are you still there at World Central Kitchen?

[00:19:10.24]

Brent Tranchina: So, World Central Kitchen has kind of phased out for Barracuda, because the amount of food that they started requiring—they went from a thousand meals to two hundred meals. It takes too much time and effort, and not enough money, to actually keep it going. The restaurant's so busy now that it's a hassle as opposed to a boon. But before, it was like, it was clutch. It was critical for restaurants like Barracuda to staying open, was this income from World Central Kitchen that was assisting them. It helped out a lot

of people in many different ways, whether it be people who needed that food at the churches or restaurants that were getting additional funds to have a job for other people.

[00:20:00.10]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. I've always had a question about World Central Kitchen. This is the José Andrés organization, right? So, do the recipes come from his people in D.C. or wherever?

[00:20:07.20]

Brent Tranchina: No, they're all my recipes.

[00:20:07.15]

Rien Fertel: So it's just your recipes. They just say, "We need two thousand meals by tomorrow."

[00:20:12.08]

Brent Tranchina: Basically. So the idea is that you have to had a certain amount of protein, grain, vegetable—stuff like that.

[00:20:16.04]

Rien Fertel: That's kind of like in the rulebook.

[00:20:20.08]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. And it's kind of—it's very flexible in what that is. My idea was just a lot of beans and rice and things that are hearty. Not necessarily stewy, because the boxes are not necessarily—you can't have a soup or anything like that.

[00:20:40.27]

Rien Fertel: Right, right, right.

[00:20:43.13]

Brent Tranchina: Trying to cook as healthy as possible for these groups, even though it probably didn't win a lot of favors. I got a lot of requests just to have beans and rice and other similar New Orleans staples kind of thing, but when you're cooking a thousand of those for a week, it's kind of hard to cook jambalaya for a thousand, especially if you don't have the correct pot for it kind of thing.

[00:21:13.00]

Rien Fertel: Right, right. You need a lot of space.

[00:21:17.03]

Brent Tranchina: But I did a lot of things with salads and chicken, and a lot of things with rice and grain, just try to keep it as diverse as possible but as nutritional as possible, as low-sodium as possible. I definitely under-seasoned a lot of my food intentionally, because

when I found out that it was predominantly black churches that my food was going to, and knowing as much as I've read about the diabetes risk in high sodium due to—. Damn. [Wind noise.] [Laughter.]

[00:21:55.28]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter.] Right. You want to limit the salt intake.

[00:22:02.06]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah.

[00:22:03.16]

Rien Fertel: What does your work-life look like now and going forward?

[00:22:07:10]

Brent Tranchina: So, right now, I transitioned from World Central Kitchen to helping at the kitchen-lead at Barracuda. Fortunately for them, they've got a very successful model where their entire dining is a patio outdoor.

[00:22:24.22]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:22:26.02]

Brent Tranchina: We even got a shout out from the mayor saying that we're one restaurant that's definitely doing it right.

[00:22:34.00]

Rien Fertel: Y'all do a very good take-out system, too. It works very well.

[00:22:38.06]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah.

[00:22:36.18]

Rien Fertel: I haven't eaten in the patio since before COVID, but have taken out many times. It works; it feels good.

[00:22:44.16]

Brent Tranchina: Thank you. They've taken this very seriously. It's just, for them at the same time, I think for Brett Jones, what he recognizes—and also Lee, who's his general manager—is that the employees are more important the restaurant itself, and everybody's health and safety kind of thing. If the employees feel like they are in jeopardy of getting COVID, then we start restricting things. For example, as we went back to Phase Two, nobody can come into the actual physical structure to order, you have to order from outside looking in kind of thing. So, yeah. They've done a good job. They're also trying to

open up a second location in the next beginning of the year, which is crazy to think about, being able to open up a restaurant during COVID-time. That's the kind of success that they've had right now. So, I'm helping them work there.

[00:23:48.21]

Rien Fertel: I'm going to stop this. I need to change out the batteries. I thought I had more juice.

[00:23:54.06]

Brent Tranchina: No worries.

[Break in recording]

[00:23:59.01]

Brent Tranchina: Kirkley. His last name is Kirkley.

[00:24:01.16]

Rien Fertel: Okay, Kirkley. Matt Kirkley. All right. [Laughter] So, you're working at Barracuda. How are you—tell me if I'm wrong, but for anybody who has spent time working in restaurants, it doesn't take long to understand that they can be—and you hinted at this before—they can be rather brutal workplace environments. Workaholism. Late hours. Abuse, which has become very public over the past couple of years. Do you feel more sensitive to these, or did you ever feel more sensitive to these, because of your academic work? How did that work? Do you question it more? Because you come from a

background that not many people I've ever met or talked to have, working in professional kitchens. How do you kind of balance those two things, I guess I'm asking?

[00:25:11.21]

Brent Tranchina: The abuses of kitchens, or—?

[00:25:17.14]

Rien Fertel: Just the fact that you know about these things from an outsider academic perspective, more than just reading about it, say, in local or national newspapers.

[00:25:28.20]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah.

[00:25:29.29]

Rien Fertel: You've studied these things. Then, you also have first-person experience about people who have never taken a vacation in twenty years and how that affects their health, well-being, and livelihood. Did the work before—coming from that academic background—make you more sensitive to the issues going on in kitchens and restaurants? Does that make sense?

[00:25:59.18]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah, I think so. I think, initially, getting into professional kitchens was more exciting than academic, I guess. Just the thrills of being thrust into an environment that—how do I put this? So, there's this idea that everyone understands some general theme of cooking. Even if you cooked at home a lot, you think you understand how to make something, and you can walk into a kitchen, whether it be professional or someone's house, and just turn out a pie or a jambalaya or anything like that. Then all of a sudden you get thrusted into a kitchen that's professional and it's a whole different world. All of a sudden, everything you know goes out the window, and you have to retrain yourself. To me, that was exciting, because the physical-ness of it, the intensity, the need to be able to focus intently on one of thing when seven-thousand things around you are going on, that was new. I think the ability to focus, follow a recipe, and do it exactly how it's supposed to be done, I think that's something that I've always personally liked and thoroughly enjoyed, as the way my brain works. That was definitely something that, for my first probably three, four, five years of trying to figure out how to exist in this new world, was very much a—was the driving force. I did take a lot of notes, as I was saying, I think before. It was just, "Hey, I don't know what I'm doing, but I probably should document this to some extent." Just to reinforce the new things that I've learned. That probably started off more about just understanding my world and what I'm supposed to be doing at that time to now. I think like any other person who's been in the industry long enough, you have two choices: you either want to have your own restaurant or you're going to find a new career. Even in the face of all this, I still want to have my own restaurant, but

it is very geared toward this notion of how do we treat employees very differently from the kitchens that I came up in.

[00:28:55.08]

Rien Fertel: Where does that start? We talk—some people talk about it, there's kind of a mushrooming effect where people talk about it, and then it just disappears and goes underground again, right?

[00:29:09.23]

Brent Tranchina: Oh, no, 100%. There's a lot of chefs who love to talk about how they're changing the industry from within their own restaurant, but they talk about that outside of their restaurant walls. Once they get back in their restaurant walls, they continue to do exactly what they've been doing their entire career. You can hear and see that on Instagram alone, much less just listen to people who work for different chefs and feel out, is anything different? I think the hard part is, a restaurant is a business by trade, and a business needs to make money. Unfortunately, restaurants have a very low threshold of profit. It's almost like a doomsday scenario of, all right, you have to start off with a high cost to get this thing open. And you have to charge something that's below-threshold to get people to come in and eat. Because nobody wants to pay the true price of what it costs a farmer to produce an onion, right? Much less raise livestock or go out to the Gulf of Mexico to fish and bring back and then have that butchered and then get it to a restaurant in general. It's hard. For me, I think the goal is, smaller restaurants are going to better

than larger restaurants in the future. Having a smaller team, one that you can focus on the health and well-being of, is going to be more important. Less turnover is going to be more important. I think what's hard for that is being able to justify that to an investor and being like, "Hey, I got an idea. Ten to twenty people dining in at a time, right?"

[00:31:27.00]

Rien Fertel: There's never going to be another location.

[00:31:29.10]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. Never going to be another location. It's only going to be me and two other people. They're like, "Well, where's the revenue?" Yeah, you might be able to cook the most amazing meal that anybody's ever had, but what does that mean if we don't make any money? Like if I put my money in there and I don't get an investment back, are we just going for notoriety? Even places like Commander's Palace, for example, I think they have forty to fifty cooks on their payroll at any given time. It's probably equal amounts to front of the house. I mean, that's insane. It's not a negative thing; it's just that they can cover five-hundred to seven-hundred guests in a single service. That's insane. I don't think that's going away. I just don't think that's going to be sustainable moving forward in a world where we're discussing climate change, the accessibility of anything, whether it be energy or food, and then also the ability to pay people what they're worth. And that starts with not just what you're buying food from, but that also goes to the person that's washing your dishes. How do you find a way to give them salary, to give

them security, and then also say, "Hey, we're not going to open up Christmas Day. We're not going to open up Thanksgiving Day. That's dedicated to you and your family." You know? But if you're an investor, you don't care about these people. You just want your money back. You want your profits. So, trying to strike a fine balance on that is going to be increasingly difficult but, in my opinion, I think a lot of this starts with the people at the top, and saying, "I don't need to make as much money from this business venture as I desire." Right? Make less money, share the profit, maybe share the investment of it. Maybe give your dishwasher not just salary but an opportunity to buy into the restaurant so they feel like they have ownership and joy and pride of the product that you give forth. If I can figure out a way to do that, that's the goal. That's the dream scenario. But it's—.

[00:34:12.07]

Rien Fertel: I want to build on that. I want to invite just asking two very New Orleans-centric questions, and the first builds off what you're saying. New Orleans is a small city, it's an intimate city, it's also a city with immense poverty and inequity problems. Do you think there's something—the restaurant that you want to open—is it more possible, less possible, as possible here as anywhere else? Do you know of anyone doing it that you look up to here? Is there something about the smallness, the intimate nature of this town, that makes that more equitable restaurant—that kind of smaller restaurant—doable?

[00:35:07.07]

Brent Tranchina: I honestly don't know. Anybody who's got, like, a mom-and-pop shop and a small bistro are definitely doing it. I think they're doing something that's special because they're not chef-driven, they're just family-driven, and that includes the entire group of people who work there. And I think that's kind of the basis of the model that we should be going towards. I think chef-driven restaurants are excellent because I want to be a chef, but I don't think—they don't really ever pay the way they should. Right? So, it's just like, take that overhead over the top of paying out somebody because they think they're more important than everybody else and just turn it around and reinvest it into the people who work for you. [Outdoor garbage can spills, due to the heavy wind, and rolls down the sidewalk. Pause as we clean up.]

[00:36:06.25]

Unidentified woman: Oh, jeez. Oh, gosh. Do that . . . thank you.

[00:36:16.12]

Brent Tranchina: I'm going to use sanitizer. I'll be right back.

[00:36:55.10]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So, I think you answered my question about how New Orleans fits into the dream, the image of a better restaurant, right? A better-working restaurant. So, my last question that I prepped—we can talk about other things—but a lot of people—and I have

very mixed feelings about this comparison—but a lot of people have compared COVID, especially in the early months, to Katrina. And because you're from New Orleans, I'm guessing you were here for Katrina or you have some Katrina experience, but also because you studied the food systems in New Orleans post-Katrina, can you tell me what you think about that comparison? I have wrestled with it. I was here for Katrina, I ran a food business at the time, and, I don't know, it's hard to wrap my head around comparing this and that. Can you speak to that?

[00:38:10.27]

Brent Tranchina: Yeah. I think my gut instinct is to say that it's completely false. That the two are very different and two very different scenarios, and you're basically comparing oranges to the apples. But I don't want to say that people who are comparing it are entirely wrong. There's got to be some similar connection. And I think it's a difference between those who were in the industry during Katrina and those who were not, in looking at it. Katrina, very obviously, changed the foodscape of New Orleans by literally wiping out the ability to get food. You can still get food right now. Grocery stores are still open. You just have to put a mask on and go get it. Before Katrina, I think there was something like forty-two grocery stores, and immediately in the months after Katrina, only five of them reopened, right? That's a food desert. There's no food desert here. Just because restaurants are closed doesn't mean it's a food desert. It just means that people who normally don't cook for themselves can't get food. So, I think the difficulty, though, is the people who are most affected by this and, say, food accessibility, are still going to

be the same people after Katrina and the same people now. If you're low-income, if you need public transportation to get food, well, there's no public transportation after Katrina. Now, public transportation is scarier today, right? You've got to disinfect every surface, disinfect your hands. Public transportation is reducing the amount of people that they allow on the busses or on the streetcars. So, if you're somebody who needed that to go to the grocery store or needed to get into somebody else's vehicle to go to a grocery store and get back, you're just as affected now than you were then.

[00:40:34.18]

Rien Fertel: That makes sense.

[00:40:37.05]

Brent Tranchina: So, I think the difficulty—okay, so, now there's a difference if you're a business owner, right? Now, you're being forced to shut down or reduce your access by the government, whether it be state, local, or federal, as opposed to after Katrina, you just lost it all. If you're a big box store, well, you'd have money from around the country to come in and reopen Wal-Mart. You can reopen Rouses here all over the state. You can reopen. If you're a corner store, good luck on that. So, I think the difficulties in that is that, if you're an owner, during Katrina, if you lost everything, you can file for insurance and kind of get something back. But it wasn't enough to make it okay, it wasn't making your life better. Nobody was getting rich off of that. Now, much to Mayor Cantrell's, I think, hard but necessary actions to restrict the opening of some businesses, I think what's

she's doing is right to save the population as a whole. I think she's going to take a tough hit with this, but what she's doing is right. Where I disagree with her, the state, and the federal government as a whole—not just her, but everybody—is that when you restrict a business. [Sunglasses fall off table. Aside:] That's okay, they're cheap. I can't have nice glasses because of this reason. [Laughter.] When you restrict somebody's access and then you tell them you're not going to help them financially, that's hard. And especially here in New Orleans, where so many people have invested their entire livelihoods, whether it be a bar, a very small restaurant, a corner store, and then you're telling them, "Sorry, you gotta close up." And then you're not going to help them with rent control, you're not going to help them with tax assistance, kind of stuff like that, I think you're going to run into a problem where it's like, people are going to get upset—which they are—and say, "Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? I can't make money. I can't file for unemployment because there's no more unemployment checks. I have to shutter my business and sell it." But who can afford to buy it right now if you're somebody who's already here? Or if you're a company that's doing really good, you can go buy up all the property right now and be *awesome*. In the next year, who knows who's going to own all this property that's shutting down? I don't know how much similar there is between the two. I don't see it. I just think that it's a different experience, a different problem, that's over a decade apart. Yeah.

[00:43:51.22]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to talk about or add? We covered a lot, and is there anything we're missing?

[00:44:06.09]

Brent Tranchina: I don't know. The year's not over. [Laughter.]

[00:44:11.11]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter.] And COVID's not over.

[00:44:14.10]

Brent Tranchina: No. I think what concerns me most about this people's wellbeing. And not just people in the industry, but overall, everybody's wellbeing. My wife works from home for now, and she's like, "I never get to leave the house. I never get to leave the house." It's hard. That's a transition that everybody who has a partner, or even kids, has had to make a huge sacrifice. How does this time now going to play out ten years from now, whether it be peoples' relationships or personal lives kind of thing? So, these are the questions that I'm asking myself. I desperately want to open up a restaurant, but that's not—the question shouldn't be, "How do I do this in the time of COVID?" Question is, "How do you make people feel better about living right now?" In my opinion. So that way, we can be more productive in the future. We have a kid who works for us at Barracuda who just lost his dad two days ago to COVID. It's that attitude that everybody's just like, “Quick, snap

back to reality, oh, this is—.” How do you keep people moving when, in reality, if I lost my dad tomorrow? I'd just be devastated. I'd probably just quit. I wouldn't know what to do, in all honesty. The fact that this kid's going to be able to come back to work tomorrow is mind-boggling to me. How do you create an environment where it's just like we're going to all move forward together in the most positive way? I really hope that's a conversation that people start having, that is more important than what is going to go eat brunch or tacos, how do we get back to brunch or tacos or full capacity? I could care less about that kind of stuff. I haven't eaten out. I've only eaten out once in the last nine months. That was just by chance kind of thing because I was meeting my dad and he was like, "I'm hungry." I'm like, "All right, let's go over here and go get a pizza." You know what I mean? I don't know. It's hard to tell, because there's just—I don't know where we move forward right now as a country. Whether it's because we're divided and some of this believe that this is real or not, but emotionally, we're all dealing with it one way or another. I just wish we would have a conversation about it more publicly than what we normally do, and hide it from each other, and pretend that everything's fine or not fine. I think that's going to be interesting coming forth, especially this notion—just thinking of it out loud—this notion you talked about where chefs are starting to become more vocal about depression, alcoholism, all this kind of stuff, which I saw rampantly through every restaurant I ever worked at. But this idea of being like, all right, now you work for an industry that could go down at any moment, through a lack of federal or state assistance. People can start digging back into old habits and it might be harder to come out of. I mean, I think it's great that people are being public about their emotions. I think it's a

positive thing, especially people who are notoriously aggressive in their kitchens and then come out and say, "Well, I was just a really depressed son of a bitch and I didn't know how to respond to it." Which is a very real thing. All of a sudden, you have people who probably turned to cooking because they had nothing else to do with their lives, became chefs, and those people are somehow supposed to lead a group of people into a profitable business. And the stress of that alone will get inverted and reflected onto other people in many different ways.

[00:49:00.06]

Rien Fertel: Well, I want to thank you for sitting down and talking about all these issues.

[00:49:04.15]

Brent Tranchina: I appreciate it. It was nice meeting you.

[*End of interview*]