



Donald McGill

Hot and Hot Fish Club

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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Diana Dombrowski

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[00:00:21]

Annemarie Nichols Anderson: Okay, we've got our room tone and I'll introduce us. So today is February 10, 2020. I am at Pepper Place Market, at Hot and Hot Fish Club with Mr. Don McGill, and this is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance Career Servers Birmingham Project. Let's go ahead and get started. Could you introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:46]

Donald McGill: Yes my name is Don McGill. I'm a server at the Hot and Hot Fish Club in Birmingham, Alabama.

[00:00:51]

Annemarie: Great, and can you, for the record, tell us your birthdate?

[00:00:54]

Donald: Yes, my birthday is September 6, 1963.

[00:00:58]

Annemarie: Great, and Mr. McGill, when and where were you born?

[00:01:03]

Donald: I was born in Birmingham. I spent my early years here and moved to New Orleans about grade school time and spent most of my formative years there, then, a couple years here in high school and then, back to New Orleans.

[00:01:24]

Annemarie: Great. Well tell me a little about-- let's first start and talk about the Birmingham of your youth. Tell me a little about what you remember about it.

[00:01:32]

Donald: I remember it being a very kind of sleepy, southern city in a way. You know, where time moved maybe a little slower than it did in other places-- particularly in the restaurant business-- because Birmingham was sorely lacking in real good kind of local cuisine when I was growing up, and by and large, it was all fast food and mom and pop kind of places that kind of just did maybe meat and three and stuff like that.

[00:02:05]

Annemarie: That's great. What were some of those places that you remember going to or seeing as a kid?

[00:02:09]

Donald: In Birmingham?

[00:02:09]

Annemarie: Mh-hm.

[00:02:11]

Donald: Niki's Restaurant, that was an old, old one. That was a big kind of meat and three place. I also remember some of the old barbecue places like the Golden Rule, and the Tired Texan, and Ollie's and some of those old places which at the time, were kind of individually owned restaurants in Birmingham.

[00:02:37]

Annemarie: That's great, I haven't heard of the Tired Texan yet.

[00:02:39]

Donald: Yeah, it's a very small place. It was over on the West Side as you left from Downtown Birmingham going toward right there in the Southwest part of the city but yeah it had been in business forever and just really good Birmingham-style barbecue, stuff like that. But most of the places, like I said, that I remember were owned locally. There were a lot of similarities between a lot of the different restaurants and what they served because basically back then Birmingham was kind of meat-and-three kinda town. No really upscale dining establishments and things like that. But that was what the scene was like at the time.

[00:03:27]

Annemarie: That's great, and tell me about your parents. What were their names and what did they do?

[00:03:31]

Donald: My mother's name was **Joanna**, she was a-- she worked for a credit bureau. And she did other things, too, once my parents split up to feed the family, but that was her occupation. My father was in the food and beverage business. So I kind of grew up in that and going to work with my dad and all that and learning the ins and outs and how to operate a business and how to treat people. Basically that's where my work ethic came from.

[00:04:09]

Annemarie: In Birmingham, where did your father work?

[00:04:11]

Donald: My dad worked-- when I was a small child, he was in the fast-food business, actually, that's where he started out cause he was only like at eighteen when I was born so at the time he was a restaurant manager for a couple of fast food establishments. Matter of fact he was one of the ones that brought Sneaky Pete's to Birmingham and everywhere else. So that was his major occupation at that time until we moved to New Orleans and he got into the hotel business and stuff like that.

[00:04:47]

Annemarie: Well great, tell me a little about the New Orleans you remember from your youth.

[00:04:51]

Donald: I remember it being vibrant, colorful. You know, lots of real kind of, local flair and all that melting pot kind of, like things that -- you had some of everything, and you have restaurants of every type of ethnicity that you could think of. Some of my favorite ones there were some of the older more established ones that I didn't get to go to too much

when I was a kid, but the times that I did, I would never forget. You know, places like Antoine's, and Galatoire's, and the Court of Two Sisters and some of those places.

[00:05:32]

Annemarie: That's great. And where did your father work when he was in New Orleans?

[00:05:35]

Donald: At the Maison Dupuy Hotel and the Monteleone.

[00:05:39]

Annemarie: That's great.

[00:05:41]

Donald: So that's kinda how I grew up by going to work and learning the business from that end of it, and that was a big plus, and it kinda of molded my mindset for the rest of my life. I didn't know it at the time, but that would be the footsteps I would kinda follow in. Albeit in sort of a different direction than he.

[00:06:02]

Annemarie: That's great, you were talking about how you got your work ethic from watching him and those early experiences that you had going to work with him. Could you talk a little bit about those early experiences--

[00:06:14]

Donald: Yes.

[00:06:15]

Annemarie: --And some of the things that you saw or did there.

[00:06:19]

Donald: Yes. I used to basically be like an appendage of my dad when I was working with him, and I watched him. I did not-- I didn't have to ask a whole lot of questions because my father was a very patient guy. You know, do it right the first time, you won't have to redo it. He was a very hardworking person, working sixteen hours a day or whatever, and I got to share that with him. And the things that I remember most again is my father was a really patient person. He was a good teacher, and he was a very kind person. He loved people, and I think I got my love of that, too, from him.

[00:07:05]

Annemarie: That's great. What were some of the responsibilities or the things that he did while he worked there?

[00:07:12]

Donald: Like responsible for purchasing of all the food and beverage stuff and working directly with the chefs and the general managers in the hotels and just a whole lot of public relations stuff. You know, in and outside of the restaurant, or the hotel, so you know that's kind of where I developed my whole-- watchin' him and seeing how he treated people and how was a very comical person, too. So it was always a lot of fun, but I never dreamed that that's what I wanted to do, that I wanted to be in that business for the rest of my life at that point. But it was just, it was always fun, you know, and that's what really kept me wantin' to get up early in the morning and go to work with dad whenever I could, you know, not in school and things like that.

[00:08:10]

Annemarie: That's great. So you told me this the last time we talked, too, about how you didn't really think that food and beverage and the food industry was something you wanted to pursue when you were younger, what did you want to do?

[00:08:24]

Donald: I thought I was gonna be an actor. I really did. I thought that was what I wanted to do, and I was always involved in drama and theater and things like that when I was in high school. I had, you know, a lot of really good teachers that kinda helped me in that way to learn more about that. And then as I got older, kind of going to school and doing things like that, to kinda support my habit of doing things like that 'cause I was in a few operas and a few different things and we actually had this troupe that traveled around for a while and did theater production stuff. But it didn't pay real well, and to support my habit, I went to the restaurant business that I knew, that I'd been in while I was growin' up to kind of support me. I wasn't makin a whole lotta money at the time. I did not have anything else to really tie to at the time. It portended my future, and I didn't really know it at the time. 'Cause I knew that I loved people, and I knew that I loved food and all that, but I did not know that I would be as face to face, kind of, with people like on a daily basis. I never thought that was a job that I would be able to do real well until I really started doing it. I tried a couple of times to do other things, but it never really panned out per se because the truth was, and I didn't want to admit it, that I missed this so bad that I really couldn't wait to get back to it you know? But that's kind of where my real kind of marriage to the industry began and solidified then and there when I was like out of high school and just startin' college and stuff like that.

[00:10:21]

Annemarie: That makes sense. I want to get to your first industry job, but first I want to ask you a little about your education. Where did you go to high school, elementary school, and then tell me a little bit about your college education.

[00:10:32]

Donald: When I was a child I attended elementary school at first in Birmingham at Crestline Elementary. When we moved to New Orleans I went to Edward Hines Elementary, then, when I lived in Birmingham for a couple of years during high school I went to Ramsay High School which actually wind up being right down the street from where the old restaurant was albeit it was something different back then. But upstairs from the old restaurant, I used to work in what is now an Indian restaurant which was a pizzeria at the time washing dishes and stuff and that is where I started-- and then I wound up leaving in my senior year I went back to New Orleans and graduated from Warren Easton High School, right on Canal Street, Mid City.

[00:11:19]

Annemarie: That's great. Did you live in the Mid-City neighborhood?

[00:11:24]

Donald: No I lived in Lakeview neighborhood, but I went to school there because it was a –

kinda like a magnet school or somethin' you know, where you had kids from all over the city that actually went there. It wasn't like a neighborhood high school.

[00:11:36]

Annemarie: Makes sense. And tell me a little bit about your-- you said you then matriculated onto college. Tell me a little bit about your career in college.

[00:11:43]

Donald: Umm, it was all restaurant business jobs and stuff like that, and I didn't make it very far in college because it seemed that I was really more interested in this, and then at that point, I started getting more interested in like restaurant and hotel management and for a brief time, I thought I wanted to cook and be a chef. So I went to culinary school for a while and did that whole thing but then as it turned out, I really missed being in the front of the house because-- and another thing too, back then you really didn't see a lot of like open kitchens and things. It was back of the house and you're totally cut off from the guests and all of that type stuff, so I wanted to be more in the front and more kind of in the public eye and have more interaction with people and stuff like that.

[00:12:41]

Annemarie: Makes a lot of sense. Where did you go to college and culinary school?

[00:12:44]

Donald: Delgado, in New Orleans. There they had the only accredited program back then, so I did that, and then I started my apprenticeship and I did a lot of that type stuff. But it was during that time that I realized, too, that I really wanted to move to the front of the house more, you know. But that's how that whole thing started and then, that's how it changed, too, you know-- me wantin' to be more-- you know, cause I can't stand-- I'm the type of person that I can't stand to be cooped up. I call it claustrophobic. That afforded me the opportunity to be out and like I said, interact with the guests. I found out really that's what I was more well suited for.

[00:13:35]

Annemarie: That's great. Well let's go back. Tell me a little bit about your first job working in restaurants.

[00:13:44]

Donald: It was when I lived in Birmingham, my first real official job and that was washing— well, I say washing dishes, but it was a little bit of everything. It was washing dishes and doing prep work and making pizza and doing stuff like that, but I definitely worked in the kitchen at that time for a couple of years growing up. And it was just-- it was almost like it was second

nature to me, and I always looked forward to going to work every day, even if I was tired from the school day and all that. Every day straight from school I would go to work and work that night and all that-- but it was just, it was the kind of thing that at the time, I didn't, again, realize that I would be doing for the rest of my life was workin' in restaurants. I figured I would just kind of get by, as kind of, like I was between the things that I really wanted to do and still tryna figure things out at the time. But it was just a fun job to me, you know? And it just kept me right on the edge of being interested and stayin in it. You know?

[00:14:57]

Annemarie: That makes sense. What was the name of the pizzeria?

[00:14:59]

Donald: Guido's Pizzeria. [Laughter]

Annemarie: That's great. So tell me a little about, I'm kinda curious as to-- I keep hearing you say I wasn't really sure that this was what I wanted to do. When did it become, the thing that like, okay this is the moment that I knew, or when you finally realized that this is what I want to do, I want to work front of house as a career?

[00:15:23]

Donald: Let's see. I was at the time, like after all that, and where it moved on from was, I had a job where I worked in the kitchen, but I also worked on the floor sometimes, so it was like part time and part time. And it was like in a local theme restaurant back in Birmingham, by then I was back in Birmingham. This was in the later 1980s. I worked in a theme restaurant. It was called Spats. I worked there for a couple years. That's kind of when I really figured out that I wanted to be in the front of the house 'cause it was just more attractive and more well suited for me being the kind of person, like I said, that doesn't like to be kind of cooped up in tight spaces. And really, I kind of lacked the creativity that I saw around me 'cause at that time, there were a lot of people just on the cusp of startin' big careers that are Birmingham legends now, like Chris Hastings and Frank Stitt and people like that. But when I did that-- and then I had another hotel job at the Redmont Hotel in Birmingham when I was in my early twenties, and I kind of did the same thing there in terms of working some front of the house and some back of the house. But it was like when I was in the kitchen, I enjoyed what I did, and I wouldn't trade anything for my experience there 'cause it kinda helped me on the other side, but I kind of felt lonely or something, not being out and being with people -cause that was my whole life before then was just-- And I was always a real social kind of person. I'm the type of person that needs people. I don't do well alone, you know, my thing is the flower that gets watered by all of my social interactions, so it was at that point where I said, "Hey, this is what I really want to do." And then I moved on and did some other things where like I was a food and beverage guy at a country club, you know, when I was in my twenties and all that. But then, shortly thereafter, I came into the fine dining part of it and

only did it front of the house. And then a short few years later, I found this place, and I've been here ever since.

[00:18:11]

Annemarie: That's great, well tell me a little bit about your fine dining experience. Where was the first fine dining restaurant that you worked at?

[00:18:18]

Donald: Probably the Court of Two Sisters in New Orleans. There and working with my dad, so that was my whole introduction to the whole white table cloth type thing.

[00:18:32]

Annemarie: Makes sense. Could you tell me a little about that experience at the Court of Two Sisters and what it was like working there.

[00:18:39]

Donald: Yeah. I had kind of a rough job 'cause I was like a steward there. And then I kind of

worked my way into being a waiter's assistant. Then I worked my way in a short period of time, and I was probably one of the younger ones that ever was able move up to server there. And I really enjoyed that, so went on kind of from there.

[00:19:07]

Annemarie: That's great. Were there any other restaurants that you worked at in New Orleans?

[00:19:08]

Donald: Unh-nh. That was it.

[00:19:10]

Annemarie: Okay, so talk to me a little about the things that you learned working there as a waiter, and a server's assistant, and a steward.

[00:19:20]

Donald: Learning how to be able to work with not only the people that I worked with, but you know, interaction again, with guests and things like that. And knowing that you're at a place that is, by and large, most everybody talks about how wonderful everything is. And I just knew that I wanted to be in a place where it was, you know, one of the more highly

regarded type things. And then my tastes kind of changed, too, from not only my physical kind of palate change, but I just gradually more and more felt at home doing it. And somewhere between like twenty-five and thirty, I realized that I was never gonna do anything else. But the very first jobs that I ever had, I was just taught to kind of speak when spoken to, and just to do a job well done, that it takes about the same amount of time to do it right as to take the shortcut. So I never ever believed in being in a place where I felt complacent or I thought the restaurant was complacent. That's kind of kept me where I'm at in life.

[00:20:58]

Annemarie: For sure. Could you maybe tell me about some of the early people-- mentors or folks that you watched who taught you about good service and providing that?

[00:21:10]

Donald: Uh-hm. Sure. Yeah. Aside from my father, there was a guy that I-- when I first started out in the restaurant business, he was a restaurant manager and I can't even remember his last name now, but it was Rick and some Italian last name that I can't remember now. But we got really close when I was at the Redmont Hotel in Birmingham when I first came back to Birmingham. And he went on to open his own restaurant a few years later, which I never worked for him or whatever, but he I guess saw something in me that you know—'cause a lot of the other people, a lot of the young people at the time in the

restaurant business were doing it as kind of a stepping stone or climbing to something else while, you know working their way through school or something like that. With me, by that time, I already knew that this was something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. But he was a little short Italian guy. He was really nice but he was a real stickler for - and he kind of taught me how to bridge the gap between the kitchen and the floor and how to do the job efficiently and to be very personable and you know, but that was one of the ones. Like I said, my father was a great mentor in helping me to form my work ethic, but there were other people that I met along the way that kind of grounded me and kept me and sort of solidified my decision to stay in the restaurant business and be in the front of the house. But there's a lot of people that have really left their mark on me. Some which I-- to this day-- I used to be better at remembering names and stuff-- but a lot people who I felt were kindred spirits that I watched them. 'Cause I did a whole lot of watching in my younger days. I tried to pick all of the best things from all the people that I worked with and the attributes that I thought would lead me to being as successful as I've been able to be all the years that I've done this.

[00:23:42]

Annemarie: That's great. Well, for the record, tell me so I could get this straight in my mind kind of the timeline of your career, what year did you start at Court of Two Sisters in New Orleans?

[00:23:53]

Donald: That would be like about 1980, [19]81, in there, until about the mid-[19]80s when I worked there. And then, shortly thereafter, I moved to Birmingham again. And that was, I think the last time. And I've been here ever since or whatever, but from that point, that was after I had already worked at the Maison Dupuy, like when I was in high school, the Monteleone, stuff like that. So this was right after high school and yeah.

[00:24:32]

Annemarie: Do you remember the year you moved back to Birmingham?

[00:24:34]

Donald: Mh-hm. Um, 1986 or [19]87, somewhere in there. But yeah, it was somewhere in there.

[00:24:51]

Annemarie: Great, and what year did you start working at Hot and Hot?

[00:24:53]

Donald: Hot and Hot was . . . [20]04, [20]05?

[00:25:02]

Annemarie: Okay. So tell me a little bit about getting this job. Why'd you decide to come and work here?

[00:25:07]

Donald: A good friend of mine called me-- because I had a job before this where I was workin' for like a corporation-- kinda like a chain. Which, a big part of my job was going around and helping them-- 'cause they were in a period of growth at the time-- was going around and helping them open new restaurants in different cities. I was part of like the whole opening team for them, and the name of that company was called BDI. Bravo Development, And they owned restaurants like Bravo and Brio and Bon Vie, and they had like about three or four different concepts or whatever. So I was doing that at the time, and a good friend of mine, John Rusiecki, who was the manager at FoodBar, if you've ever heard of that restaurant in Birmingham, Cahaba Heights. He called me one day out of the blue, and I had thought about coming to work before, a couple years before, but I just didn't want to take the chance you know of-- 'cause I was making good money doing what I was doing, but I just wasn't spending time with my family. But then he called me, and the time was just right, and I came and I did the interview and I got

hired right there on the spot. But that is when I came to Hot and Hot, and I've been here ever since.

[00:26:32]

Annemarie: That's great. Well tell me a little bit about the restaurant, so I obviously, we know, but for somebody whose listening to this, and they don't know anything about Hot and Hot Fish Club. Can you kind of describe and explain the restaurant to them?

[00:26:44]

Donald: Yes. Hot and Hot is very decidedly Southern. [Weather Warning Sounds] You know, the culture of the restaurant and the cuisine is decidedly Southern with kind of a classic sort of French twist to it or something. But we are-- and we like to convey Southern hospitality and just kind of taking the best of whatever that geographically the area has to offer on a daily basis-- 'cause the restaurant changes in some shape, form, or fashion every day. The origins of the restaurant go way, way back to Chef Hastings, one of his great grandfather's, like great-great-great grandfather who was like a charter member of the original Hot and Hot Fish Club which was – back then no women, just men. But they were like rice planters and they lived on kind of adjacent lands to one another, so they had this familial kind of relationship whereby they would celebrate the births of their children, grandchildren, mourn the deaths of their loved ones. But the main thing that Hot and Hot Fish Club was originally, was a good place for a bunch of men to kick their feet up, let their hair down, have a little strong drink and some good food and

everything was-- rice being the center piece of everything because they were rice planters-- but what everyone would do and be charged to do, is to bring the best of the bounty of their land, whatever that was, fish or fowl or that sort of thing and have a big celebration around the table with food. So this kind of being an extension of that. Nowadays, albeit, yeah I mean, probably more than half our guests are women, a couple hundred years later [Laughter] but we just want to be the kind of place that you come in and cast away the cares of the world and have some good food and that sort of thing. But we are all about local and seasonal and our whole premise is that we-- agriculturally speaking-- ninety some odd percent of all the agricultural products and the produce come from within a ninety mile radius of where we live, so being very local of course. But seasonal in terms of “hey, what is the coolest, freshest thing that came out of the ground first thing this morning?” because a lot of our menu is based upon, the first thing in the morning what we get and what we can make a menu out of and so we hope to be-- we’re firmly rooted in southern cultural cuisine and that sort of thing, but we also have over times kind of changed to-- you have to sort of change with the times. But the one philosophy that will never change here is our work ethic and our commitment to keeping things very much local, seasonal, southern and you know. Also again, treating people with, kind of like the old golden rule, we treat people the way we want to be treated. And we’re enthusiastic about what we do and we-- that’s one thing that will never change is our commitment to the quality and the service to the guests. You know, that’s just something we really, really, firmly believe in.

[00:30:36]

Annemarie: That’s great. I’m curious too-- so I have a follow up question from when you were

talking about the job previous to this one. When you were opening restaurants, what were your specific responsibilities? Were you training servers?

[00:30:47]

Donald: Yes, exactly. Front of the house, training servers, hostesses, anyone that had anything to do with front of the house and teaching people and trying to make sure that we left a fully functional restaurant by the time. You know, with the opening team after six to eight weeks we were in any given city, that things were in good hands when we left them there and that they were on a firm footing and stuff. So that was what I was doing, a lot of training and teaching and things like that, you know. Not really how to open a restaurant but how to operate one on a day to day basis and like I said, going ahead and really laying the foundation for that.

[00:31:29]

Annemarie: That's great. How did-- if this did, how did that experience kind of impact your work or the way that you thought about kind of managing the space of the dining room

[00:31:41]

Donald: Um, it made me kind of cognizant that everybody—'cause of a lot of times, too, when you open a restaurant and you know right off the bat, there's a buzz about the new restaurant and

this and that, and so a lot of the mistakes that people make when they first open a restaurant is just swinging the doors wide open and saying, “Everybody come on in.” I mean, that’s well and good, but when you have a bunch of people that’s mildly experienced and you’re tryin’ to teach them, a lot of times it doesn’t bode well for the restaurant because in the beginning people are not happy with the food and the service and this and that, and that’s why, what we’ve done with this place, in opening this place, we’ve kind of limited the reservations until we really get a good grasp on it. But, going back to what I was talkin’ about with opening new restaurants is teachin’ people how to handle volume and how to stay calm and how to still be able to treat people right and how to calm them. It was a lot of X’s and O’s in terms of, this is how we make coffee or this is how we-- whatever it was. But a better part of the job was teaching people how to manage their time and their space and the volume of the restaurant. And that’s just something that no matter where you work, whether you’re opening a restaurant or if you are in a well-established one, that’s something that is always vital to your whole existence in the whole scheme of things is learning how to-- if at least for certain if you work in a busy restaurant-- is how to be cool, be yourself. Take it as it comes, and just make sure that you give every bit of yourself to making sure that the people have a great experience. And I think a lot of times that’s lost on like chain restaurants and why restaurants like this are so successful when they do not deviate from their whole mission statement or whatever like we have. But that’s mainly what I learned and what I was able to impart to other people. That we are in this business, albeit on a different level than we are here.

[00:34:18]

Annemarie: That's wonderful. It's one thing to teach people like, here's how you do coffee service or something like that. It's another thing to teach them kind of people skills and time management skills, so I can imagine that would be quite a task.

[00:34:33]

Donald: Oh sure, 'cause not everybody's born with them, me included. It takes time to develop a lot of your social skills as it relates to the food and beverage industry and just overall treatin' people. But the main thing is, that you do treat people like family no matter where you are, and that's one of those very kind of southern things too, is being nice to people, being the kind of place where people feel welcome, where people feel celebrated, not tolerated. Cause, I mean, let's face it, without your clientele, without your guests, your restaurant's not much, It's all brick and mortar in here, but what really makes this place is the people that come in here and some of the nicest people in the world do so. But you really do have to concentrate on making sure that you do things that you know if you were on the other side of it, that you would want people to do and extend that same courtesy to those people.

[00:35:43]

Annemarie: For sure, that's a really lovely sentiment, making people feel celebrated and not

just tolerated. Tell me a little bit about-- let's get back into your job here, tell me what was your first impression of Hot and Hot? Working here and being in the restaurant space I guess.

[00:36:04]

Donald: The first thing that kind of struck me about working for Hot and Hot was the level of commitment and how much that never wavered. And what I saw from the ownership on down. I saw a place where people are really, really committed to you know the overall guest experience. I mean, the people in the kitchen care just as much about the guests as the people in the front of the house do, you know? And how their experience goes, so we have a lot of interaction and I just think that the overall communication and the way people treated each other here in terms of just the employees, much less the guests. There's a lot of communication between front and back of the house and there's no division, and there is no kind of animosity or anything ever between front and back of the house. We realize that we are all part of the very same-- we're all part of the threads interwoven that makes this place what it is, you know? That impressed me a lot. And the fact that there was, like I said, just an unwavering commitment to excellence in what we did, and that we never let that down. We're always thinking about the guests and how we can do better and what we can—it's just what really kept me here, just knowing that I worked in a place where it wasn't just another little restaurant in Birmingham, Alabama or whatever. That it was really something special. And then after that, we went on to do

even greater things, you know. So I just knew that it didn't take me long to realize that I was home.

[00:38:17]

Annemarie: That's great. That's really nice So tell me a little bit about your responsibilities here as a server here. What are some of the responsibilities of your job?

[00:38:24]

Donald: Umm, is to – a lot of my job, too, is to kinda help bring younger people or people newer to this industry along, you know, as well as waiting on the tables and all that and doing all the usual things that you would do as a server and stuff like that. But having been here as long as I am, it's incumbent on me to welcome people and that's one of the things that I like to do with new people. Welcome them to the team. Make sure that I am as accessible to them. If they ever need anything from me, and if they could ever benefit from my experience, I'd like to be able to provide that. And you don't really think of yourself in terms of-- or I don't-- in terms of like providing leadership, but you really kind of do anyway. That's part of it, the fact that people can look to you and think, that you do a good enough job to where they have something to aspire to. 'Cause I have a list of people here, like requests and stuff that is lengthy, and those people help me pay my bills. And I even try, or I even strive as hard with them as I do a person just in off the street, their first visit to the restaurant. So a lot of my responsibility is to my job and the

guest and making sure that they have a good experience. But a lot of my job, too, is to help-- and I mean, I don't want anybody to emulate me and the way that I do things 'cause everybody here is encouraged to be themselves and not have a canned kind of response to something or a monologue. You're encouraged to be yourself, but to be very thorough and knowledgeable and things like that of the menu and of the overall operation of the restaurant. Like I said, I think that is a lot of my job, too, not the least of which too, I like to make this a fun place to work. There's a lot of camaraderie let's say but that's really a lot of my job. I'm not in management or anything, so I really have the time and the wherewithal to spend strictly with the guests and the employees and we all just kind of try to help each other as things go along, too, so there's no weak link in the fence or whatever. And then, too, I think your job here in terms of like you're knowledge and with the menu changing so much is just staying on top of things and knowing to give and then teaching other people, too, how to give the level of service that people come to expect from a place like this. You know, they got the food but we have to make sure that it is presented in a way that makes people kind of go "wow," you know, and makes them want to come back. So outside of just being a waiter, a lot of my responsibility is just trying to make sure that other people feel like they have a nice place to come to work, too, and that everybody's happy. I love for everybody to be happy.

[00:42:25]

Annemarie: That's great. Well tell me a little bit, you were mentioning about staying on top of

menu, especially with how it changes seasonally-- but tell me a little about-- and you mentioned this before too about your training in back of house and working in culinary school. How was that impacted your work or how has that helped you learn about the food that you serve?

[00:42:50]

Donald: Oh, that's been a tremendous asset to me because a lot of it, coming from where I come from, you realize how much work and how much commitment goes into what the finished product is and you also have a sense of pride cause you know that-- and I'm talking specifically about this place now-- you know that out of all the places that you've worked, at least I do, that way more painstaking process goes into everything so that the finished product like I said is something that is impeccable and that's the way that we hope to keep it. But a lot of my experience in a restaurant outside of being a server has kind of taught me to have respect for people in other departments than I work in. And how really really-- how their commitment kind of translates into, they kind of hand the ball over to us and take it from there. If we do things right after they have done us the service of giving us a great product to serve, we have to make sure that we're the eyes and ears. And we can look at something before it leaves the pass and know whether it's exactly right with all the different ingredients. And we have, you know lengthy meetings every day before service, right before people get here, and we discuss everything and the preparation and the method and things like that. Like I said, having worked in other parts of the restaurant has given me greater appreciation for that face-to-face guest experience

and also I'm the type of person that loves to see other people happy. And there is just a satisfaction that comes with people going, "I've been here, there and everywhere, and wow, this is the best meal I've had." Here. And it really makes you feel good and it validates you. You realize that you're doing something really important, and food is the biggest thing in people's lives a lot of times, you know? There's a lot of people that feel the same way about it that we do that may not be in this industry, but they know what to expect and they have high expectations and that's why they come here, to have them met.

[00:45:38]

Annemarie: That makes a lot of sense. Can you tell me a little bit, too, about, I guess the specific ways that y'all here educate yourselves on food and wine continuing to do that besides the meetings y'all have.

[00:45:50]

Donald: Yes, what we do is, we have-- like what's going on right now up there. [Interviewer's note: Two employees were having a wine tasting at the bar] We have wine tastings on a regular basis that are-- and even if it does not-- if it's a particular wine or something that doesn't make it to the wine list, at least we can compare and contrast with what we have. And the wine list is always evolving, too, and it's always kind of related to the changes and season and this and that and what kind of food is on the menu. And that's why the wine is just like the menu, is almost on a daily basis changing in one way or another. But what we do is, that we try to not just be in the

meeting, the things we talk about—albeit, that is a very important time of the day and what we do to prepare for the guests and stuff like that. And I tell people this too, you've got one of the greatest resources with-- I mean we didn't have the internet and all that stuff when I first started doing this, I mean, it was go to the library a lot of times though. [Laughter] But I always try to encourage people that maybe don't have the kind of experience that I do in this industry-- if you know this is really what you want to do, study. Be open. Learn things. And not just in the restaurant, take the time to do extracurricular things that will teach you more about the job that you're doing. But we have all sorts of things. We even have like some of our purveyors of some of the agricultural products that we get, like different seasons they will have open house at their farm where you can go, and you can see what they grow, and you can taste and they will make a big family style meal or whatever, and you get to talk directly with them. And I think that's a big part of what we do, too, because-- I mean, we'd probably come and live with you for a couple weeks before we use your products or before we-- because we want to know that you're a kindred spirit of ours and things are really-- if it's supposed to be like biodynamic, we want to make sure your statement about what you do and your product is what it needs to be. But this restaurant is, in terms of the number of people we have working here, it's a very much family kind-of atmosphere. It's a family owned restaurant. So we try to teach each other. I mean, I learn all the time. I'm never too-- I love to learn-- I'm never too far along to where I think, "ah, maybe I don't really need this." I listen to everything and we also-- like I said, our continuing education is one that if you don't you don't maybe get something in the meeting, but you want to come in and figure stuff out in terms of some of the prep and how it's done, hey, they'll let you go work in the kitchen for the day or on the off-day or the early part of the day when all that stuff's going on. You are more than welcome to, if you feel like you need a little bit, or if you just want to see

how a job is, we're very flexible in terms of, if you want to be behind the bar, you want to be in the kitchen, or if you're waiter's assistant and you want to move up to server or whatever, I mean we try to encourage things like that. But we just continue to learn from each other all the time or what the guests teach us about how we need to do things and what they're satisfied with and all that. There's just a lot of communication. Lot of communication. And we are very specific on things like the seasonality and the local aspect and all that. I mean, we remain true to that to this day. And we always will. But learning is one of those things that it's still an ongoing thing and it's something that I still do on a daily basis.

[00:50:26]

Annemarie: For sure, that's great. Well walk me through a typical work day for you at Hot and Hot.

[00:50:30]

Donald: Okay, alright, so, come to work, make sure that the restaurant is set up by-- everyone has their prescribed kind of duties in order to-- you know, you do this, I do that, but we also try to help each other out a lot. So when we first get here every day, the first thing is, lots of polishing and setting up the tables and doing the prep things that we need to do. You know, the stocking-type stuff and all that that needs to be done for the restaurant and then we have about an hour and a half at that, and then we move into the meeting. The meeting is kind of, everybody has-- like, the bar manager will talk about the bar, the wine person will talk about that, the chef

will be in the meeting, and we'll have our meeting and then we kind of move into people start coming in later on-- what we want to do is make sure that all the I's are dotted and all the T's are crossed before everybody gets here so that when you're setting up the restaurant, if there is something that may be a little bit more demanding or something that someone needs help with or whatever, we always try to be right there. But when we first come in, everyone by and large, everybody is glad to see everybody every day. And I like all the people that I work with, and we have a really, really good working relationship, all that people that work here, 'cause like I said it's a familial kind of relationship. And it's not just that way because the owners of the restaurant are. It translates to being all the way down the line, that it's a family type thing. But a lot of what we have on the next day depends upon leaving the restaurant in a pristine manner at the end of the night. So a lot of that is making sure you do a lot of things at the end of that night so that you won't be faced with going back in and redo what's still messed up from last night and start anew. We really do start anew because, like I said, we come in all the cleaning things and all the housekeeping stuff is already done, and we have people that do that. But we spend a lot of time talking, even while we're setting up, talking about the menu. Talking about whatever the difference between yesterday and today was and you know maybe what has changed. Sometimes it's just little trivialities of what's gonna be different today than it was yesterday. But we try to stay on top of that because we're probably more conscious and we're probably more conscientious, I should say, about it then maybe the guests are. I mean they don't care whether there was another tablespoon of this or that in there but the big thing is that every day knowing everything there is to know about what we are serving that night to the guests. So while we are setting up, we are continually talking about that and everything else. But it's just a good atmosphere to come to work in because everyone works together and they know what their

responsibilities are, and in the course of our performing them, we try to just welcome each other to work every day. ‘Cause I mean if it starts out that way then, chances are the evening’s gonna go well, you know. But just not a whole lot of animosity or ill-will towards people. Everybody’s happy for everybody and whoever the big winner is and whoever makes the most money or something, everybody’s proud of that person. It really is a team concept. But my duties don’t really waiver a whole lot. I mean I have pretty much the same to do every day, but it’s not the same either, in a way because every day is new. And a lot of that depends on who comes in the restaurant. And after this amount of time, I know, at any given time, I probably know half the people in the restaurant. But the way the day starts every day is vital to how it ends up, and we realize that. So we try to be real steadfast in making sure the restaurant is set up. But we also try to make sure that each other are ready and looking out after each other.

[00:55:46]

Annemarie: That makes a lot of sense. So tell me a little bit about-- I’m kinda interested in your philosophy of like managing your tables or giving service and within that, building rapport with your guests. Could you tell me a little bit about how you do those things?

[00:56:05]

Donald: Yes. I make sure that whether I saw a person yesterday, or it’s been years, or if it’s their first trip to the restaurant, that I have a consistent way of treating people in terms of-- ‘cause let’s say you were in the restaurant yesterday, but if the menu has changed some,

cause it does that. It is too, I don't mean to harp on this a whole lot, but it really goes, a lot of it just goes down to good old southern hospitality. Treatin' people right, welcoming them, making sure that they know that they're welcome, appreciating people, you know, and showing them that you appreciate what they're doing 'cause without them, where would we be? But what I try to do is to make sure that at very first, that I go over the menu and let people know, like, "on the one side of this page you have the list of the seasonal or the classical cocktails or whatever, on the backside of that page are the ones by the glass." And then show them the wine list and kind of start like that. And then letting them know that if they need or want anything or have any questions that you're the person to see. And when you tell people that, you really want to be confident that you can be that person. And if everything goes well and you stay on top of stuff, you are that person. That's what they're looking to you for. And then too, people will generally-- even people that come in a lot have questions. There's a lot of question answering to things, or what does this mean or if there's like quotations on the menu, what does that denote? So I try to let people know that if there is anything or any questions that they have that I can certainly answer them, or if I can't, I know right where to go to do it. I don't ever-- I never say no. if there's something that we can do that is slightly different than what we normally do, but I know that we can, yes, absolutely. I try to make sure that I do not crowd people too much, too, that I kind of maintain my distance while still kind of making sure that everyone is happy and satisfied and things like that. I try to also make sure that if they are having a multi-course dinner, I kind of get a feel for how fast or how protracted they want things to go. A lot of that kind of comes with experience and time, and then, too, knowing people. But I just want to make sure that everybody feels very

welcome, for one thing. Is happy and feels like their money was well spent, you know, when they leave. That they had a good experience, that they want to come back again. That it will leave them, “Hey this was so good, maybe next time I want to bring in somebody else.” I would say most people that come into this restaurant, for whatever meal that they come in for, they want to take the time to really savor and enjoy their experience. That’s part of my job is to make sure that they’re able to do that while still being able to-- if there are turns or whatever on the tables, to be able to do that efficiently where we can accommodate the next wave or the next round of people that are coming in. The one thing that I’ll always try to do is to be patient with people because not everybody works here. They don’t know. I mean that’s why they come here, so that you can be able to provide that kind of knowledge, and a lot of this is teaching. And people actually do come here to learn. By doing that, they want to try something that maybe was a little out of their comfort zone or something that they never had tried before or that they never had tried in this manner before. So what I try to do is to make people feel very welcomed from the time that I see them walk through the door. I don’t care whether it’s my table or not. It’s still the restaurant, and if it’s good for them, it’s good for me. But I always try to be very accommodating, very welcome, like I said, use that good old Southern hospitality your taught when you’re a kid and just try to make sure that people are able to experience what they do experience in a favorable light and feel like they come to the place where they can get all that maybe even get the kind of knowledge that they want and maybe try something new or different, but know that they’re in a place that is very, very committed to quality, and excellence, and both food and service and leave them, again, wanting to come back. Hopefully as quick as you can get them back. But that’s my

philosophy is to try to just—‘cause let’s face it, nobody wants to come into a slow, dull restaurant, but no one wants to come into a restaurant that is teeming. Obviously, something’s good there, but you won’t be able to maintain it if you don’t do everything. You know, three sixty like food service and everything else. And so I want to exceed people’s expectations of what they come here for, so I try to make sure that at every crook and turn that I treat them the way that I want to be treated when I go out, when I do things. But that is my goal. Is that everyone feels welcome when they walk in, and everybody feels that same way when they leave and that they are happy. That’s my whole goal with people, and that’s how I approach what I do. A lot of it is knowing how to read people and listen to people. I try to listen a lot. I talk a lot, but I try to listen a lot, too, and that is how I am able- I want to be able to accommodate you in the manner in which you hope to be. But we’re gonna make sure that you are happy, or if you’re not, that we’re gonna do something about it while you’re here, you know what I’m saying. So that’s a big part of how I approach things, I just treat people with the old golden rule.

[01:03:18]

Annemarie: That’s great. I can imagine that this is a challenging job because it requires a lot of precision and efficiency in the service aspect but then a lot of like people skills and dealing with emotions and desires and wants on the other hand. I was wondering-- I kind of ask everybody this question-- but I was wondering-- and you’ve kinda talked about this, but what are your definitions for hospitality and service and how are those two terms, how are they similar or the same or how are they different.

[01:03:57]

Donald: It's all kind of one ball of yarn to me. But, you know, part of how that I feed my family is predicated on how I treat people in this restaurant and what kind of experience they get so I try to make sure that I am the type of person that they feel comfortable asking questions to. Cause a lot of times, I would tell people if I were you and you were me, I'd probably have this question for you, you know, and just kind of preempt their question. 'Cause a lot of times, people don't want to say, "Hey we don't know." But I don't want-- the very last thing that I want someone to do is sit there and pretend they like something they don't or that I haven't done my job correctly in reading them to know. People skills are something that you're not born with. You learn them, and you kind of learn stridently as you grow up from the type of people that you associate yourself with. And, having done this most of my life, I want to see people-- the only emotional way that I hope to see people is elated. That's just something that we don't really-- I mean, it's something that we're worried about obviously, you know, that people come and have a great experience, but it's something that we believe is kind of second nature. It's something that we do because we are who we are, and we want to be the type of place where people know that every time they come in, they're gonna get a good quality experience, both front and back of the house. But – you know, like I said, people skills are learned. But you want to be a nice person. You want to accommodate people. You want to be able to give them and to exceed whatever it is their expectations are. So to me, that's one of the better parts of my job 'cause I love people, so if I feel that I've

made someone happy-- or we collectively have made someone happy-- it makes me feel better about what I'm doing overall and how things go. I am so-- I don't know. I'm not saying that it ruins my life if something happens, but at the same time, if people aren't happy and you know it right then, the best thing you can do is try to do something about it, but thank God we don't have that problem most of the time. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time everyone is saying, "Oh wow this is awesome and lovely." But let's just say that something has lagged or something has gone missing or whatever on the service end of it, then we want to fix it. We want to do whatever we can to make sure that you leaving going, well, these people put everything they had into it and that's why I want to come back and give them another chance if that were to be something that would happen. Like I said, it's just not something that we really have to worry about too much but it's something that we're really cognizant of, and we don't want to happen. We want a, you know, a happy house. But that's just kind of how I approach. I just try to make sure that I'm diligent about being there. I don't want to be not there when somebody needs anything. I want to be right on top of it. Because, that's what people are paying for, you know? It's food and it's service. But that is just how I believe in doing things. You just have to start out by being very welcoming and then be very accommodating and then be very thankful.

[01:08:23]

Annemarie: That's great. So I have a couple of questions about your overarching career and

how certain aspects of that have changed overtime, but I was wondering specifically about the role in technology and the way point of sale systems have changed the way that you do your job or the way you get paid or something like that –

[01:08:44]

Donald: Oh heck yeah--

[01:08:45]

Annemarie: From the beginning to now.

[01:08:47]

Donald: Well yeah cause it's drastically different. From the hand written ticket days and all that stuff and from—even when I started, this was largely a cash only business not even a whole lot of people were using credit cards to come in and have dinner at the time and the internet has been a wonderful thing to have at our disposal because it has made the world so much smaller in terms of being able to find out things that you wish to know about a restaurant or what's happening there. And then there are all these other people who go on these particular websites and stuff and give comments and things. Whereby, in the old days it was just morem, “Hey, I see that place is busy you know we ought to try to go there sometime.” or something. And that's one thing too that like social media has done

is to kind of open it up for all the world to see, you know what I mean? You go online, you can learn a lot of things about a restaurant, and a lot of it comes from wherever they created, their kind of mission statement, and what they hope to do, and what kind of food they have and all that. Technology, oh God, it has turned its business on its head in a good way. There's so much more efficiency in being able to print things in the kitchen. And while communication is still a very big—now, that's one thing that social media will never take away from this business is the inner kind of communication that goes on in a restaurant. You're still gonna have to verbalize a whole lot of things. No matter what you're able to type in on the screen or the printer that comes through the kitchen or that type of thing, you still have to communicate and communicate very specifically and very concisely in a restaurant because you don't-- it's all on the fly. It's ongoing. So technology has been a wonderful thing because it's opened up the whole world to what we do and we have-- oh my gosh, we have people from-- I don't know, I have probably seen and met people in all the years that I've been here, from probably a hundred different countries or more. A lot of it's owing to the fact that we have the big kind of medical facility of UAB [Interviewer's Note: University of Alabama at Birmingham] and we have some of the best doctors in the world coming in and out all the time. But it lends itself to not being-- 'cause I know the way it was a long time ago, people kind of felt intimidated sometimes about, well that restaurant is maybe a little bit too nice or that might be a bit pricey or whatever but you can go on the internet and you kind find out a lot of what you want to know now. Does that translate into the experience that you get when you get there, not always, but there is just so much more that can be done with the aide of social media that was not around back then. I mean, I'm talking about like

handling credit cards even back during the day-- as few credit cards as there were and using those knuckle buster things and all that. I mean, it seems now to be very antiquated where it really hasn't been that that long ago that that's what you were doing, when you look back over the course of your life. But I will definitely say that social media has played a big part in really streamlining things in this industry, but there is no substitute, though, for social interaction, too. And that is by and large where you get a lot of your business from, at least in the city that you live in, a lot of times is word of mouth and people telling other people and that is really still the best advertising. But social media is wonderful, and it has really transformed this industry a lot and it has made a big, big difference in what we do. And I think overwhelmingly for the better. But I can't imagine now going back to the way that it was then 'cause we've come a long way as far as that's concerned, but it certainly has helped a lot in what we do.

[01:13:29]

Annemarie: Tell me a little bit too about who has worked in the dining room since you began.

Especially fine dining, it's like traditionally been dominated by white men. I was wondering in terms of gender and in terms of race, how you've seen that dynamic change or not change.

[01:13:49]

Donald: Yeah, I would say that there's a huge change. And you're right. That that is the way

that I remember things being but, no, some of the best people that I have ever known in this industry that do the same job as I am are not white men. [Laughter] A lot of ladies that are really strong. Some of the best servers that I've known were females and females of all-every different creed, color, and everything else. And men too, but I think that Birmingham is such a different place-- now I'm just talkin' about Birmingham. I think Birmingham is just such a different place than it was maybe when I was a child to now that there is a lot of-- a lot more cultural diversity. There's a lot more-- and not just the people in the restaurant but people that come to the restaurant, too. But I think that it has changed a lot from when I very first started and for the good, for the good. A lot of the barriers, or unseen ones, whatever back in the day, all the glass ceilings and such has gone by the way side. What really matters is-- and I know you get tired of hearing this-- but how you treat people and how good you are at your job. I mean, you're only as good as what happened last night. That's just the way it is. That's just the cold, hard truth. But it has changed so much that I enjoy it. I like the changes that have come along, and I think that we are leaving the world in a whole lot better place than we found it, you know. But it has changed, it has changed me, it has changed-- just everything about all the different things that have kind of-- all the things that you might have thought about the restaurant business then, they have changed now about who's taking care of you and whose preparing your food and this and that. 'Cause going back to things a long time ago, yeah, you're right, predominantly you saw probably white men on the floor and you saw probably black or persons of color or another race preparing your food and all that and it's just not that anymore because we have people coming and going. And thank God the world has become a more people friendly place too. There's a whole lot more tolerance and stuff like that and now a days people really don't-- at least that I know of-- don't really care about that as long as you're providing the kind of food and service

that they expect when they come there and all that. But for me personally, it's a wonderful thing. 'Cause I have always embraced cultural diversity in this business cause we all need each other. I mean, in the South, we are and we have waived all the different cultures and things like that-- or subcultures, I should say. We need each other. And we're doing a good job nowadays now that we've finally figured that out.

[01:17:32]

Annemarie: Thanks for that. I have one last question for you, we've been going at this for a while.

[01:17:37]

Donald: Yeah, go ahead, whatever.

[01:17:39]

Annemarie: So, the one last question that I have for you is, if there were somebody who's coming in who's new to food and beverage and they think they want to make service their career, what sort of advice would you give them?

[01:17:54]

Donald: Make sure that you love people and that you take people for who they are and not everybody has a lovely pleasing temperament. [Laughter] People are people, but, you have to love people as a whole. You have to-- that's the very first thing you need to know if you're planning to make a career out of this is that you do love people and you really do genuinely care about what kind of experience that they have. 'Cause it makes me happy, but it really bothers me to the nth degree when I know something is wrong, but I can't do anything about it. But, I would say to people that this is a viable career. I made a very comfortable living in all the years that I've done it and that the world has changed so much that now there is a whole lot more diversity in not just cultures and stuff like that, but in restaurants and the themes of restaurants and in the kinds of restaurants. So I would say be willing to be the type of person that can change with the times, but just make sure you are the type of person where maybe you're inner happiness is not all dependent on someone else, but you have to realize that when you are in a business, it is very much a people business. And if you don't love people, an office job might suit you a little bit better or whatever or working from home. But the one thing I could say is that if you really apply yourself and you really try it-- and a lot of this comes too from what we were talking about earlier- a lot of this comes from your extracurricular things. Your desire to learn more about what you do 'cause, I mean, if all you ever learn is what they you tell you every day when you come to work here and that you hear in the meetings, then, specifically this place it might be alright, but in order to be the type of person that is more kind of cosmopolitan or whatever in your outlook, hey, get on the internet. You can learn so much. You have so much at your fingertips. But just know that it is-- not everybody can do it and not everybody wants to. Let's be honest, it's the type of thing where a lot of people go, "Hey, no I don't think I don't think I'd like what you do" or whatever. But, the fact is I do. But if you are

the type of person that likes making other people happy and you like to see other people happy and you like to be in that type of atmosphere that is lively and vibrant, and all that, get yourself a server job, learn as much as you can, be happy in that because it's rewarding for me because I'm the type of person, I look forward to coming to work every day, and I'm the type of person, when I'm not here, I feel like I'm missing something. And that's one kind of way of letting you know that you're doing the right thing. When, what little vacation you get or for me what little I take-- that I'm still missing my job. But just make sure that if you want to be in a place like this, you're very committed and that you're very sure, this is what I want to do with my life and all that but it's very rewarding 'cause there's just like an instant satisfaction, and it goes table by table of how happy you've helped made somebody and all that. And if you're the type of person that cares about those things, this might be what you want to do. But if any of those things you're kind of lacking in and you just don't feel like you'll ever be, then maybe another job. 'Cause everybody has a place. If you're a good people person and you don't mind working hard and you don't mind working kind of strange hours sometimes and stuff like that and you have an affinity for food and wine and all that stuff, then hey, this might be it. Cause I'm one of those people that you can come see from a mile away and you look at me and you go, oh yeah, for whatever reason, that guy there, he probably likes food and wine. [Laughter] He's got the figure for it. But, it's more about really loving people and in a strange way, being loved back. That's how it is. I love to see people that are glad to see me. It's a wonderful thing, but, that's the whole thing is that this is about food and wine but it's really even more about people.

[01:23:15]

Annemarie: That's great. Well is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanna share?

[01:23:28]

Donald: Just that I think that-- we kind of touched on this earlier-- I don't think people realize at all, what a mecca Birmingham is. And I don't shy away from using that description of food that Birmingham is and how hard that people here work, and they have to work, to maintain what we have and do all that. But Birmingham is like in another galaxy light years away from what it was when I was a young person, and I am happy to see it because I had my doubts about whether it would happen or not having lived in New Orleans and here or whatever. But it has come to fruition, and Birmingham is a formidable city in terms of its food and its hospitality and just some of the nicest people in the world wind up here one way or another. But that's what I think about it, and I can't say enough about the people that have been the forbearers of the whole thing from Chris Hastings to Frank Stitt some of the godfathers of Birmingham cuisine 'cause they have brought us something that will remain with us, at least for the rest of my life and hopefully it will be carried forward. But I see a lot of new young chefs and people in this industry, and I know a bunch of them 'cause when you work here, you're probably gonna know a lot of people in the other restaurants of this caliber and stuff like that. And I just have to say there's a lot of excitement. There is just a whole lot of work has gone into what we do over the years. It takes a lot of work to maintain it, but I think that is happening to a great degree and Birmingham is a hidden gem among cities. But the

whole southern culture and cuisine, it's unmatched in this country. It is. There's no other part of the country that can say-- and then, too, like we talked about last time. There is no other part of the country culturally or as a subsection of this nation that works any harder to do what we do than people in our part of the country. And that's it.

Annemarie: Well, thank you so much for talking with me.

Donald: Thank you, Annemarie. I really appreciate it.

Annemarie: I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]